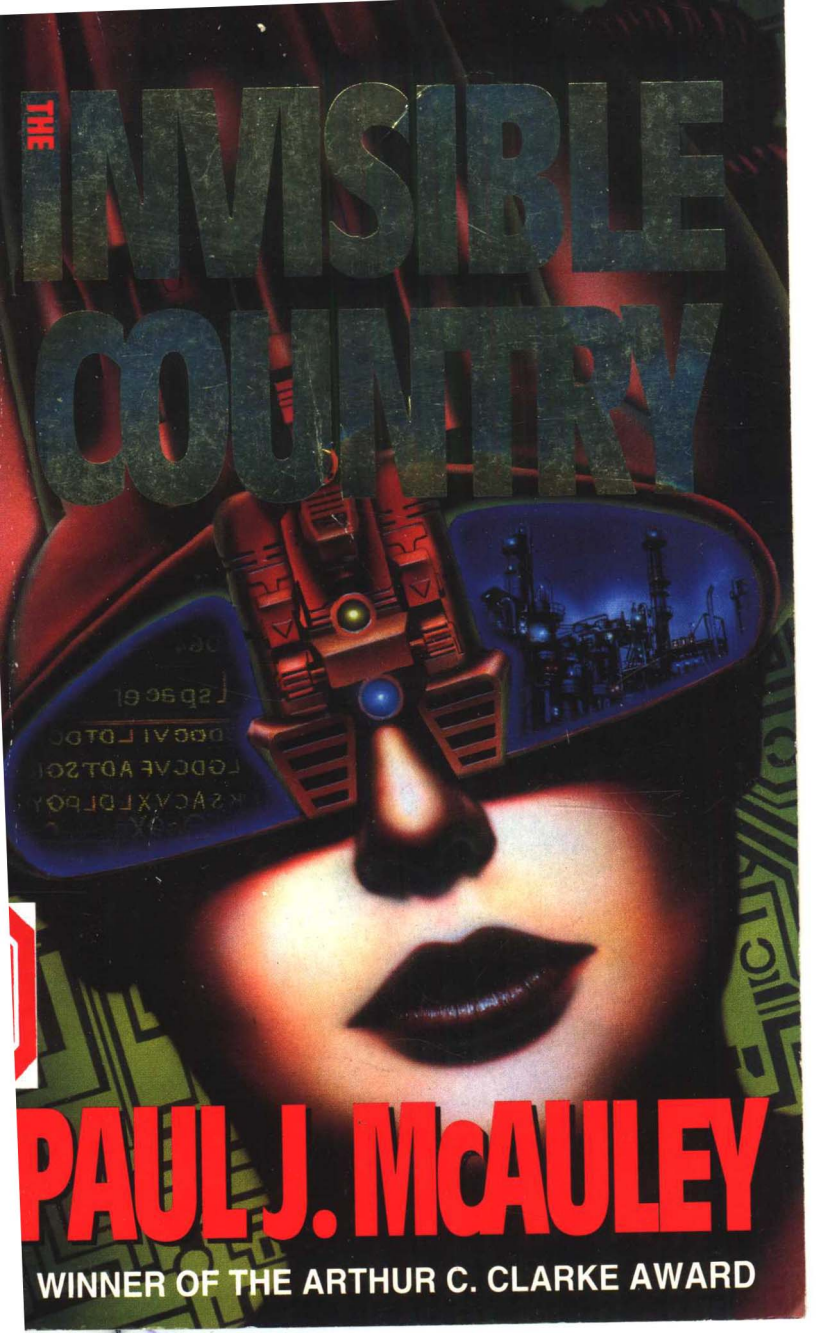


THE INVISIBLE COUNTRY



PAUL J. MCAULEY

WINNER OF THE ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD

THE INVISIBLE COUNTRY

In a fifteenth-century Venice subtly different from our own, a physician chasing the image of his lost daughter encounters a forerunner of Baron Victor Frankenstein; in near-future Europe the use of genetically engineered dolls in combat games and the sex industry poses hard ethical questions, while their liberated cousins threaten human existence; on an artificial world at the edge of the Galaxy, one of the last humans causes revolution amongst the alien races abandoned there by her ancestors.

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PAUL J. MCAULEY

THE INVISIBLE COUNTRY

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and Lewis Shiner.

We should not be surprised that life,
having subjugated the bulk of inert matter
on Earth, would go on to subjugate
technology, and bring it also under its
reign of constant evolution, perpetual
novelty, and an agenda out of our control.

