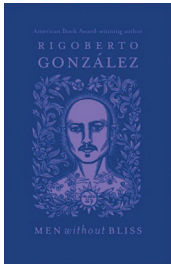


Nevertheless, several beaux seek Lilly's favor, from the disreputable Lord Marlow of her hometown to Dr. Graves, a newly-minted physician. However, her life straddles the tense juncture between three professions: university-trained doctors, surgeons who learn their trade on the battlefield, and the apothecaries. It is upon this landscape that Lilly finds her true place in the world. (January) *Carol Lynn Stewart*

## SHORT STORIES



### Men Without Bliss

**Rigoberto González**  
University of  
Oklahoma Press  
Hardcover \$24.95 (216pp)  
978-0-8061-3945-6

The subjects of the stories of *Men Without Bliss* postpone satisfaction for a better year. Half of them are gay and half are straight, but there are almost no committed relationships of equals. Most work jobs which lack meaning; homosexual characters are accepted by some families, the object of shame in others, and passed over in silence by more.

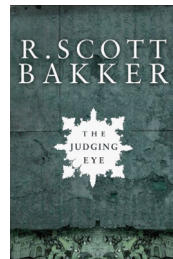
Sтымied Chicano characters in their twenties or thirties act out of obligation to parents who are aging, failing, distant, deluded, or dying. The young men aren't even liberated when overbearing parents pass on, as illustrated in "Malicious Moons": "...your mother—dead four years and still you carry her coffin on your shoulders." One of the most beguiling stories, "Good Boys," features brothers named after the Three Wise Men, whose behavior has coworkers re-labeling them as Three Stooges. Gaspar is a cruel-hearted looker, Balthazar tries to buck his status as a confirmed mama's boy and the happy-go-lucky Melchor is almost as good at diffusing trouble with humor as he is at burglarizing the mansions around Caliente Valley. More than half of the stories are set in this fictional area, which seems to be near the southern end of California's Central Valley.

"Cactus Flower" projects a very different aura. It is a gothic meditation of a farm laborer who lives with a lovely ghost for company in the desert. González draws on a reserve of fantastic lyricism describing how the ghost became one: "She said she was going to leave him, she said she was going to let their world collapse. So he didn't let her leave, not entirely, taking her neck in his hands and widening her mouth until she burst into the air like a puff of dandelion seeds, an explosion of stars in the sky, an outbreak of marigolds. Such beautiful flowers."

González serves on the Board of Directors for the National Book Critics Circle and is a contributing editor to *Poets and Writers*. His novel, *Crossing Vines* won the *ForeWord Magazine* Book of the Year Award for Fiction

in 2003. *Men Without Bliss* is thirteen angles on dreams deferred, on desire that goes unserved, on the potential of undetermined outcomes. This kind of writing connects the particular with the universal and it holds an undeniable draw. (November) *Todd Mercer*

## SPECULATIVE



### The Judging Eye: The Aspect-Emperor, Book One

**R. Scott Bakker**  
Overlook Press  
Hardcover \$26.95 (448 pp)  
978-1-59020-169-5

Sweeping in scope, populated by nations, this first book in a new series by author Bakker picks up twenty years after the events of his first trilogy, *The Prince of Nothing*. Readers of that series will find it easy to submerge themselves in the saga, though there's plenty here to draw in first-timers as well.

Anasürimbor Kellhus, the Aspect-Emperor, has launched the Great Ordeal to prevent the resurrection of the No-God—or so his worshippers believe. Kellhus himself is revered as a god, and the very force of his personality—aside from his uncanny powers—overwhelms everyone from his own wife, Esmenet, and his stepdaughter, Mimara, to Sorweel, son of the late king of Sakarpus. The one person to repudiate Kellhus is Drusus Achamian, a Wizard who has lost everything to Kellhus, including his beloved wife—Esmenet.

Achamian is determined to reveal Kellhus as a fraud, not a god. When Mimara, who has sorceress abilities, seeks out Achamian, determined to have him teach her, he refuses. But Mimara will not be denied; her own mother sold her into slavery years before and Mimara wants revenge. Achamian sees Esmenet every time he looks at Mimara, and for him the line between mother and daughter sometimes blurs.

There is a poetic poignancy in the pained relationships of these people. Mimara tells Achamian that her mother "used to tell me that...that she was your morning." "I no longer fear the night," Achamian tells Mimara: "...I no longer pray for the morning."

Many other subplots surface during this complex tale: Sorweel's despair at his father's death, and his self-disgust at succumbing even a little to Kellhus' charisma and power; Psatma Nannaferi's determination to elevate the worship of Yatwer, her Goddess, as the White-Luck rises to challenge Kellhus; the uneasy relationship between Achamian and the Skin Eaters he has hired to take him to the Coffers—a journey he takes to find a way to defeat Kellhus.

The most compelling character is Mimara, who doesn't truly come into her own until the last quarter of the book. However, if future

volumes live up to the promise of this one, she will be a powerful force. She has the Judging Eye of the title, which is an ability to see through and beyond things, to see sorceries for what they are and recognize that which is hidden to ordinary people. (January) *Marlene Y. Satter*

## THRILLER



### Ultimate Weapon

**Chris Ryan**  
Weinstein Books  
Hardcover \$23.95 (368pp)  
978-1-60286-050-6

When a fiction writer concocts a plot in which the fate of the world is at stake, the reader becomes a confederate, suspending belief in the expectation that plenty of fun will result. The author has an obligation as well: He or she can't go too far. As the hero or heroine saves the world, implausibility is acceptable; inanity isn't.

Think of the plots of Alistair MacLean, for example, whose thrillers also made popular movies. They are improbable but entertaining, for the most part, as in *Where Eagles Dare*. In *Ice Station Zebra*, however, the clumsy, silly climax ruined everything.

In *Ultimate Weapon*, Chris Ryan unleashes a tight, fast-moving, and violent yarn worthy of MacLean at his best, only to have the whole thing skid to a thudding climax with some story twists that probably would have MacLean cringing in his grave. It doesn't help that he occasionally employs clichés and his characters hiss rather too often.

Ryan's strength is lean, muscular prose and the ability to keep the plot moving without stopping for breath. He also has an obvious grasp of, if not love of, the weaponry and techniques of the techno-thriller. Ryan was a member of the British Special Forces in Iraq during the Gulf War. His first-hand knowledge gives the story authenticity.

Iraq is the primary setting here, and Saddam Hussein is the sinister bad guy whom readers will have no trouble hating. Ryan's two main characters are both Special Forces survivors. Nick is retired, aging, and somewhat broken. Jed is young, tough, resourceful, and able to kill on a moment's notice. Nick's daughter Sarah happens to be an erratic but brilliant nuclear researcher who mysteriously vanishes. As Sarah's father sets out to find her, Sarah's boyfriend Jed is involved in secret missions in Iraq that represent the best parts of the story and some of Ryan's best writing.

It will give nothing away to say that everything comes to a head in and around Iraq. In, you might say, the Nick of time, the ultimate weapon is snatched from Saddam's hands quicker than any weapon of mass destruction. The final plot twist arrives with one of the characters spend-