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The Real Macleods

&

A Vertical Strategy

The Agony Column for July 12, 2003

Commentary by Rick Kleffel

If reading stupid reviews of even stupider movies has not turned your brain to guava jelly, it's time to go back to the books and get some decent input. I promise not to froth at the mouth too much. Really. I'm not going to rant on about how critics who are too stupid to understand the plots to summer blockbuster movies probably require assistance to guide forks full of food to their faces. Really.



Forget the fakers -- these are the real deal writers who can entertain the heck out of those who are willing to read a book. On the left above is Ian R. Macleod, author of 'The



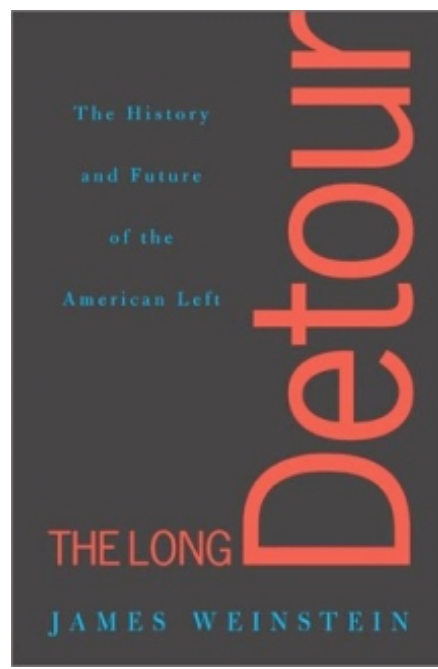
Ken Macleod looks a lot happier than you might expect the author of 'Engine City' to look.

Light Ages'

Instead, I'm going to accentuate the positive and in a summer when you can read back-to-back Scottish Socialist Science fiction writers *with the same name*, well who needs the silver screen, the plasma screen, or any screen whatsoever, other than the screen upon which you're currently reading this column. I had the distinct pleasure of enjoying the work of two writers I've been following separately for a long, long time, and whom I've never had the pleasure of connecting until this summer. That would be Ian R. Macleod and Ken Macleod, who both have recent novels out of substance, style and utterly opposite effect. Ian R. Macleod's '[The Light Ages](#)' is a gorgeous, rich tapestry of beautiful prose, original speculation and complex characters caught in a melancholy life of work. Ken Macleod's '[Engine City](#)', the conclusion of his 'Engines of Light' trilogy, is a lucky-bag stuffed full of ideas, characters, legends and humor then compacted into fewer pages than the introductory portions of a fantasy epic. But both engines run on the author's own version of homegrown socialism, played out in the nitty-gritty of a world re-imagined by a talented and particularly odd writer.



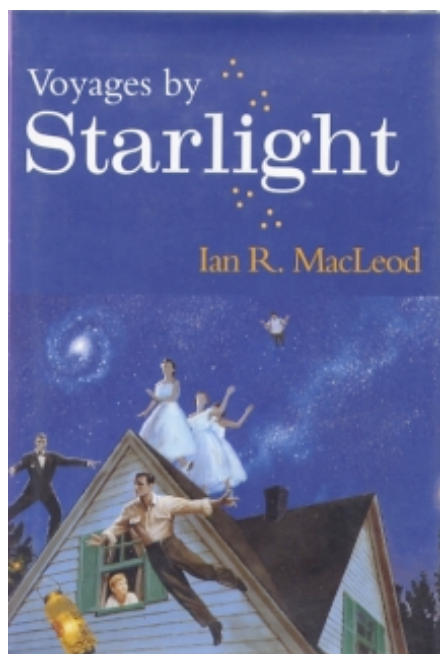
This non-fiction work is as powerful and as plotted as a novel; it begins with the assassination of the ex-governor of Idaho, and brings in Clarence Darrow and the Pinkerton detectives.



James Weinstein documents the history of Socialism in America.

