

# THE ALIEN REVIEWS



# THE ALIEN REVIEW 3

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### THE ALIEN REVIEW 3

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# Initial Notes

## by Perry Middlemiss

A couple of interesting things came out of the recent 2021 World Science Fiction convention:

1. The shortlisted entry on the Hugo Related Work category that I argued against last issue did not win;
2. Chengdhu won the right to host the 2023 World Science Fiction Convention, thereby strengthening the meaning of the word "World" in "Worldcon"; and
3. Some of the oldest Hugo Award categories may no longer be viable.

I'm not going to discuss the first of these as I covered that last issue. Let's just say that I am thankful that sanity prevailed and the award was given to a deserving entry, ie *Beowulf* translated by Maria Dahvana Headley.

The second item will take some time to discuss as the associated arguments are complex and political. I may well be best served by leaving that for others.

The other item of note regarding the Hugo Awards is that the Best Fanzine category, first awarded in 1955, looks like dying a slow death, and may not make it past Chicon 8, the 2022 Worldcon. There haven't been any amendments made to the World Science Fiction Society's constitution to ensure it is dropped as a category, rather it will fade away due to neglect.

Let me explain: Article 3 of the WSFS Constitution deals with the Hugo Awards, and section 3.12.2 under that Article states:

"No Award" shall be given whenever the total number of valid ballots for a specific category (excluding those cast for "No Award" in first place) is less than twenty-five percent (25%) of the total number of final Award ballots received.'

What that basically means is that if any category on the ballot receives votes from less than 25% of the total number of ballots cast then the winner in the category shall be deemed to be "No Award". I assume this rule was introduced to ensure that enough people cast votes in a particular category to make it worthwhile presenting. If,

for example, only 10 people voted in a category with 6 items on the shortlist, some entries may receive no votes at all and the winner have received only two or three votes. That would not be a good look for the Awards as a whole, so a "cut-off" percentage was introduced.

But what if the demographics of the Hugo Award voters changes to the extent that a number of categories are just ignored by the majority of voters? In that case a Hugo Award category may go to "No Award" in successive years, which may well lead to it being dropped from the Awards roster.

In 2021, a total of 2362 ballots were cast in the Hugo Awards voting. In order for any Award category to pass the 25% vote threshold it therefore needed to receive votes on at least 591 ballots, where those votes were for an entry other than "No Award". According to the data provided by the 2021 Hugo Awards sub-committee the Best Fanzine category received 643 ballots, or 27.2% of the total; Best Fancast received 632, or 26.8% of the total, Best Fan Writer received 680 votes, or 28.8% of the total; and Best Fan Artist received 732 votes, or 31% of the total. Looking at those numbers you would have to conclude that all of these categories are in trouble. By comparison Best Novel received votes on 86.4% of ballots cast, Novella got 71.6%, Novelette got 63.5%, and Short Story got 66.6%.

By any measure the actual numbers cast in the Hugo Award Fan categories are pretty good, and I'd suspect they would be considered very high if compared to previous years. The trouble these categories currently face is that the bulk of Hugo Award voters aren't particularly interested in them, and don't vote in them. And with the push by successive Worldcon Committees to get members to nominate, and then vote, we are seeing higher and higher numbers of ballots cast, and the 25% cut-off line rises higher and higher until we've reached the point where some of the oldest categories on the ballot are in danger of being sidelined. An outcome I think few in the Worldcon community would welcome.

I am aware that a lot of older fanzine fans, who cut their teeth on the printed fanzine publication form, are completely uninterested in the award candidates they see on the Hugo Ballots, and so make no effort to vote. They feel that the categories have morphed into something they don't recognise and therefore don't follow. And they have a point.

The other major fannish awards, The Fan(zine) Activity Achievement awards (FAAns), define a fanzine as "an immutable artifact, once published not subject to revision or modification. The fanzine might not exist in a physical form. A pdf, for example, is an artifact." The Hugo Awards define it as:

"Any generally available non-professional periodical publication devoted to science fiction, fantasy, or related subjects that by the close of the previous calendar year has published four (4) or more issues (or the equivalent in other media), at least one (1) of which appeared in the previous calendar year, that does not qualify as a semiprozine or fancast, and that in the previous calendar year meet neither of the following criteria:

- 1) paid its contributors or staff monetarily in other than copies of the publication,
- 2) was generally available only for paid purchase."

In 2021 only one entry on the Best Fanzine ballot was of a form that the FAAn awards would consider eligible: **Journey Planet**, edited by James Bacon and Christopher J. Garcia et al. The others are websites or weblogs which are updated on a regular basis, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly. They aren't what I consider to be a fanzine as they don't have what I can readily identify as an "issue". A weblog entry, in my mind, cannot be anything like an "issue" in the true fannish sense. But arguing the toss over this is just a waste of time. The decision to allow these weblogs onto the Best Fanzine ballot was made some time ago and it's a decision we have to live with.

The question that is probably more important is: has the presence of these titles on the Best Fanzine ballot expedited the decline in this, and associated, categories? I'd say "yes",

though I really have nothing to base that opinion on other than a gut-feel that is more than likely heavily influenced by my views on fandom and fanzines.

I don't think the solution is to "split" the Best Fanzine category in two to cater for both "immutable artifacts" and websites; we have too many Hugo Award categories as it is. The best solution, in my view, would be to tweak the 25% cut-off rule to acknowledge the greater number of Hugo votes received. Though, frankly, I don't think even that will save the categories in the long-term.

The 2023 Chinese Worldcon is going to cause problems for many people; the Chinese Government's involvement and their ongoing suppression of internal dissent and diversity of any kind, and recent statements by their Russian Guest-of-Honour in support of Vladimir Putin, being just a few of them. As a result, I fear that the imminent loss of the fan categories on the Hugo ballot will get lost in the ruck. It will be a sad day when that happens.◀◀

### **My Books**

**by Zora Cross**

My books are like a lovely land  
Where Life and Death walk hand in hand,  
Where I may pluck in happy ease  
A branch of faëry fantasies;  
Or take the little skiff of dreams  
And sail enchanted summer streams  
To reach a blessed isle of light  
Where there is never fear of night.

My books are as a magic world  
Within this dull one wisely curled –  
A realm of immortality  
Where I am queen of land of sea,  
And all the subjects of the soul  
That wander there in Love's control  
Through my serene imagining.

Hector in anguish fights for me,  
Ulysses sails a stormy sea;  
Queen Guinevere and Lancelot ride  
Between the elm-trees side by side,  
And many a man and many a maid  
In leafy lane and glad, green glade  
To faëry cymbals lightly dance  
From out the leaves of old Romance.

Ah, mighty kingdom of the mind,  
That rules the hearts of all mankind,  
When I remember that for me,  
For my undreamed mortality,  
My little soul, unthought, unborn,  
Great poets sang in some far morn,  
I am unhumble than the air  
Lingering here on Song's first stair.

First published in *The Bulletin*,  
27 May 1920

## Going East: SF in Dialogue

### ***David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss discuss two Eastern Bloc science fiction novels and the films that have been adapted from them***



*Originally recorded for Episode 39 of the podcast Two Chairs Talking, in October 2020.*

#### ***Solaris* by Stanisław Lem**

**David:** First, A little bit of background on Stanisław Lem himself. He was born in 1921 in a town called Lwów, which was then in Poland, but after the war, the borders shifted. It's now in Ukraine, but we still definitely call him a Polish writer because he was writing in Polish. He wrote a novel which was published in 1946 called ***The Man From Mars***, which I haven't read, and he went on to write many novels after that. Some of them were autobiographical, but were mostly in what we would certainly describe as the science fiction genre. As well as novels he's published several compilations of stories like ***The Cyberiad***, which is a collection of stories all about two little robots running around the Galaxy, and he's also written several philosophical works. He became celebrated as one of Poland's leading writers. He's won many awards and you would have to say he was the most popular writer of science fiction in the Eastern Bloc, before the Strugatsky brothers came along. That's my impression anyway.

Lem died in 2006 at the age of 84 and we're looking at his novel ***Solaris*** today. It was written in 1961 but wasn't available in an English translation until 1970, and even that was in fact a re-translation from the French; someone translated it into French and then someone else took that French translation and translated it into English. That version, by Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox, was the version I read, though there's a more recent direct translation by Bill Johnston, published in 2011, which is generally regarded as much superior.

I don't want to go into a lot of detail about the plot, but I'm going to have to cover the whole story, and it will also set us up for thinking about the films. So, ***Solaris*** is written from the first person point of view of someone called Kris Kelvin, and he's traveling to a research station on the planet Solaris. It's not entirely

clear to me from the novel what his intended role is going to be at the station. Later on, we discover that he studied psychology, but I'm not clear that that's actually why he is going to the station. Anyway, the two films differ in how they handle what his role is going to be.

There's quite a lot of detail at the start of the book about the journey Kelvin makes from the spaceship *Prometheus* down to the surface of the planet, where the research station is located. Though there were once many more scientists at the station, in fact hundreds at one point, there are now only three researchers left. They have been at the station for some time, a few years perhaps. But when Kelvin arrives, he is surprised that no one comes to meet him, and he has to find his own way into the living quarters, where he finally encounters the researcher Snow in the radio room. Their first encounter is remarkable: Snow is terrified by the sight of Kelvin. It takes some time for Kelvin to convince Snow who he is, and that he has come from Earth. Then Kelvin asks about the other two researchers, in particular Gibarian, who Kelvin had studied with, and knows well. He's horrified to be told that Gibarian is dead, having apparently committed suicide that very morning. And the third researcher, Sartorius, is locked away in his laboratory and refuses to come out.

After that strange introduction to the place we start to get into a lot of background exposition about the planet and why the researchers are there and why it is of such interest. It turns out that Solaris is of interest because it is orbiting two stars, and ought to be in a chaotic orbit, but the planet appears to be actively adjusting gravity to stay in a stable orbit. Solaris is covered by a planet-spanning ocean, with just a few areas of low-lying land, on one of which the station is located. The ocean isn't merely water, though, it is active and continually throwing up bizarre and complex concretions. Over time, the scientists have come to suspect that the ocean is in fact a gigantic living thing, and it is the ocean which is adjusting the planet's motion. Perhaps the ocean is conscious, sentient? Over the period of just over a century a whole branch of science has developed called Solaristic studies, which is

dedicated to creating a taxonomy of the various forms and shapes that the ocean throws up, to understand its behaviour and try to communicate with it. There is quite a lot in the book about these studies, the ocean's concretions and people's interactions with them. All of these efforts, the novel makes clear, have been utterly futile. They still really don't understand what's going on. So this is one very interesting theme of the book: the idea that we could come into contact with an alien species, suspect that it is intelligent, yet be utterly unable to understand it, or have it understand us.

Kelvin is equally unable to understand what is going on *within* the station, he's baffled by the behaviour of Snow and Sartorius, and by Gibarian's suicide. Snow is unable to give Kelvin any sensible sort of answer. The next day, Kelvin is astonished when he encounters a huge African woman, naked except for a grass skirt, coming down the corridor and going silently into Gibarian's room. Again, Snow has no answers which make sense to Kelvin, telling him only that he will eventually understand what's happening.

Kelvin then tries to talk to Sartorius, but at first Sartorius just refuses to open the door to his laboratory, and only agrees to come out on the understanding that Kelvin will promise not to try to get in. While Kelvin is talking to him, he realises that Sartorius is desperately holding on to the handle of the door to keep it closed behind him against someone or something pulling at it from inside. Eventually, Sartorius breaks off the conversation and cries out "I'm coming, I'm coming" and whisks back inside. Kelvin sees a huge shadow loom at the door, and there is a noisy struggle within.

So he is baffled and he returns to his room to sleep. When he opens his eyes, he sees, as though in a dream, his young wife Rheya, who died ten years ago by suicide, at the age of only nineteen. He's at first convinced that it's just a dream, but eventually he is aware that he is, in fact, awake and that Rheya is really present. Which is, of course, impossible. Everything about her, how she looks, how she speaks, is a perfect reproduction of his wife. Kelvin is in a bizarre state of mind, uncertain

whether he has gone crazy, or is hallucinating, or what's going on. Rheya herself is vague about how she got there, and she talks to him quite sensibly, she doesn't know how she got to the station, and for a while she thinks she's at home with him. Eventually, as she lies on the bed, he decides to examine the soles of her feet : quote:

"The skin was soft, like that of a newborn child. I knew then that it was not Rheya, and I was almost certain that she herself did not know it."

So things begin to make a bit more sense. Each of the scientists on the station has received one of these "visitors". They can only assume that the sentient ocean is able to study their minds and has created these simulacra from what it discovers there. We're never really clear about the nature of Snow's and Sartorius' visitors, but I get the feeling that in each case there's some element of suppressed guilt involved. Kelvin certainly feels guilt for Rheya's suicide ten years ago. Convinced that the being he is with isn't really Rheya and is some kind of monstrous imitation, he manages to lure her into a rocket capsule. But once he closes the hatch on her, the Rheya simulacrum thrashes about with truly inhuman force, almost breaking out of the capsule, trying to get out. Nevertheless, he launches her into space on a random orbit. He thinks he's got rid of her.

But it's all in vain, as the other researchers tell him, because Rheya appears again in his room, apparently knowing nothing of what he has done to the previous version of her. Despite himself, knowing that in some sense she's not real, Kelvin finds himself falling love with her again. But as she herself becomes more and more aware that she is not truly human, that she's not really Rheya, her situation becomes tragic and to her, unbear-

able. She makes a suicide attempt, but her body miraculously heals itself. She cannot die.

To me this is the heart of the book, its real theme: this tragic situation of this young woman; this tragedy of being created without knowing why; this awful self-knowledge that she is not the 'real' Rheya, that she is only the shadow of someone Kelvin once loved. And for Kelvin, there's the guilt of knowing he has in a sense called her up and placed her in this situation, and he's therefore responsible for her pain she's suffering.



Sartorius eventually finds a way to permanently destroy "the visitors" and Rheya goes to him while Kelvin sleeps, and begs Sartorius to use his technique on her, to literally put her out of her misery, which he does. When he finds out about this Kelvin is consumed with grief but there is eventually a feeling of relief and understanding. At the end of the book he travels out onto one of the ocean's mysterious constructions and ponders what has happened to him, thinking that he will remain on Solaris, even not knowing what future horrors the ocean may subject him to.

The closing passages are a very moving statement of the tragedy of the human condition. It's really the antithesis of the romantic notion that "love conquers all". It certainly doesn't in this case.

This is a real masterpiece, certainly a masterpiece of the science fiction genre. It's a great book and one that most people who are interested in the genre should read. What about you, Perry? What do you think of it?

**Perry:** I would mostly tend to agree, though it's always good to have a little bit of difference. I think that you're quite right about the problem of the human condition and the human identity, and the question of what is it to be human? Are the simulacra really human even though they've been created—theoretically?

cally out of thin air—and where have they come from?

You get the feeling all the way through this book that there is a purpose behind the simulacra's existence, you just don't know exactly what it is. If we go with the idea that this big ocean is sentient and has a consciousness, I'm of the view that it is trying to communicate with the humans but can't in any normal manner, the way that you and I would, either by speaking or by radio, or by doing something along those lines. But it can't do that, and so has to have a simulacra that it can utilize, to be the communication device. But the point is they can only get the information about these beings from the humans and the humans don't know why they're there, so the simulacra don't know why they're there, and so there's this big sort of first contact communication problem that goes on.

