Time Travel to a Parallel World: John Christopher's *Fireball*

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Books for young readers set in Roman Britain saw a 'particular flourishing' in the 1950s, with the works of Rosemary Sutcliff, Geoffrey Trease and Henry Treece (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 18). More recently, the past twenty years have seen a resurgence of British adult and children's books set in the Roman world (often, but not always, early imperial Roman Britain). These books may either situate the narrative entirely within a Roman Britain as we imagine it or, in the guise of what Karen Hellekson calls 'true alternate history', years after a 'nexus event' (Hellekson 2000: 253) in a world radically changed from the one we know. An example of the former is Caroline Lawrence's children's *Roman Mysteries* series (2002-12), which is set entirely within the Empire of the first century CE, and her follow-up series *Roman Quests* (2016-8), which focuses on Roman Britain in the same era. By contrast, Sophia McDougall's *Romanitas* trilogy (2005-11) is set in a twenty-first century world in which the Roman Empire has outlasted its historical counterpart. A different variant is those narratives which use a protagonist from our own world and time (generally speaking, for young readers, a modern British teenager) who visits the Roman world and provides a directly comparative perspective on what they encounter there. This may be achieved either by time travel or by what Hellekson terms the 'parallel worlds story' (Hellekson 2000: 254). The parallel worlds narrative operates on the alternate history (or 'allohistorical') assumption that history can change at any point, and any change, no matter how insignificant, can result in substantial changes to timelines. It posits, however, the existence of every possible outcome of every event, in an infinite set of parallel worlds existing simultaneously in one timeline or another, with characters able to travel between these parallel existences. The time travel narrative is exemplified in Lawrence's *Time Travel Diaries* (2019-20) and Julia

Jarman's *Time Travelling Cat* series (1992-2010), each of which allows the teenage protagonist to travel back to Roman Britain. N.M. Browne's *Warriors of Alavna* (2000) is an example of the parallel worlds story, in which the two protagonists are transported into an alternate Roman Britain, where they save the native Britons from the murderous Roman Ravens by bringing the Ninth Legion from our timeline into this parallel world. In both time travel narratives and parallel worlds stories, the protagonists provide some commentary or reflection on the differences between life in the Roman (or apparent Roman) world and in present-day Britain. These narratives in particular need to navigate the nature of Roman influence on Britain, showing it as either brutalising or civilising.

John Christopher's *Fireball* (1981) is an outlier among Roman Britain narratives for young readers, coming between the heyday of the 1950s and the more recent resurgence of such stories. But Christopher, the pseudonym of Samuel Youd, had established himself as one of Britain's leading sf writers at the same time as Sutcliff, Treece and Trease were writing (respectively) such novels as *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954), *Legions of the Eagle* (1954) and *Word to Caesar* (1955). Christopher's sf novels, most notably *The Death of Grass* (1956) and *The World in Winter* (1962), consolidated the success of John Wyndham's so-called 'cosy catastrophes' such as *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). Like Wyndham, Christopher's adult sf displayed a scepticism of geo-politics and technological progress in the era of the Cold War, as well as a bleak Social Darwinism in the spirit of H.G. Wells. Christopher's successful venture into writing sf for children was also indebted (albeit unconsciously) to Wells, beginning with the *Tripods* trilogy (1967-8). Although they target his writing to a younger readership, novels such as *Fireball* are nonetheless marked by the concerns of Christopher's adult sf. At the start of the 1980s, Latin was continuing to lose ground on the UK school curriculum, and prominent Young Adult sf writers, such as Nicholas Fisk and Monica Hughes, tended to focus on possible futures rather than pasts.

Fireball portrays a contemporary parallel world, but one which feels very much like the distant past rather than the future. The text thus combines the time travel narrative with the parallel worlds narrative, and paints a rather ambiguous picture of the Roman occupation of Britain. This article examines how *Fireball*'s transition between generic narrative forms determines the way in which Christopher portrays the Romans.

Noble Romans or Rotten Romans?