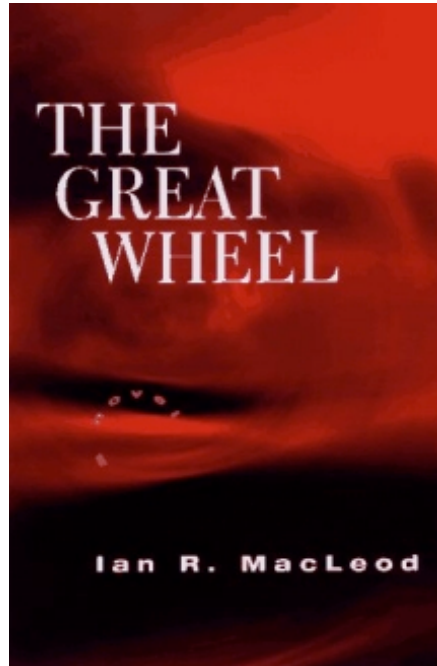
Now before the carping starts, let me qualify what I say. I'm by no means a card carrying socialist, though I was more than ready to join after reading J. Anthony Lukas's 'Big Trouble'. This gripping story of the battle between mining corporations and the unions in turn-of-the-twentieth century Idaho is also the story of how socialism was crushed in America by an effective partnership between a fearful government and greedy corporations. Sound familiar? Well, you can fast forward to today to read James Weinstein's 'The Long Detour', an effective overview of socialism in America. Lukas's work reads like a gripping, epic novel and will stir your soul, or depending on your politics, inspire you to toss it across the room. It's hefty enough that you should also expect damage to the impact area. You can also expect damage to your brain; you won't think of yourself, your country or your corporate sponsors in the same way ever again. So compared to anyone who really knows anything about it, I'm

very lightweight. Neither of the Real Macleods may be card-carrying socialists; they may not even like socialism. But to me their books walk like socialists and talk like socialists; I'm calling the books socialist.



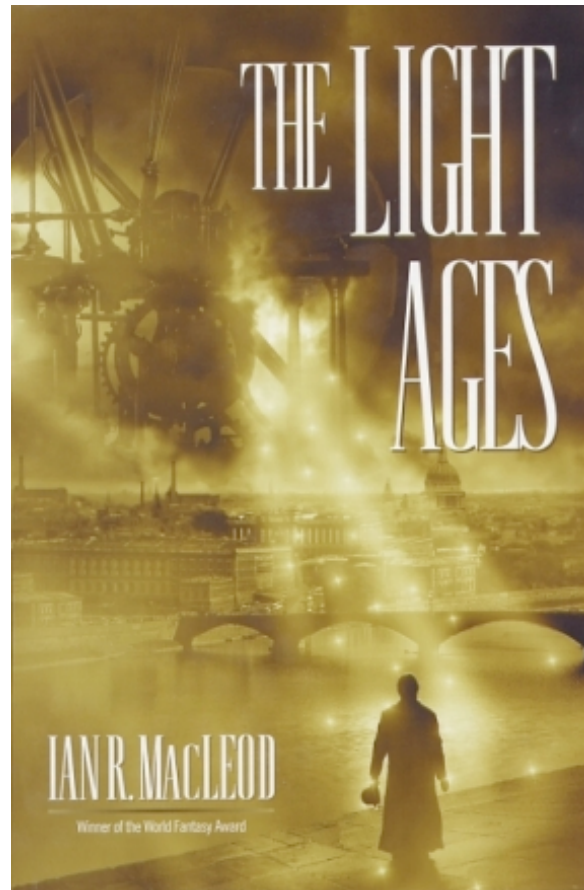
This collection came my way via the Arkham house auto-buy policy.

My first contact with either of these writers was when I picked up Ian R. Macleod's short story collection, 'Voyages by Starlight'. It came to me via my auto-buy policy for anything from Arkham House, a policy that's served me well for years. 'Voyages by Starlight' was a strong indicator of what we could expect in forthcoming novels from this writer. Macleod creates so confidently that any story of his could be described to fit within just about any sub-genre of speculative fiction - science fiction, fantasy or horror. What unites them all is Macleod's careful prose. This doesn't mean that he writes frilly literary prose for each and every story, but rather that he adapts the language to the story being told. In '1/72nd Scale', the language is simple and straightforward to match the story of a boy trying to live up to his dead brother's legacy. But when Macleod wants to get lyrical, watch out, or more pertinently - bring out your singers. You'll want to hear the full-voiced richness of such pieces as 'The Giving Mouth' read aloud. And you're lucky enough that you'll be able to find this book with relative ease.