**David:** Absolutely.

**Perry:** And while the whole concept of first contact is never actually mentioned, if you've read anything in the field at all, it sits over the whole top of this, and you suddenly realize that you have a big problem. How do you firstly identify another intelligence that isn't anything like yours? And how do you communicate with them? Now, it's quite easy for you to sit back and say, "this is just silly because, you know, run me through an evolutionary path that would get from a drop of water through to this huge ocean which is sentient." And I thought about that, and I thought that is really silly criticism, Perry. That is a really weird thing to be asking. I just threw that out because I thought that's not the whole point of this at all. You shouldn't be thinking about how it actually got there and then dismissing it because of that. It is there and you have to accept the fact it's



there. So how then do you communicate with it?

I thought it raised really good and interesting questions about, as I said, first contact protocols and the morality of what they do, because they have started trying to interact with the sea, with Solaris, and they have bombarded it with some some X-rays. And there's a big

morality question here, especially when one of them says, "Well, you know, we're not allowed to do this, but we gotta do it anyway."

**David:** That's right.

**Perry:** That's not really very good from that perspective. I know that it forces Solaris to say "Oh well, now we can start doing something." This is a novel of the intellect rather than action. I do think it's a major novel in the field. I gave this four out of five originally but I'm going to up that as I don't think that's quite right.

Now, there are some fairly massive info-dumps in this.

**David:** Oh, there are.

**Perry:** You sort of alluded to a bit of that, and I thought that you might have taken a few points off for that, because you're not big on info-dumps, David, as I recall.

**David:** No, I'm not, and you're right, there's some great slabs of talking about the Solaristic studies, and what I've called this taxonomy of the various shapes and so on, and it's almost like it's pretending to be an academic work, referring to the literature in the field about the behavior of the ocean, and these very, very complex constructions it throws up. So, I think that's fair to say that that is a heck of an infodump, but at the same time, I actually think he's making a point with that. And the point really is that

human beings can come up with these elaborate theories; these vast complex constructions of their own; a theoretical construction of thought about something and yet actually not even touch the surface at all of what's actually going on. So I think, yes, they are a bit tedious but I think he's making a point with it. It reminds me a little bit in some ways of Borges's work where he has fake books or fake theories that people have come up with. I can't quite cite an exact example now, maybe things like *The Book of Sand* which features this inexplicable book, which people have theories about how it works. Or his "Library of Babel", but that's a very slight connection.

I thought it was a very interesting book and I was glad to reread it after many years, I think it's probably 20 or 30 years since I first read it.

**Perry:** It was been a long time since I've read it and I would have suspected that if I read it back in my teens, I would have hated it. Absolutely hated it.

**David:** Which I think, as a teenager, you would.

**Perry:** It would not have been my style at all.

**David:** 'Cause there's no action, really. It's really this philosophical study. I mean, there's this kind of action in the relationship between Kelvin and Rheyra. It's not really just going out there and shooting purple aliens with with ray guns, is it?

**Perry:** Not that that was what I was into all the time back then either, David, but this is just people sitting around talking. Basically the whole of the book is set on the space station, or even around it, and that is something to be remembered as we move further into this discussion. Because that is an important difference between the novel and the films coming up.

I believe that this is one of those books that if you want to know what's gone on in the field in the past, I believe that you need to have read this book. And it is quite short. This is about 150 or 160 pages, if that. It's not a five or six hundred page brick. You can

actually sit down and read this in an afternoon. And if you want to skim through all those info-dumps, you can quite easily do it because it's not going to really impact what you're going to get out of the book.

**David:** Yeah, interesting.

### **Solaris (movie) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky**

**David:** The novel came out in 1961, and there have been two movies made based on it. The first one of these was made by Andrei Tarkovsky, the Russian film director who also co-wrote the script. And that came out in 1972.

**Perry:** Can I just interrupt you just a little bit here, there appears to have been a two-part Soviet television black and white program made in 1968. But I can't find it. I don't know if it's available. I haven't seen it. If I had had been able to find it, I would have attempted to watch it for this program, but unfortunately can't find it anywhere, sorry.

**David:** That's right, yes, there was that.

**Solaris** was written in 1961 and this film by Tarkovsky came out in 1972. It stars Donatas Banionis as Kelvin and Natalya Bondarchuk as his wife. Interesting enough in this movie, she's called Hari and not Rheyra, I don't know why they made that change, but never mind.

**Perry:** There are other name changes here too, and I'm not quite terribly sure why.

**David:** True, the researcher Snow becomes Professor Snaut.

**Perry:** Which is a bit strange.

**David:** Yeah, I mean you don't really know here whether there's been a translation issue between the Polish and the Russian or something. Who knows.

**Perry:** Maybe the word "snow" in Russian wasn't ever a surname, I don't know.

**David:** Yeah, who knows, never mind. OK, So what do you have to say about this film? One thing, along with most of Tarkovsky's films, as I understand it, is that it's very slow. It's very slow paced and it seems interesting that

it doesn't start on the way to Solaris as the book does. It starts on Earth. At the very beginning of the film there's quite a long segment before Kelvin gets to travel to Solaris. He's staying on a farm, Wikipedia says it's his parents, I thought it was his uncle and aunt, but never mind. However, whoever they are they're his relations, and while he's there, they are visited by Kelvin's colleague Burton, who was on Solaris some years ago and was subjected to a very critical inquiry about his report of an incident he witnessed on Solaris. Partway through the visit Kelvin and Burton watch a video recording of this inquiry and the whole purpose of that, I think, is really to give you a pretty good background of the idea of there being Solaristic studies. We see the scepticism with which Burton's report is held because he reports he was flying over the surface of Solaris in a helicopter and he sees this monstrously sized human child created by the ocean. It's just one among all the very bizarre things it throws up there. It throws up sort of fake replicas of gardens and trees and bizarre geometric constructions, but he reports seeing this monstrously sized human child. I haven't re-watched the movie recently, but if I recall correctly, it's actually the image of one of the children of one of the other researchers. Now this event is actually described in the novel, so Tarkovsky is really using this as a mechanism to show you the background of these studies of this weird ocean.

Then Burton leaves the farm where Kelvin is and there's this long, you'd have to say, almost interminable sequence. I don't know how long it goes for. It feels like ten to fifteen minutes. It can't be that long? But it goes on and on and on. Which is Burton returning, presumably to his home in his car and he's passing along freeways and through tunnels and it goes on and on through all these different freeways and roads and tunnels and eventually, eventually you get to

a point where the camera pulls back and you see this aerial view of traffic. A big traffic jam in this complex road intersection. I'm not sure how to take all of that. I can only read it as being some kind of metaphor of Kelvin traveling this long distance to Solaris. Maybe a hint that our world, if you saw it with alien eyes from outside would be as strange and alien as the surface of Solaris is to us. I'm not sure. I don't know how to take that.

So finally we get to the part where we pick up from the book directly and Kelvin travels to Solaris and then it sticks fairly closely to the book, apart from those couple of name changes we mentioned. And so I don't think there's any point in describing that. It sticks pretty closely to the plot of the book that I've already described. But at the very end of the film Kelvin appears to have returned to his father's farm, or his uncle's farm, whichever you like, but something odd is happening. Because you see his father, or his uncle, in the kitchen and this steaming water is pouring down into the kitchen from somewhere and his father is completely unaware of this. Not paying any attention at all. Eventually the camera pulls out and we see that the farm is really just another simulacrum resting on the surface of Solaris. Solaris has created this whole environment for Kelvin to be in. And that's the end of the movie.

I think it's an interesting film and it's an interesting take on the book. What did you think?

**Perry:** One thing that we have to be aware of is that Tarkovsky was very much a strong Roman Catholic. But, he mentions in some interviews that he gave regarding the films that he made, that he never set out to have anything in his films which would be in any way construed of as being a metaphor. Now, I'm sorry, mate but, I don't really care whether you don't think there's metaphors here; there are metaphors all over the place. And this is one of those situations I think



where, as you'll know David, that we come across sometimes where artists, novelists, writers, film directors, basically are unaware of the fine detail final product that they produce. Somebody comes in afterwards and says, oh, you've done this and this connects over here to that and that's there. So this is a metaphor for this. And a reader will go "yeah, well that's just bleedingly obvious," and the artist will say "I didn't put it there." Well, sorry mate, but somebody did. You may not have known that you were doing it. But it's there. And I think you're right about the idea about that travel on the freeways. He is trying to set up something that gives you the idea of the journey that Kelvin is making. He's got this nice environment on the farm and he has to go back into an industrialized complex so that he could actually travel off to this space station and he has to make that psychological adjustment. But did he have to take so bloody long to do it?

**David:** I agree.

**Perry:** The other thing that got me, and which is actually important for other things that we will talk about later on in this particular program, is the amount of water that is there in those first sequences on the farm. There are lots of long shots of a single set-piece of reeds in a river and the current going past, with the reeds just basically drifting. When later on you see the planet Solaris, you think: "Oh yeah, OK, that's what he was pointing to." He was alluding to that beforehand.

**David:** Kind of pre-figuring it, yeah.

**Perry:** I've only seen two films of his, and we'll talk about both of them today, and in both of them he has a scene where he has characters just standing in a field, or standing somewhere and it just starts to rain. Then they get out of the rain, and they stand undercover for a while and it stops. It really made me think: "is he in some sort of a controlled weather environment? Is this a part of a world where the rain just basically comes on? They turn it on at a certain time and then turn it off after 5 minutes or so. Or is it just that it happens to rain and that's the way that it rains there?" I don't know, but

there's a lot of water involved and again at the end of the film where the water is dripping down on top of books and into the kitchen and there's water everywhere. Except when you get to the station and there's no water there at all, because it's completely sort of sterile. Except for the fact that it's filthy. There's garbage everywhere.

**David:** Yeah, it's a complete mess, which is out of the book.

**Perry:** Which is really quite interesting. But you've got a station where, I think they allude to in the book, that it could hold anything up to 150 or 170 people. But it's only got 3, and I kept thinking "who's doing the maintenance on this bloody thing?" And really, there's nobody. There's nobody doing this. There's just rubbish all over the place.

Now it's interesting that Tarkovsky made this film, and you have to remember it came out in 1972, three, four years at the most after **2001**. Tarkovsky hated **2001** and he hated the way that SF was portrayed in western films and he called **2001** "a lifeless schemer with only pretensions to truth." Bloody hell. Talk about cutting that to the quick. And what Tarkovsky ends up doing is he just cuts away all the SF stuff in this completely. As much as he possibly can. But even then he gets to the point where he still had too much of it in there. And one British critic, who we will talk about later on, actually notes that this was Tarkovsky's least favorite of all of his films.

**David:** Interesting.

**Perry:** This is the one that he did not like more than anything, so that's interesting. I gave the film 3.8 out of five. I thought it was a good representation of the book, with enough of a change, but I thought that there was far more in the film about the interactions between the people and much less emphasis on what it was that **Solaris** itself was attempting to do. So there was less of the alien communication and more of, "well, you found yourself in this funny position. What's going on and how are you handling that?"

**David:** I think this is true of both films of **Solaris**, and I'll talk about the second one next.

**Perry:** I think that was a product of the fact that Tarkovsky was attempting to get rid of all the SF stuff out of it. Which really, he couldn't. He couldn't avoid *Solaris* itself, but he just used that as a mechanism to get this simulacra there, and then he just did not care where they came from. All he was worried about was what impact that they had on the people that were in the station and how they interacted with each other regarding that. And he disregarded anything about first contact protocols or about the morality of what they were doing. None of that mattered and it was merely a matter of how the people interacted with each other.

### **Solaris (movie) directed by Steven Soderberg**

**David:** Indeed. The second film based on the book was directed by Steve Soderbergh and released in 2002 and this one stars George Clooney as Chris Kelvin and Natasha McElhone as Rhexa. In this one there's much more emphasis on the idea that Kelvin is a psychologist who is being sent to *Solaris* to determine the mental state of the researchers there by direct request of his old friend Gibarian. So we get quite a lot of background of Kelvin's character, and his work as a psychologist, and then we're in a series of flashbacks throughout the whole movie. We get his past relationship with his wife, Rhexa, who was portrayed here as much older than in the book, where she's only said to be 19. I think again, from his arrival on *Solaris*, the film follows the novel reasonably closely, but not at all as closely as Tarkovsky's film, which is ironic, since Wikipedia says: "reflecting on Andrei Tarkovsky's critically acclaimed 1972 film **Solaris** Soderbergh promised to be closer in

spirit to Lem's novel." Still, it says Lem disliked both renderings.

**Perry:** Spirit rather than the actuality, I think.

**David:** So Kelvin arrives, as in the book, and in the previous film, and he comes into the living quarters, and in this version he sees



numerous smears of dried blood. All over the walls. What's going on here? And then he meets up with the character Snow, who is played here by Jeremy Davies. And when Kelvin meets him, he's this laid-back gum-chewing young guy, very vague and apparently unconcerned—a very annoying character—apparently unconcerned about the strange events at the station. And the Sartorius character is now a doctor Gordon, who is a middle aged African American woman played by Viola Davis. And then at the end there's a real

twist away from the novel as Kelvin and Doctor Gordon discover a body stashed away behind a panel in the wall. And it's Snow. Probably the original Doctor Snow, with the live one they've been talking to, being the simulacrum. I assume that's what we are meant to understand.

For reasons I can't now recall, the planet's gravity somehow begins to increase. I think they've zapped it with X-rays or whatever and the planet's gravity now begins to increase and pull on the station which had been in orbit. In the book it's supported on a solid part of the surface. But in this movie, and I think also in Tarkovsky's movie, it's portrayed as being in orbit—anyway in this movie the station is being drawn closer and closer, so the station will eventually burn up in the atmosphere or crash to the surface. So Doctor Gordon readies a capsule to escape. But Kelvin at the very last minute decides to stay behind. And then we have this typical happy-ever-after Hollywood-type ending with Kelvin and Rhexa reunited, both apparently as simulacra. And I thought "oh no!"

So I didn't like this one anywhere near as much as Tarkovsky's film and but it's interesting that in both films there's very little attention paid to the mysteries of the ocean or discussion, as you said, about the first contact issues or discussion about whether the ocean is actually sentient. We really don't see the ocean much at all except out of the window with a bit of swirling going on. We don't see any of the complex concretions it throws up, which is talked about a great deal in the book. Though at least we do get a *description* in Tarkovsky's film about some of these constructions, though we never see them, but not in the Soderberg film. So what do you think of this version Perry?

**Perry:** It's interesting that this film was produced by James Cameron. He had originally attempted to try and make this film, but just couldn't do it, because he was doing a whole lot of other stuff. Probably doing **Aliens** or one of those other ones that he did. Anyway, it looks much slicker and more science fictional than Tarkovsky's. It's a clean space ship, this one.

**David:** Well, there is rubbish lying around.

**Perry:** But it actually delves more into the philosophical problems associated with the presence of the visitors. You spoke about the fact that when Rheyra turns up in the book,

and also in Tarkovsky's version, that Kelvin doesn't know how to handle this, realizes that she's dead, realizes that she shouldn't really be there and convinces her somehow to get into a space capsule and then shoots it off into orbit. Well, she comes back in this version. In a scene, about the midpoint of the film, Kelvin and Rheyra are talking to Gordon and Snow, and they talking about what the visitors are made of and what they're going to do with them. And Kelvin just says, "Well, we'll take all the findings back to Earth," and Gordon, who seems to spend most of the film in a complete state of distress, says:

"What if what's happening here started happening on Earth on a mass scale? Don't you see that as a problem? I think it's a serious mistake to assume it's benign. For all we know, it's driving us crazy so it can watch us kill each other."

