A Light Touch Paper
Stand Clear Sampler

Edited by Edwina Harvey and Simon Petrie
A

Light Touch Paper

Stand Clear

SAMPLER
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Many of our readers may recall lighting fireworks when they were younger. The instructions were often: *Light Touch Paper, stand clear.* And what would happen next would either be a skyrocket shooting to the moon and exploding in a galaxy of stars halfway up the sky; or a pinwheel of light spinning faster than a pulsar, from a nail on your backyard fence; or else an innocent-looking paper pot hissing like a dragon as it issued thunderclaps and a sparkling explosion in a rainbow of colours. You’d stand there, transfixed, never really sure of what was going to happen next, not even aware of the *ooohs* and *aaaahs* your mouth was making.

As editors of this anthology, we weren’t really sure of what was going to happen when we lit our own touch paper; that is to say, invited authors to send us their work. But, like children, we were transfixed by the diversity and quality of the submissions we received.

We are unwarrantedly proud of the thirteen stories that comprise the full anthology. Unwarrantedly, because clearly they are not our work; they’re the efforts of thirteen exceptionally talented fictioneers who know how to make the magic that is storytelling at its best, and to whom we’re greatly indebted. We started the process of assembling this anthology with a spark, a title, and an invitation to the authors to propagate this spark along whichever fuse they saw fit. They’ve done this, and have given us a set of stories that are supremely varied in their...
focus. Hopefully the samples we have provided in this ‘taster’ will give you some indication of their quality, and their ability to surprise and enthrall.

Our thanks to cover artist Les Petersen, for being given some rough specs and delivering a wonderful cover that so suited this collection of tales.

And last but not least, our thanks go to Liz Bright, commissioning editor at Peggy Bright Books, for giving us free rein to put this anthology together.

*Edwina Harvey and Simon Petrie*

*April 2012*
First, the Song.

Those bones were singing before Casimir brought them to me. I heard their jumbled and discordant notes through wood and calico lining, through security spells and spirit wards, as far away as the centre of town. I appreciated the warning; it gave me time to compose myself before I opened the shop to him.

He stood a little too straight, dark waistcoat emblazoned with an eye in gold thread, crisp white shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows in the heat. His loosely clubbed hair was iron grey, and the Summoner scars across his cheeks stood out as though they were fresh.

Five years since I last saw him, and he had aged far more than he should have. The war was long over and he was married now, with three apparently beautiful children. Not that I’d ever seen them—I had no desire to put myself through that particular torture. What right did he have to come here now, looking so tired and old?

“Casimir,” I said, stepped back to let him enter, and prided myself on the steadiness of my tone.

“Zvonimir.” He entered stiffly, with none of his usual sharp soldier’s step. “I come requesting help.”

I jammed the shop door open, and was surprised to see his dark Watchman’s carriage waiting, surrounded by half a dozen or so of his UnderWatch Necromancers. They scowled back at me, white robes bright in the
midday sun. What could their fearless Watchman—war hero, powerful Summoner and wholesome family man—want with a poor, middle-aged craftsman like me?

A breeze from the street set my wind chimes humming, casting faint shadows through the shop with their songs. “This would be an official visit, then?” I asked, as I ran my fingers through the coat of a spectral foal then steadied its horseshoe chime. “I’ve never had one of those before.”

“Please understand.” Casimir skirted the racks of wind chimes to place his wooden box on my workbench. “You are my last resort. I only come to you because I could think of nothing else to do.”

I smiled my bitterness, and said nothing.

Joanne Anderton lives in Sydney with her husband and too many pets. By day she is a mild-mannered marketing coordinator for an Australian book distributor. By night, weekends and lunchtimes she writes science fiction, fantasy and horror. Her short fiction has most recently appeared in Midnight Echo #6 and Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. Her debut novel, Debris (Book One the Veiled Worlds Series) was published by Angry Robot Books in 2011, and will be followed by Suited in 2012. Visit her online at http://joanneanderton.com and on Twitter @joanneanderton
Odysseus

How did it start? I’ll tell you. It started when we all went to court the world’s most beautiful woman and I glanced around at my competition and knew I was not even on her father’s list.

It wasn’t just her beauty we wanted, either; Sparta was a plum, and the royal line went through the women. She had twin brothers, but the man who married Helen would inherit Sparta.

All I had was my small, rocky island, but I didn’t want to leave it.

Helen had a cousin, Penelope, who could cook, weave, sew, run a farm, run a kingdom, without any of the disadvantages of marrying Helen. She was exactly what I needed.