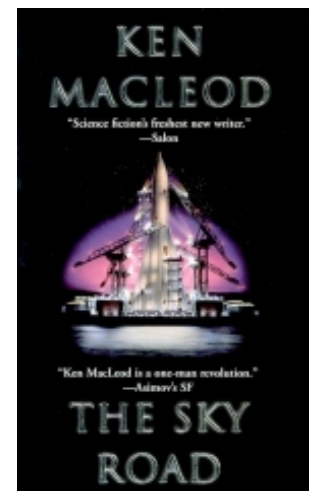
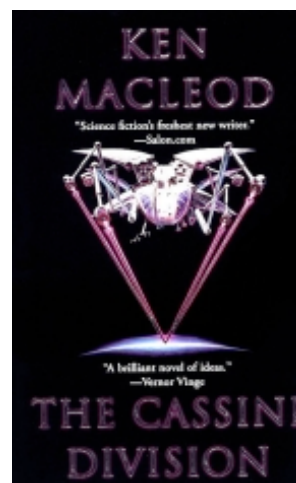
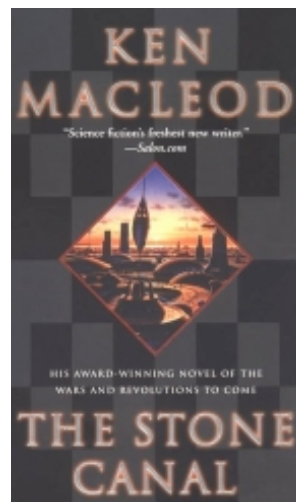
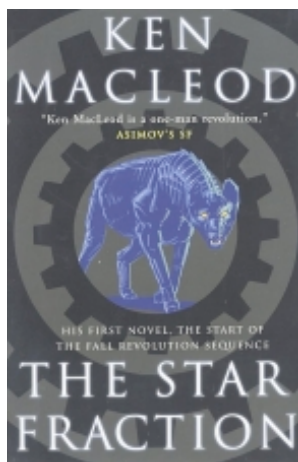
Ian R. Macleod's first novel is a dense exploration of disease and spirituality in a nearer-every-damn-second-future Africa.

Busy with the intransigence of everyday life, I missed Ian R. Macleod's first novel, 'The Great Wheel' and rather forgot about him until I laid my hands on 'The Light Ages'. Here was another case of me digging up an author's old books even before I'd finished the new ones. Fortunately, I was able to go to a very nice vendor, Von Thiel, who had sent me stuff in the past, and he had 'The Great Wheel' at a very reasonable price, in a brand new first-edition hardcover. 'The Light Ages' meanwhile beckoned and it should beckon to all readers. It's a seriously beautiful novel.



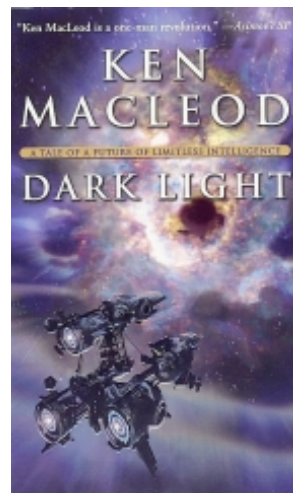
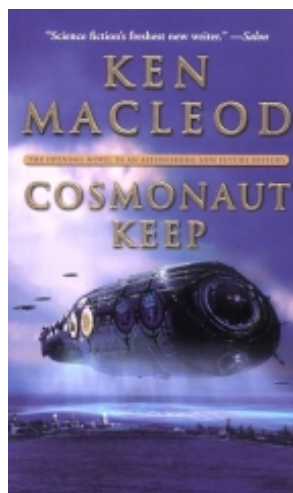
*Buy this novel now while the first editions are still cheap.
For an example why, check out the costs of hardcover
first editions of 'Perdido Street Station'.*