Out of Control,
Kevin Kelly

Introduction: McAuley Moments

In the summer of 1993, Paul McAuley and I travelled separately to California, mostly to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in San Francisco, but also to remind ourselves of that frayed edge of reality lapped by the Pacific. We hooked up in Los Angeles, where I staked out in an anonymous motel and he stayed with an academic couple who keep a remarkable cactus garden. Paul had lived and taught in LA for a couple of years before he got started as a writer, and knew his way around the grids of endless streets and neighbourhoods. I'd been there before, but was more familiar with the fantasized city projected through popular culture. Between us, we had adventures, coped with things and picked up story ideas.*

At that time, Paul's latest novel was *Red Dust*, in which Elvis Presley is a mythological figure to Chinese cowboys on Mars. In America, Paul was on the scout for E-Moments, those tiny incidents in which Elvis touches your life, whether as a stained-glass window or through a telecine sample on a tape loop in a retro-diner. As we travelled around two cities, and took a long drive between them that brought us to San Simeon and the kelp-beds of Morro Bay (Paul has a thing about kelp), I realized we were more likely to be struck by McAuley Moments. These are chance encounters with a person, building, cultural event or phenomenon that convince you Paul J. McAuley is the only writer in the science fiction field whose future is already here.

The cumulative effect of three weeks of McAuley Moments is that you come to believe Paul is the only man in the

* At least, Kim did – see for instance, his novella 'Out of the Night, When the Full Moon is Bright'. I got a guy with a crusty head wound. [PJM]

universe capable of dealing with it, if only by wearing mirror-shades ironically (not as easy as it sounds) and sniggering like some post-modern Muttley. Actually, the cool shades he is seen to be sporting in some photographs are old-fashioned granny-takes-a-trip black sunglasses: Paul has the knack of tilting his head so the photographer's flash catches the lenses *just so* and makes mirrors of them. Confronted with an impossibility, he will mull it over for a few quiet moments as if considering accepting it, and then chortle 'fuck off'.

A wino came up to us outside Book Soup on Sunset Boulevard and claimed he had just triaged his head with a bottle of cleaning fluid. He had the bloody marks to prove it. In Los Angeles, down-and-outs can form sentences using the word 'triage', probably some fall-out from battlefield medical jargon in one of the USA's odd little pseudo-colonial embarrassments. That bum reappears in Paul's novel *Fairyland*, which is essential reading, and not only because it is the largest component of a loose cycle of near-future stories represented here by 'Prison Dreams', 'Dr Luther's Assistant', 'Children of the Revolution' and 'Slaves'. You don't need to know the novel to enjoy the stories – a throwaway line in 'Slaves' unfairly sums up its entire plot as bad fiction – but each shard illuminates the others. It's a fallacy to subdivide Paul's work into cycles (the story clusters that accrue to *Fairyland*, the alternate world of *Pasquale's Angel* or the far future setting of *Eternal Light*), since his ideas cross the barriers between them, and stories with apparently the same background sometimes cut different ways.

The triage bum was a McAuley Moment, revealing a truth about the way the world is going that runs through McAuley's humane but sardonic commentaries: you don't have to be ignorant to lose the place. Science fiction used to give us technocrats as heroes, visionary spacemen and thinkers who would expand mankind's (America's, they meant) manifest destiny to the stars. Paul's science fiction, which is as involved with the magic and romance of *realwelt* science as anyone else's, gives us the marginals: workers, artists, hustlers, ex-revolutionaries, criminals, losers, eternal stu-

dents. For a long time, he has taught at various academic institutes: his characters are the types who drift around the edges of any university, never quite getting round to taking or teaching classes but often spinning elaborate and pleasing theories in common rooms or hall of residence kitchens.

While Cyberpunk™ replaces the old-style Dan Dares with supercool drop-outs, the Fonz with a plug in his skull, Paul knows what life in squats and collectives is really like. His outlaws spend most of their time in the cold, glimpsing the ripples of history that pass them by, sensing the great changes overtaking the universe, struggling sometimes to do the right thing in extreme circumstances, never entertaining fantasies of omnipotence or martyrdom, as deeply surrounded by naff cultural debris as by anything which might be categorized as trendy pop reference. Like any English writer (he has Irish ancestry and lives in Scotland, but he's English), McAuley often pinpoints the exact rituals of tea-making and snack-sharing that underly his characters' circular arguments.

Through it all, wonderfully in two stories here that (following *Pasquale's Angel*) embroider the character and legend of Dr Pretorius (the waspish mad scientist played by Ernest Thesiger in James Whale's 1935 film, *Bride of Frankenstein*), there's a sense of the sheer looniness of those hidden masters who have tapped into the way the world works and manipulate it for their amusement. Dr Luther is also an avatar of Pretorius, taking this creature of hidden history into the future.