So when King Tyndareus wrung his hands at me as we sat by his fire, crying, “How do I choose one of those princes and kings without all the rest declaring war on me?” I had an idea.

“Get me Penelope for a wife and I’ll fix the other thing for you,” I told him.

Next day, he told the other suitors, “My daughter will choose her own husband from among you, but on one condition: you must promise to defend her choice.”

Of course, I had to swear too, on the hide of a sacrificial horse, or they would have smelled a rat.

It seemed like such a good idea at the time. How was I
supposed to know it would come back to bite me?
She chose Menelaus, the good-looking Atreus brother from Argos, who wasn’t too bright and so would suit her well.
And years later I was dragged kicking and screaming into a war that wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t had that bright idea about how to keep the peace.

Sue Bursztynski is a writer, teacher-librarian and reviewer who lives in Melbourne, without a cat. She has written ten books and many articles and short stories. Her short fiction has been published by ASIM, Ford Street, Fablecroft and Specusphere. Her YA novel Wolfborn, published in 2010, is a Notable Book in the Australian Children’s Book Council’s annual awards. Sue’s blog is at http://suebursztynski.blogspot.com.
I shrugged my pack higher on my shoulders and walked on, glancing seaward at the clouds building in the west. Winter was coming. Time to be seeking the shelter of a lord’s hall and a place by his hearth.

A guard was squatting by the side of the path, and he straightened as I approached. I nodded good day, and halted just short of conversation distance, leaning on my staff, unsmiling. It looked mysterious and aloof. This culture valued gravitas.

From the way he moved, this man had been a hunter, not some peasant. Islander, maybe. His accent would tell me more.

He was assessing me, too. He saw the harp standing out of my pack, of course. I was no merchant, that was certain.

“Where from?” he asked. Islander for sure. He had no business here, in one sense. In another, of course, waylaying travellers was his business.

“Lerra last. Before that from Bruscelaire.” I didn’t tell him about the stop I’d made to bury my cache of gear in the woods.

He tried to seem unimpressed. “You were singing in the Emperor’s hall, then?”

“No. I wasn’t there to sing.”

“What’s your business here, old man?”

Curious layers of truths and mistruths. ‘Old man’ was actually a title of respect, though you wouldn’t think so.
I looked twice his age—in my late forties, perhaps, an old man here. But my body was as young as his, and much, much more capable. Of course, I was actually five times his age.

I shrugged. “None. I am on a journey.”
“Where to? And why?”
“Where the road takes me. And why not?”
Pause. He had me tagged now. A wandering bard.
“It will be dark in an hour. The lord of the hall bids you welcome, and offers guesting.”

I inclined my head. “The lord is gracious. I am happy to come to his hall.”

Ancient and loathsome, Dave Luckett is still in business at the same old stand, fuelled by single malt and indignation that nobody writes golden age stories any more. He used to think we were going to the stars. These days he has his hands full making it to the bathroom, but at least that’s happening more and more frequently. He’s very glad that for short fiction he gets to write actual, you know, SF.
When I kicked out of orbit and into landing mode near the largest city on the planet I had just about made up my mind that this would be a First Re-Contact. There was no sign of a space-field and there had been no attempt to contact me in orbit, which meant either that no-one was looking up, or, if they were, they hadn’t been briefed on Universal Space Frequency.

I threw in a hover at 300 metres and had a closer look. I was being observed now all right, as I drifted over the city looking for a convenient set-down. Vehicles were stopping in the streets, some voluntarily, others because they ran into each other or stationary objects, as the drivers craned their necks upwards to watch me.

A large central park surrounding an imposing building seemed to be my best bet, so I angled over and switched back into landing mode, touching down gently beside an ornamental lake on which some not-quite-ducks paddled away from my shadow. All my instruments were measuring and analysing, and coming to the superfluous conclusion that this planet was Terra-type within a negligible margin of differences. The last to register, as usual, was the Air Test, because it concerns itself with bacteria as well as chemistry. When the green line lifted itself sluggishly through Supportable and Acceptable and stopped a little above Standard, I knew I could unseal my lock and meet the people crowding around my ship. It always seems a little precious to wait for a
piece of clockwork to tell you you can breathe the air that hundreds of people outside obviously are breathing, but humans and viruses have a habit of mutating so that a newcomer can be as vulnerable to their mildest diseases as the Pacific Islanders on Old Earth were to measles and the common cold when these were introduced from Europe. And you’d feel a fool suffocating in an alien atmosphere just because you couldn’t see the local nose filters.