For those who try the first-page prose test (which I admit isn't something I often try), ['The Light Ages'](#) will be a very easy buy. Macleod's gorgeous prose rises from the page and coalesces into a gorgeous painting right in front of your eyes. His story of an alternate England powered by a uranium-like substance of flesh-warping power called aether, is achingly melancholic. He creates a world so detailed, so full that it's easy to feel the passion of his carefully crafted characters. This is a world of great injustice, where the gap between the rich and the poor is positively astronomical. In other words, it's much like our world. Ian R. Macleod's socialist bent is that of the passionate on-the-street believer. Robert Borrows, the first person narrator of 'The Light Ages' is a pamphleteer, a ranter and raver in the most primitive sense of the word, railing against -- the Guilds. Macleod creates an interesting dissonance by defining his fiscal aristocracy through 'The Guilds'. For most modern readers, the word "guild" has the connotation of a union, and thus a populist entity. But in Macleod's world, the Guilds are used to create the hierarchy that keeps the rich separated from the poor, much in the way corporate entities do in our world. In our world, the unions at least would like to have the average joes believe that they stand between us and corporate domination. In Macleod's world, nothing stops the Guilds from dominating all wealth. Robert Borrows moves from the aether-mining town in which he was born to the big city and starts calling his comrades "Citizen". 'The Light Ages' shows Macleod to be a world builder of supreme skill and a writer with a powerful voice -- a powerful Scottish socialist science-fictional voice. He claims on his [website](#) to be "well past what I'd like to think is the half-way point of my next novel, Electricity...Electricity is set in the same world as 'The Light Ages', but almost a century further forward in time, which, by their slow technological progress, means that things have moved forward by perhaps ten or fifteen years." If you want to talk about highly anticipated sequels, this would be one.



Ken MacLeod's 'Fall Revolution' series is a dense evocation of a confusing and complex future.

On the other side of the spectrum is Ken MacLeod, also Scottish, socialist and a science fiction writer. Other than that, no similarity. Well, the name, but -- Ken MacLeod has been on my radar since the US release of 'The Stone Canal'. The 'Fall Revolution' sequence of novels should be read in the proper order if you're going to have a hope of understanding what's going on, so here you go: 'The Star Fraction' is first, with the birth of world chaos and an online AI, followed by 'The Stone Canal', 'The Cassini Division' and finishing up with an elegiac 'The Sky Road'. Ken MacLeod writes books that are so packed with ideas, reading one is like picking up a handful of needles. He'll start in the recent past, with bullshitting socialist wannabes hanging about and philosophizing while getting hornswoggled. Before you know it, they're building working versions of the traditional flying saucers ("gravity skiffs") and popping off to live in harmony on an alien earth with Bigfoot ("gigants") and Grey Aliens ("saur").



The 'Engines of Light' series features Fortean and socialist themes played out across a wonderfully detailed universe.

This is just a small part of what happens in his latest series, called 'Engines of Light', which consists of three novels, '[Cosmonaut Keep](#)', '[Dark Light](#)' and '[Engine City](#)'. Ken MacLeod is a guy who likes to have a lot of fun with ideas, characters, settings and his vast imagination. He's also a guy who has the wit to have this fun in highly compacted novels that are chock-a-block full of humor and bristling with life to the point where you might need a scorecard to keep track of who is in love with who and what planet they're on at any given moment. As a science

fiction writer, Macleod is too-sharp-kitchen-knife sharp. You might injure your brain as you slide between the clever ideas that he serves up like razor blades for the soft-skinned. Most importantly, he has a sense of humor about all this stuff he packs into his novels. About the 'Engines of Light' series, he told me that he "may write a sequel to the series in which some people from subsequent generations go adventuring off along the paths opened by the dissident god's map of the galaxy...but mention it's not going to be soon.." I really loved the universe he created in this series, and I'd really like to see where he goes with it. But whatever he offers up, I'll be among the first in line to buy.

Alas, getting the Ken Macleod titles in untouched first editions is going to set you back a few samolians but it's definitely worth it. If you're not so inclined, most of them can now be had as domestic paperbacks on either side of the ocean. In any event, if you've not tried out Macleod's utterly unique brand of chaotic socialism, get out of your sandwich sign and into the bookstore. Good socialists are supposed to read.



The Vertical-Inc Home page features their latest releases from Japan.

Good capitalists, on the other hand, are supposed to make money. A publisher I've been looking at fairly closely of late seems to have very intriguing plan for doing just that, and doing so by publishing books that even good socialists might want to read. Vertical-Inc came into my purview when I picked up their publication of Koji Suzuki's '[Ring](#)'. In picking your reading, it's nice to find publishers who consistently publish stuff you like; it makes experimentation a little less costly and a little more likely to lead to the purchase of a book you like. It's often rather hard to get a good bead on what kind of books to expect from a particular publisher, however, since most publishers calibrate their output based on editorial choices made by a group of editors whose choices can be totally idiosyncratic. That's why I found it rather refreshing and interesting to see what they're doing over at [Vertical-Inc](#).