From the perspective of the British Isles, the Romans arrived as an invading force, conquering the location, and imposing their language and culture on the local populations. However, they also brought with them writing, plumbing, building and trade. The majority of books set in or partly set in Roman Britain tend to focus on the first century CE, a period in which Roman rule was still establishing itself on the island. There is therefore a dichotomy in how Roman authority is represented, depending upon whether an author chooses to portray brutal, savage Romans who colonise the island by force or organised, efficient Romans who bring civilisation to the local populations. Catherine Butler and Hallie O'Donovan observe that fiction of the 1950s is broadly sympathetic to the Romans, since these narratives suggest that the benefits of integration into the Roman Empire outweighed the disadvantages of colonisation (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 32). This tendency partly reflects patterns of thinking about the former British Empire through the Roman Empire, such as the legitimacy of imperialism and the benefits it brought. It falls within what David Mattingly terms a 'national nostalgia' for the old British Empire (Mattingly 2006: 4), which was in the final stages of disintegration in the 1950s. These civilised images of the Romans may also have arisen from the post-war political climate, in which wartime austerity and its aftermath left a strong desire for the wealth, modern comforts and superior technology available elsewhere in the world during the 1950s (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 34).

More recent stories set in Roman Britain also often paint a relatively positive picture of the civilising influences of Roman culture, such as the houses, food and baths which Jarman's protagonist, Topher, experiences as an Atrebatan child in *The Time Travelling Cat and the Roman Eagle* (2001). However, these twenty-first century texts are perhaps more conscious of the frequent daily violence present in the ancient world. For example, after his return to the present, Topher considers the varieties of punishments the Romans regularly used, and he decides that, although the Romans 'had a lot of good qualities', 'they weren't into forgiveness' (Jarman 2001: 153). Roman levels of comfort receive short shrift in Lawrence's *Time Travel Diaries*, as the narrator Alex turns on the hot and cold taps in his bathroom at home and realises that 'the richest Roman could never dream of the luxury of this bathroom in our little two-bedroom flat' (Lawrence 2019: 256). A glance in the medicine cabinet cements his realisation even further, as he acknowledges that a wealthy Roman Londoner would 'probably give everything they owned' for its contents (256). Wartime austerity has given way to a greater acknowledgement of the higher standards of living which even less affluent young people in London like Alex now enjoy, in contrast to what a wealthy Roman might have experienced in the same city two millennia earlier.

These texts are forced to 'reconcile the Janus faces of Rome, as both a brutal and a civilising force' (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 41). On the whole, the Romans of these stories generally represent an ordered society and are part of an overall safe, stable environment. The unpleasant Roman officer who threatens to destroy the Atrebatan sacred grove in Jarman's *The Time Travelling Cat* is ultimately overruled by his superior Agricola, who insists that the road should be built on another route. The children in Lawrence's *Roman Mysteries* and *Roman Quests* are granted far greater agency than their historical counterparts would have had and undergo various dangers, but they are always protected by kindly Roman parents and guardians. By contrast, the alternate Roman Ravens of Browne's *The Warriors of Alavna* are

more dangerous, violent and imperialistic than their historical counterparts. Similarly, the alternate Roman Empire in McDougall's *Romanitas* trilogy is cruel and politically unstable. Dangerous Romans who practise savage imperialism seem more likely to appear in parallel worlds stories and alternate histories, while narratives taking place in our own imagined past (or involving time travel to it) are more likely to contain orderly, civilised and noble Romans. Even when the Romans themselves are ultimately civilised and organised, the Roman past generally turns out to be a dangerous place for time travellers from the present, as Alex in Lawrence's *The Time Travel Diaries* sums-up: 'I was chased by slaves, tripped up by a goat, nearly drowned in the Thames, attacked by a knife-wielding mud woman' (Lawrence 2019: 246). These adventures are a key part of the narrative, but the dangers of the past are much greater and less regulated than those of the present.