Katherine Cummings is a librarian, writer, editor, indexer and reviewer. She has moved around the world, settling briefly in Fiji, Kiribati, Canada, the United States and Scotland, but thinks of herself as Australian. Her series for Radio National’s ‘Health Report’, describing her progress through gender identity change, ran for over two years and then morphed into the award-winning book, Katherine’s Diary. She discovered science fiction in the 1950s and has never grown out of her love of ‘cogwheel’ sf, with as many rocket ships and ray guns as possible. She is a hundred and seven years old. She is still beautiful.
In the downpour and the dusk, dangling upside-down from power lines, birds bathed in their hundreds.

The flock of galahs weighted down the cables, clinging and preening while the rain ran down their pink and grey feathers.

Seeker swooped in to land beside them, making the high voltage transmission towers groan in protest. Screeching, the birds abandoned their bathing spot, wheeling away into the night.

Seeker carefully folded the aluminium struts of his bat-like wings. The smell of sulphur, the smell of success, was still thick in his nostrils.

He had found it. Mistress would be pleased.

Stretching his serpentine neck, he sank copper teeth into a parallel line. Charge danced down his copper spine. Seeker trained his tail towards the stars.

A spear of light struck up at a gap in the clouds. The message was zero point zero two seconds duration. Six thousand kilometres long.

*Faet’s Fire is found*, the message said, amongst other things.

Seeker dropped from the power lines, entering the bedrock cleanly like a diving bird entering the ocean.
Thoraiya Dyer’s work has appeared recently in Apex magazine, Cosmos, Nature and Redstone SF. Her fantasy story, ‘Fruit of the Pipal Tree’, won the 2011 Aurealis Award. An original collection of her short fiction, Asymmetry, will be published in 2012 as part of Twelfth Planet Press’ Twelve Planets Series.
Heathcliff pulled the ring from his pocket, fitted it perfectly on her finger, and pulled her towards him ever so roughly, for the kiss that she’d always dreamed of.

Finally, that part was over and she opened her eyes.

The minister smiled at them and opened his arms wide. “I love you all,” he declared.

Stephanie bit her tongue.

The minister then turned, and rolled down a ramp and then the aisle, to open the doors. Rolled!

“Come, dear,” said Heathcliff, taking her arm.

She jerked back, but his grip was firm. He was, after all, Heathcliff, not some wimp from work.

Maybe it’s the lack of sleep, she thought, as they walked past rows of smiling guests.

“I’m just overexcited, darling,” she said, thinking that she’d still not trade him for anything.

The guests stood, and on the uneven floorboards, there was an ungainly sound of tracks and stiff wheels as they moved into the aisles, and out to the stone steps for the traditional rice-throw.

Under the friendly rain and loud good wishes, Stephanie asked Heathcliff out of the side of her smile, “Why did you order those models? I shouldn’t have to say, get ones that walk. And what’s up with the ‘I love you all?’”
Anna Tambour’s robot wears a monocle, but is a model of deportment. As to her (Tambour), amongst other cames and upcomings, her latest published story is ‘The Dog Who Wished He’d Never Heard of Lovecraft’ in Lovecraft eZine. And CRANDOLIN, a novel that David Kowalski described as “A fairy tale Dostoevsky would have liked … It’s like it was written by a demented chef” will be released by Chômu Press later this year, for the feasting season.
For more, see www.annatambour.net
A thousand dollars gets me out of bed, no questions.
    Ten thousand gets me out of bed and attentive.

I’d been told to see Detective Dunne. He was hard to miss, standing at one side, looking worried. When he noticed me, he glared with undisguised dislike from across the room. He was young, wearing a well-tailored suit, a German cut, but it was looking rumpled and he’d already loosened his tie. I had him down as ambitious but green—trying to earn his stripes on the night shift. He’d probably been called away from harassing working girls and small-time dealers to what would have looked like a dream case—a VIP murder.

But he was way out of his depth on this one.

I walked over. “Mr Jaeger called me in to take a look,” I said, offering my card.

He took it between finger and thumb, daintily, like it was a particularly noxious piece of biohazard and he was wishing he had his gloves on. He turned it over. On one side, an animated skein of silver smoke rose along the length of the card. It wreathed hypnotically across the dark background, billowing into separate filaments then coalescing again. The other side said ‘Whorl Subjunctive Investigations’ in plain letters, with my webmail address underneath. In between, ‘Mr Gabian Whorl—Principal’ and ‘Affordable Parallel Investigations’ alternated in a succession of pastel colours.

