

# ENTERTAINMENT & THE ARTS

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SECTION K

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## BOOKS



Inside: Nisi Shawl reviews new science fiction. K 9



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Saga, a swashbuckling fantasy by a Japanese woman named Kaoru Kurimoto. An anonymous warrior wakes by a forest pool, wearing a leopard's head mask he's unable to remove; a pair of twins, exiled royalty, fight off flesh-eating ghouls; a swarm of monkeylike forest dwellers attack and destroy an ancient castle.

The book's intense images and dreamlike simplicity give it an anime air, and followers of that distinctively Japanese style of animated storytelling will feel quite comfortable in this milieu.

Action's always center stage; this stripped-down style may be the secret to Kurimoto's prolific output. A Japanese publisher recently released Book 88 of the 100 Kurimoto promised when she began the Saga series 25 years ago. English translations of Books 2 and 3 are slated for release in September and November, so if readers want more, they won't have long to wait.

*Nisi Shawl's column on science fiction runs quarterly in The Seattle Times books pages.*

## SCIENCE FICTION

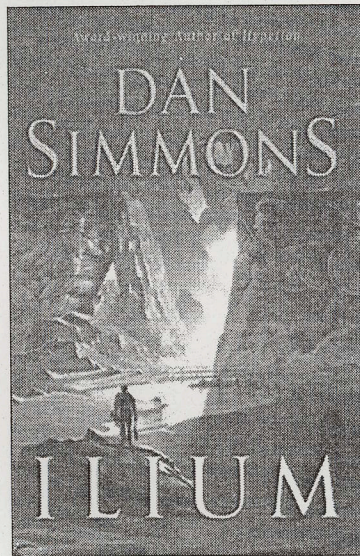
## Complex 'Ilium' features strange locale, familiar plot

BY NISI SHAWL  
*Special to The Seattle Times*

Summer lures us out of hibernation with the promise of wonderful adventures to be had — or read. Those who prefer the latter course can choose new tales set in strange locales or older ones with tried-and-true characters and familiar, well-loved plots.

Popular science-fiction author Dan Simmons gives us both in "Ilium" (Eos, \$25.95), the first volume of his two-part take on Homer's "Iliad."

Thomas Hockenberry, resurrected professor of classical studies at a small Eastern college, is now a firsthand observer on the front lines of the Trojan War. Every morning Hockenberry and his fellow "scholics" leave their Muse-supervised barracks on Mount Olympus and quantum jump to the plains of Ilium. There, disguised as bit players, invulnerable in high-tech armor and equipped with long-range sensors, they keep track of any deviations



from Homer's version of the day's doings. Then the Muse gives Hockenberry an extra-credit assignment: Kill the genetically enhanced superhuman entity called Athena.

Meanwhile, the decadent remnants of humanity scattered

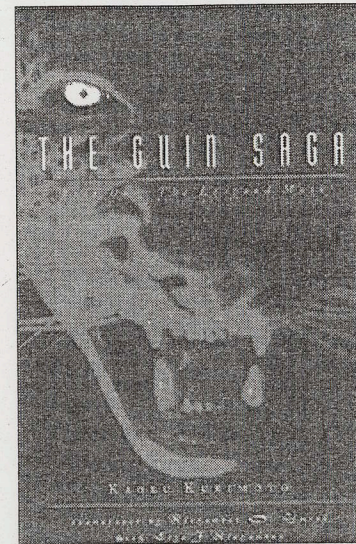
across far-future Earth "fax" themselves instantaneously from weeklong cocktail party to weeklong cocktail party. After 100 pointless years, each is faxed to join the immortal post-humans in their near-Earth-orbit habitat. Or are they? A select few begin to doubt this and attempt to find the post-humans before their own allotted lifespans end. But the post-humans seem to have disappeared.

The plucky robots the post-humans put to work in the far reaches of the solar system also notice their absence. The robots' search for their creators centers on the slopes of the gigantic Martian volcano Olympus ... which just happens to be the hangout of Hockenberry's Muse and the other "gods." Are these gods and the post-humans the same?

When Hockenberry goes to Ilium, is he travelling in time to Homer's original "topless towers," or to a far-future reconstruction generated to entertain the terminally bored, or even to some alternate universe? These important questions remain unanswered at the book's end, presumably to be addressed in the next volume.

This is a complex story, even before the author adds retellings of some of the Iliad's battle scenes. While Simmons is certainly capable of carrying it off with verve, humor and several

highly poetic rants, you can see why it will take him two big, fat books (this one is more than 550 pages) to do so. As well as Homer, "Ilium" draws on the works of Shakespeare, Proust, Browning, and Tennyson — in other words, the Western canon. An indisputably awe-inspiring group, these authors are not the sole sum and source of all literature, as Simmons implies through the absence of any other candidates.



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The magical worlds of Martha Wells' "The Wizard Hunters" (Eos, \$24.95) may seem less exotic. The narrative switches between the fictional nation of Ile-Rien, where there are automobiles as well as wizards, and another more traditionally low-tech magical realm.

Tremaine, orphaned daughter of a genteel mobster and patron of the sorcerous arts, donates an en-