Time Travel and Parallel Worlds

The nature and format of time travel narrative and the parallel worlds story are closely linked. Both involve protagonists from our own world and time who are mysteriously, or occasionally intentionally, taken through some kind of portal into the past, or into a parallel world that may resemble the past. This is a common plot device which allows the main characters to observe and comment on the differences between the world we recognise and the fictional world they experience in the main narrative. The use of two protagonists allows the characters to interact with each other as well as their new surroundings, and enables greater commentary on the fictional world through multiple perspectives. There is some generic crossover between stories of time travel and those of parallel worlds, since time travel also has the potential to alter history. For example, in Lawrence's *The Time Travel Diaries*, Alex wonders as he returns to the present: 'But was it *my* twenty-first century? Or a twenty-first century where Germany had won World War Two, or maybe the Roman Empire had

never fallen and everyone still spoke Latin?' (Lawrence 2019: 238-9). Lawrence plays with some common tropes of parallel worlds, via an explicit allusion to Ray Bradbury's famous short story 'A Sound of Thunder' (1952), by suggesting that some minor change in the past might affect the shape of the world in the present.

Hellekson has noted that parallel world stories play with historical events that appear unpredictable, and that such stories 'have the capability to cast notions of history seriously into doubt, as the meaning of history in another world can be troublingly other' (Hellekson 2001: 48). Thus, in Bradbury's story, stepping on a single butterfly in the Jurassic era alters the outcome of an American presidential election in the present day. While there is no clear connection between the two events, the small divergence in the distant past leads to altered political attitudes in the present, which become magnified into a changed election result. Stories set in the past for younger audiences have to account for the likelihood of their lesser historical knowledge, whether the past presented is imagined according to current historical consensus or an alternative, allohistorical past that depicts a radically different version of history. Butler and O'Donovan have noted that young people may have a less detailed knowledge of historical consensus than adults, and as a result, 'the cues that might alert them to a text's allohistorical status (in the form of "obviously" non-historical elements) may consequently be less visible' (Butler and O'Donovan 2012: 107). Such stories may require greater signposting in order to indicate and explain the historical elements, as well as any allohistorical changes. The Roman world can seem like a pretty strange place to young people, even without any additional fantasy elements, and therefore such signposting becomes even more important to distinguish the 'historical' from the 'fantasy'.

Time Travel to a Parallel World

The protagonists in *Fireball*, the British Simon and his American cousin Brad, come from our world and are catapulted into a parallel one by a mysterious fireball. The reader experiences this parallel world through an oblique third-person narrator, that of the protagonist Simon. Simon thinks he has gone back in time to Roman Britain, at some point during the later years of the imperial occupation. Simon's understanding of the apparent Roman world is limited, and he is separated from the far more knowledgeable Brad shortly after their journey through the portal, only to be reunited with him halfway through the book. Until this point, therefore, the text functions as a time travel narrative, since there is no indication from the limited narrative perspective that there is anything particularly different about this Roman world from the historical one which Simon has learnt about at school. Only when the two cousins are reunited does Brad reveal to Simon that they are in a parallel world, one in which history has turned out differently. In this world, Brad explains, the emperor Julian, who lived from 331 to 363 CE in our world, did not die prematurely in battle, but instead won the wars against the Persians and lived a long life during which he stabilised the later Roman Empire. However, as a result of this change in the life-span of this single figure, there have been no significant or obvious changes during subsequent centuries. This Roman Empire has not changed its territories through expansion, which is more common for portrayals of an extended Roman Empire, such as that imagined in McDougall's *Romanitas* trilogy, or in Robert Silverberg's *Roma Eterna* (2003), where the political and linguistic structures change considerably over time. The world that Simon and Brad have found themselves stranded in is effectively a late Roman world, almost frozen in time from the mid-fourth century. *Fireball's* sequel, *New Found Land* (1983), postulates two further changes as a result of the continuation of a late Roman Empire: the European migrations to North America and Australia did not take place, but instead the Aztecs fought and conquered the Incas. In the final part of the *Fireball* trilogy, *Dragon Dance* (1986), Simon and Brad discover that the

Chinese empire holds the greatest power and technology, as well as an understanding of travel to parallel worlds.