A client had given me a deck of them in gratitude for
my assistance with a delicate matter. Or in gratitude for keeping my mouth shut. Either way, they were worth more than I took in an average week. (Not that I’d had an average week for a while.)

Detective Dunne flexed the card experimentally. The tiny LEDs started to delaminate. He pushed harder. The card cracked and the images froze.

“So you’re the private detective they’ve brought in. Well, they can waste their money if they want, but just make sure you keep out of the way of the real investigation.” He let the card drop to the floor.

Robert Porteous lives in Canberra, Australia with his wife and two teenage children. He thinks himself fortunate to have careered through a curriculum of interesting jobs, including stints as a speechwriter and a research physicist. He has only started writing in the last year or so and is still teaching himself the trade by writing each story in a different genre. This is his first detective story.
The last thing on earth Mary Maloney wanted was a unicorn. She wasn’t an addict, no matter what they said at the welfare clinic. Sure, she used sometimes just to have some fun, or when she was down. But who didn’t? It wasn’t any different than the booze her dad tanked. Or the pot he smoked. But you didn’t see anyone assigning him a freakin’ genetically engineered, one-horned parole officer.

They made her pick out the unicorn herself. They had them all in a little room, one of those big-windowed rooms pet shops have at the very front to display puppies. There were seven of them, all white and no taller than her knees, but they didn’t play or romp, or do anything cute like that. They just stood in a huddle with their shimmery horns jutting in various directions. Except one stood away from the rest, and Mary chose that one.

After that, they took Mary and her dad to a little side room, and brought the unicorn in. While the clinic lady read Mary’s dad all the instructions and he signed papers, Mary was supposed to bond with it or something. She sat in a chair. The unicorn stood in a corner, pointed its horn at her, and quivered, which Mary thought was a good sign. If it was scared of her, all the better …

… Mary had to admire the unicorn just a little after it destroyed the house.
Ripley Patton resides in Portland, Oregon, having recently returned to her homeland after a five year jaunt in New Zealand. She has had numerous short stories published, and she won the 2009 Sir Julius Vogel Award for best short story. She is also the founder and president of SpecFicNZ, the national association for writers of speculative fiction in and from New Zealand. Ripley recently finished her first novel, a YA urban fantasy, and is currently shopping it to agents. She lives with her husband, one cat, and two very opinionated YA fiction critics, who also happen to be her children.
The fourth time, we met in a coffee house. Melissa seemed more nervous than usual. I noticed it, but I was so excited by a new design I found for very thin and flexible space suits that I didn’t think much about why she might be nervous. “They’re hiding this part in plain sight. After all, they have a contract to pick up old space debris, so they have a reason to need suits. But these are designed to be super-durable and to have parts replaced. That means—”

Two people slid into the booth, effectively trapping both of us against the wall. They were young, clean-cut men. Maybe five or six years older than me. The one next to me looked Japanese and the other was white with an American accent. Melissa looked at me and mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

I was young and stupid and brave. I looked right across the table at the man next to Melissa and said, “I know about your ark. I want to be part of the project.”

He didn’t react.

Melissa spoke. “The ark doesn’t exist.”

I had not expected to hear that, or to hear it from her.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. The expression on her face looked sorry. Miserable, even. “It never existed. Even so, we needed to manage the rumors. It is a good cover for what we are doing, and a good thing for people to hope we are doing.”

We.

My greatest secret dream had gone to flames that I felt flash across my cheeks in mortification. I tried to stand,
but the man next to me was stronger by far even though he was smaller than me. His hand on my shoulder was enough to keep me down.

The man across from me said, “We want you to be part of the ark project.”

“The one that doesn’t exist?” Mortification and confusion warred with each other.

Melissa smiled softly at me. “You’ve proven you’re smart enough to see between the lines of the web—pardon the cliché. And you’ve kept a secret for a whole year. We will trade you a thing for a thing, but you must promise to continue to keep our secrets.”