Now that's the first time in any of this whole film that anybody refers to anything happening like that. And this is the first time also that you get that very American thing that assumes that any alien that you come across is going to try to kill you. And so that's the first thing you think of. Rather than saying, "well, maybe it's just trying to communicate with us. Maybe that's what we should be thinking of now." No, they're scared.



Also, the weird thing about this is that if you look at all the visitors that each of these scientists get, one of them gets his child, who is still alive back on Earth. And so he's got his son there with him and his son also back at home. But the son is as he remembers him, as a child. Rheyra is how Kelvin remembers her, and there are problems with his memory regarding that. Gordon? I'm not terribly sure exactly who she has remembered...

**David:** I don't think we ever see them in the films.

**Perry:** But it scared the bejeezus out of her.

**David:** Which is pretty well right with the book, I think, in that you don't find out really about their visitors, but they're obviously not pleasant.

**Perry:** But everybody pictures them as they think they've remembered them.

Now, as you said, there are shots on the spaceship and then flashbacks to when Kelvin meets Rheyra for the first time on a train and then catches up with her again at a party somewhere and they start going out and it sort of keeps on going from there. The actress has got this stunning face. Absolutely stunning face. And it reminded me of a line from a song, probably written in the late 80s by Lloyd Cole and the Commoions, called "Perfect Skin". I don't know if you remember it, but it's got a line that goes: "She's got cheekbones like geometry and eyes like sin, She's got perfect skin," and this woman's face is like that. Cheekbones. And a jaw like geometry. It's just right there. You can understand why they had to up the age of the wife in this because, as one critic said, George Clooney always looks like he's in a role auditioning for a later George Clooney. He's basically playing "George Clooney" as he thinks he will be later on, so he's looking a bit more serious than he would be. But he's got grey hair, and if he had grey hair and the wife was 19, you start thinking this is not a terribly good look.

But there's also differences in this particular film about why they're actually there. You mentioned about the fact that the Institute for Solaristic Studies has been going on for

decades. In this particular station, it seems to me that somebody mentions that one of the reasons why they are there is to investigate it as an energy source. And I thought, what the hell are you talking about? It's halfway across the bloody universe. What do you want that in the script for anyway? This is one of these times that you need to have somebody go through it and with a big blue pen, and just get rid of that crap. You don't need that at all.

Now I was talking about how the visitors come in: Kelvin's got his dead wife; Gilbarian's son comes back; and we don't know who Gordon's is. But why is Snow's visitor himself?

**David:** He think he says early on in the movie that it's his brother. You can assume it's his twin brother.

**Perry:** OK, I must have missed that bit.

**David:** It doesn't make a lot of sense, either way. And then the fact that the body of one of them is stashed away, doesn't make a lot of sense either. Because this is the first time there's been any violence, in the book, or in the other film, where there's been any indication that these simulacra are going to be violent in any way, although they're very powerful. I mean at one point Rheyra tears her way through a metal door.

**Perry:** Yeah, punches a hole through it because she doesn't realize that the door actually opens the other way. Now there's a fair bit, in this particular film, about the formation of the simulacra. Clooney's character keeps on saying "she was as I remembered her". But Rheyra says, "but you remembered me as suicidal. And that's what I am", and that's why she tries to kill herself. That's interesting. That wasn't picked up anywhere else.

I was quite impressed with this film all the way right through, and then in the last 15 minutes it dropped a whole point for me. The whole ending just lets this thing down considerably.

**David:** Yeah.

**Perry:** Gordon's gone back to Earth. Snow and Kelvin remain on the station, and the station is gradually falling into the planet. And the film cuts back to Earth again. And we know it's Earth because all of the shots in the space station had a major blue tinge, and all of the stuff on back on Earth is more reds and yellows and bits of green as well. So Kelvin is cooking in the kitchen and he cuts his finger and he puts it under the water tap. And as he's looking at it in the water. He suddenly realizes that it's healed very quickly. So he realizes that he's a simulacra as well, as you said, and then Rheya turns up and Kelvin asks: "Am I alive or dead?" And Rheya says "we don't have to think like that anymore". And she smiles. "We're together now. Everything we've done is forgiven. Everything." And I thought "Oh no, this has now turned into a semi-religious afterlife fantasy. At the end everything will be happy ever after and the audience could walk out and go: "Oh, really glad that was uplifting" and it ruins the whole bloody thing. Without the last five minutes of the film I would have given this a score above 4. But then I gave it down to 3.4. I just thought that it dropped right away. It really just ruined it for me.

**David:** I think that's right. I certainly prefer the Tarkovsky film. Which still doesn't end the way the book book does, but it's a good deal more in sympathy with the spirit of the novel.

Alright, well I think we've done **Solaris** to death, don't you think so?

**Perry:** I do. It's been a very interesting exercise to read the book and then later on to watch both film adaptations. They're all worth having a look at for their own reasons, but be aware of the fact, as you said, that Tarkovsky is a very slow, slow film director. Which we'll come up to a little bit more later on. Because now we are going to move on to the short novel:

### **Roadside Picnic by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky**

**Perry:** Or even probably just a novella.

**Roadside Picnic** was first published in Russia in 1972, but not translated into English until

1977. Written by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, who you also mentioned earlier on. Sometime in the 1970s books by the Strugatsky brothers—because I have only ever seen them as authors together—started coming out into English, and by 1987 they had been invited to be Guests of Honor at the World Science Fiction Convention in Brighton, in the UK—a convention that I went to. And do you know who the other professional Guest of Honor was at that convention?

**David:** No, I don't.

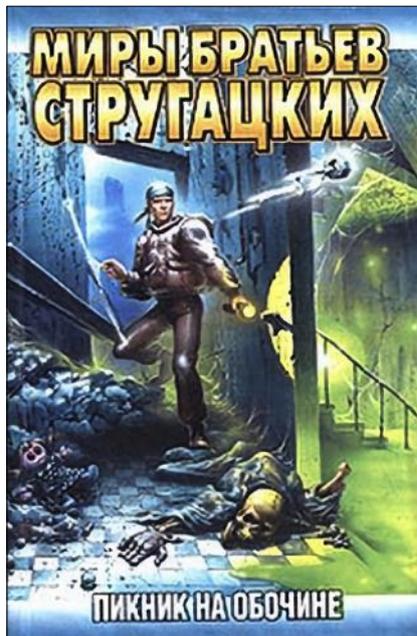
**Perry:** Doris Lessing—the Nobel Prize winner, so that was interesting. They had Russians on the one side and they had Doris Lessing, who was far better known for her literary stuff, but was basically there as a science fiction writer.

Anyway, getting to this particular book, it'll be quite quick because I want to talk much more about the film version than about this. Thirty years before this novella starts aliens have visited six different places on Earth, leaving behind debris—junk and various objects in mysterious areas called Zones. Now people go in and out of these particular areas—a lot of them illegally, although there's an official Institute that is supposed to be looking after the studies of these Zones. But some people go in there and they collect some of the objects, and bring them out and sell them on the black market. And these guys are called Stalkers. That ends up being the name of the film that Tarkovsky, again Tarkovsky, made of this particular short novel later on. Now, the other thing that you need to be aware of is that these Zones are theoretically always changing and they cause long term medical and genetic changes in the people who enter them. In the first section of the novel, Doctor Valentine Pilman, who's got a Nobel Prize for physics, is being interviewed by a reporter from a local radio station and is asked: "what in your opinion, is the most important discovery in these thirty years", that is, the thirty years of the existence of the Zones. And Pilman says, "The fact of the Visitation itself." "I beg your pardon?" "The fact of the Visitation itself is the most important discovery not only of the past thirty years, but also the entire history of

mankind..." because it's important to know that these visitors were actually here, that there is another intelligence in the universe. The reporter is nonplussed and wants to know what he is talking about? Surely all the little bits and pieces and the gadgets are the most important. But really it is the fact that this thing actually happened.

The book basically follows a guy by the name of Red Schuhart at the age of 23, 28 and 31, as he goes in and out of the Zone, first legally, because he is a laboratory assistant with the International Institute for Extraterrestrial Cultures. And then later on illegally. First off, he goes in with a couple of people who are friends of his or compatriots of his, and they get all the stuff they need. They come back out again and they get a really big bonus because they found some really good material. Red goes off to the bar and while he is there somebody comes in and tells him that one of his companions is dead. It seems he had a heart attack in the shower. This is a bit of a shock to Red, so he flees the bar and runs into his girlfriend in the street, who tells him that she's pregnant and her mother wants her to have an abortion because she's worried that their child will end up being genetically deformed because Stalkers produce mutant children. And that's the end of the first section.

In the second section, he's 28, he's now married with the child and the only way that he can make money is to go into the Zone retrieving alien objects, bringing them back out again and selling them on the black market. It starts when he's actually in the Zone with a friend of his by the name of Burbridge who's had a bit of an accident and he's fallen into some—I don't know—alien water. Its a "goo" of some sort, which has turned his lower legs into jelly from the knees down. He doesn't have any bones left. The flesh is still there, but everything underneath is gone.



And then Burbridge tells him about the Golden Ball, that is, the big thing in the Zone that Burbridge has always been looking for. And he says that he knows where it is and that if Red gets him out and gets him to a doctor, so he can get seen to, then he will tell Red how to find it. Well, Red gets him out along with their swag, and goes off and sells it. But he finds out he's been betrayed by somebody and that he's going to get arrested. So he rings up a mate of his, Richard Noonan, who's supervising electronic equipment at the Institute and says "look after my wife. I'm going to have to give myself up because they're going to come and get me anyway and they'll just trash the house looking for everything. If I give myself up there's a chance that they'll leave her alone and the child alone." So he goes off and he says he's going to get two to three years.

The next section starts after the end of the time Red's been in jail for two years. But Noonan hasn't gone back to see the wife in that time. Now he goes there to see the wife and Red at the same time. Prior to that, he has a bit of a discussion with a compatriot of his who tells Noonan what he thinks this Visitation actually is: he describes it as being "a picnic". He says:

"Picture a forest, the country road and a meadow. A car drives off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out of the car carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. And all that crap has been left behind."

All the stuff's been left behind, and that's what he says has happened here. The aliens have turned up just on some road through the cosmos, got off the side of the road, had a picnic and just left all this garbage behind. And that's what they're picking up.

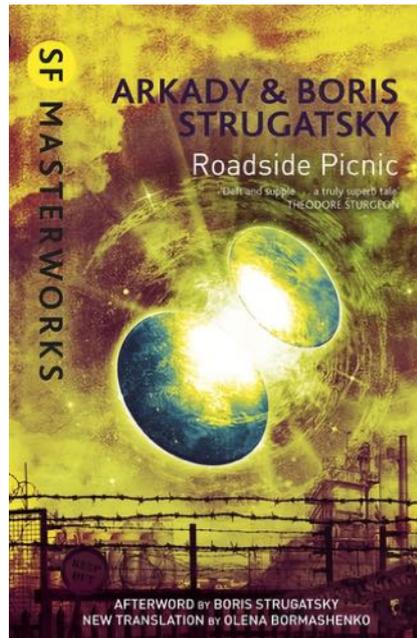
Red gets out of prison. We realize that there is something wrong with the

child in this particular section. We don't know what it is exactly, but it's there.

In section 4 we find out that when Red kisses his child on the cheek that her face is covered in golden fur and we then know that something has gone wrong. In this section of the book Red's making one last run into the Zone to try and find the Golden Ball. And he's taken another guy with him because he has to get through a particular point called the meat grinder, and what they do is they take somebody who's expendable, somebody that none of them like and who they want to get rid of, because the person that goes first is going to die. And after that person has gone through, then the person behind them can come in and pick up whatever they need. So it's a fairly monstrous way of going about achieving what you want. And it ends when Red gets to the point in a quarry where he's found the Golden Ball and he's just about to go and pick it up. And then the novel ends.

Now this is a mysterious novel of first contact, again, but also this time without the aliens. There are no aliens here. They've been and gone.

Some people might need to be aware that some authors in the science fiction field sort of have a conversation with books that have gone before. We've spoken about Ann Leckie with the Culture novels of Iain Banks. In this instance in 2014, Jeff VanderMeer, an American author, wrote his Southern Reach trilogy, especially the first novel called **Annihilation**, which covers similar ground to this. It's about a group of four people—in the film version, which featured Natalie Portman, four women—who enter this particular area, which is very much like the Zone. Parts of it will kill you. Parts of it keep changing. Things have all gone very weird, and you don't know why, but the aliens have been there at some point. This is a conversation with this partic-



ular Strugatsky book. It's not a sort of pastiche, it's just another version of the story and another look at the themes that have been presented.

**David:** Well, it's very interesting that you say that because I have another part of that conversation to talk about, so I'll do that in a second, but very quickly I would say I actually enjoyed this book quite a lot. It was good, well written, but in terms of this conversation, it reminded me enormously of Algis Budrys's **Rogue Moon**. If you recall, in that novel—which was written 11 years earlier, in 1960, **Roadside Picnic** was written in 1971—there's this very strange construction which is discovered on the moon, in Budrys's book, in a very strange area. It's lethal if you try to get into it. People get killed as they try to navigate their way through this object. It's clearly

of alien origin, but there's no aliens around. There's been some sort of Visitation. So I thought that was a very interesting to pick that up. Now, whether the Strugatsky's had read **Rogue Moon**? No idea. Even if they had, it's not plagiarism. It's just picking up the similar sort of idea. And it's also the case of this unknowable alien, which we just deal with in the peripheral results of what it does or what it's left behind it and the humans are never able to fully understand it. And that's certainly the case in both **Rogue Moon** and in **Roadside Picnic**. I don't think there's anything more I've got to say about the book, but then we move on to the film, that was based very loosely on the book, I would say.

### **Stalker (movie) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky**

**Perry:** Here, we've got another film directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, this one in 1979, and it's called **Stalker**. The title is taken from the name of the people that go through this Zone. The script was written by the Strugatsky brothers in consultation with

Tarkovsky. Made in Russia and has a lot of Russian actors' names in it. I should have mentioned earlier that the Internet Movie Database has a rating system that allows people to write in and give their score. The original Tarkovsky **Solaris** had a rating of 8.1. This **Stalker** has a rating of 8.2, so it's sort of fairly similar.

Now I've got to tell you that I had a very weird experience with this particular film over the weekend. A friend of mine, a friend of the podcast, WH Chong, told me about a particular book called **Zona**. The full title is **Zona: A Book About a Film About a Journey To a Room**, that's the title, by Geoff Dyer published in 2012 that was published in Australia by Text Publishing. Geoff Dyer, who I actually alluded to a few times in our discussion about **Solaris** when I mentioned a British film critic. But I didn't want to give his name until I got to this point, because I didn't want to give away the whole story of this book before we got to this part of the discussion.