Later in our Los Angeles trip, Paul and I visited the La Brea Tar Pits, where the Japanese-style wing of the LA County Museum of Art offered another vision of a future that is already here, and happened into an exhibition of huge pictures by the artist Mark Tansey, which turned out to be another McAuley Moment. Among Tansey's most impressive works is 'Derrida Queries de Man', a parodic recreation of Sherlock Holmes's struggle with Professor Moriarty above the Reichenbach Falls in which the French philosophers Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man dance close to a precipice on a turquoise mountain-top etched with words.

The mix of complex allusion, wry humour, minute detail, populist form, serious content and figurative-narrative elements strikes me as the canvas equivalent of a McAuley novel or story. Also in that exhibition was 'The Innocent Eye Test', in which a cow in an art gallery is shown a seventeenth-century canvas of a bull by dignified experts, which a passing American child told his parents was his favourite picture in the exhibition. Why? 'I just like the cow.' Similarly, though there's an exhausting amount of content in a story as brief as 'Gene Wars', it could also be read and loved by that kid who just liked the cow.

Paul is of that post-New Wave generation of sf writers who have rediscovered the pleasure of the gosh-wow (witness the far future kaleidoscope of 'Recording Angel') and of stories with plots and characters as well as big ideas and unusual structures. In many ways, his strength is that approachable narrative allows you to get closer to the white heat of Idea than you might think. And, with Paul, ideas always proliferate, rushing like the dizzying waters of that fall which claimed (but didn't) Holmes, throwing up patterns and resonances.

In San Francisco, crammed in the back of a wild taxi with Ellen Datlow, Paul got into a conversation with the driver about Theory. If you have to ask 'theory of what?' you wouldn't have been able to get into the conversation. As he debated the finer points of de Man's arguments with the cabbie, I realized this was another McAuley Moment, drawing out of the woodwork yet another surprise. The philosophical taxi driver has yet to show up in Paul's fiction, but he would fit in, exchanging Theory with random fares, delighted to find someone capable of talking on his level. Ellen was annoyed because the guy couldn't find our restaurant, but I think that was a small price to pay. As Paul reminds me, the guy blurted 'Oops, I forgot I was a taxi driver,' killed the meter and did get us to our meal only half an hour late.

Pay attention to these stories. There are things in them that you need to know.

Kim Newman, 1996

The Invisible Country

Cameron was discharged from the black clinic with nothing more than his incubation fee and a tab of painkiller so cut with chalk it might as well have been aspirin. Emptied of the totipotent marrow that had been growing there, the long bones of his thighs ached with fierce fire, and he blew twenty pounds on a pedicab that took him to the former department store on Oxford Street where he rented a cubicle.

The building's pusher, a slender Bengali called Lost In Space, was lounging in his deckchair near the broken glass doors, and Cameron bought a hit of something called Ephedrin from him.

'Enkephalin-specific,' Lost In Space said, as Cameron dry-swallowed the red gelatin capsule. 'Hits the part of the brain that makes you think you hurt. Good stuff, Doc. So new the bathtub merchants haven't cracked it yet.' He folded up his fax of yesterday's *Financial Times* – like most pushers, he liked to consider himself a player in the Exchange's information flux – and smiled, tilting his head to look up at Cameron. There was a diamond set into one of his front teeth. 'There is a messenger waiting for you all morning.'

'Komarnicki has a job for me? It's been a long time.'

'You are too good to work for him, Doc. You know there is a place for you in our organization. There is always need for collectors, for gentlemen who have a *persuasive* air.'

'I don't work for the Families, OK? I'm freelance, always will be.'

'Better surely, Doc, than renting your body. Those kinky cell lines can turn rogue so easily.'

'There are worse things.' Cameron remembered the glimpse he'd had of the surrogate ward, the young men naked on pallets, bulging bellies shining as if oiled and

pulsing with the asynchronous beating of the hearts growing inside them. The drug was beginning to take hold, delicate caresses of ice fluttering through the pain in his legs. He looked around at the dozen or so transients camped out on the grimy marble floor and said loudly, 'Where's this messenger?'

A skinny boy, seven or eight years old, came over. All he wore was plastic sandals and tight-fitting shorts of fluorescent orange waterproofed cotton. Long greasy hair tangled around his face; his thin arms were ropery with homemade tattoos. A typical mudlark. Homeless, futureless, there had to be a million of them in London alone, feral as rats or pigeons, and as little loved. He handed Cameron a grubby strip of paper and started to whine that he hadn't been paid.

'You've a lot to learn, streetmeat,' Cameron said, as he deciphered Komarnicki's scrawled message. 'Next time ask me before you hand over the message.' He started for the door, then turned and knocked the shiv from the boy's hand by pure reflex.

