

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

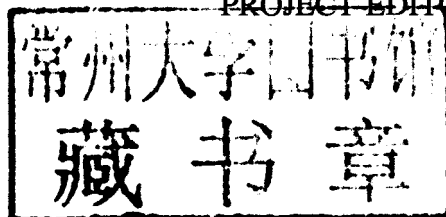
309

Volume 309

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITOR



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of CLC in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. CLC, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in CLC inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each CLC volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in CLC provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A CLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Paolo Bacigalupi

1973-

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Bacigalupi's career through 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Bacigalupi is widely acknowledged as a rising star in the science fiction genre. His work has been noted for its dystopic world models and scathing cultural critiques. Despite having produced a relatively small body of work, Bacigalupi has earned lavish praise from veteran writers in the genre and has won several prestigious awards.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bacigalupi was born in 1973 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. His father, Tadini, was a professor of sociology at Metropolitan State College of Denver, and his mother, Linda, was an associate publisher at *High Country News*. When Bacigalupi was six months old, he moved with his parents to Paonia, Colorado, where they operated a communal apple orchard with another family. His parents divorced when he was three years old, and he spent the next several years moving from place to place, living with one parent or the other, around Colorado and Wyoming.

Bacigalupi felt an acute sense of isolation and alienation throughout much of his childhood, a budding liberal in an intensely conservative culture. While attending Colorado Rocky Mountain School in Carbondale, he learned of the liberal atmosphere at Oberlin College from a guidance counselor. He was unsure about what he wanted to pursue at college, and, looking for a challenge, decided on East Asian studies in order to learn the Chinese language.

Bacigalupi made several sojourns to China throughout his academic career. He graduated from Oberlin in 1994, then accepted a job with a Chinese consulting company. He worked there for only a few months, though, before returning to the United States to be with his college girlfriend, Anjula, in Boston. He learned HTML code and secured a position at a web consulting firm, but was quickly disillusioned with the business world.

After reading a how-to guide about writing a novel in one's spare time, Bacigalupi was inspired to write as a hobby. He wrote a science fiction novel due to the fact that he had enjoyed reading the likes of Robert Heinlein, John Norman, and J. G. Ballard in his youth. He and Anjula, now married, moved to Denver, where he met William Gibson at a reading in a local bookstore. Gibson suggested that Bacigalupi try his hand at short stories, so Bacigalupi started reading stories in science fiction magazines to get a feel for the form. After taking his first story to a workshop, he received more advice, sharpened the story, and published it as "A Pocketful of Dharma" in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Newly inspired, Bacigalupi hired a literary agent to help him publish the novel. After marketing the novel and ultimately turning down a lowball offer, Bacigalupi again became discouraged. Then he received a phone call from science fiction legend Harlan Ellison, who had read "A Pocketful of Dharma" and found it promising. Ellison critiqued the story to Bacigalupi over the phone, and then warned Bacigalupi against getting typecast as a science-fiction writer. Bacigalupi took Ellison's advice to heart and proceeded to write three novels in different genres over the next four years. Once again unable to sell his work, Bacigalupi was dispirited. Now living with his wife and their son in Paonia, where he spent most of his childhood, Bacigalupi was ready to abandon his writing career. His wife took a teaching position and Bacigalupi took a webmaster position at *High Country News*, where his mother had worked years earlier. During this time he began to write science-fiction stories again, but only as a hobby. His skill improved markedly, and he began to develop themes of environmentalism and social consciousness which would eventually find their way into most of his work. Between 1999 and 2008, Bacigalupi wrote twelve short stories, ten of which were collected and published as *Pump Six and Other Stories* (2008).

Inspired by a flight attendant he saw on a flight back from the Far East, Bacigalupi began writing a story that, over time, grew enough for him to sell piecemeal to magazines. He worked on the story for three years and it eventually expanded to novel length. It was published as *The Windup Girl* (2009). The novel was greeted with extraordinary praise and won the prestigious Nebula Award for Best Novel in 2010.

During the arduous writing of *The Windup Girl*, Bacigalupi put that work aside for a period and wrote *Ship Breaker* (2010), a young-adult novel which he completed in just one month.

