





Space ships and sound money

Sci-fi fans gather in Melbourne this year to recognise the battle for liberty, writes **Ben Hourigan**.

In September 2010, thousands of science fiction and fantasy fans will converge on Melbourne for the 68th Worldcon—a convention best known for being where the Hugo awards are decided and announced. Given every year since 1955, the Hugos recognise achievement in speculative fiction, most notably in print.

Along with the Hugos, the lesser known Prometheus awards are also presented at Worldcon. Founded in 1979 and run since 1982 by the Libertarian Futurist Society, the Best Novel award is meant to ‘provide encouragement for science fiction writers whose books examine the meaning of freedom.’ The Hall of Fame Award, added in 1983, is ‘designed to honor classic libertarian fiction.’

This year’s finalists for Prometheus Best Novel include Orson Scott Card, Cory Doctorow, and Harry Turtledove. Whoever wins, the work and the decision will record what motifs and issues move today’s libertarians.

After all, often it’s not practical politics, but art, that drives libertarians to their beliefs. For me, the key was a copy of Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, found second-hand for fifty cents at the bottom of a suitcase full of books in a country junk-shop in 1996.

The Dispossessed is the story of Shevek, a physicist from an anarchist colony who leaves home to visit a capitalist planet where he thinks he can do better physics. When he returns home, he realises how authoritarianism and conformity have corrupted the hard-won utopia where he grew up. You can’t live free by having a one-off revolution—you have to struggle personally and politically all your life.

Published in 1974, *The Dispossessed* remains one of the most profound explorations in literature of what the life of a free person should look like. The Libertarian Futurists honored it with a Hall of Fame award in 1993. When I finished that book around 11pm one evening, I stood up from my armchair and thought: ‘I am an anarcho-communist now.’ Eventually I decided I was more of a libertarian, but *The Dispossessed* stands

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as the book that taught me freedom is my highest political value.

Granted, some other people are not so moved by novels. But stories such as *The Dispossessed* remain key vectors for a clearly reasoned and articulated love of liberty.

So what does 30 years of Prometheus Awards tell us about libertarian preoccupations? The award itself gives a first hint: the prize component is a gold coin—currently an ounce for the Best Novel Award and an eighth of an ounce for the Hall of Fame.

It's a nod to the recurring libertarian concern that fiat currency is a government fraud. Since the state can theoretically issue more currency whenever it pleases, devaluing existing cash holdings and causing high inflation. Paper money violates some libertarians' sense of the sanctity of property, since it's a form of wealth that the state can destroy at any time.

In 1983, the Libertarian Futurists gave Hall of Fame Awards to Ayn Rand for *Atlas Shrugged* and Robert Heinlein for *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Each of these had issues with fiat money: Heinlein's Lunar protagonists prefer gold-backed Hong Kong

dollars to 'Authority scrip.' Francisco D'Anconia, one of *Atlas Shrugged's* heroes, makes money an existential issue in Rand's typically melodramatic (and rousing) style, saying:

Whenever destroyers appear among men, they start by destroying money, for money is men's protection and the base of a moral existence. Destroyers seize gold and leave to its owners a counterfeit pile of paper. This kills all objective standards.

Atlas Shrugged remains the definitive statement of libertarian ideals for the hardest of the hardcore—the relentless egoists who believe in icy, superhuman rationality and self-reliance without compromise. So there's a paradoxical combination of defiant bravado—'screw the Fed, let's mint a gold coin!'—and fanboy obeisance in the shape of the Prometheus Awards medals themselves.

This paradox—which will bedevil Rand fans forever, knowing that the writer they admire should have decried their homage as the act of a reviled 'second-hander'—rises again with the first winner for best novel, F. Paul Wilson's

Within Wheels. This 1978 book nakedly pays tribute to Rand, right down to the overt didacticism and shonky writing style (flaws that Wilson acknowledges in his own early work). It has its own disdain for fiat money, borrowed perhaps from Heinlein as much as Rand. Here, the heroes like to keep their wealth in certificates of deposit from the planet Tolve, where the government punishes deviations from the gold standard as 'fraud ... punishable by public flogging.'