Koji Suzuki's 'Ring' is an intense novel of technological, supernatural and mathematical terror.

I wrote the folks over at Vertical-Inc to find out if they'd be releasing the sequels to 'Ring' by Koji Suzuki. I liked that novel well enough to want to buy the author's other works, particularly the two sequels to 'Ring', 'Spiral' and 'Loop'. Suzuki brings an interesting dispassionate mathematical point-of-view to his techno-horror. I also enjoyed the [Chip Kidd](#) book design. Micah Burch wrote me back and informed me that they were in the process of translating the two sequels, and suggested that I might find their publication of 'Guin Saga' interesting, and that Chip Kidd was in charge of their art. It was then that I took another look at the Vertical-Inc website.

In the first place, the [web site](#) is fairly nicely designed. It loads quickly, at least. But the Vertical -Inc strategy is nothing less than brilliant, especially in these uncertain financial and reading times. Vertical-Inc's plan is to translate and publish the best of the most popular Japanese fiction. Here's what they say on their website:

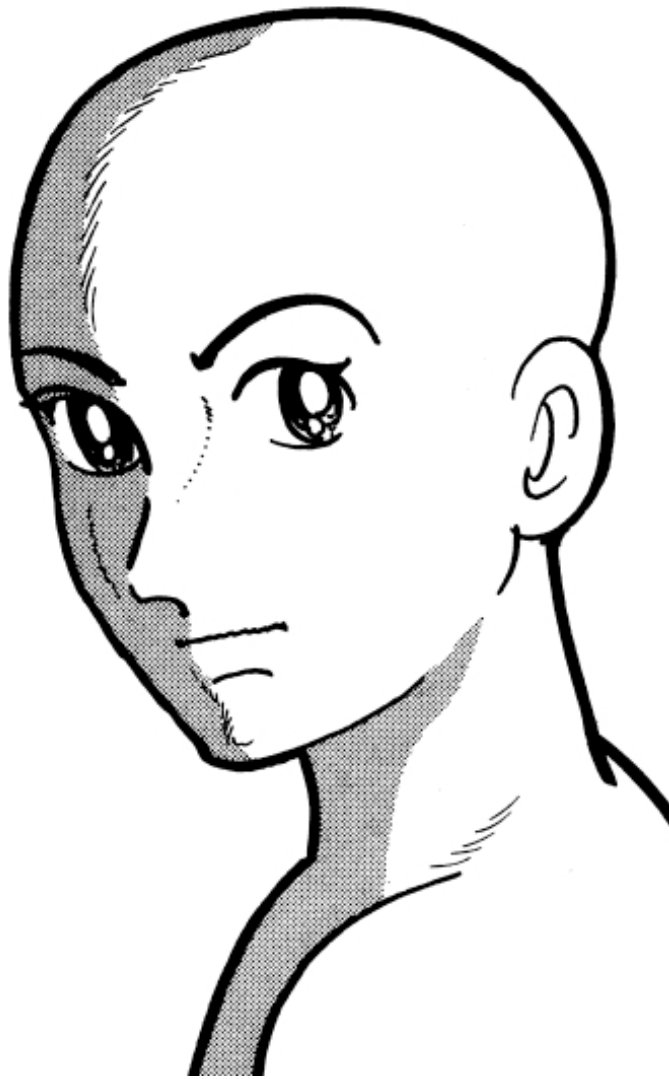
"Vertical, Inc., is a unique new publisher specializing in translating the best contemporary Japanese books. We select our popular novels, graphic novels, and quality nonfiction from a rich, variegated stock: Japan's huge and vibrant book market. "

"In fields like animation and video games, Japanese entertainment thrills people worldwide. The Japanese book world's offerings are equally entertaining. Until now, however, most Japanese books translated into English have been either literary classics or introductions to traditional culture meant for a limited circle of Japanophiles. Vertical publishes exciting titles that require no prior knowledge of Japanese culture and are not intended primarily

to familiarize readers with it; we choose good reads with universal themes. "

Here's a publishing company that's got a huge backlog of bestselling titles queued up and ready to go. They have no pesky writers to deal with; the writing aspect is a done deal. The books have all been test marketed and proved profitable. They've all been heavily reviewed. Now in most cases, publishing is really a hit or miss proposition. Great works are often wasted upon the great unwashed. But what Vertical-Inc has done is give itself access to a huge body of ready-made and more importantly, ready-to-sell-big titles. It's a pure and simple and rather mind-boggling inspiration. They get themselves a couple of translators, a great art director, publish fabulous books that sell well and they don't have a huge out-of-pocket expense. There's a huge audience for entertainment that originates from Japan, and a huge audience for simply good entertainment. There's no market research required. What this means is that they may be able to stay the course and keep publishing until they work out all the kinks of this strategy and are able to seamlessly and effortlessly hand over book after brilliant book.