MAJOR WORKS

Bacigalupi's first story, "A Pocketful of Dharma," drew heavily on his interest in the East. In the story, a homeless orphan named Wang Jun, from Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan province, finds a data cube containing the Dalai Lama's personality. Published four years earlier than any of the other pieces included in *Pump Six*, the story also sets up Bacigalupi's recurring themes of environmentalism and social consciousness while providing a commentary on poverty juxtaposed against privilege.

Also included in the collection is the story "The People of Sand and Slag," set in Montana in a distant, dystopian future. In the story, the world has become a vast wasteland and humans have adapted and are able to subsist by eating sand. The story's characters come to accept their situation after they happen upon an unmodified, natural dog and adopt it as a pet. The story was nominated for both a Hugo and a Nebula Award. "The Calorie Man," which won a Theodore Sturgeon Award, is also set in a bleak future, but one in which fossil fuels have been exhausted and food is used as an energy source. In the story, Bacigalupi again tackles the subjects of class and environmentalism.

The year following *Pump Six*, Bacigalupi published his first novel, *The Windup Girl*, which is set in a calorie-driven economy much like that of "The Calorie Man." Anderson Lake, the Calorie Man in *The Windup Girl*, works in Thailand for the mega-corporation AgriGen. Anderson embarks on a secret mission to find the location of the Thai seedbank and he employs a Chinese refugee, Hock Seng, to manage his AgriGen factory while he sets out to locate the seedbank. Seng's motive, however, is to steal the designs for "kink-springs," which can be used as a new, more efficient energy source and which Anderson keeps in his safe.

Emiko, the title character of *The Windup Girl*, is a bioengineered "New Person," manufactured by the Japanese and scorned and hated in other countries. Emiko is designed to be beautiful and, due to a modified pore structure, has exceptionally smooth skin that is prone to overheating in the Thai climate. New People are programmed to be slaves, and Emiko has been abandoned by her owner in Bangkok. Raleigh, a sex club owner, bribes the police for her life but forces her to work in his club, where she is abused and ridiculed by the patrons. Living in despair, she meets

Anderson and tells him of a secret seedbank she learned of from a customer, and Anderson tells Emiko of an area in the north where windups live free. She becomes obsessed with escaping from Raleigh and the club and finding her "people." Anderson becomes enamored of Emiko and, as they set out to help each other, learns of Gibbons, a former generipper employee of AgriGen. Though he is presumed dead, the work of Gibbons has allowed Thailand to avoid the plagues other nations are beset with. At the heart of the novel is an intense political struggle for power and, at the end, Anderson is killed by plague. Gibbons finds Emiko and promises to use her DNA to create a new race of windups that are capable of reproduction.

The Windup Girl brings together many of the themes and subject matter that Bacigalupi's stories are known for: a dystopian world in which technologies have run amok or are rendered obsolete, where traditional energy sources are depleted, and soulless mega corporations rule the world through spying and subterfuge.

Bacigalupi's next novel, *Ship Breaker*, was written for young-adult readers, but the subject matter is no less dark and disturbing. In a future in which the world has been ravaged by climate change, the novel's teenage protagonist, Nailer Lopez, struggles to survive, working as a ship breaker—scavenging abandoned oil tankers and barges. His mother is dead and his father is a violent drug addict who beats Nailer. Nailer and members of his crew strip abandoned ships of anything of value and give the items to their boss, who then sells the items. Nailer and his crewmates are, in essence, slave labor, not allowed to leave or advance. Due to global warming, they are in constant danger of massive, "city killer" hurricanes. One of the hurricanes strands the beautiful daughter of a wealthy shipping magnate named Nita, nicknamed "Lucky Girl." Nailer befriends Nita and they escape toward the destroyed city of New Orleans, witnessing the struggles of the poor at the hands of the wealthy along the way and the tone of the book shifts from a dark, menacing tale to an adventure story. Bacigalupi makes clear his concerns about environmental issues while telling a story accessible to young readers.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bacigalupi spent years writing before he was published and many editors suggested that his work was too dark to appeal to a wide audience. He nearly quit writing several times, but when the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* published "A Pocketful of Dharma" as its cover story and Harlan Ellison reached out in support, Bacigalupi continued writing. Many of

