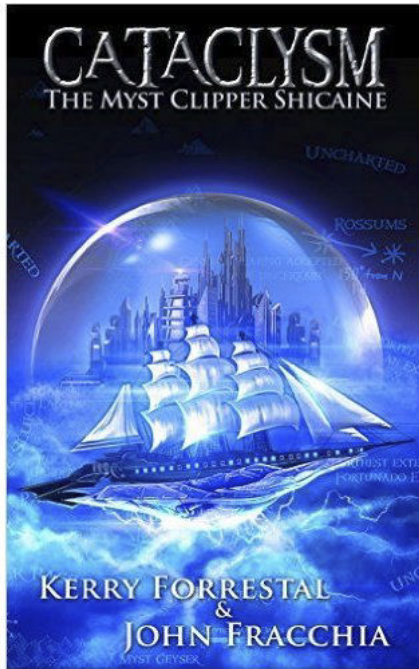


http://www.ithaca.com/entertainment/books/a-trip-through-the-zones-sci-fi-fantasy-horror-in/article_3e9fc97e-4eb2-11e6-ab53-5b58b6a7b30a.html

A Trip Through the Zones: Sci-fi, fantasy, horror in the myst

By Bill Chaisson Jul 22, 2016



Cataclysm: The Myst Clipper Shicaine

Kerry Forrestal & John Fracchia (Self-published; 2016)

After you get 100 pages into this 570-page book you will find that new characters are still being introduced and new aspects of the world of T'Amorach are still to be discovered. The amount of invention and imagination here is impressive, and you will not be surprised to learn that this is the first volume of a proposed tetralogy. *Cataclysm* is a mash-up of several genres, including maritime fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. The book opens on a high-tech sailing ship that is floating through a toxic brew (called myst) in a place that bears no geographical resemblance to Earth and is populated by humans, androids (sentient and not), mutants, genetically engineered beasts, and ... vampires.

The plot is one familiar from action-adventure films: getting the old gang together again because something has changed in the world. The crew of the *Shicaine* once smuggled sentient androids from places where they were mere servants to an anarchic place called Rossums, where they could live as free persons (and, yes, the network of which they were part was called "the railroad.") They had been betrayed five years before the book begins and in exchange for being allowed to live, everyone signed a contract stipulating they would never see each other again.

T'Amorach is a post-apocalyptic landscape where life continues within domed "zones." Each zone has its own ideology: two are devoted to corporate capitalism; two to piracy and crime; one is a Luddite agricultural society; one is a theocracy; and the oddest is controlled by a vampire tribe called the Lokaryns. Forrestal and

Fracchia constructs the book in short chapters that leap from place to place, introducing you to the many parts of this world and its strange mixture of social realism and magic.

Typical of their brand of invention is the concept of a bonding. Some members of the population of Ravensford, the agricultural zone, are able to manifest at will a metallic projection that changes shape through a liquid to a solid and becomes a variety of weapons. These people are members of a sect of warrior-monks called the Seb-Ichi. Concepts like this seem to surface in about every fifth chapter and are introduced without fanfare. The cumulative effect is to progressively expand and prolong the suspension of your disbelief; you are drawn further and further into a world that is so like and yet so unlike our own.

Cataclysm is informed as much by the conventions of cinema and comic books as it is by those of literature. The idea of sentient androids comes from Philip K. Dick, but more people probably first encountered it in *Star Wars* movies. The quick cutting from scene to scene as you burn through these chapters will strike you as paced more like film than books. Forrestal and Fracchia's prose style is transparent and without artifice. The book never gets bogged down in long speeches, exposition, or interior monologues about the absurdity of existence. Instead the plot plunges forward, and the many threads that were separate at the start become progressively more interwoven as you race toward what turns out to be a cliffhanger conclusion.

It took Forrestal and Fracchia three years to write *Cataclysm*, but it has been in the making for 15 years. The depth and duration of this rumination is manifest in the language of T'Amorach—given names, surnames, place-names, sacred words used in prayers—which suggest the awareness that etymology preserves and reflects history. Personal names in Kwyne, for example, are somewhat different from those in Ravensford. More generally, formal names associated with older or sacred places and people of rank are more exotic than those given to commoners and marginal places.

There is also a sense of humor running through *Cataclysm* that most resembles the wry understatement and self-deprecation that has come to be associated with action-adventure movies. It isn't the madcap absurdity of Douglas Adams novels, but it also isn't the adolescent guy-humor of maritime fiction or the gross-out yucks of horror. Forrestal and Fracchia's humor lends verisimilitude to the characters; in spite of the fact that they are wielding shape-shifting weapons and drinking the blood of the living, you still think, "Hey, I know these people." •