Dyer's whole book revolves around a viewing of this particular film. He works his way through the 142 cuts in this film. Now firstly, somebody went and counted them, which I think is good. I wouldn't want to do it, but he works his way through every one of the 142 cuts. I watched maybe the first 15 minutes of this particular film just to get a bit of a feel for it and thought "Oh gawd, this is gonna be a long and slow", because it's 2 hours 46 minutes this one. I then came across **Zona**, picked up a copy, started to read it. And then I thought: this might be an interesting exercise, if I watch a bit of the film and then read what Dyer's got to say about it, maybe read on a little bit and then do overlapping all the way right through. Which is what I did the whole of yesterday. One laptop showing the movie and one laptop where I've got the book on an e-reader. And it was a very, very strange experience. I have no idea whether it completely changed my view of the film or not. Anyway, we'll get there.

So the film differs markedly from the book, in that it really only concerns that very last section of the novel where the Stalker—and he's only ever called the Stalker in this film and is not given any other name at all. He

earns his living by taking people into the Zone. There's also a change in that there's no Golden Ball that is going to give people lots of wishes and give them whatever they want. In the film the area where you can go and get your deepest desires fulfilled is just called The Room. So the film starts with the Stalker waking up in bed. He's lying in bed with his wife and his daughter. He gets up, and gets dressed—as an aside, the film is in this section is shot in a sepia wash. I found out later on that they filmed it all in color but they printed it in black and white and so they put this sepia wash over it all the way right through.

The area in which the Stalker lives is a shithole. There's garbage everywhere, but it's not garbage like bits of plastics, it's industrial waste. You've got big hunks of steel that are rusting over here, there are puddles of oily water and bits and pieces of equipment that are just lying around all over the place that he has to go over, half burnt logs of wood lying on the road and all this sort of stuff, it's just awful.

**David:** You're talking about the area around where he lives?

**Perry:** Yeah, after he gets up and his wife is really annoyed that he's actually going off to the Zone again, he goes off to a bar and he meets the two people that he's going to take there who try to introduce themselves by name and he says "No, no, you're the Writer and you're the Professor." They both have their own reasons for wanting to go into the Zone. The Writer says that he has completely lost inspiration for his work and he needs to be able to go and find it again. And the Professor gives some story about how he just wants to go in and see what's there and do some measurements. There's a beautiful sequence in the **Zona** book about the bar. It goes on for about 20 pages and it's fantastic. It goes into the flickering light that's there, the grubby barman that comes out and pours the beers, it's just wonderful stuff. They leave there and then they head towards Zone. To get into the Zone they have to take a Jeep. They do a bit of a zigzag around, being chased by a motorbike. The Zone, in this film version, is completely surrounded by a very

high wire fence with guard posts and guards and gates. And the gates are there to allow trains to go through the area. The only way for The Stalker and his mates to get through is to follow a train through the gate and try to make sure they don't get shot by all the guards. Once they get in far enough, the guards won't follow them because they don't want to go anywhere near the Zone at all. So, after that sequence, we're still on the outside, but there's a buffer area before you get to the actual Zone. And so the three men get onto this small diesel powered cart. And as they're going along there's a long, long, long sequence with the camera just sitting on them. Dyer says this is one of the greatest sequences in cinema ever...

**David:** Wow.

**Perry:** ...which I thought was a bit of a stretch. But anyway it is interesting. And then the film just changes. And suddenly you're in color. You move from the sepia straight into color. It's a beautiful way of making that big jump. You don't know when it's gonna happen, it's just happens.

**David:** Not all that original. Remember **Wizard of Oz**.

**Perry:** True, but Dyer says he's never seen **Wizard of Oz** but he's aware of it. He knows that's there, but he's never seen it. He doesn't want to see it. I don't know whether Tarkovsky had seen it, maybe. But anyway, it's a good break.

**David:** It's good technique.

**Perry:** So they start moving through the particular Zone itself. Now The Stalker, all the way right through, keeps on warning his companions "you gotta be careful, you gotta be careful. Everything's gonna change, things change in a hurry and you have to keep up with everybody and you have to keep sticking together." It's a dire place, there's water and mud and stuff everywhere and yet nothing ever changes in the Zone. In the book, in order for The Stalker to know whether he can move from one particular point to another, because gravity sometimes changes in the area in front of him, he gets a large steel bolt, a nut, and he ties a ribbon around it and

throws it. And if it looks like it goes in a dead straight line and lands the way he thinks it should land he can walk through there. But sometimes he throws it and it just either veers off to one side or it doesn't land properly or shoots up or goes in a different direction. And he doesn't want to go that way, because there's something there that's going to impact them. Every time he throws a nut in the film, it goes exactly where he wants it to go, so you never know whether anything happens. There's a few little pieces where a bird appears and then disappears, and then another one turns up straight afterwards. But you don't know whether that's an illusion or you missed something, but that's it in terms of what goes on in this Zone. As the three three of them all head towards their goal they have arguments, they have discussions about where they're going. They seem to do a heck of a lot of just lying down in puddles of water, which I don't quite understand. Again, there's water everywhere. We were talking about that in **Solaris**. There's water everywhere, and it doesn't seem to bother them.

**David:** At one point The Stalker goes to sleep in a pool of water.

**Perry:** You know, in **Solaris**, Kelvin's walking through rain, and it just doesn't bother him. He flicks his head and that's it. Here, they're always going through this water. Stalkers always tell you you have to stay together, things change and if you get lost, we can't go back the way we came. We have to keep on going all the way right through. So I thought, well there's a bit of a problem about the Jeep as they've left that one behind.

They are able to put the diesel cart into reverse and send that back off, so that's OK. But the Jeep seems stuck where they left it.

Basically the three men end up working their way through and go further and further into the Zone heading towards The Room, and they pass through a long, wet and mossy tunnel, that The Stalker calls "the meat grinder". This is the equivalent of the meat grinder in the book. "The meat grinder", I believe, was the slang term given to the Soviet gulags, that if you went in there it was

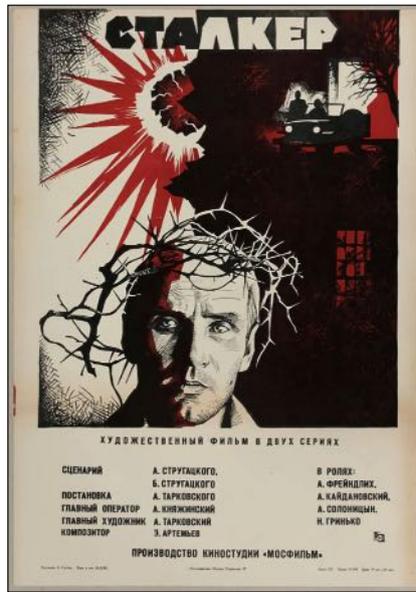
like a meat grinder and that you were going to be ground up. Some people came through it, but not many others did. So there's always, with Russian novels, a fair bit about politics. But not politics in the way that you and I understand it, it's the politics of the bureaucracy around you, and the overriding police apparatus everywhere. And so they're always thinking about whether they're going to get into trouble, whether they are going to get shot, whether they're going to get arrested and so on.

Now halfway through this journey, a dog turns up. We don't know what the dog's doing there, but it pops up here and there and sometimes you see it, sometimes you don't, but it keeps on coming back.

They all finally work their way through to the room although you can't get to it in a straight line. The Stalker says "the room's 200 meters in that direction, but we can't go that way, we gotta go round here." An hour and a half later after they've gone through all of the journey they finally all get there together, and it's then that you come to the understanding that the Writer doesn't really want to go into The Room because he's now scared of getting inspiration back again. But the Professor, who's been carrying this knapsack with him all the time, causing all sorts of frictions because he's been leaving it behind and has to go back and get it—he's got his thermos and his sandwiches in it—pulls out something from the bag which looks like a Thermos Flask. And when somebody asks "What's that?", as he starts to unscrew it, and fix it all up, and pulls something out of his pocket he then slips it into the mechanism, and he says "it's a 20-kiloton bomb which I'm going to use to blow this room up". So there is a big scramble with the Stalker, and the Writer actually steps in between the Professor and the Stalker and throws the Stalker into the water and he keeps on throwing him into the water. The Stalker gets up and gets thrown back into the

water again. There's something about water with Tarkovsky. I don't care whether he doesn't think there's metaphors or not but there's something there.

In the end, the Stalker gives up the struggle because he thinks "I can't stop this guy" and he says to the Professor, "why are you doing this?" "Well, I don't want idiots to come here who want to get their heart's desire in this particular room, which would be to gain power and rule the world. So I'm going to blow it up." And they talk a little bit and about two or three minutes later he thinks, "Nah, I'm not gonna do that anymore." And he starts unscrewing and disables the bomb, and throws it away." And I thought "Gee, that was pretty quick". One minute he's sitting there and he's actually



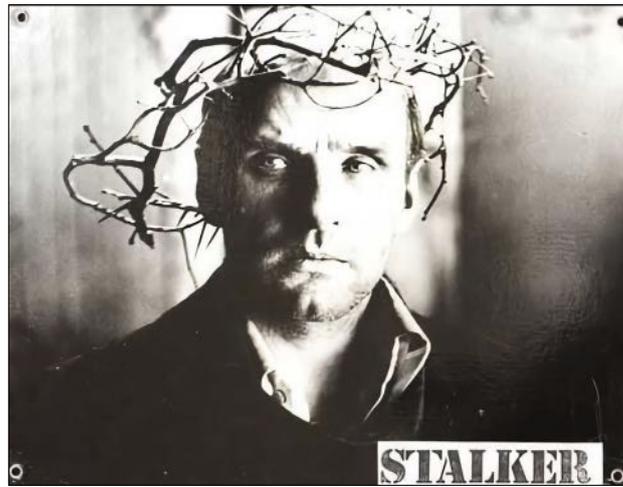
got it almost to the point where he's just about the punch in the combination at the top to arm this particular bomb and he just decides, "no, I don't wanna do that anymore. Alright, I won't." And so he's got a change of heart and the three of them sit there a bit, and look into The Room and it then starts raining in The Room. The Room, the capital R, where they're all trying to get to has a tiled floor and it's got 10 or 15 centimeters of water in it. And it starts raining inside The Room. Then the camera pulls back, away through The Room at the back, so you're looking at the three of them looking into The Room and then the rain stops. And they're still sitting there and they're still sitting there and it's still sitting there, and then the film cuts and then we're back to sepia and we're back in the bar again. And the three guys are standing in exactly the same spots as they were at the start of the film. Oh, hang on, the dog from the Zone is there. Now they've got a dog. So they did actually go through the Zone. Then the Stalker is feeding the dog and the Stalker's wife turns up. They have a brief discussion and then the Stalker and his wife leave the bar. After he gets home he has a fit and collapses on the floor. She puts him to

bed and then has a bit of a discussion directly to the camera about what it is that she's done.

And then it cuts again to a color shot of the child seemingly walking, but as the camera pulls back, you find out that she's sitting on her father's shoulders and they're walking around and then walking off camera. Then it cuts to the girl sitting at the end of a table reading a book. She's just reading a book as the camera pulls back. That's the other thing I need to mention, Tarkovsky likes to keep his camera in motion. It doesn't sit in one place all the time. It's slowly works its way in or slowly works its way out and it's so slow it's almost imperceptible. So we get a wider shot of her sitting at the table and on the table there are three glass containers—I think there's two glasses and a jar—and she finishes the book. Then there's a voice over of some verses. She puts the book down and puts her cheek down on the top of the table top and looks down the table towards the camera. And as she's doing that, one of the glasses just starts to slide down the table and goes all the way to the end and then the jar starts sliding, and goes all the way to the end. And then the last glass goes all the way to the end and falls off the table. But doesn't break. You hear it clink, but it doesn't break. And then all you see is the top of the table with her face looking down towards you, glass and jar on either side and it fades to black and the film finishes.

**David:** Yep.

**Perry:** So Tarkovsky stripped every single piece of science fiction out of this film, until right at the very end. It's a very interesting ending. I was really impressed with the ending and overall I was very, very impressed with the film. I thought it was an excellent film. But David there's one thing that I don't know: would I have given it the same rating if I hadn't been reading Dyer's book at the same



time? Dyer's book is, at times, incredibly funny. He has some really funny observations. He brings a whole lot of things in all from over the place. Some I agreed with and some I didn't, but it was like having a conversation while you're watching the movie, and it was really very very bizarre, but a very interesting experience. But I could never do it again. I'd never seen the film before, and I'd never read this particular book before, but having them together is a one-off experience in my life because I can't do it anymore. It's done, but it was very interesting to do. What do you think of it?

**David:** I didn't like it. It has been very well received critically, so I'm obviously missing something. There's something I'm not getting, but I found it unbearably tedious. And it just goes on and on and on. It lasts forever. I suppose it kind of reminds me a bit of absurdist plays, you know, Samuel Beckett, things like **Waiting for Godot** and whatever that Beckett play is with the three men in rubbish bins sitting and talking deep philosophy to each other. This is a lot of that. All they do is wander around this landscape and talk philosophy or talk about things in the world. And as you say he has stripped all the alien stuff out of it. As they go through this Zone, this wilderness and this industrial wilderness, there's nothing actually alien in it. All you have is the Stalker's words: "We gotta go this way; no, people don't go that way; we're gonna have to pass through the meat grinder. Oh my God, he's gone the wrong way." But we never see any *implications* of going the wrong way. You know, the Writer does walk off and go the wrong way, but nothing ever happens to him and the Professor gets told "You mustn't stay behind. You can't go back for your knapsack." But he goes back and picks up the knapsack, and then after a bit the Writer and the Stalker come back to where the Professor is sitting

there having his lunch. And you think "OK..." There's nothing other than the Stalker's word there are alien things, or dangerous things are actually going to happen. And maybe that's what we are meant to see in it.

I would never watch it again. I think I can see what some people see in it, but I didn't see it, not directly. I just found it very tedious. It really has very little to do with with the book. There's a quote in Wikipedia: according to Tarkovsky, in 1979 the film has basically nothing in common with the novel except for the two words Stalker and Zone. That's not quite exactly true, but it's pretty close.

**Perry:** You're right. The only way that you know that there may be any reason for this whole thing is that the authorities have blocked it all off, so it gives you the idea that there's something going on. But once you get into the Zone, it's all the word of the Stalker and nothing that happens in the book validates anything that he's got to say. And when they turn up to The Room, which is going to give everybody their heart's deepest desire, the only one that he ever talks about is the guy he calls the Porcupine that went in there, came back out and a week later got very rich. But he went in with the idea that he wanted to get his brother back. But he didn't get his brother back. He got a whole lot of money, got rich, realized that he had sent his brother to his death at some point, and then hanged himself. You can actually get rich just by buying a lottery ticket, so that may have been what happened. And so is there any anything other than chance that's involved with all of this? We just don't know it. You just don't know. It is a very interesting film, but as you say...

**David:** It's very interesting but I didn't enjoy it.

**Perry:** Ah, I enjoyed it. I don't think I will have subject myself to it again. There are some people like Dyer who seems to have seen it about 40 or 50 times. Some people have fixated on this particular thing, and I'm not entirely sure why.

**David:** Yeah, and it certainly seems to be very well regarded critically. There's something

missing in me. The one thing I would like to say that is, is that all of these books we've been talking about, and the two Tarkovsky films, were all written under the Soviet system and so some of it must have been constrained by the requirements of Soviet censorship. In fact, there's an interesting afterward to my copy, which is an e-book, of **Roadside Picnic** where Arkady Strugatsky talks about the years' long struggle to get the book published through the Soviet system and all the compromises he kept being forced to make, and still having it rejected by the Soviet system. It would be interesting to know what sort of influence that had on the writing of the books and the making of the films.