his stories have been anthologized in various “Year’s Best” collections, and several have won or have been nominated for the most prestigious prizes and awards for the science fiction genre. Prior to his 2009 novel *The Windup Girl*, Bacigalupi had earned relatively little critical acclaim. About the novel, *Booklist*’s Regina Schroeder observed, “Bacigalupi’s near future is terrifying, astonishing, and brilliantly brought to vibrant life through the machinations and concerns of a few key inhabitants.” Although critics tend to use such words as “bleak,” “dystopian,” and “post-apocalyptic” when describing Bacigalupi’s work, a *Publishers Weekly* critic reconciled Bacigalupi’s dark tone with the merits of his writing by calling the novel “grim but beautifully written.” The American Library Association declared *The Windup Girl* the best science fiction novel of 2009, and *Time Magazine* listed it among the year’s ten best works of fiction.

Ship Breaker was eagerly anticipated by science fiction fans despite its designation as a young-adult novel. The work has been praised for its timely themes; a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer noted, “[T]he book’s message never overshadows the storytelling, action-packed pacing, or intricate world-building.” Some critics have questioned whether the novel is appropriate for a young audience, citing the complex plot and characters, and also the degree of violence in the story. At the same time, the book is acknowledged for communicating an overtly political, environmentally conscious message.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Pump Six and Other Stories (short stories) 2008
The Windup Girl (novel) 2009
Ship Breaker (novel) 2010

CRITICISM

Paolo Bacigalupi and Matthew Cheney (interview date 1 September 2004)

SOURCE: Bacigalupi, Paolo, and Matthew Cheney. “A Conversation with Paolo Bacigalupi.” *Mumpsimus* (1 September 2004): NP.

[In the following interview, Bacigalupi discusses the influence of his multicultural experiences on his writing.]

Paolo Bacigalupi has published a handful of stories in *F&SF*, including “**The Fluted Girl**”, which appeared in more *Best of the Year* anthologies than any other single story from 2003. This year, “**The People of Sand and Slag**” appeared in *F&SF* and “**The Pasho**” in *Asimov*’s.

Bacigalupi lives now in Colorado, where he grew up, but he has spent a lot of time traveling, particularly in Asia and India. In 1999, the same year he published his first story in *F&SF*, he had an essay at Salon.com about some of his experiences in China. He has worked as a writer and online editor for *High Country News* and has published essays and articles on conservation issues and politics.

But it’s his fiction that intrigued me, and made me seek him out and see if he would be willing to answer some questions. He was, and his replies were fascinating, as you’ll see below.

It is hard to describe Bacigalupi’s stories effectively, to capture the disturbing oddness of them, the careful prose, the pacing, the imagination. When I first read “**The Fluted Girl**”, I thought the central idea of a child genetically sculpted to be a flute to be a bit silly, but the story stayed with me, it lurked and lingered. “**The People of Sand and Slag**” made me pay more attention to Bacigalupi, because in some ways it made “**The Fluted Girl**” seem tame and run-of-the-mill, a considerable accomplishment. “**The Pasho**” is even more accomplished, and here, it seems to me, the different pieces of Bacigalupi’s art all come together. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with his work, here is one paragraph from “**The Pasho**”:

Raphel ducked his head and stared at his hands, vaguely embarrassed at the women’s sudden attention. On the back of his left hand were his first attainment marks: the old alphabet in tiny script. From there, lettering the color of dried blood marched up his arms and stole under his robes. Denotations of rising rank, ritually applied over the years, the chanted mnemonic devices of the ten thousand stanzas, hooks into the core of Pasho knowledge, each one a memory aid and mark of passage. They covered his body in the spiking calligraphy of the ancients, sometimes a mere symbol to hook a bound tome’s worth of knowledge, something to recall, and ensure that all Pasho trained later might have access to an unchanging spring of wisdom.

And now to the conversation . . .

[Matthew Cheney]: *It’s standard practice to ask authors about their influences, about what they read and such, and it can sometimes be tedious, but your work is so individual in its imagery that I can’t help wondering, “What does this guy like to read?” When you are a reader, what do you find fulfilling?*

[Paolo Bacigalupi]: Honestly, I'm not sure that much of what I write about comes from reading, or at least, not directly. Sometimes something clicks for me: when I wrote "**Sand and Slag**", I ran across an article about a dog in Butte, Montana that was surviving in the middle of a mine tailings dump . . . and the image hung with me.