The three societies – Roman, Aztec and Chinese – are each peculiarly insular. The Chinese have heard of the other two, but don't have any political or economic relations with them, and it seems that there is no international trade between the nations. Equally, the protagonists are strangely unemotional and detached from their surroundings. Such dispassionate male teenagers figure elsewhere in Christopher's work – Neil in *Empty World* (1977) is unemotional throughout a disaster narrative which would be many people's worst nightmare. Brad is particularly motivated by his conviction that technology enables progress and change, and as such, his behaviour becomes emblematic of Christopher's disdain for technological progress for its own sake and of American boosterism, in particular. In each stage of the *Fireball* trilogy Brad causes a major political change in each of the empires he visits by introducing some form of technology, as well as taking a central role in the rebellion in the Chinese empire before leaving the world through another fireball. As John Newsinger has noted, much of Christopher's young adult science fiction is focused on 'rebellion against various authoritarian and conformist societies' (Newsinger 1989: 46). Stagnant societies with ambivalent attitudes towards technology also feature in Christopher's *Prince in Waiting* series (1970-2), although both *Empty World* and *Prince in Waiting* are set in imagined futures rather than an apparent past.

Time Travel: Violence and Daily Life

We see the *Fireball* world through Simon's limited perspective, but we gain enough information from his encounters with Brad to see that the experiences of the two characters are radically different. Simon's experience before his reunion with Brad is time travel – the events which happen to him are small and localised, the common events of daily life. These

events create a believable picture of daily life in the late Roman world for a foreigner with no money or status. Brad's experience is rather different. As we will see, he focuses on the political and global events, which make his perspective one of alternate history. The narrative thus straddles the genres between time travel, parallel worlds and alternate history through the difference between the two protagonists' perspectives and experiences.

Simon realises that something very strange has happened when he discovers that he can't recognise his surroundings, and subsequently sees horsemen armed with swords. The free indirect discourse of the narrative allows us to follow his thoughts as he links the strangeness with the fireball and ponders if it was some kind of a gateway. This establishes it as the portal through which the protagonists have travelled. Simon wonders:

> Could they have passed through it and come out in a different place? But a place where you got run down by barbarous-looking horsemen with swords. Place — or *time*? A gateway to the past. Or maybe to the future, and a new Dark Age after the world had blown itself up as thoroughly as some people had suggested it might. (Christopher 1981: 25)

Christopher plays with the reader's expectations here — we, like Simon, know that murderous looking horsemen belong to a different time, rather than just another place in the known world. He gives us two options of time travel: this unknown country could be the past or the distant future, in a dystopia where civilisation has decayed. Since much of Christopher's other fiction is indeed futuristic science fiction, set in a future dystopia where some natural or other disaster has destroyed or hindered civilisation (such as the *Prince in Waiting* series), this is partly a nod to the reader's prior expectations. It also gives us a hint

that this may not turn out to be a straightforward time travel story, but a science fiction story set in an unknown world.

Simon identifies the horsemen as 'barbarous-looking' belonging to some kind of 'Dark Age', whether in the past or the future. His early encounters with the strange world confirm the 'barbarous' nature of its inhabitants, as his experiences are full of danger. Initially, he cannot find anything to eat or anywhere to shelter as it grows dark. Subsequently, he finds and unwittingly takes shelter in a small hut with a supply of food, which he realises at dawn is in fact a charnel house, containing a dead woman prepared for burial accompanied by grave goods which he has eaten. As soon as he escapes, he is immediately captured and taken to the slave market. He sees relatively little of his surroundings as he is either bound and blindfolded or put in a dark prison. By the time he has arrived in what he mistakenly thinks must be military barracks, he realises that 'being plunged, without warning, into a barbarous past carried hazards he never would have guessed' (38). Simon's initial conviction that this new world is 'barbarous' is thus again confirmed by his early experiences of violence.