**Perry:** Lem said that he disliked Tarkovsky's version of **Solaris**, said he hadn't made the book, he'd made **Crime and Punishment**. Which is very perceptive. And he heard about Soderbergh's version, but had heard only enough about it to realize that he wasn't going to watch it and condemned it anyway. And of course the Strugatskys were involved with this Tarkovsky version, but I gather he demanded endless rewrites and the whole production was a complete disaster. They lost two film directors. One of them walked off the job because there had been a problem with the film not being developed properly or something. It was a real big problem and they had to redo it all. No, you sort of think though, that given the way the film goes that Tarkovsky didn't have to do much. Stick the camera there and let the guys do their bit. That's really it. There's no special effects. There's nothing here except for the film development. So either the sepia-colored black and white or the colour, that's it.

**David:** That does work well as a transition. From the Stalker's point of view, the *Zone* is the real world. You know, it's the place where he comes alive and the world comes alive for him, whereas everything else is this dreary, dingy sort of industrial environment, which is really depressing.

**Perry:** It's polluted, it's just the worst place you could possibly want to try and live. You don't think anything can grow there.

**David:** Whereas the Zone is full of life, of plant life and bird life and so on. And so it is kind of the real world. There is an interesting scene right at the very beginning, once they get into the Zone, where the Stalker goes off, leaving the Writer and the Professor sitting on the cart next to the diesel track and he goes off and wants to commune by himself. And he literally throws himself into the grass and lies facedown as though he were hugging it; "this is, this is my love." That was interesting, I thought.

**Perry:** In the Zone the greens are very green and the blues are very blue, and elsewhere, outside, it's monochrome. That's the big thing that he's trying to tell you that you know there are greater things to see out there. But of course, Tarkovsky said he's not trying to tell you anything. All he's trying to do is tell you a story. Well, there's a whole lot of other things I could have talked about. There's a Crown of Thorns in there somewhere.

**David:** Yeah, the Writer puts it on this head.

**Perry:** You cannot put a Crown of Thorns into a film without thinking there's only one thing that it leads to. There's only one thing in the whole of Western cultural or the whole of human culture or civilization that it alludes to. As Dyer says, it's a hat that basically doesn't fit very well and doesn't keep you dry and doesn't keep the sun off. It's a Crown of Thorns, and that's all it is, and so it's a metaphor, and that's all it is.

Anyway, it's been a very interesting exercise to watch to watch the films and read the books, but I don't think we'll do it again for a while. It was pretty intense for a little while. Let's get back to just reading a few interesting books.

Thanks, David.◀◀



# Sputnik — A Reviewed Alien

*by Nick Price*



**Sputnik** is a Russian Science-Fiction Horror film released in 2020. It's giving away nothing more than the trailer does, to say that the plotline is an *extension* of one of the most horrific parts of the 1979 movie **Alien**. **Alien+** in some ways.

In this piece I'll steer clear of plot spoilers beyond the trailer as much as possible. Certainly not disclosing the ending. This should allow you to still enjoy the movie but with another layer to consider. This film, while centred on an alien being, gives us a backdrop to consider the meaning of the word *alien*.

## Alien?

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, definitions for the word 'Alien' include '*belonging or relating to another person, place, or thing*', '*differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility*' and '*coming from another world*'.

Sputnik takes on these three definitions and adds '*belonging to another time*'. It also gives us an insight to explore the earthbound human idea of 'alienation' '*a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment*'. Let's look at Sputnik through these *five* different lenses.

## 'belonging or relating to another person, place, or thing'

Rather than a civilian mission administration, over worn footage of ocean recoveries from the American space program and another spin on 'the hero's journey' from the USA, we have a less familiar setting.

The movie setting is the Russian space program in 1983. This means military administration, land-based landings in Kazakhstan and, in this case, imperfect heroes. There are a small number of introductory scenes in space. We then move to the ground to civilian and military institutional ones. This gives non-Russian audiences a less familiar backdrop throughout.

### 'differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility'

The design values of the Russian institutions are less familiar to ones in movies produced in democratic, consumer driven societies. In a consumer driven society there are competition driven innovations, beautification for appeal and many choices of styles. Science fictional pieces from these societies often feature high technology with strong colours, rich imagery and digital graphical controls.

Interestingly, the *Alien* (1979) movie, from which some partial plot inspiration seems to come, does give us a baseline for some comparison. It was made early in the development of special effects so they are more physical than digital. The shown computer technology is also rudimentary in user interaction compared to what we know of today. This movie has an industrial setting, a factory travelling in space, a utilitarian demeanour that is echoed in the set design in *Sputnik*.

The Russian design values in *Sputnik* set are utilitarian, low-cost, easy to produce, functional and with little expression of status. There is a grey-green-brown colour palette and backgrounds dressed with low-resolution digital technology. This is design for a centrally organised society.

In both films, *Alien* (1979) and *Sputnik* (2020), technology sinks into the background to emphasise the biological elements, the characters. Humanity and biology are barely compatible with the industrial themed technical environments. These dour and unstimulating backgrounds though allow the characters of the films

to rise. We quickly focus on the storyline, characters and our other-worldly alien.

### 'coming from another world'

The premise of *Sputnik* is that in 1983, two returning cosmonauts have a malfunction on their re-entry. But there is something not quite right about a survivor...

The form and behaviour of alien life here is unearthly. The digital rendering and the special effects are of high quality. The aliens organic form contrasts with the surrounds to help show it is not of our planet. The alien life has a layer of horrific behaviour that is less immediately bloody but invasive, visceral and uncomfortable for us to ponder. The alien life is definitely not of this world, in an unfamiliar place and in a different time.

### 'belonging to another time'

The movie casts aside any distraction of technological advances of the future by the setting of the Russian space program in 1983. The setting in time and place takes us back to the early days of the break-up of the Soviet Union and deep in their 'Era of Stagnation'.

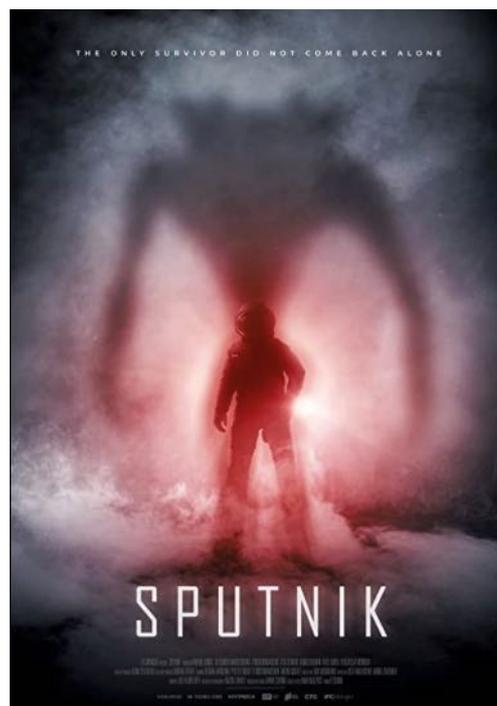
The political, technological and social atmosphere is similar to that of the 2019

*Chernobyl* television series.

That television series was set only three years later than this in 1986. Being set 38 years ago probably allowed more leeway to the Russian film makers to show a less than perfect administration. The social attitudes of the characters are also of that time.

### 'a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment'

Our problematic surviving cosmonaut hero Konstantin, played by Pyotr



Fyodorov, has developed an attachment to an alien. While the horror storyline drives along, there is an underlying sub plot about the cosmonaut's personal life. A sub-plot that adds nuances to his cosmonautical hero surface. Konstantin is a false protagonist though. In this male dominated setting we have a strong female character.

Our real protagonist is Dr Tatyana Klimova, a psychologist. Klimova is already a hero of sorts, albeit unrecognised, in her own right having ignored civilian bureaucracy for a patient's treatment. This has been to her professional cost. She is drafted in by the military to advise on Konstantin and herself alienated from this employer too. She too has issues that deepen her character.

Klimova is played with a beautifully understated performance by Oksana Akinshina. The physical, cultural and task needs press down upon her character and Akinshina reflects this in her acting. One could imagine the director pressing the actor's expressions down and down until she does so much with only a little.

These two characters serve to remind us that, however exceptional as space travellers or intuitive experts of the mind can be professionally, they are as human. In the end, for all its practical and fictional elements the movie is about the human stories. The character arcs are not as obvious as they might seem.

### Five Meanings of Alien

The five meanings of "alien" then are a useful lens to break down a science fictional work. Here, as a recap, I used:

*'belonging or relating to another person, place, or thing', 'differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility', 'coming from another world', 'belonging to another time' and Alienation - 'a withdrawing or separation of a person or a person's affections from an object or position of former attachment'.*

These meanings of "alien" are not limited to science fiction. The first two definitions, *'belonging or relating to another person,*

*place, or thing'* and *'differing in nature or character typically to the point of incompatibility'* and then *alienation* can equally be applied to 'The Mauritanian' (2021). A movie about someone who gets caught up in the 'war on terror' and finds themselves held in Guantanamo Bay.

### Yes, yes, yes but is it actually worth watching?

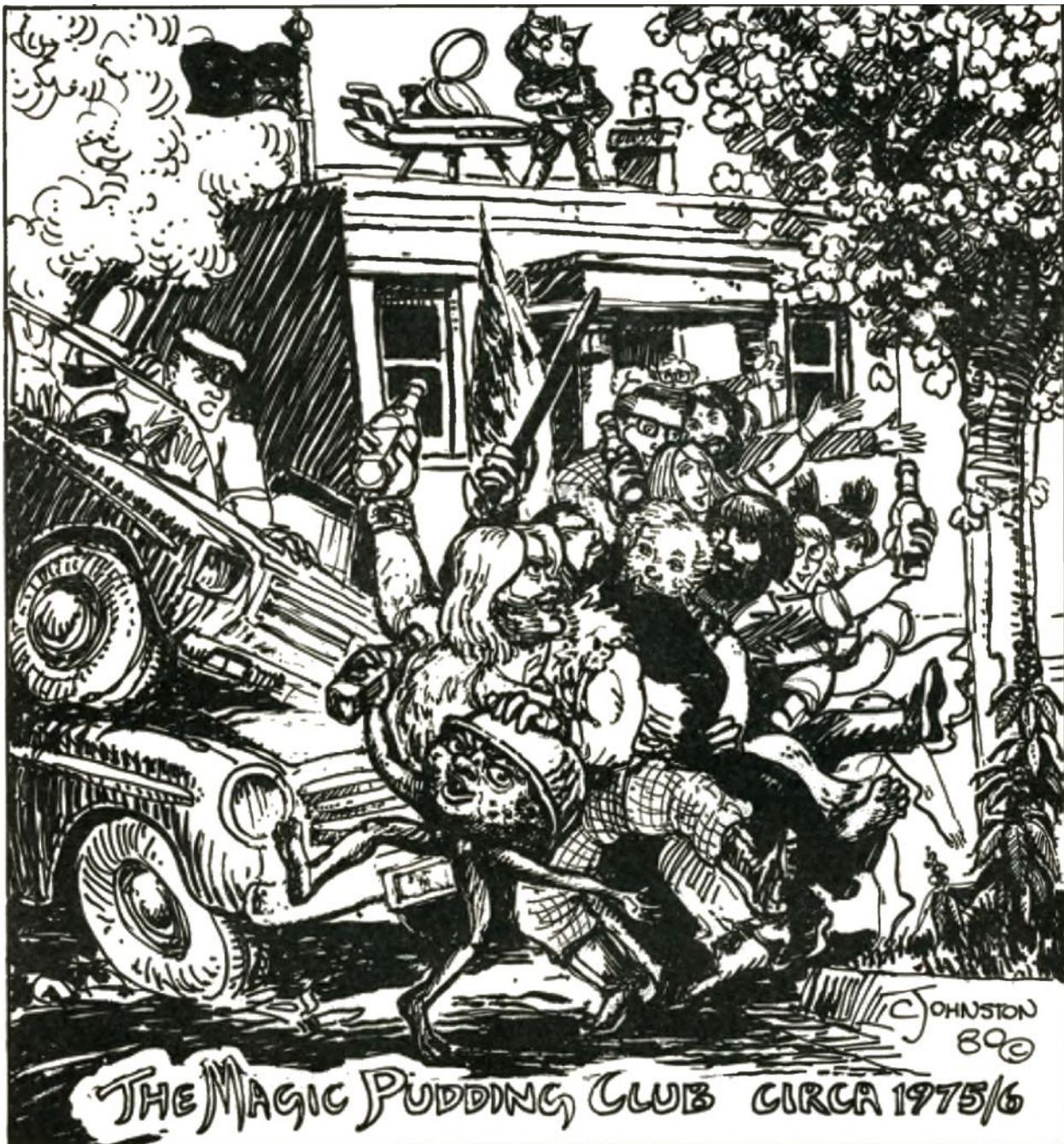
Yes. It's science fiction, it's horror, it's another glimpse behind the Iron Curtain and it has some great acting. It also allows you to dig a little deeper it is also about many ways that something can be alien. ◀◀

# Fannish Reprint

## Pie in the Sky: The High History of the Magic Pudding Club

by Don Ashby

First published in The Metaphysical Review 4, edited by Bruce Gillespie, July 1985



The name's Don Ashby, and if that doesn't ring a bell the following won't mean a goddamned thing. Bruce has been at me in a desultory way to produce a history of the Magic Pudding Club, and I have been writing it in an equally desultory way. If you are reading this in one of Bruce's publications, it has been finished at last. Telegrams of congratulation are unnecessary. It has been close to four years, since the whole shebang faded acrimoniously into the west, so I am grateful for the odd memory jog from Carey Handfield and Bruce. Carey and I are probably the only two survivors who can pretend any sort of objectivity about the high times and the low times of those far-off days.

For those people who do not know, The Magic Pudding Club was a single-storeyed, three-bedroomed, single-fronted brick dwelling at 259 Drummond Street, Carlton (an inner suburb of Melbourne). Some people will tell you that it was rat-infested and inhabited by paranoid, alcoholic, drug-crazed ex-hippies, who had a filthy kitchen, three cats, and more visitors than they knew what to do with. Other people will tell you much the same. Its residents included (mostly all at once) John Ham; myself; Ken Ford; Derrick Ashby (my brother); Judy Coleman; Carey Handfield; Randal Flynn; Dale Davies; Wendy Boag; Neil rest. Frequent house-guests included Christine McGowan (now Christine Ashby, my brother's wife), Keith Taylor, Bruce Gillespie, Chris Gregory, Linda Davis, Robin Johnson, and many other people who are still well known in fannish circles.

Before I launch into the history proper, I will need to recount some background.

## **Introduction**

### **Our Hero Discovers Fandom.**

About the middle of 1974, my esteemed brother and I lived in the Melbourne suburb of Edithvale, This beach suburb was a place overrun by mentally disturbed housewives and hardened criminals, ranging in age from three to ninety. My parents had the misfortune to own a milk bar called, rather incongruously, "the Oasis". It was rapidly going bankrupt and ruining my parents' health and any appre-

ciation I had for ice cream. At the same time I was acquiring health-food-of-a-nation-phobia I was also acquiring a wife. The prospect didn't thrill me. You've heard about having children to save the marriage? We were getting married to save the relationship — sort of like having a frontal lobotomy to cure a headache.