This said, 'Ring' is a pretty great start, though it's clearly going to play to smaller audiences this time around. But think of the great strategy; here's the book upon which two huge hit movies were based, 'The Ring' and 'Ringu'. Now, both these were out before the book. But the novel sequels should be out before the English-language versions of the sequels are made and before the Japanese versions are available in a decent domestic DVD. Thus, the sequels are pre-sold to an ever-growing audience. That's a publisher that's smart and profitable. We need more.



This image by Chipp Kidd will be formed by the spines of the Vertical-Inc hardcover releases of Osamu Tezuka's 'Buddha'.

I asked Micah what else was up at Vertical, and he told me about 'Buddha' by Osamu Tezuka. Tezuka is apparently the 'father of manga'. This is the 8-volume story of Siddhartha told in manga-style with hardcover editions designed by Chip Kidd. It sounds wonderful and is potentially a very important publication. At this point in time, manga is pretty much the province of Comic book emporiums. Yes, you get a lot of notice about its importance, but if you actually want to find it, you have to go to a comic book store. There, you'll find yourself confronted by a confusion of comics that only a pro can sort through, and most plain-old book readers just can't be bothered.



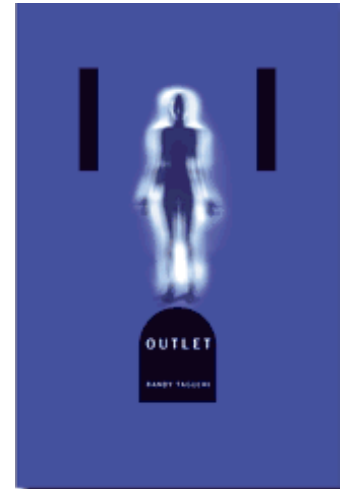
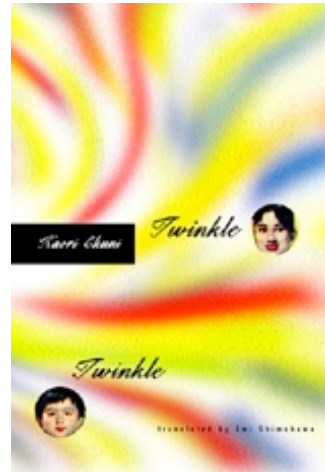
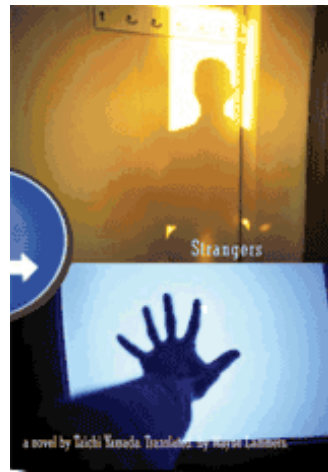
Will Osamu Tezuka's 'Buddha' usher in an age of respect for Manga in the US?

The Vertical-Inc version of 'Buddha' is manga that will look like a book, walk like a book, talk like a book and be available in bookstores. If it lives up to its reputation, and there's an entire nation that says it will, then it should read like literature. I can totally understand why Vertical-Inc is excited about this; they're about to introduce US readers to manga. According to Micah, "...we just got back the galley of our graphic novel "Buddha" by Osamu Tezuka. We're very excited. It is, for lack of a better word, money."