Once he identifies a Latin word, Simon works out that he appears to have gone back in time to Roman Britain. His experiences of Roman life conform to his idea of a 'barbarous' past because he has the misfortune to be sold as a slave not to a private owner but to the gladiatorial school. Christopher leads the narrative through Simon's ignorance – firstly, his sluggishness to recognise and subsequently understand the Latin language, and secondly, by his consistent misunderstanding of what is happening to him until his fellow gladiator Bos patiently explains it to him. In this way, we see the minutiae close up, never gaining a fuller picture of these Romans and their society beyond the immediate proximity. Simon is predominantly concerned with self-preservation, and this leads him to pay close attention to his direct needs and circumstances. In the barracks, he focuses on the training he needs to

undergo, both physical exercise and weapon training with a wooden sword and a wooden dummy called a *palus*. After he learns that he has not been conscripted into the military but is instead training to fight in the gladiatorial arena, Simon focuses even more determinedly on training. He discovers that he has been lucky, and that the others in his group at the slave market were '*damnati ad bestias* […] Condemned to the beasts – sent out into the arena weaponless, to be savaged and eaten by starving lions, for the amusement of spectators' (46). The threat of death is never far from his mind in the gladiatorial school, since he finds out there are many ways to die as a gladiator. The description of the details of various types of gladiators, from *secutores* to *retiarii* (47), provide a plausible picture of the life of a Roman gladiator, although the overall impression of Roman society is one of brutality and violence, rather than order and civilisation.

Simon's first proper glimpse of wider Roman life and society beyond gladiator school is from the stage of the gladiatorial arena. Simon sees the games not as a spectator like the protagonists of Lawrence's *The Time Travel Diaries*, but as a participant who needs to kill or be killed. He parades the stage with the other gladiators, noticing the governor's platform with its purple drapery from below. The gladiators shout their ritual greeting to the governor, '*morituri te salutamus*' ('we who are about to die greet you'), emphasising the grim fate of the gladiators, since those who win victory on this occasion will eventually not be so lucky on another. In depicting Simon's experience of the arena, Christopher's account not only engages with popular myths of gladiatorial combat but also the pessimistic influence of Social Darwinism. The ritual greeting that Christopher's gladiators shout appears frequently in popular culture in the twentieth century, and continues to feature in re-imaginings of gladiatorial combat, such as Ridley Scott's film *Gladiator* (2000). By contrast, it rarely features in Classical sources. In *The Twelve Caesars* (121 CE), Suetonius records the phrase on only one occasion while, in his *Roman History* (211-33 CE), Cassius Dio provides a single

Greek account of the same event. Both accounts, though, refer to a *naumachia*, a staged sea battle rather than a professional gladiatorial combat. Gladiatorial combat did not always end in the death of one of the combatants (Dunkle 2014: 446), partly because of the expense of training and maintaining a skilled professional body of fighters. Nonetheless, the emphasis on the possibility of death suits Christopher's narrative as the danger focuses Simon's attention on the details closest to him. Christopher's image of the games contrasts to other, more positive portrayals of Roman gladiatorial combats for young audiences. In Lawrence's *The Time Travel Diaries*, for example, the protagonists only watch animals fighting each other, and the animals they see are too old and tired to fight seriously. In comparison, Simon's feelings of disgust at the audience's bloodthirsty chant of '*iugula*, cut his throat' (Christopher 1981: 57) emphasise only the most violent and barbaric aspects of Roman culture. These aspects are thrown into sharp relief by Simon's inability to kill his opponent, even when he has won his fight. However, although the civilising restraints that prevent Simon from committing murder would suggest his moral superiority to his Roman predecessors, when Simon's storyline is juxtaposed with that of Brad, it becomes evident that Christopher is not proposing any straightforward historical progression from a 'barbarous' past to a 'civilised' present.