One day Derrick came over to my flat and told me that he had been browsing in Space Age Books and considering whether or not he could afford to put a down-payment on a paperback, when he heard people discussing this place called 'Degraves', We decided to go along and investigate. Concentrations of people interested in sf are almost rare as happy marriages, and we were determined to seek out this particular one. The vagaries of Henry's watery, the Degraves Tavern, have been well documented by other fan historians, so I won't go into details. The food was edible, providing you didn't swallow, and the wine was drinkable if you had stainless steel plumbing.

Anyway, this particular Wednesday we trucked along to Degraves. It was Bill Wright who took us under his wing. He always had his eye out for young neofans, for one reason or another, and after the meal was over he took us off to visit the Hallowed Halls of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club (MSFC).

Armed with a flagon of Wynvale vitriol we arrived at its headquarters, a garret above the old Space Age Books. There we found a huge collection of sf and not much else. The club was at the bottom of one of its periodic declines, Still, we made the acquaintance of John Breden, Paul Stevens, and Merv Binns, The wine lived up to our expectations, and Bill recounted a series of improbable anecdotes concerning mysterious organisations like the United Fanarchist Party and COMORG.

Degraves and the MSFC became a matter of habit. Bill decided that we, under the gentle patronage of COMORG, would revive the Club. The revival got as far as Derrick starting a proper catalogue of its library books. The only one then existing was in accession order: they knew how

many books they had bought, but had no idea if they still had them, or where they could find them on the shelves. We calculated that at least one-third of the titles were missing and, borrowing had not been recorded for over three years, they stayed that way.

Library problems aside, fandom was a great success: not only did I find one or two people who liked talking about sf, but I also found even more people who shared my passion for *vin ordinaire*. One night at Degraves I discovered Ken Ford, 'a man', as they say, 'of infinite jest'. He, like everyone else in this story has changed somewhat these days. Such people as Leigh Edmonds, Valma Brown, Carey Handfield, Lee Harding, and Irene Pagram contributed to a warmhearted feeling of unconditional welcome and provided some unforgettable good times.

Time passed quickly, and the weeks to my coming marriage got fewer as I got bluer. One night at Degraves I found myself sitting between Lee and Irene, and I was expressing my considerable scepticism about signing on the dotted line on an agreement demanding a large down-payment with declining interest, when I was assailed from both sides at once. Good sense was rammed into my skull with all the gentleness of a pile-driver. Lee's excursion into marriage made his arguments more persuasive, and I left with the firm intention that mighty would be the sundering.

Male ego is a funny thing. I resolved that I would have a long talk with the lady in question at the weekend, She was a nurse on night shift, and no nurse I have ever met has been sane during such periods. On the Friday she rang me and told me it was all off. Do you know – I felt monumentally cut up! As I said: male ego is a funny thing. The resultant domestic kerfuffle was amazing. It made **Days of Our Lives** look like **Evening Meditation**. Both of our families, especially the mother hens, behaved like the aforementioned birds, sans heads.

Ken Ford and I went on a protracted wake, consuming huge quantities of Canadian

Club Whisky at the Graham Hotel. One night after Degraves I crawled out of a carafe to drive Irene and the cadaverous Paul J. Stevens home to St Kilda. I remember nothing of the ensuing attempt at the land speed record, but after about three months, when Irene, Lee, and Paul had calmed down enough to talk to me again (and for once I am not exaggerating), they informed me that I did the trip from Degraves to St Kilda in eight minutes. I know that you get peculiar time-dilation effects at speeds close to that of light, but the mental state I was in at that time makes their statement not unlikely. In the case of Irene, it was a fairly bastardly way of paying her back for all her support and good advice, I tend to do stupid things at times, as almost anyone in fandom can tell you.

Maniac driving aside, I survived. Leigh and Valma took me in and fed me Milo and pavlova. Ken Ford took me out for more riotous pastimes.

After a while I stopped going catatonic every time I thought about the whole mess, a mess compounded by the rift I created after my driving exploits. My consumption of Wynvale and Leo Buring factory seconds eased off. To make the break complete, I decided to move. Edithvale is a great place for oil-encrusted seagulls and social workers, but it ain't no place for human beings.

One night at Leigh and Valma's, Ken Ford and I decided to move in together. He was living in Ivanhoe, a suburb of Melbourne where the locals rearrange their garden gnomes for a bit of excitement, and wanted to move closer to College. We cast the **I Ching** to seek its advice. I forget the hexagram we cast; it said lots of positive things and mentioned the north. We checked in a street directory to see what was north of St Kilda, and lo and behold, Carlton was, just where Ken wanted to move. Leigh remembered that Robin was moving in with Peter Darling, and his current flatmate was looking for people to help pay the rent. "There and then, on the spot, we rang Robin and made an appointment to see the then mysterious John Ham. We learned from Valma that John

was recovering from a serious motor-bike accident and a divorce. With some trepidation we rolled up after Degraives the next Wednesday to meet him. We found him absorbing quantities of Ben Ean and entertaining a lady by the improbable name of Pixie (she was actually christened that, or so she said). John used to do a lot of both those things, so we had a lot in common already. We hit it off right away, and moved into the Drummond Street house that is the subject of this story.

It wasn't quite that easy, however, First we had to move Robin out. Robin was and is unique in many ways, not the least of these being his concept of a filing system. Most people call it the floor. Moving him out as very much like an archaeological dig. The floor was a foot deep in Aussiecon and an impressive collection of left shoes (we never did find out what he did with the right ones), He also had complete run of airline timetables since the Montgolfier Brothers and more science fiction books than Robert Silverberg and John Brunner have written.

We hired a truck and, though we didn't know it at the time, it was the very first job of Magic Puddin' Removals. We hired a nasty puce-coloured Ford van, one of those clunky, cheap imitations of a Thames transit van from Kays Renta Heap. It broke down three times, and we switched allegiance to Budget after that. It was probably the biggest moving job we ever did, apart from moving Carey and Robin to Sydney a few years later. It was a four-cornered move: me from Edithvale to Carlton, Ken from Ivanhoe to Carlton, Robin from Carlton to Elsternwick, and my cousin Alan from Glen Iris to Ringwood. I must have been crazy in those days. We clocked up 300 miles, got lumbago, and went through three trucks.

**Innuendo Inc.:**

**Our Hero Invents Promiscuous Algebra,**

After the dust had settled and Ken had discovered my book collection and I had discovered his comics, we were all set for a long stretch of blissful domestic harmony.

**PROMISCUOUS EQUATIONS**



For a while that's what we got. John and I had passions for chess and philosophy, we all had passions for cooking and eating, and Ken and I were silly in complementary directions. Hubris being what it is, sooner or later the BEM comes 'out of the woodpile. Our pile had a whole colony. The first one appeared in the person of my ex-intended.

I have no idea from where she got my new address, I had left strict instructions that she was not a person with whom I wished to be reacquainted (male egos – remember?). She was going through great hassles, and after two years of having me to pat her on the head, she found she couldn't cope. She cried, which was dirty; I am a sucker for crying women. The reasons for the hassles were complicated. Let's call ex-intended **x**, **x**'s brother **y**, **x**'s best friend and flatmate **z**, me **s** (for sucker), \* insanity, **£** misery, and @ chaos.

The situation can be written thus:

$$x + zy$$

This became:

$$x + (z - y) =$$

$$x£ + y£ + z£ =$$

$$(@)z =$$

$$(x + s) \text{ divided by } £.$$

I told you it was complicated. Now we have to add one more integer: let **j** be John. After a settling-in process by **x**, we have (after a large quantity of **£** and @):

$$xs + xj =$$

(by mutual decision) (s) + (j) - x =

**R (for relief).**

After a brief bit of tension, the sky cleared and things got back to normal. There are many fish in the proverbial social puddle, but not many chess-payers as good as John, and I hadn't finished convincing him that the idea of being a Christian humanist was a philosophical contradiction (come to think of it, I never did<sup>1</sup>). John went back to trying to naughty relations with all the women in Carlton and I went back to trying to avoid having them. Then — out sneaked another BEM.

This one was also female. I was writing a play with this particular one, and so she visited quite a lot. Ken, already interested, became enamoured, and she seemed to have to same feeling for John. I was amused. Ken, however, was not. He was not as used to the quixotic vagaries of bed-hopping as was John, and took the whole thing rather badly. The dark night of the soul as like the Melbourne Show compared to what Ken put himself through. He got a lot of gratuitous and half-arsed advice from me, which didn't help. The atmosphere in the house began to curdle, and John and Ken partook of some very sarcastic and bitter exchanges, and so Innuendo Inc. became a reality, It was all very nasty. I am ashamed to admit that I was still amused. I hung a big day-glo sign on the front door which proclaimed the establishment as Innuendo Inc. Some funny Greeks and Italians mistook the sign as one for a house of healthful massage.

Ken wandered around the house like a wet sock and finally went home to Robinvale for a holiday (the Foreign Legion not being available). John went up to Queensland to visit his parents. It was a relief. At this stage John had moved out, more or less. In fact it was more less than more, He converted our verandah into a crash pad and we built the first item of what was going to be a craze in fandom for mezzanine beds. My brother moved into my old room and I moved into John's old room and we had peace and quiet. At that stage Derrick had discovered neither alcohol nor women, He spent all the spare time he

had typing library cards and playing a complicated and solitary game called Null Gravity Hockey.

In my spare time (it is now early 1975) I was supposed to be doing a postgraduate diploma in Librarianship. In actual fact I was writing a play and stage-managing another at the Open Stage theatre in Carlton. There I met Chris Gregory, a lady called Linda, and another one called Judy. Judy was a good friend of Ken's and came round a lot to see him. After Ken left for his holiday, she still came around, an event whose significance I didn't quite catch until a very significant evening.

### **The Magic Puddin' Club:**

**Our Hero Discovers That Even Though All That Glitters Is Not Gold, It Is Still Better Than Sitting Up To Your Neck In Shit.**

The play I was stage-managing was due to hit the boards in a few weeks so we were rehearsing most evenings and all weekends. After a rather gruelling session, Chris, Linda, Judy, and I came around to partake of coffee and food. We were all feeling very mellow after consuming a burnt offering of some herbs imported from South-east Asia. We were deep in trivial conversation when Chris produced from his bag a copy of **The Magic Pudding** by Norman Lindsay<sup>2</sup>. He started to read his favourite bits, and Linda suggested we read the whole thing out loud. This we did, taking it and some more of the burnt offerings by turns. We finished the book and most of an ounce. Chris and Linda made themselves and each other comfortable on the floor, and I went into my bedroom to get Judy's coat before taking her home. I was ambushed, and when I woke up in the morning, the first thing I saw was Judy still asleep beside me.

When we emerged from the bedroom several days later, Ken had come back from Robinvale and was very surprised, So was I, Chris, Linda, Judy, and I declared that there was to be a rise in optimism. The INNUENDO INC, sign was taken down, It was replaced with one that declared

'THE MAGIC PUDDING CLUB' and that 'there should be less talking and more Puddin' eating'. Ken cheered up remarkably. About the same time Derrick discovered alcohol and began to emerge from his pathological addiction to library cards and submerge himself in quantities of Ben Ean<sup>3</sup>.

During this period, Carey Handfield discovered us – and after that, so did everyone else. Carey discovered that both John (who had also returned from the Deep North) and I could cook, and I have never seen Carey when he wasn't hungry. He also discovered a nest of neofans he could exploit for the cause of Aussiecon. Carey turned up at most meal-times, usually armed with what he called wine (affectionately known as 'Handfield Horrible') and a list of jobs that had to be done yesterday. We began to get lots of visitors. To save washing up, we would suggest that we go round to Borbles. Borbles at the time was the best and cheapest Carlton restaurant. Bruce, who lived round the corner from us, suggested that we go there regularly every Monday night. At that time there was a bit of a movement away from the Wednesday night Degraeves meeting, as some of the company had become less congenial than before. For those who still frequented Degraeves, Borbles was a good excuse for a second get-together each week. John had a thing going with one of the waitresses, so our bill wasn't very carefully added up.

Having joined ANZAPA the year before, Carey threatened Derrick, Ken, and me into running jointly for the position of Official Bloody Editor. Carey likes to be the power behind as many thrones as possible. While rearranging our lives, Carey also sold me an antediluvian mimeograph machine. In due course we wowed the members of ANZAPA with our incomprehensible typography and our Rorschach-blot duplicating technique. Judy also contributed drawings to all who asked, and improved the general landscape around fandom immeasurably.

Judy also contributed three cats to the household: two strays that I was conned into taking on – Ersatz and Linus – and her own Miffy. The first two wore slightly

simple-minded, and Miffy was downright neurotic. They fitted in famously. Ersatz kept having kittens, fathered by her brother Linus, and Miffy looked after them. Linus and Miffy had a really good game going. Ersatz, when on heat, would disport herself in the courtyard behind the house. Miffy, a neutered female with a sadistic streak, and Linus would hide, one on each containing wall of the courtyard. They waited until a tom had become **very** interested in Ersatz – and then Linus would leap down and knock the unfortunate animal sideways and Miffy would come in with teeth and claws (she was half Siamese). After one of these fiestas, we found a cat's ear in the middle of the courtyard. Them's were mean cats. In the end Christine nagged us into, and Derrick paid for more efficient form of feline contraception. It was a case of Presbyterian morality winning out over Scottish thrift.

John Ham is very concerned about things ecological, and in those days he was even more so. One day John was bemoaning the terrible state of Spaceship Earth and quoting at length from the Club of Rome when I had an idea. I decided that, since we were in such a mess, we ought to fly a sign of distress. I shinnied up the stink pipe emanating from our portion of the sewage system and hung up an Australian flag upside down, as an international sign of distress. This caused considerable amusement to visitors who joined us for meals on balmy summer nights in our courtyard. On one such occasion we were raided by the police. It appeared that some public-spirited and patriotic Aussie had taken offence at our distress signal. Three constables and one sergeant burst into our house and demanded that we take it down and give it to them. This we did very meekly. On table, no more than a foot from where the sergeant was throwing his weight around, were three or four ounces of Asian herbs. Much application of them was necessary after the police left.

Less festive were the Nova Mob meetings that were held at the Magic Pudding Club. The Nova Mob, Melbourne's sf discussion group, began in 1970, died for the first time in 1972, and was revived by John

Foyster (who is really responsible for almost everything in Melbourne fandom) in 1974, The most memorable of the Magic Pudding meetings was the public reading, by Derrick, of the entire length of his Librarianship thesis, which happened to be about some sf writers. It seemed incredibly boring, or incredibly long, or both. Only copious quantities of the usual Skipping Girl vintage allowed us to survive this experience,

At this stage Derrick was the only member of the Magic Pudding Club actually working at a real job. John had got the push from his employer because of an unfortunate altercation concerning his use of the company's computer time to print out Aussiecon address lists.

I was pretending to do a full-time Librarianship postgraduate course at Melbourne State College, and Ken Ford was doing a Drama degree at the same place. Life was easy for everyone but Derrick. Riotous evenings left Derrick with the horrible problem of getting up in the morning. To see his suffering was too much to bear, so we all stayed in bed till lunch times.

### MOVING ROBIN JOHNSON



One morning Derrick went through his usual routine: fall out of bed, lie there groaning for a while, crawl into the lounge room, switch on the radio from the wall switch (which was also attached to the radiator, stumble into the kitchen, put on the kettle, and then stumble to the bathroom for a shower. This particular morning, Derrick failed to notice that, in the confusion of trying to find the lounge room door the night before, someone had knocked over the radiator. When he came back, more or less awake after his shower, he found the lounge full of thick white smoke. The place stank of burning wool for days. No doubt the carpet still bears the scar<sup>4</sup>.