A lot of what I find interesting or fulfilling these days is actually non-fiction, some philosophy and political theory, some history . . . really, it's all over the map, and often I just pick at books, slowly, one after another in a pretty unplanned rotation.

Things I'm picking at right now are *Out of Africa*, coupled with a biography of Isak Dinesen; *Sand Rivers*, about a safari into a game reserve in Africa; *Song of the Dodo*, by David Quammen, which discusses the distribution of species on islands, and the implications for habitat fragmentation on continents; *Walden*. Some Wendell Berry. Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Marquis de Sade (he's always good for a no good view of the world). *No Depression*, the music magazine. *The New Yorker*. Those are the kinds of things that I pick up when I'm hunting, trying to find something that I'm still not clear on, trying to make my brain kick over.

In fiction, I honestly read very little of it these days, unless it's something trashy and brainless. I just re-read the first five books in the Gor series by John Norman, and they were horrible. But I remember totally loving them when I was in high school, so it was fun to return to them. My dad gave them to me for safe-keeping to keep my stepmother from throwing them away. So they were horrible, but I wasn't really reading for ideas or to refill the well, more to shut everything down. Recently my life has actually been somewhat stressful. I've been juggling a new job, and a new baby, so my life has taken a lot of sharp turns recently, and I'm still trying to really settle into the new rhythms of my life. The fiction I read is really for escape, rather than for stimulation.

When I think about where some of my imagery really comes from, it's generally chance moments that for some reason stick, and make me look at the world differently. Mostly, those are things that I experience, rather than things I read. At least, that's the recollection that I have now. Honestly, in the making of a story, so much ends up getting layered into it, that by the time I'm reading it in final draft, I'm often surprised by the details and catch myself thinking, "Huh, that's not bad. I wonder who thought that up?" (And then I get a terror that I've actually ripped it out of someone else's story and don't know it). Seriously, though, a lot of the result seems mysterious, even to

me. Obviously, the ideas mulch in from somewhere, but it's hard to pick out specific influences. With something like the fluted girl, I was looking for a really nasty way to demonstrate Belari's power over other people, and reaming out people's bones seemed like a great way to go about it. Maybe de Sade helped with that. Maybe not. In the case of other individual images, a lot of them come from my own experience. I went to India a couple years ago with my wife and my mother-in-law (who are both Indian) and my mother-in-law noted the smell of dung smoke in the air. She took this deep breath and said something along the lines of "Do you smell it? It's dung, burning. I love that smell." This is a fairly elite woman, very proper, who runs a fuelcell technology company, and she's waxing nostalgic about dung. And that image stuck. It was a perspective that was new, and I tried to hold onto it. A couple years later, when I started working on "**The Pasho**," and wanted to illustrate the initial homecoming, that image was there for me.

Is writing fantasy and science fiction stories something you stumbled into, or is being an SF writer something you dreamed of being from, say, birth?

I didn't really think I would be a writer of any sort, for a long time. I read science fiction when I was a kid. My father introduced me to it. He was a big fan, and my grandfather also. I think the first "real" book that I ever read was *Citizen of the Galaxy* by Heinlein, and it was actually my grandfather's copy. I think I was eight or nine years old. I was really proud that I'd hacked my way through the whole 300-odd pages. So I grew up reading sci-fi, mostly by picking out of my father's collection (a lot of Anne McCaffrey, Heinlein, Poul Anderson, Niven, stuff like that). So it was always there in my mind, as a genre.

But you know, you grow up, you go to college, you get a dose of reality, you go get a job, and then another job, you make some money and you start to get a real life . . . and then you find out that that you don't like the life you're building at all, and you start writing, because it's the only thing that wards off depression. I started working on my first novel about ten years ago and at that time, I'm not quite sure why (maybe because I'd read so much of it), I had a real burning urge to write science fiction—even though almost all the things I was reading at the time weren't. Around then, I think I was reading Cormac McCarthy, and J. G. Ballard, and Hemingway, stuff like that. But anyway, I wrote that sci-fi book, and managed to avoid selling it, and at the same time I also wrote "**Pocketful of Dharma**" which came out in *F&SF*. Harlan Ellison called me up soon after, and after sort of dressing me down and giving me a solid thump on the head about problems he perceived in the story, he told me

not to get stuck in the science fiction genre, not to get labelled as an sf writer and to get out while I could. A "Save yourself while there's still time" kind of speech. It was a weird phone call, but in some ways it hung with me. I ended up writing three other novels, and none of them were sci-fi. One historical fiction piece. One contemporary "literary" (whatever) book. And one mystery. And then, at the end of all of that I sort of looked around, and decided that I actually liked writing science fiction quite a lot and went back to it.