Parallel World: Political Power and Revolution

Simon's perspective is limited to his personal circumstances since he is constantly in danger from overseers, gladiators, kidnappers and slave dealers at various points in the time travel portion of the narrative. He rarely considers the bigger picture, idly wondering 'just when in the past he was', before concluding that 'it scarcely mattered' (51), since it would not help him to return to the present, and such knowledge would not even help him escape from any current predicament. His attitude is reinforced when he notices that Bos, who was taken

captive as a child and sold into slavery before being sold again to the gladiatorial school, has an attitude of 'acceptance of things as they were' (48).

Brad's perspective, and therefore his experience, is radically different to Simon's, since he is able to control his situation and manipulate it for his own benefit. Although, as Brad explains to Simon when they are reunited, he was also captured soon after emerging from the fireball, his superior skills in Latin enabled him to understand his captors' plans to sell him in the slave market the next morning. That same evening he successfully manipulated another man into buying him from his captors, by observing that this man wore a cross and was a Christian. As a result of his greater skills, Brad does not become a helpless victim like Simon, but instead secures himself a much safer and more comfortable lifestyle. Brad's ability to manipulate situations also leads him to locate – and purchase – Simon in another slave market when Simon is dismissed from the gladiator school after failing to kill his opponent. In other words, Brad exemplifies Darwinian principles of social advantage, adaptation, fitness, self-interest and survival.

Brad explains to Simon that they are both the guests of a wealthy Christian landowner, Quintus Cornelius. Simon's initial impression of 'spaciousness and luxury' (60) in the comfortable villa contrasts sharply with his prior experiences of slavery and gladiator training. At first glance, the villa with its central courtyard and twin fountains seems typical of the ordered and civilised Roman society more often portrayed in time travel stories for young readers, such as Jarman's *Time Travelling Cat* or Lawrence's stories set in the Roman world. Comfortable houses, bathing facilities and pleasant tasting foods are shown to result from the building, plumbing and trade which the Romans brought to Britain. Simon feels, for the first time, comfortable enough to be mildly curious about when precisely in the past they have ended up. This is further motivated because he is disturbed by slight discrepancies surrounding the behaviour of Christians from what he remembers about their status in the

historical Roman world. The transition from Simon's experience as victim of circumstances to Brad's ability to manipulate his own situation also shifts the narrative from time travel to the parallel worlds story. Brad has managed, much to Simon's – and the reader's – irritation, to work out all the details about what has happened to them, and to start manipulating the situation for political purposes. Political change and revolution are the common fare of alternate history rather than a feature of pure time travel.

As Brad and Simon sit in the *impluvium*, the central courtyard of the villa, there are tiny clues in the scene which help to switch the narrative from time travel to a parallel worlds story. Simon observes a strange cultural mix among the visual decorations on the walls. The first images he notices, ceramic tiles with 'pictures of dolphins sporting in the waves', seem typical of fourth century mosaics found in Britain, such as the dolphin mosaic from Bignor Villa in southern England. But as he gazes around, he sees 'paintings of saints on the walls', and he remembers seeing 'paintings very like them in the National Gallery' (63-4). This suggests that these paintings are similar to the fourteenth century Italian paintings held by the National Gallery, rather than the early Byzantine paintings which we might associate as contemporary with mosaics from Bignor Villa. This scene indicates the generic shift since the juxtaposition of these decorative and devotional styles disrupt our expectations of late antiquity.

Brad's account of the differences between our world and the alternate Roman world focuses on political and imperial issues, rather than cultural matters or everyday life. Brad declares that the alternate Julian won the battle against the Persians, eventually defeating them. He explains that Julian 'totally reorganised the empire. He didn't die until he was nearly eighty, and he'd gotten things pretty stable by then. They've stayed that way' (65). Historically, we know that there were many points of frontier tension in the late Empire, which were exacerbated by migrants entering from the east. Visigothic, Ostrogothic and Alan

refugees entered Roman territory as they fled from the Huns (Cameron and Garnsey 1998: 425), which changed the social demographic of the countryside. In turn, the countryside suffered greater dangers from bandits and robbers (366), while cities became more exposed to frontier threats, and as a result their social structures gradually also shifted (409). These changes came about globally and collectively across the late Roman world, and resulted in other cultural changes. Brad concentrates on the political and revolutionary aspects of Julian's rule, and thus his image of the Emperor is in stark contrast to that portrayed by contemporary sources. Brad claims that the alternate Julian 'reversed' Constantine's changes and 'restored paganism' (Christopher 1981: 65), thus ensuring the political stability of the Empire. This is a surprisingly positive impression of a political figure whose historical reputation was far from popular.