The blade had been honed from the leaf of a car spring: when Cameron levered it into a crack in the marble floor it bent but would not snap. He tossed it aside and the boy swore at him, then dodged Cameron's half-hearted cuff and darted through the broken doors into the crowded street. Another enemy. Well, he'd just have to take his turn with the rest.

Lost In Space called out, 'Your soft heart will get you in trouble one day, Doc.'

'Fuck you. That blade was probably all that poor kid had in the world. Sell a working man a couple more of those capsules and save the opinions.'

Lost in Space smiled up lazily. 'It is always a pleasure doing business with you, Doc. You are such a regular customer.' The diamond sparkled insincerely.

Cameron checked his gun harness out of storage and hiked around Wreckers Heaps to Komarnicki's office. The shanty town strung along the margin of the Heaps was more

crowded than ever. When Cameron had lived there, his first days in the city after the farm, after Birmingham, there had still been trees, even a little grass. The last of Hyde Park. No more. Naked children chased each other between tents and shanty huts, dodging around piles of rubbish and little heaps of human shit that swarmed with flies. Smoke from innumerable cooking fires hazed the tops of the Exchange's far-off river-front ribbon of glittering towers, the thread of the skyhook beyond. Along the street, competing sound systems laid overlapping pulses of highlife, rai, garage dub, technoraga. Hawkers cried their wares by the edge of the slow-moving stream of bubblecars, flatbed trucks crowded with passengers, pedicabs, bicycles. Occasionally, a limo of some New Family or Exchange vip slid through the lesser vehicles like a sleek shark. And over all this, ad screens raised on rooftops or cantilevered gantries straddling the road or derelict sites glowed with heartbreakingly beautiful faces miming happiness or amazement or sexual ecstasy behind running slogans for products that no one on the street could possibly afford, or for cartels only the information brokers in the Exchange knew anything about.

A couple of mudlarks were stripping a corpse near the barricades at the southern corner of the Heaps. Riot cops guarding the gibbets where the bodies of a dozen felons hung watched impassively, eyes masked by the visors of their helmets, Uzis slung casually at their sides. They stirred the usual little frisson of adrenaline in Cameron's blood, a reflex that was all that was left of his days on the run, a student revolutionary with an *in absentia* sentence of treason on his head. But he was beyond the law now. He was one of the uncountable citizens of the invisible country, for whom there were only the gangs and posses and the arbitrary justice of the New Families. Law was reserved for the rich, and fortress suburbia, and the prison camps where at least a quarter of the population was locked away, camps Cameron had avoided by the skin of his teeth.

Inside the barricades, things were cleaner, quieter. The plate-glass windows of Harrods displayed artful arrangements

of electronics, biologics, the latest Beijing fashions. Japanese and Brazilian business men strolled the wide pavements, paced by tall men in sleeveless jackets cut to show off their fashionably shaped torsos – like a blunt, inverted triangle – and the grafted arm muscle and hypertrophied elbow and shoulder joints. Some had scaly spurs jutting from wrists or elbows. A league away from Cameron's speed. He relied on his two metres and muscles shaped by weight-training, not surgery, to make a presence. Consequently, he got only the lesser members of visiting entourages, translators, bagmen, gofers: never the vips. As *Lost In Space* had said, he was getting old. And worse than old, out-of-date. Even though Komarnicki's protection agency had never been anything but a marginal affair just one step ahead of the law, Cameron was hardly getting any work from it any more.

Komarnicki's office was in a Victorian yellow-brick town-house in the warren of streets behind the V&A, as near to Exchange as he could afford, three flights up stairs that wound around a defunct lift shaft at least a century old. Cameron swallowed another of the capsules and went in.

Komarnicki was drinking rice tea from a large porcelain cup, feet up on his steel and glass desk. A fat man with long white hair combed across a bald spot, his gaze shrewd behind old-fashioned square-lensed spectacles. 'So you are here at last,' he said briskly. 'Doc, Doc, you get so slow I wonder if you can any more cut the mustard.'

'Next time try employing a real messenger.'

Komarnicki waved that away. 'But you are here. I have a special job for you, one requiring your scientific training.'

'That was another life. Twenty years ago, for Christ's sake.' In fact, Cameron had hardly started his thesis work when the army had been sent in to close down the universities, and besides, he had been too involved with the resistance to do any research.

'Still, you are all I have in the way of a biologist, and the client is insistent. He wants muscle with a little learning, and who am I to deny his whim?' Komarnicki took his feet off the desk. Tea slopped over the rim of his cup as he leaned