So, here I am again, sort of the long way around to get here, but I'm feeling a little more focused because of it. And, I think those other writing projects were instructive for me. Sort of a self-study course in writing, where I got to work out a lot of the questions of craft that I had.

One of the things I like about writing science fiction is that I feel like it gives me a large enough palette to work with my ideas, without having to be constrained by "reality". For me, sci-fi means that I have a huge amount of control over every aspect of the story, and ideally, that means that the characters and plot which I create can then be reinforced, hopefully quite strikingly, with the settings and technologies that I choose for it. What I'm trying for, when the story is really working well, is to create a sort of feedback loop between the setting, the characters, and the plot so that they're mutually reinforcing. With science fiction I feel like I've got room to do that.

Do you think you'll try to publish the early novels you wrote, or are you moving on?

I did actually try to get them published. My agent shopped all of them, and I ended up getting a lot of interest, without any final commitment. Typically, I'd have one editor fall in love with the story, and then it would be killed by other editors, stuff like that. With my first sci-fi novel, I actually turned down a publishing offer, because my agent felt the advance was too low. Looking back, maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. At the time I was feeling pretty good about myself, and was confident that I'd write more novels, so I was able to walk away from the offer. Now, older and more bitter, I might go back and take it. Who knows?

At some point, I suspect that I will try again to get those stories out into the world. The rejections had less to do with the quality of the stories, and a lot to do with how they would categorize, and where they would fit into various market segments, and in one memorable case, I was rejected by an editor because, as she put it, "As a mother, this story disturbs me." All of that was a bit of an eye-opener for me, because when I started out writing, I was so sure that if I just

wrote a great story, that was all that mattered. I didn't really understand the business end of the book-selling equation. These days, I'm mostly focused on writing new material, and I'm putting most of my energy into short stories, where editors seem to have a little more flexibility about what they buy.

China and the Chinese languages have been, it seems, an important part of your life. How did you develop an interest in China, and where has it led you?

I started studying Chinese in college. Originally I didn't actually have much interest in China, per se, but I had this idea that by the time I finished my liberal arts degree, I wanted to be fluent in a language. I was sick of studying Spanish from high school and thought it was too easy, so when I went through the school's course catalog and ran across Chinese as an option I said to myself, "Huh. Chinese. I've heard that's hard." So I picked it. And it turned out I was right. It was really hard. But that was really the only reason. I was so ignorant going into it that I think the full extent of my knowledge about China was that there'd been some kind of a protest there, and it maybe had a big wall . . . or maybe that was Mongolia. I really was that ignorant. Over time though, I ended up spending a couple years over in China, and it ended up informing a lot of the way I view the world.

If you spend enough time away from your own country, it sort of poisons your psyche. You never get to be a pure American again, because there's this foreign part of your brain that's been jammed in as well. It gives you a bit of double vision when you look at things. And I think that sort of experience, looking askew at the world, also helps me write, somewhat: that off-kilter sense that everyone else thinks something is normal, but you can't quite get on board. The classic example that I hear a lot from people who've been in the Peace Corps or spent a lot of time in a poorer country, is their first view of a supermarket when they return, with its aisles and aisles of food. It seemed so normal before, and yet suddenly it seems perverse.

For me, the first time I really felt off-kilter with home, I was just back from China, and I was walking through a park, and I kept coming across all these awful rodents, and I kept wondering why no one had put out traps or poison for them. And they were squirrels. You just don't see things like squirrels in parks in China, so I'd completely forgotten about them. It's trivial things like that. And also larger ones. Things like the assumptions we carry with us about what fairness is, or honesty, or family, or what human life is worth, or what responsibility means. Things that we take for granted often because of common cultural understand-

ing, and yet can have very different meanings for people from other cultures. It's daunting to run up against because you can end up losing your sense of absolutes. And ultimately, when you come back, it makes you think about everything again, because you suddenly have a sense of how much of our life depends on everyone agreeing on certain baselines of behavior. But it's all made up. And absurd.

