

Regeneration by Stephanie Sauter
(Jo Fletcher Books, 2015)
Reviewed by Nick Hubble

Reading this final volume of the @Evolution trilogy, it is difficult not to be aware of the contemporary social parallels of Sauter's nearish-future techno not-quite-thrillers. While it is true that there are not communities of genetically-modified humans – 'gems', as distinct from non-genetically-modified 'norms' – living in trendy up-and-coming districts of London, nor has the general population yet crashed due to neural overload from digital devices, we do live in the world of social networks and competing memes that Sauter displays with sophistication and nuance. This is a tense world in which politicians representing minorities cannot afford to say anything that would 'imply that we think we're better than the people who think they're our betters'. Changes have resulted in a reduction of jobs and therefore allowed people a negative way of talking about new developments that they're able to convince themselves isn't bigoted.

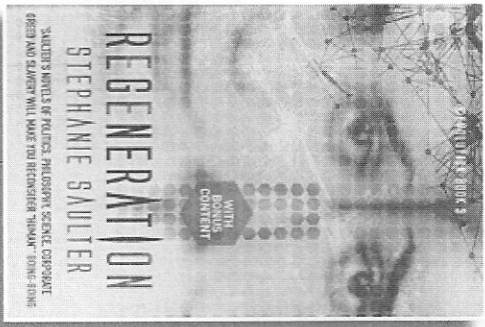
At a time when so much – including gender, sexuality, western-centric thought, science, climate, and the nature of work – that we hitherto took for granted is in flux and prompting a reactionary nostalgia for traditional hierarchical values, it is good to be reminded that, as the opening sentence of the novel states, 'It is a rare thing, to see change coming'. Unfortunately, we are all too aware of the truth of the second sentence: 'Embracing it is rarer still'.

The plot of *Regeneration* concerns the opening of a tidal power energy station on the Thames, which is run and owned by a team of gillungs, gems who can breathe underwater. Through the innovative use of quantum batteries, 'Thames Tidal' promises to supply the energy needs of the city but at the cost of the existing biomass industry, which is a major employer of norms in the countryside around London and controlled by an entrenched financial elite. This same elite dominate a conservative political party, the 'Traditional Democrats' or 'Trads', attempting to wrest power from the more liberal 'United People's

Party', who support gem entrepreneurship and technology. Thus the scene is set for a power struggle between an inclusive, multicultural vision of the future and the determination of those with vested interests to defend them by stoking the fears of those outside the cities who feel left behind.

This archetypal conflict is intensified by the cumulative effect of the two previous volumes in the trilogy, *Gemsigns* (2013) and *Binary* (2014), which introduced us to the principal characters and established their background history. *Gemsigns* begins with the escape of a gem, who we only much later learn to be the enigmatically hunchbacked Aryel Morningstar, from a secret research facility. Thereafter, the novel is concerned with a special Congress in London to determine whether escaped gems should be given human rights or returned to the control of the corporations that have engineered them such as Bel'Natur, where power is wielded by the supremely cold Zawcka Klisi. It is only when forced to save the telepathic gem child, Gabriel, from thugs over-zealously

carrying out Zawcka's orders, that Aryel reveals her true nature and dramatically carries him to safety. The sense of wonder engendered by this rescue, carried out in front of the eyes of the global media, connects directly with so many human desires for transformative magic that it overcomes the norms' fear of difference and opens up a window for progressive change.



Binary, a much tighter novel, turns on Zawcka's offer to Aryel of collaboration with gems to develop a human-binary interface for digital interaction. While the plot follows Bel'Natur's attempts to replicate how the autistic gem Herran interfaces directly with binary code, it only becomes belatedly apparent that Zawcka's motivation is to transfer her own unnatural longevity into immortality by finding a means of digitally transferring her consciousness into the clone she is illegally growing in the secret labs in the basement of the Bel'Natur building. Sauter's mix of thriller elements, scientific extrapolation and character-driven drama is sometimes uneasy, especially in *Gemsigns*, and it is not always clear if we are reading a work of social vision or a police procedural. Indeed, the back cover blubs of *Binary* and *Regeneration* give the erroneous

impression that the norm police detective, Sharon Varsi, is the main character. However, by the end of *Binary*, a genuinely powerful representation has been created of a dialectical struggle between progressive difference, as embodied by Aryel, and entitled power, as embodied by Zawcka.

What enables *Regeneration* to work as a satisfactory conclusion to the trilogy is that the opposition between Aryel and Zawcka is not simply mapped on top of the power struggles between the gem-run Thames Tidal and the Trad's but provides depth by running at a tangent to the main plot of the novel. The same forces trying to sabotage the new power station are also looking for Zawcka's clone, who is now being brought up as Gabriel's younger sister, Eve. In this way, the traditional financial elite also hope to gain access to Zawcka's supposed immortality and thus entrench themselves in perpetuity. But what their hunger for power illustrates is a comparative lack of vision in contrast to both the gems, with their different sense of human possibilities, and Zawcka, with her different sense of time. In a nice touch, it is the latter who, while desperately trying to be the first one to get to the abducted Eve, recognises the revolutionary transformation of society taking place in the streets in which the gems and their allies have become the pioneers of a new landscape. *Regeneration* closes with the promise of a future for Eve as the new woman living in an age that has space for her.

World of Water by James Lovegrove
(Solaris, 2016)
Reviewed by Stuart Carter

The story engine at the heart of Lovegrove's *Dev Hammer* series is a sound one, with perhaps a small debt to the early adventures of a certain Time Lord who also travelled the universe unsure where his travels would take him. However, that's where the similarities end. Dev Hammer isn't a Time Lord, he works for Interstellar Security Solutions (ISS), although not by choice. A former soldier in the war against the Polis+, now he's an indentured servant for ISS, working to pay off his debts by serving as an intergalactic trouble-shooter. When there's trouble on a human colony ISS send in Hammer – via a consciousness download, uploaded into a locally cloned body – to fix it. Dev never knows where he's going, or what the problem is, until he gets there.