Soon after this event, my conscience got the better of me, and I went back to teaching full time. I was very grateful for the seven-month working holiday I had had but, despite what people tell you, I do have scruples. Things got very hectic indeed. By this time I was assistant booking secretary to Carey Handfield, and I had managed to convince Robin that a video coverage of the Worldcon was a viable proposition. ANZAPA, Aussiecon, teaching, and theatre work were keeping me **very** busy.

The house seemed to be constantly full of Robin Johnson and the several tons of paper that he seemed to produce magically from his briefcase. He was always in deep and convoluted discussions with Carey, Peter Darling, or Peter Millar (whatever happened to him?). As the Writers Workshop got closer (and as he became aware of the cornucopia of food and wine at our place), Bruce Gillespie increased his frequency of visits. It was a good venue to complain, sample our provender, and try out his latest excuses for the lateness of **SF Commentary**. Bill Wright also visited. Probably the calmest of anyone, he sat around and made profound remarks. A Buddha in a three-piece suit.

The rapidly increased fanac led to the submersion of some of the Pud's inmates' personal hassles, and we all got on better. The Magic Pud' was on a war footing. We didn't realise that all too soon it would

turn into a state of siege. John Ham became our MPC/Aussiecon super roustabout and rushed all over the place in his little Renault averting crises and generally being indispensable. I haven't the space to tell you about some of the asinine correspondence I had to answer from various microencephalitic fans from around the world. John looked after the logistic of tracking down hundreds of feet of the audio and video cable we needed, and the 25 kilowatts of lighting. Eventually we cornered every last foot of cable in Melbourne, and every last reel of videotape.

A sort of numb hysteria descended on Melbourne fandom, and its epicentre was the Magic Pud'. Many nights I was woken by people ringing us from the US and elsewhere wanting to speak to Robin. Careful explanations of time zones ensued, and I went back to bed. All in all, the Magic Pud' stuffed thousands of envelopes with even more thousands of bits of paper, and our tongues became permanently glue-coated from licking stamps. (Kissing became a problem.) We averaged twenty to thirty phone calls a day, and made about the same number.

Then came the Writers Workshop. Ursula Le Guin was the Writer in Residence, and Bruce Gillespie was supposed to be organising the whole thing. Bruce is not a good organiser.

Of course everything was running late, we took delivery of a photo-copier, and it was entrusted to Derrick's tender care. Bruce came around in a panic, saying he had about thirty stories, average ten pages in length, and he needed 20 copies of each of them photocopied by Sunday. He came around on the Friday. It as probably the biggest and most fiddly collating job ever done in Melbourne. It wouldn't have been so bad if try hadn't been wet copies.

The job as finished on time, and Derrick, along with a huge pile of stories and the copier, disappeared into the Dandenongs. From then on, the whole Aussiecon shebang is a blur. I know I didn't sleep much. We were supposed to be administering ANZAPA, and we left it up to Derrick

(before he want to the Workshop). A mimeo whizz Derrick ain't, and the result was rather worse than usual. Interstate fans howled, showing a complete lack of understanding of what we were all going through. Some of the oldest of the old guard did what they have always been best at — sitting and criticising — which did little for our peace of mind.

Aussiecon was a success (more or less) and I was proud to be associated with it. It cost me my relationship with Judy and contributed to a couple of other domestic schisms as well. The only reason that Robin didn't got divorced was because he wasn't married, a piece of foresight for which he is justly famous.

### **Aussicon:**

#### **In Which Our Hero Wishes He Had Kept His Mouth Shut**

On top of the Workshop kerfuffle, it looked for a while as if the video wouldn't happen. The video Special Effects Generator (SEG) had blown up and was away being fixed. I started to look slightly crazed. At school I was also running the school concert, and it would be performed on the night of the Con bump-in. So on top of everything else I spent about five hours after school each day working on that. Ham was the hero of the hour. Every morning I would give him the room bookings money to bank, and a list of things to do. When I came home he and Judy had cooked a meal for me, and off we went again: answering correspondence, making huge numbers of local and interstate calls, and finally collapsing into bed about 2 a.m. I would wake up at six, give John a new list, and go off to school. My memory and my diary at this point suffer from tunnel vision. I cannot remember, and did not write down, what the rest of the valiant Puds were doing at that stage. Fandom wasn't a way of life; it was a pathological condition!

Finally I got the school concert over with and turned up at the Aussiecon site, the Southern Cross Hotel, at midnight. I remember, and indeed my diary records, the next three days under the heading of the Aussiecon Hassles:

\* Hassle 1: The people who had been 'fixing' the SEG hadn't hooked up the talk-back function. How the hell would we direct the cameras on the floor from our position in the control room? Methinks Robin and Co. could have been unimpressed by the use of a loud hailer. Robin, Christine, and Peter Darling got hold of some walkie-talkies from somewhere, so we thought we had more or less solved that problem.

\* Hassle 2: While we were testing, the program channel blew (it was supposed to be fixed), This meant that we could not preview our shots or cuts, and had to go straight to tape. This was a dicey business, and it cost us six months of soul-destroying editing to fix up the bloopers.

\* Hassle 3: We were well into filming the first panel (after a 5 a.m. to set up the monster) when a frantic Robin appeared to tell us our walkie-talkies were breaking into the PA of the hall. We twiddled around and reduced the effect, but not entirely.

\* Hassle 4: The hall was so **big**. People complained that the cameras were getting in the way of people's views, so we had to pull them right back. Then there wasn't enough light, so we had to bring in huge 2-kilowatt TV lights, It was the first real-life demonstration of the inverse square law I had ever experienced. The panellists all started looking like refugees from a Hollywood movie set, each hiding behind a pair of dark glasses. I was unpopular.

\* Hassle 5: It needed three people to run the control room: one on the VTR<sup>5</sup>, one on the SEG, and one relaying information to the cameras on the floor. The catch was that there were only two of us – John and myself. We had to plead with or threaten people to come and give us a hand. We managed to acquire some good operators for the cameras from Melbourne Stage College, and a few loyal fans. (One of them was Marian, a lady I was destined to spend two years of my life living with. At that stage I had never met her; she was a disembodied voice through a set of cans coming from camera three.) John and I were condemned to spend the whole convention viewing it from three different

directions. Our reality became gloving rectangles of excited phosphor-dots. After the hall had emptied, John and I spent our time trying to arrange a more pleasant (for the panellists) lighting rig. We were so busy we never got out of the place to buy food, and malnutrition would have set in if Saint Eric Lindsay hadn't appeared with sandwiches and Cokes.

Hassle 6: The Masquerade: What fun that was! Shayne McCormack came up to me at the end of the final panel of that day with a huge box of cassettes and a limp-looking list. 'Could I please play something suitable for each contestant?' After someone threw a bucket of water over me and I came to, I attempted to explain the difficulty of cueing cassettes, picking appropriate material from then when (a) I hadn't heard of most of the music and (b) I had no idea what the people looked like in their costumes. I was left holding the baby and the bathwater, but without a bucket. Oh yes; it appeared that Shayne hadn't checked that her cassette machine was compatible with the inputs on the PA. Of course it wasn't. A frantic search liberated Robin's and John Bangsund's machines. We needed both because we had no patch leads that fitted, and while we could plug Bangsund's into the PA we couldn't connect it to any of the other two to effect a dub. Robin's had stereo condenser mikes, so we dashed up to Shayne's room (it had a bathroom ~ good acoustics) and recorded direct from the pile of tapes on to a single tape. Time was getting on, so I had to leave the heroic Pedr Gurteen to finish the job. When I got downstairs I found some amazingly stupid Southern Cross minions trying their best to ruin \$40,000 worth of video equipment while they pretended to set up the hall for the coming debacle. A frantic round-up of the gear revealed that they had only smashed two lamps and ruined two audio plugs. Frantic activity with a soldering iron and five-minute Araldyte fixed that.

Forcibly calming myself with a large can of beer that someone had handed me, I set up the cameras and ran a check. Everything at our end, at least, was running fine. Pedr turned up with the finished tape. I was supposed to be in the Masquerade as well

as filming it. An interesting topological problem, as John would say. I was also supposed to make up John as Mephistopheles; he was in it, too! We would have to film by telekinesis. We managed somehow. Del Stocks, a lady of infinite patience and charm, filled in the broach backstage as best she could. Even so, despite her herculean efforts, poor Lee Harding was left to be witty for sadistically long periods of time between acts. Much fast footwork enabled us to get most of the event on tape. Both John and Judy were big successes, for rather different reasons, and somehow we managed to play most of the right music in the right places, and the whole event stumbled to its mighty conclusion. Despite the mess-ups, Lee did such a good cosmetic job that I don't think most of the audience noticed. Backstage, we collapsed to count our grey hairs.

It was finally all over. We packed up the equipment and headed for the Dead Dog Party. It was the first party I had reached during the whole convention, and I must say I enjoyed it. Meat pies and beer never tasted so good.

A couple of days of tidying up and we thought we would be able to rest. Little did we know.

### **Post-Aussiecon:**

#### **In which Our Hero And Co. Become The Victims of a Riotous Population Explosion And Buy A Doormat.**

Despite the general confusion of Aussiecon, we acquired quite an entourage. Neil Rest, a fan and 'anarchist' from Chicago, moved in to stay 'for a few days'; Wendy Boag, probably Melbourne fandom's only ever groupie, sat around displaying a Lolita complex and as much of her flesh as we would let her get away with; and Gordon, the Magic Viking, were three of them. After the post-Convention weekend, at what was then known as the Foyster Farm, Derrick acquired Christine. Derrick had pushed her around and been pushed around by her for the whole of Aussiecon, and they both seemed to enjoy it so much that they have made a life-long project of it. They introduced a certain Keith Taylor



to the fold, and he spent many months hunched in corners reading books and filling up thousands of exercise books with tales of derring-do. Keith revealed a strange and bizarre predilection for the wholesale destruction of coffee percolators. He would put one on the stove to boil, go into the other room and read for an hour or so, come back, take it off the stove, and quickly pour cold water into it so that bits of white-hot glass would whizz all over the kitchen. In the end we ran out of glass percolators, so he had to stop this strange sport. We found Keith delightful. He had, and has, a fine wit and an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes from his and the world's past.

Carey still came around. Although it taxed him mightily to find new things to bully us about, he managed. Lots of overseas fans dropped around, and we started a party that lasted for a couple of months. About a month after Aussiecon, Randal Flynn turned up, all strawberry pink and innocent from the Deep North. He stayed with us and kept demanding that we indulge in long and rococo debates about everything from the number of angels you can get on a pinhead to the toxic effects of

corflu on typewriter ribbons. The house was very crowded. We had anything up to ten people staying at one time. Fun it was; relaxing it was not.

At this stage the membership of the Magic Pud increased rapidly. During the week after Aussiecon, Bob Tucker, Rusty Hevelin, Susan Wood, Mike Glicksohn, etc., etc., became honorary members. Melbourne fans were taken over by Puddin' Fever, and Judy was hard at work creating t-shirts for them all. We had the original Magic Puddin' militia, a quasi-military organisation comprising the originals of that fateful night, and before long we had the Magic Puddin' Gestapo: Carey Handfield; The Magic Pudding Department of Propaganda: Derrick and Christine; Commander of Jagpanzers: Leigh Edmonds; and Magic Pudding Sorceress: Micheline Cyna-Tang; and many, many more. The whole list was published somewhere, probably in **Fanew Sletter**.

One particular party comes strongly to my mind. The whole house was full. This was not unusual. What was unusual was the fact that, at least in the lounge room, everyone was quiet. Micheline and I both read the Tarot for inquisitive fans, who didn't believe all that rubbish, of course, but always wanted more. At this party we decided to check our results against each other. Each of us read the people we knew least well. We came up with some quite amazing correlations, and some of the strangers who drifted in to the party were stunned and amazed. One lady, who after that party I did not see for five years, said that everything foretold by the Tarot had come completely true. This was unfortunate, because both Miche and I saw nothing but unpleasantness for her. That night we ended up with a Tarot marathon that left Bruce Gillespie, for one, in a thoughtful mood.

After Aussiecon, Bruce found himself In Love. This was not unusual. What was unusual was that the involved party reciprocated. So for a while we saw a Very Cheerful Bruce. (Have you noticed how much Bruce reminds you of Eeyore?) Polygamy rarely works, however, and

Bruce ended up going back to **SF Commentary** in October.

About the beginning of September, Carey Handfield decided to move in, so I gave him my room. I'm not sure how he did that, but next time he shakes your hand, remember to count your fingers afterwards. Judy and I moved into the mezzanine bed in the verandah, and it was very intimate, I can tell you. Three months after, Ken, who was demoralised by his continued lack of luck with the fair sex and the fact that three hours sleep and no privacy are no way for a growing boy to live, moved out around the corner into Palmerston Place. I moved into Ken's room. I say I, because Judy and I had busted up.

The strain of Aussiecon and living in the middle of Piccadilly Circus got too much for her. In fact, it was getting too much for all of us. Unwanted and uninvited quests started to get a distinctly frosty reception. At times we were downright hostile, Neil Rest finally left, after a brief fling with a couple of the female members of fandom, and the last we heard from him was an aerogram from Katmandu. After chasing Wendy from everyone's beds we finally packed her off to become a groupie for the Vikings, who hung out in Cardigan Street. This left Randal, Christine, Keith, and Bruce as our most permanent visitors. Randal left to start a house with Claudia Mangiamele, Roger Weddell, and someone else named Tony, and we all know what that led to. Then we acquired Dale Davies, a wargames freak, who left soon afterwards, having smoked a small fortune in my cigarettes and owing money to everyone. This soured us even more to the human race. Carey and I acquired a new doormat and wrote 'GO AWAY!' on it in large letters. It wasn't a notable success. John Ham fled permanently to Healesville, taking the mezzanine bed with him, which meant at least we had nowhere for people to stay.

The whole menage had lost its magic, although we continued in a desultory way. Chris Gregory had moved into a huge house with Judy and quite a few other people, and it seemed that more was going

on there, and in a more friendly way. I decided to move out of the Pud' and got room there. Derrick moved out into Leigh and Valma's old flat in St Kilda, and they moved into the Pud with Carey. The final stage of paranoia set in. Leigh and Valma were terrified that they would be inundated in the way we had been. Even though they did not surround their house with barbed wire, the effect was the same.

It was all a part of the post-Aussiecon rot, that still (in 1980) seems to hold sway. I don't think that this generation of fans will ever again aspire to the warm and heady atmosphere of '74/'75 again. I hope I am wrong.

### Postscript:

#### Magic Puddin' Removals

The only institution that lasted after we all moved out of 259 Drummond Street was MPC Removals. While we lived at the old place we carried out about half a dozen fannish moves. After we left, about the same number. It seems that fans move a lot. Probably the worst in terms of organisation was the first one, after which we learned how to do it. Moving Bruce from Carlton Street to Johnston Street, Collingwood, in 1977, was the worst in terms of volume. The most distance travelled was moving Carey and Robin to Sydney. There are numerous and entertaining stories about the exploits of the organisation and its minions, and I think a sequel is in order, as this chronicle is quite long enough.