Every once in a while, I go back to China, and Southeast Asia, mostly in the hopes of having my ideas stirred around and confused again. That's a huge influence for me. Just to be reminded that the way I view the world isn't the way others view it.

"The Fluted Girl" has become, by virtue of being reprinted in three best-of-the-year anthologies, your most famous story so far, the one readers are most likely to know if they know your name. What was the genesis for that story?

It actually started out as the idea for a novel I had and which I then trimmed down, thinking that I'd go back later and write the full version if I ever got time. Originally the focus was more on the feudalism of the society. I'd been watching a lot of music stars and assorted richies buying up land around the town that I grew up in, and their paternalistic "we're going to help out these poor hick locals" attitude, along with the way they injected cash into the local economy, really got me thinking about a new sort of feudalism. People seem to read those feudalistic elements as fantasy, rather than sci-fi, but in my mind, I was trying to reflect a sense that we are moving in a feudal direction with our worship of music and film stars, and their increasing monetary clout. Out here in the rural West, these stars are buying huge ranches and really to my mind, setting up their own little fiefs. So that was a lot of what I was thinking about when I first started working on the piece.

At the time, Belari was actually the main character, but by the time I finished polishing the story, I hated it, and I realized the biggest problem with the story was that the fluted girls were actually the most interesting thing in it. So I went back and rewrote the whole thing from scratch, from their perspective. And, as I worked on it, it opened up new ideas for me: the power relationships, the subservience and dominance, the hunt for self-realization, all that really came to life for me. I'm glad I forced myself to go back and tear up the first version of the story, because **"The Fluted Girl"** was better because of it, but it was scary and depressing to do, at the time.

Some of this is hindsight, too. Even when I finished the rewritten version, I still thought it was crap. I sent it to Gordon Van Gelder at *F&SF* and I spent the next

month waiting for an insulting rejection. I was really embarrassed about it, because it felt like such a demented little piece, and I didn't think anyone would care for it. If Gordon hadn't taken it, I doubt I would have had the guts to send it out to a second market. I'd already given up on it, and only really sent it out because I try to make rules for myself about finishing stories and submitting them so that I won't chicken out. That's actually a problem I have with a lot of my writing: by the time I finish a story, I'm pretty certain it's dumb, it's been done before, it's obvious, its derivative, its boring. Then I force myself to send it in and find out if I'm right.

Have you ever had the opposite experience with a story: believing what you've written to be interesting and not being able to find anyone interested in it?

Not really. I've written a couple sub-par short stories, but I hated them just like I hate everything else when I finish writing, so it wasn't really a surprise when they got rejected. More of a feeling like, "Oh. I guess it really did suck. Bummer. I should work on that." With the really good editors, they sometimes take the time to point out some possibilities of why the story went wrong, but I've never had anything rejected because it was uninteresting. With my novels, I've sometimes felt that I had good material and that it wasn't being appreciated, but I never really got the feeling from the editor's rejections that I hadn't written good stuff, just that I hadn't written stuff that was a good monetary risk. The rejections ran more along the lines of "great writing, great story, I can't buy this, it's way too dark." Stuff like that. With short stories, I get the impression that editors evaluate stories more for their quality. With novels, it seems like it all comes down to the cash potential. How many units can we sell? How much for each unit?

With "The People of Sand and Slag" and "The Pasho", I felt like you were creating stories that not only worked well on their own terms, but that had a hard-to-pin-down, nearly-allegorical relationship with contemporary events and trends (political, environmental). Am I imposing my own inclinations on stories that are really just stories, nothing more?