Surviving contemporary accounts of Julian are often negative, since he promoted a 'mystical brand of Neoplatonic Hellenism' (Cameron 2011: 722), which did not appeal to the pagan aristocracy, let alone the established Christian majority. According to his contemporary Gregory Nazianzus, Julian added images of the gods bestowing the symbols of imperial rule to his imperial portraits: '*τῇ τῶν βασιλέων τιμῇ τὴν τῶν εἰδώλων συμφέρεσθαι*' ('[Julian was responsible for] mixing up honour of the emperor with honour of idols [pagan gods]') (Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations* IV: 81, translation mine). Gregory disapproves of the way Julian 'mixes up' (*συμφέρεσθαι*) the political with the religious, since imperial portraits were a political matter, not a religious one. Another contemporary, the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, provides one of the more sympathetic accounts of Julian, and tends to defend him against criticism. Yet even Ammianus found Julian's practices at best bizarre: '*victimarius pro sacricola dicebatur ad crebritatem hostiarum alludentibus multis, et culpabatur hinc opportune*' ('He was called in jest by many the "assistant at sacrifices" instead of the priest, regarding his frequent sacrificial victims; and he was fittingly criticised

for this') (Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 22.14.3, translation mine). Ammianus explicitly

indicates that this criticism of Julian was appropriate, through his use of '*opportune*'. This

word also contains the sense of opportunely as well as fittingly, suitably (Glare 2012: 1383),

but given Ammianus's criticism of Julian's excessive sacrifices elsewhere (22.12.6 and

25.4.17), '*opportune*' seems to support the additional criticisms levelled against Julian here.

His use of the term '*victimarius*' ('assistant at sacrifices') is quite degrading, since it links

Julian with those who traded the sacrificial animals, as well as the assistants who looked after

them, rather than the one who oversees the process, the '*sacricola*' ('priest'). Jack Lennon

notes that the job of a *victimarius* carried a lower status partly because it was messy and

partly because the elite presided over the ritual to make it official (Lennon 2015: 84), and that

applying the term to Julian was intended as an insult (73). Ammianus thus shows both

Julian's lack of popular support as well as his own disapproval of Julian's behaviour.

Brad concentrates on Julian because he is focused on political and global structures,

while Simon is concerned with the local and immediate needs of his everyday life. After the

narrative has shifted from time travel to a parallel worlds story, our impression of this late

Roman world changes. When Simon is taken to the parallel London (Londinium), he notices

that the city gates are very old and set into crumbling brickwork. The wooden gate looks as

though it has not been closed for centuries and, on closer inspection, Simon realises that it

can't be closed because 'a small hut to house the sentry had been built against the door and

would have to be demolished before it could be closed' (Christopher 1981: 82). The image of

the crumbling wall with a useless gate which cannot be shut signals the characteristics of this

other late Roman world. It has hardly changed politically for two millennia, and the

crumbling walls present an image of decay rather than prosperity. The obvious age of the gate

and walls emphasise that Simon has not travelled to the past in time, but has travelled to a

place which effectively seems to live in the political and imperial past. Brad seizes on the

idea that, because no one has repaired the now crumbling aspects of late Roman politics, this is a stagnant empire which would be easy to overthrow.