The Randian flavor permeates through the rest of the book, where hyper-competent trade consultants attempt to foil a protectionist plot against a free-trading interstellar federation. The heroine, Jo Finch, is the relentlessly determined heir to a major corporation. She may as well be Rand's Dagny Taggart, except her talent is for business analysis rather than railroad operations. It has its own, forlorn John Galt in the aging engineer who invents a new kind of warp drive that could revolutionise interstellar travel, but would rather see it lost to humanity than let others tell him how it should be marketed. And Elson DeBloise, the novel's protectionist villain, views

his own apparent social conscience as a mere tool for accumulating power, just like Ellsworth Toohey, the diabolical social-crusader columnist from *The Fountainhead*.

From a 21st-century perspective, Wilson's cleaving to Rand's themes and motifs also reflects a world not too far removed from *Atlas Shrugged's* publication in 1957—still haunted by communism and the Cold War, imperfectly globalised, and intimating little of the accelerating technological developments that would reshape the world in the late 20th century. Wilson

citizens without charge and haul them off to secret prisons for brutal interrogation.

Marcus swears revenge against the DHS, and his social network use their hacking skills to sabotage its increasingly intrusive surveillance of San Francisco. Simultaneously, they employ cryptography to maintain their privacy so they can continue their work—and their lives—free and unmolested. The book, which in its way can be as heavy-handed and didactic as Wilson's, loads its story with explanations of the real-world technolo-

gic analog Jo in *Wheels Within Wheels*. Then there's the anarchist revolutionary leader Odo, whose teachings underpin the world of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*. *Little Brother* has more than its fair share of kick-ass chicks, foremost among them Marcus's girlfriend Ange, a computer-savvy geek with an addiction to super-hot chilli and the guts to defy the authorities. Some might call libertarian writers' fascination with female strength an echo of feminism, even a fetish, but arguably it's deeper and more universal—an admiration for humanity in full bloom, gloriously competent and defiant against entropy and oppression.

Little Brother's selection as Prometheus Best Novel for 2009 shows the scenery has changed. But the recurrence of old libertarian themes shows that the forces in conflict remain the same—at least as writers imagine them. Though technology has opened new battlefronts, the war is still authority versus liberty. Uniting the works mentioned here, and numerous others, there's a libertarian conception of an evil which stands against those old values of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' It's government destroying human dignity and prosperity in the name of the general good: Orwell's 'boot stamping on a human face—forever,' or DHS torturers subjecting a teenager to a simulated execution because he worked with all his cunning to preserve what Doctorow calls 'the right to explore your weird ideas provided you don't hurt others.'

Right now there's a teenager reading *Little Brother* or another Prometheus winner, who's going to stand up when they've finished, hold the book in their hands and think, 'that's what I believe in.' All their life they'll be an advocate for liberty, and it's the power of a novel to inspire that commitment that this year's Prometheus awards will honor once more.

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realises this: his foreword to the 2005 version (available, appropriately, on Amazon's Kindle e-book reader) observes that *Wheels'* 'main failings are those suffered by any science fiction written in the seventies, in the Dark Ages before ... the microchip revolution ... World Wide Web ... e-mail ... wireless telephones ... the nascent genetics revolution.'

Reality has redefined the frontiers of science fiction, and also of the freedoms Wilson pays tribute to in *Wheels Within Wheels*. The 2009 winner of the Prometheus Best Novel Award, Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother*, is a stunning piece of evidence to that effect.

Little Brother tells the story of Marcus, a San Francisco teenager detained and tortured by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in the chaotic aftermath of a massive Al Qaeda attack on San Francisco. In his near future, the government passes a 'PATRIOT Act II,' and school-issued laptops, library books, electronic public transport passes, videogame consoles and even electronic funds transfer become tools for the overzealous DHS to dig up excuses to detain

gies behind Marcus' hacks, and his attempts to keep his messages private and his body free. It serves as a practical introduction to how readers can protect themselves from the state online.

Thirty years after *Wheels Within Wheels*, Doctorow is still echoing some of the classic libertarian preoccupations we see there and in Rand. Money is still an issue: this time it's electronic transfers versus cash. The Turkish owner of Marcus's favorite coffee joint bans debit cards from his store. 'Where you have government always spying on the people, is no good,' the owner says. 'I move here twenty years ago for freedom—I no help them take freedom away.' There's no call for a return to gold coinage, but the fear that government's power over money puts individuals' economic and personal freedoms at risk remains.

And Doctorow, like many freedom-loving writers before him likes his women smart and strong. Male or female, freedom-loving writers tend to like writing strong female characters, often protagonists. Among them, there's Rand's Dagny Taggart, and her