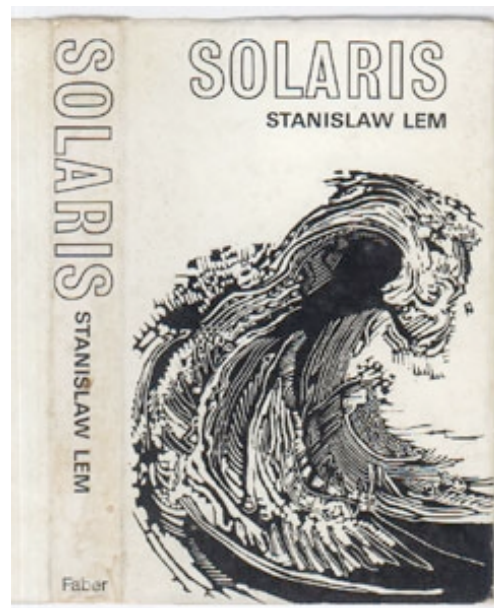
The first volume of the Guin Saga is one of a 100 volume planned series.

I'll say; the illustrations are gorgeous. But 'Buddha' isn't the only trick they've got up their sleeve. There's the 'Guin' saga, an 89, no I just checked, 90 book series that was the Harry Potter of Japan (until the heavily translated Harry moved in, one would presume; I'm not sure who's outselling who now). Projected to be 100 volumes long, the quality supposedly varies after say the first 20. So, 20 volumes of hardcover original fantasy, anyone? Who wouldn't be excited at the prospect of publishing this? And I must say, I'm interested in reading it.



Four new titles from Vertical-Inc cover a range from Cop procedural to new-age horror.

But Vertical-Inc isn't just doing horror, SF and fantasy. Their roster includes some crime fiction titles and other straight fiction titles. '[Ashes](#)' by Kenzo Kitakata is the story of middle-aged mobster, facing a life in mid-level management. Taichi Yamada's '[Strangers](#)' looks to be a bit of surreal suburbiana, while Kaori Ekuni's 'Twinkle Twinkle' is a novel about sexual identities and masks. Randy Taguchi's 'Outlet' is a new-age horror thriller, and like 'Ring' the first of a series.



Yikes! I originally brought in the kissy cover but before my brain could explode, I managed to get a shot of the first edition hardcover from the 1970's. Here's a classic novel that needs a new translation from master Michael Kandel.

The whole deal is not without potential problems for both the publisher and the reader. From the reader's perspective, there are definitely issues with translated fiction. Stanislaw Lem is a great writer, but his translations

remain very uneven. His best stuff is that translated from the Polish by Michael Kandel. But his most popular and best-known novel, 'Solaris' exists only in an inferior English translation taken from a French translation. Infuriatingly, it's not likely to get the Michael Kandel treatment any time soon. Vertical-Inc's hopes hang on translating and translators. 'Ring' was ably served and relatively well-translated. For the most part the author's limpid style seemed to shine right through, though occasionally you could sense the gears behind the otherwise seamless machine. Still, Vertical-Inc will clearly get better and better with this as time passes; it's barely an issue in 'Ring' and is not likely to be an issue in future releases.



Mark Schrieber's 'Tokyo Confidential' is a very weird and funny collection of urban-legend style stories from Japan.

But beyond the raw translation of language, which Vertical-Inc seems to have well in hand, there's the issue of cultural translation. This is a tougher nut to crack. Earlier this year, I came upon a book that humorously capitalized on the issues of cultural translation titled 'Tokyo Confidential'. Here, the authors simply related the most hysterical stories out of Japanese newspapers and played them out like a series of urban legends for sheer entertainment value, and they are sure as heck entertaining. Many of the Japanese straight-fiction bestsellers might hinge on cultural mores and prejudices that are either obscure or non-issues here in the West. Vertical-Inc promises that they will cherry pick the best, the most universally-themed works. These might not be as common as Vertical would like and the process might not be as easy as Vertical-Inc thinks.

On the other hand those cultural differences might be just what discerning readers are after -- a true taste of the strange and exotic. It will fit in perfectly with the genre-oriented offerings that are more sure-fire. Vertical can offer faux-aliens and actual aliens. In any event, Vertical-Inc is clearly a publisher with a unique vision, an interesting set of initial products and some intriguing upcoming projects. We'll be looking at them with great interest, and you should as well. With Chip Kidd's easy-to-spot art direction, it should be a no-brainer to find new Vertical-Inc offerings in your local independent bookseller. Once again, it just got easier to buy books. And, of course, ignore the rest of the entertainment world. While you won't have the pleasure of frothing at the mouth with frustration at good ideas gone bad, you may at least enjoy your Scottish Socialism -- or your Japanese bestsellers - with the knowledge that your brain is not being turned into guava jelly, or indeed any condiment that

might go well on toast.