Brenda Cooper is a futurist and writer, and also the CIO for the City of Kirkland, in Washington State in the USA. Brenda is the author of the Endeavor award winner for 2008: The Silver Ship and the Sea, and of the sequels, Reading the Wind, and Wings of Creation. She co-authored Building Harlequin’s Moon with Larry Niven. Her most recent novel is Mayan December, available from Prime Books, and her next novel will be The Creative Fire coming out from Pyr in late 2012. See her website at www.brenda-cooper.com or follow her @brendacooper on Twitter.
Big Ung felt the cry more than he heard it, through the soles of his feet and the hilt of the Sword-and-a-half resting against his shoulder. Even the feeling was so faint that he wondered if it was imagination. He shuffled about, his broad feet crunching on the snow, and faced north, the direction he fancied the cry might have come from. He dug the blunt tip of the Sword-and-a-half’s blade into the snow, to be closer to the rock, and tilted his head to better listen.

A shout closer at hand disrupted his concentration. “Look at me, Big Ung!”

“Well done, Little Ung,” he said, not turning around to look.

The next peak to the north was Marnnonttok. Big Ung wondered if the cry had been so faint because it was more distant than that, or because it was weak. Or if it had even been real at all. Perhaps it was just the snow playing tricks.

“I’m jumping now Big Ung!”

“Well done, Little … hmm?” Big Ung spun in time to see Little Ung launch himself from a tree branch about the height of Big Ung’s head. He landed heavily, but on his feet, the impact cushioned by the snow. Seeing Big Ung watching, Little Ung threw himself forward and rolled dramatically. He came to a halt just short of Big Ung’s toes. Big Ung peered down at him.

“Why didn’t you catch me?” Little Ung said.
Leaning on the Sword-and-a-half, Big Ung bent down to set him on his feet. “Because you didn’t need me to.”

Ian McHugh is a graduate of Clarion West. His stories have appeared in professional and semi-professional magazines, webzines and anthologies in Australia and internationally. They have won grand prize in the Writers of the Future contest and Australia’s Aurealis Award and featured in the annual Locus Recommended Reading List. Links to read or hear most of his published stories free online can be found at ianmchugh.wordpress.com.
“Who are you?” asked Drake.

“To the world at large, I’m unimportant,” said the voice. “To you I’m the most important person in the world. You may call me Mr Judge.”

“And I’m Mrs Medic,” said a woman in a bright and cheery tone.

Drake tried to flex his muscles discreetly. Once again, they did not respond.

“What happened? How did I get here?”

“Mr Carrier brought you here in his van,” said Mrs Medic.

“I don’t remember that.”

“Of course not. Mr Sniper shot you with a tranquiliser.”

“Shot me?” exclaimed Drake. “What the hell is going on?”

“You’re so careful about your car’s security that you neglected your own,” said Mr Judge. “You had only a personal alarm app on your phone and a security beacon under the skin of your left leg.”

He answers off-topic, thought Drake. That’s bad. Hard to take control of the situation when they do that.

“Yeah, and my SB starts transmitting automatically unless I do resets,” said Drake. “I can feel its vibrator, that means it’s calling the police right now. You better start running.”

“You can’t feel anything below your neck,” said Mr Judge, sounding unconcerned. “Besides, enclose any
transmitter in wire mesh, and what happens?”
“Er … what do you mean?”
“Wire mesh blocks radio signals, it’s called a Faraday cage. The body bag that Mr Carrier put you into was lined with fine wire mesh. Mrs Medic removed your security beacon in a room that was also lined with mesh, then hit it with a hammer. You have vanished off the police grid.”

Sean McMullen has had seventeen books and over six dozen stories published. His story ‘Eight Miles’ was runner up in the Hugo Awards in 2011, and he has won a dozen other Australian and international awards. His latest novel is Changing Yesterday (2011), a young adult time travel story described as Terminator on the Titanic. Sean works in scientific computing, has a PhD in medieval fantasy literature, and teaches karate in Melbourne University.
Minke was hungry for a great story, but no-one who came to Ye Aulde Owle ever brought her one. She served stale sandwiches, glasses of wine and whisky and listened, discontent, to the idle tales customers told.

Ah yes. The call of the open road, the thrill of adventure …

There was an empty, sleepy world outside Ye Aulde Owle Café & Bar, and Minke had a gift she didn’t want to waste.

“No-one will hire you!” said Minke’s aunt. “Where else do you have to go?”

“I’ve everywhere else to go!” said Minke.

Kathleen Jennings lives in Brisbane where she writes (and illustrates) steampunk and fantasy. She loves how bits and pieces of the world can be cobbled together into new stories, and stories knocked together until they make sparks. She also believes maps are getting too crowded and that sometimes space must be elbowed out for adventure, romance and dragons of one sort or another.

She can be found at http://tanaudel.wordpress.com
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(‘Snow’, one of the shorter pieces in *Rare Unsigned Copy*)

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