I feel a little weird talking about this in some ways, because I don't like my politics to get in the way of my stories, but more and more I feel like I'm influenced by larger ideas that I'm wrestling with, and it's interesting to me to find ways to use fiction to gnaw away at those ideas—political, social, environmental, what have you. The trick, in my mind, is to tell a compelling story that maybe carries an idea, but doesn't leave anyone with that awful "I've just been preached at" feeling. In large part, that means to me

that I try hard to make things more complex, less clearcut, less explicitly confident of the conclusions, even if that means obscuring some of what I really wish people would take away from the story. At the end of the day, I feel like the story has to hold its own as escape, as entertainment, and then, if I can manage it, as a food for thought. I don't really know if I succeed at that, but that's what's on my mind when I sit down to work with an idea.

With **"Sand and Slag"**, I had a beef with an old boss of mine, and his absolute belief that science would solve all our problems into the future. It's not a new belief, but we got into an argument about it, and I ended up mulling the question for years. Then, finally, this story about the Butte dog showed up and the pieces started to come together—that I could make my argument by giving my boss' assumption free reign: Yes, we can solve every problem with technology. But there's no guarantee that we'll solve the right problem. What I desperately wanted to do was hold up a sign and say **"HEY WE'VE ONLY GOT ONE PLANET, LET'S NOT FUCK IT UP"** but that would have made a pretty boring story. I hope people ended up both entertained, and came away with something to think about, but I have no idea if it succeeded at that.

With **"The Pasho"**, I'd been thinking a lot about cultural extinction, and **"The Pasho"** was my attempt to look at some of that. It came from spending so much time abroad and seeing the "Americanization" of these various places that I was travelling through. China has been interesting to watch over the last ten years as it's gotten progressively more open and leaned more and more toward a market economy. So China is, in some ways, because it's no longer insulated from outside influences, becoming less Chinese. Maybe. Does eating McDonald's take away your Chineseness? Does driving a car? Does playing Quake? Does a belief in freedom of the press? This is fertile ground for me, because there aren't any good answers to what we are as a culture, and what makes a culture alive or dead.

Down in southern China there are a bunch of minority cultures who are all dealing with encroachments not just of U.S. consumer culture, but also Han (the dominant cultural group in China) culture. They've got floods of Han tourists coming through, gawking at them, taking pictures, paying them to perform their festivals every day instead of just once a year, sort of theme-parking them to death. And the impacts are pretty acute: the sons don't want to be monks anymore, they just want to ride around on motor bikes, they don't want to wear their culture's traditional dress, etc. etc. It's a mess.

And more than anything, with **"The Pasho"**, I couldn't come out with an answer to these problems. Cultural integrity is important, sure. But so is technology and comfort. So how do these things intertwine? As we interact more and more, it means that the diversity of things, people, viewpoints that makes life so interesting, are blended away. Maybe this didn't matter when we only had small cultural incursions like war. But when culture is globalised—through media, branding, manufacturing, what have you—the homogenization is apparent. I'm trying to figure out what my half-Indian kid is going to be like. How much of India is really going to survive the cultural mixing in him?

Do you think that writers have any responsibility, or even ability, to combat cultural homogenization?

I don't think we can combat it, really. Even by writing a book and publishing it in several languages on several continents, an author can be part of the phenomenon. And, I'm not even sure that we should try to combat it. Cultural interactions seem like a mixed bag to me. On one side, you learn new things, on another, those new things have the chance of wiping out your old ways. And that's a two-way street for both cultures. Coca-Cola's all over Asia, but at the same time, because of time I've spent over there, I take off my shoes in my own house. Am I more Asian because of this? Or am I a little more civilized because I don't track dirt around my home? These are trivial examples, but they're illustrative. China might not be discussing press freedom if there wasn't an interaction with the outside world. Taking my son as an example, he's not going to speak Hindi very well, and his understanding of Hinduism is probably going to be an outsider's view, but, on the other hand, he also isn't going to treat women the way they're treated in India. Cultural change and influence and homogenization are all extremely complex in my mind. What's interesting to me as a writer, in this particular case, is to look more critically at this phenomenon which is more and more pervasive, and which we also often seem to take for granted.

Publishers Weekly (review date 11 February 2008)

SOURCE: Review of *Pump Six and Other Stories*, by Paolo Bacigalupi. *Publishers Weekly* (11 February 2008): 54.

[In the following review, the critic describes Pump Six and Other Stories as "deeply thought provoking."]

Bacigalupi's stellar first collection of 10 stories [*Pump Six and Other Stories*] displays the astute social commentary and consciousness-altering power of the very