Brad is characteristically unemotional about his revolutionary ideas, stating that he thinks 'this place is overdue for a change' (88) when he reveals that he has been helping the bishop of London, who is planning a revolution. Brad's attitude to the Roman Empire mixes time travel with parallel worlds. He perceives the global political structures of this empire as a parallel world, but the solution he provides for the bishop comes from a time travel perspective, as if he came from the future. Brad concludes that in a military environment which has seen no developments for two millennia, 'the only way of reversing the odds would be to bring in some devastating new weapon' to ensure the success of the revolution (87). He selects two technical developments which apparently 'switched the odds' (88) each time they were used, the stirrup and the longbow. Brad uses the language of chance (the 'odds') to express determinism, both concepts that govern the rules behind a parallel worlds story, and he follows the logic of 'technical determinism' (Rey 2010: 21) in which the weapons, rather than those wielding them, win battles. By contrast, the church leaders perceive their military success as a moral victory, convinced by the validity of their cause, reflecting the way in which ancient sources stressed the human factor since 'moral qualities were thought to be the real causes of victory or defeat' (41). Simon, whose focus remains on the local and personal, notices the broader popular support for the uprising among the people. Brad's interaction with this late Roman world is governed by his assumption that he comes from a superior society, because it has progressed technologically, and he links technology to the future. Brad focuses on the political change and revolution common to the parallel worlds story, but he takes the means to carry out that change from the technology of a time travel narrative.

The revolution caused by Brad's technologies and the bishop's armies eerily echoes political changes in the fourth and fifth centuries, magnified in both speed and violence. Christianity becomes the state religion, and is a requisite for anyone holding public office, with conversion enforced on pain of death. The persecution of pagans at the end of *Fireball*, with a murderous pendulum set up to punish anyone who refuses to convert and 'plenty of other ruthless fanatics about' (Christopher 1981: 122), suggests a bizarre reversal of Diocletian's persecution of Christians. The capture of Rome after the bishop's army is victorious is much more violent and destructive than Alaric's sack of the city in 410 CE, and the mysterious fate of the Emperor, either fled to Africa or killed by his own slaves, mirrors the retirement of Romulus Augustulus in 476 CE. The imperial household is overthrown by the bishop, but replaced by the rule of an authoritarian church. The consequences of the *Fireball* revolution present a 'troublingly other' (Hellekson 2001: 48) narrative, an unsettling variant of the later Roman Empire.

Conclusion

Fireball combines the time travel narrative with the parallel worlds story, and manages that transition in complex and interlocking ways. Simon experiences significant dangers in the first part of the narrative, which functions as time travel, but his dangers are small and localised, since they only affect him, rather than society at large. The Romans he encounters are largely violent and brutal in their treatment of him, but this seems to be a result of his inability to make himself understood and, consequentially, his low social status as an ignorant barbarian. Brad, on the other hand, whose narrative functions as a parallel worlds story, is rarely in personal danger, and meets Romans who represent the civilised and comfortable images of Roman society. However, Brad's concerns are political and global: he focuses on the larger structures and organisations which make the society what it is. In the end, it is

Brad's larger political structures which are shown to be far more brutal, since through the revolution he has de-stabilised many of the better aspects of this strange Roman world. Brad's concern with technology as the key to 'advancing' societies borrows from both the time travel genre and dystopian future narratives. I noted above that positive images of Romans are more common in time travel narratives for young readers, where the travellers experience the local, everyday aspects of life, and thus notice the buildings, plumbing and trade which are so often highlighted as Roman achievements. On the other hand, parallel worlds stories are more likely to focus on the global, the politics and structures of the societies, where the travellers may face dangers of a different and more significant sort. Christopher has combined these genres in *Fireball*, although the overall picture of the Roman society is rather less sympathetic than the Roman Britain stories of the 1950s and those of the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Instead, whilst writing for a juvenile audience, Christopher has filtered his image of Roman Britain through the concerns that characterise his science fiction – the decline of the British Empire and the onset of a 'Pax Americana', an arrogant belief in technological progress, and a self-serving interest that endures from the cruelties of ancient Rome to the so-called civilisation of late twentieth-century society.

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