Now praye I to hem alle that herkne this litel tretis or rede, that if ther be any thing in it that liketh hem, that thereof they thanken oure Lord Jesu Christ, of whom proceedeth all wit and al goodnesse. And if ther be any thing that displesse hem, I praye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unconning, and nat to my wil, that wolde ful fain have said bettre if I hadde had conning.

- Don Ashby, 1980

### End notes:

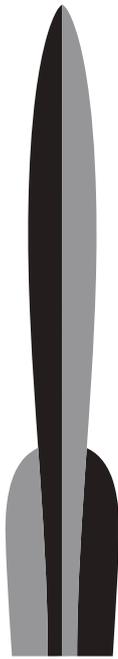
1. ((1985:)) and these days, I know that it doesn't matter.
2. Australia's best-known children's book. **The Magic Pudding** always provides a good meal to the hungry, no matter how many slices are taken from it.
3. By 1985 Derrick has (I'm glad to say) graduated from the Filthy stuff and now not only can tell you the vintage of the wine, where it came from, and what part of the vineyard it came from, but he knows some of the vines personally (and sends them fanzines).
4. ((1985:)) In 1982 Claudia Mangiamele and I went to look round the place, when it was open for inspection, and sure enough, the burn was still there.
5. ((1985:)): Time flies. They still call them VTRs at the ABC. ◀◀

Illustrations by Chris Johnston



# Commentary on the 2021 Hugo Award Nominees

***Claire Brialey, David Grigg, Perry Middlemiss***



HUGO AWARD<sup>SM</sup>

## THE 2021 HUGO AWARD NOVELETTES

### *Introduction*

The 2021 Hugo Award Novelette final ballot of six stories shows a greater range of publication sources than we had for the Best Novella nominees where all of those stories were published by Tor.com (see *The Alien Review 2*). Tor features here again, but with only one story. The online sf publications Uncanny and Clarkesworld are represented by two stories each, and one, by Meg Elison, was originally published in a collection of her short stories. This continues the recent trend within the sf&f genre where Hugo nominees, in the main, come from online publications rather than the traditional print magazines. The last time a novelette from one of Asimov's, Analog or F&SF appeared on the Hugo Award Ballot was in 2018 (**Wind Will Rove** by Sarah Pinsker, Asimov's Sep/Oct 2017), and the last time stories from those three publications dominated a year's ballot was in 2015, when Analog had three stories featured. The times aren't changing in this regard, they changed some years back.

Novelettes here are defined as stories within the sf&f genre with a word count between 7,500 and 17,500.

### *Final ballot:*

- "The Inaccessibility of Heaven", Aliette de Bodard (Uncanny Jul/Aug 2020)
- "The Pill", Meg Elison (Big Girl)
- Helicopter Story, Isabel Fall (Clarkesworld Jan 2020)
- "Burn or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super", A. T. Greenblatt (Uncanny May/Jun 2020)
- "Monster", Naomi Kritzer (Clarkesworld Jan 2020)
- "Two Truths and a Lie", Sarah Pinsker (Tor.com 17 Jun 2020)

**Claire Brialey –**

**The Inaccessibility of Heaven** by *Aliette de Bodard*

I admit to some positive bias as soon as I realised that this was set in the same world as *The House of Shattered Wings*, although it's been so long since I read that novel that I couldn't tell whether I'd know anything about any of the characters here if I still had a young person's memory. On that basis, then, I could almost judge it as a standalone novelette, except that here I knew it was a piece of a bigger picture and remembered at least a little of the context; I'm sure I'd think there's a sequence out there (as there so often is).

In any case, it's clearly a murder mystery of some sort and I'm prejudiced in favour of that sort of story too; and I was neatly misdirected by the plot. I'm fairly certain that this story would make me want to read more of the *Dominion of the Fallen* sequence if I hadn't otherwise – and luckily I have now got both of the other novels – but although I enjoyed it in all respects I'm left with a vague hankering that works of short fiction should be more self-contained in order to actually win Hugos.

**The Pill** by *Meg Elison*

This novelette started strongly, at least, with a conundrum that again I found quite personally thought-provoking: if there was a cure for obesity that was relatively quick (although potentially disgusting and quite painful) with a 10% risk of death, would people take it? As well as the story of the narrator's family, I found the perhaps dystopian imagining of broader social responses to be engaging and well-realised; even the rather pointed side effect that all the born-again thin people literally looked alike seemed a reasonable touch.

This seems, at heart, to be a body positive story – also making a distinction between those people who are naturally slim, and

comfortable with that, and the many who take the pill or had adopted other extreme approaches to trying to control their body and their image of it – but I found its depiction of a safe haven for increasingly rare fat people, and the origins of that as a kind of fetish club, to be nearly as dystopian an option and more bizarre as fiction; still, that might well be the intent.

As well as a spur to thought about the pressure to conform to an ideal body image, this can be read more broadly as metaphor

for many outsider groups in society. If the best that marginalised groups can hope for is a comfortable ghetto they hope is well-hidden enough, that's not a resolution I find satisfying; but fiction can be polemic, and not all stories have to be cosy. In places, though, it could be read as satire of the fat acceptance movement rather than as the logical end-point of current attitudes; there are quite a few descriptions of the difficulties of being obese in a world that doesn't want you to be,

which don't really read as body positive, and I have to wonder again about that outcome in which the few remaining fat people have been driven into hiding. Maybe, like 'Helicopter Story', it would benefit from a clarifying editorial note; but I'm still not sure whether it really works as a story.

**Helicopter Story** by *Isabel Fall*

I came to this knowing that it had been controversial, and that the title had been amended as a result; it also now begins with a short note indicating its stance and intent, which made me wonder if that was insufficiently clear in the writing. But I think it's mostly because any writing, fiction or otherwise, that addresses issues of gender and gender identity currently has the potential to be inflammatory to almost everyone, with too many filters of expectation to fight through. All the more so, perhaps, for this novelette now.



The narrator notes the ways in which they would have reacted, or more often been expected to react, when they presented as female – but their identity is now quite different, which shapes their reactions even while they retain an awareness, or a perception, of how they would have felt and acted previously. And while they have consented to a change in identity, the specific outcome is not their choice. It feels like colonisation. But the novelette is also avowedly about the appropriation of queerness, and concerns about trans bodies, it's also about people questioning not only their purpose but also their identity when they find themselves being expected to act in ways they're not sure are right.

I suspect it would also repay a re-read, but I found it smart and engaging and it really made me think about a lot of things about the world today and in the near future – assuming we have even that much left. And I want science fiction to be doing all of that.

### **Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super** by A T Greenblatt

Thirty years ago, before superheroes were fashionable, there were a couple of shared world anthologies – Temps and Euro Temps – about people with powers. Otherwise quite ordinary people, trying to lead everyday lives; and so they needed to find work, in a way that either made use of or wasn't hampered by their abilities, and there was an agency for that. It was all really rather British and I don't remember any of the individual stories – but this could be the pitch for the revised and updated version.

Sam has a power which doesn't really achieve anything useful but which takes quite a lot of effort to control. I can't tell whether it's part of a larger story; if not, that speaks well of the worldbuilding and characterisation, I guess, although it didn't wholly feel as though it was all that much on its own. Perhaps that was the fault of Temps, because the set-up all felt quite familiar and so the

story about finding friendship and acceptance and some sort of a use for a baffling power didn't ultimately seem to amount to anything out of the ordinary. Maybe I've just reached that point in my life as an SF reader where it's not easy to find something new, and sensawunda is a barrier rather than a launchpad.

### **Monster** by Naomi Kritzer

Another Hugo novelette that gave me some grounds for identification. The protagonist is searching for her long-lost high school friend; their tribe were the uncool kids, the bright ones, the nerds – and in the 1980s at that. Cecily becomes a successful scientist, while a question always remains about whether Andrew was living up to his potential. Now she's trying to find him in hiding, and she's not the only one.

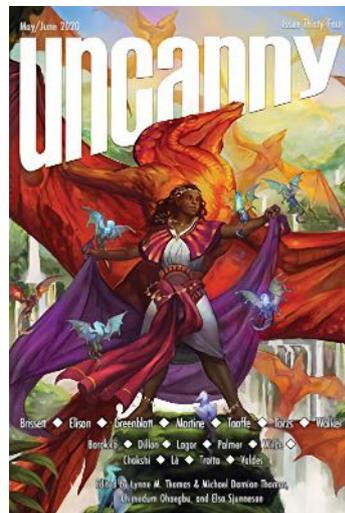
The more I think about this in retrospect, the more it plays with questions about who is a monster and why, and what the response to that should be; while

reading, it felt as though there was slightly too much story to fit in, particularly in the descriptions of the present-day setting, which I thus kept expecting to become more significant to the plot. Before too long, however, I found a lot of the detail fading away fast.

### **Two Truths and a Lie** by Sarah Pinsker

I found this one to be pleasingly disquieting, chiming as it does with several discussions among my friends about part-remembered (often at least genre-adjacent) TV programmes from our respective youth; maybe we're rather typical, and certainly the other explicit themes here of hoarding and decluttering will be very familiar among our people.

I'm again left uncertain, and now presuming that I've just become an inattentive reader, about what are the specific statements referred to in the title, while wondering if



perhaps it doesn't matter. The narrator tells us that she lies instinctively, but I felt less alerted than perhaps I should have been to her obvious unreliability – notwithstanding the rather unlikely circumstances under which she came to be helping out a friend with whom she'd long lost touch – and although she also tells us her ground rules for being exceptionally sparing with the truth we see her break them, clumsily, perhaps more often than not. Are the weird and fantastic elements of the story also just not true?

This is proving to be another of those stories that I was caught up in while reading but feel increasingly troubled by when I think about it afterwards. That's partly because I'm not quite sure that the various elements of the novelette hang together – or maybe the transitions between them don't quite flow; perhaps it should have been just a little longer, to ink in a little more of the pencil sketching, or shorter and tighter with a few of those sketches excised. But it's also because its ambience is effectively disturbing. I'm worrying away at the possible flaws, I think, because it's good enough to bother about that.

### **David Grigg –**

#### **The Inaccessibility of Heaven** by *Aliette de Bodard*

This story had an interesting concept, I thought.

It's set in a city called Starhollow. Other than that fantastical name, it seems to be very similar to a fairly normal modern-day American city. But as well as human beings living in the city, there's also a large population of displaced people, refugees, if you like. These are the Fallen: fallen angels, expelled from Heaven due to their rebellion. It appears there have been several such episodes of rebellion over the millenia, not just the one we read about in *Paradise Lost*.

Some of the humans in Starhollow are also witches, and the first-person protagonist Sam de Viera is one of these. She works with a fallen angel called Cal, at an agency trying to protect the Fallen from body-looters who

want to kill them to use their bodies for various purposes, both magical and medicinal—the bones of angels can apparently be used as drugs, and there's a thriving black market in them.

Sam is very close to Cal. It's not quite clear if they are actually lovers, but they have a very close friendship which goes beyond their working partnership.

As the story opens, Sam de Viera is forcibly taken from her apartment to see the boss of a crime syndicate, Arvedai, who is himself one of the Fallen. He wants her help because there seems to be a killing spree going on, unconnected with the body-looters. Certain fallen angels have been targeted and parts of their bodies removed. The plot thickens, and despite Cal's warnings Sam eventually uncovers evidence of what is going on—the angels are being killed so their body parts can be used in an audacious attempt to open a portal into the Heavenly City through which a group of the rebel angels can return. In the process of discovering this, Sam also learns things about Cal which are very unwelcome.

Look, I didn't mind this story, I thought it had an interesting premise, and the plot is interesting, basically a kind of noir detective story with a couple of interesting plot twists I didn't see coming. The build-up and maintenance of tension is handled well, and the characters are well-defined and interesting.

#### **The Pill** by *Meg Elison*

This story is about the development of a pill which for the first time genuinely makes people lose weight.

As the story opens, the first person protagonist explains how her mother was one of the first to try out the experimental drug. That night the family hear her screaming in agony in the bathroom, but she refuses to open the door. The drug causes intense pain as the body basically burns off and excretes all of the excess fat through the digestive system. Nevertheless, despite the agony of the process, after a few days, it clearly works, and the mother rapidly loses weight and becomes attractively slim.

There's a drawback, however. The drug's action is so severe that approximately one in ten people who take it die from the effects. The protagonist's father decides to take the drug, but is one of those who dies in agony from it. Nevertheless the protagonist's mother keeps urging her to take the drug herself, but she consistently refuses.

The craze for taking the drug sweeps the country and almost everyone takes it, despite the continuing loss of life. The protagonist still resists, however, fearing the risk and also she is content in her body as it is. Eventually, though, it almost becomes mandatory to take the drug, as fat-shaming becomes endemic. The protagonist's life becomes more and more miserable.

Finally, the protagonist is approached by a man who makes her an offer. There are apparently people who find fat people beautiful, and because fatness is now so rare they are in great demand, though they are still scorned by most of society. There is an organisation taking in fat people to both keep them safe, and of course, to exploit them. The protagonist accepts the offer and spends her life in a building where she can show off her body and live and love other fat people.

So, this is basically a think piece which makes a few good points about Western obsessions, body-shaming and the desire for conformism, and about differing ideals of beauty, but I didn't really find it engaging as a story. A lot of the action is passive, we're just told about what is going on.

### **Helicopter Story** by Isabel Fall

This is yet another case, I think, where I have to begin by recognising and trying to balance my white heterosexual male privilege, because the very start of this story seems designed to challenge that.

It starts with an Author's Note. Now personally I would have thought that a good story

should speak for itself and not require an explanation from the author, but here we go, quote:

This is a story about the pinkwashing of imperialism and the need for queerness to constantly challenge the powers that want to capture and use us.

Fair enough. But having started with that statement, I think this story utterly fails to deliver on that premise.

OK, the first line of the actual story is:



I sexually identify as an attack helicopter.

...all right... But the very next sentence contradicts that:

I lied. According to US Army Technical Manual O, The Soldier as a System, "attack helicopter" is a gender identity, not a biological sex.

Now, I'm really trying hard here to be sincerely respectful of those with non-binary gender. But we don't have any guidance about what pronouns to use for someone whose gender identity is "attack helicopter" so I'm going to use "she" and "her" in this discussion, OK? Don't email me.

So the story is ostensibly about how the military has subverted and weaponised gender, the way they have weaponised many other facets of humanity. And I think that could have made an interesting story. But this is not it.

The protagonist is biologically of the female sex:

...my body is an XX-karyotope somatic female.

...and once identified as a woman. But now she's an attack helicopter, she says, though for all I can tell from the story she's physically still human, really just a pilot deeply integrated into the helicopter's control system. There are some admittedly interesting passages about how she uses her past experiences as a woman in her military role.

Setting all that aside, the story is basically that of a military mission to bomb a school inside a breakaway republic in North America. This republic is called the Pear Mesa Budget Committee, a credit union gone rogue. It's mostly controlled by the computers of that old credit union, now become an artificial intelligence.

The mission is perilous but they dodge radars and reach the school. Barb, the woman/helicopter, orders her weapons specialist Axis to attack the school with their thermic missiles. But Axis hesitates and Barb has to issue the command again, after which he fires and the school is destroyed. Later they discuss his hesitation, his lack of commitment to the mission. But there's not much time for that because they are targeted by fighter planes from the Pear Mesa Budget Committee, are damaged and barely able to limp back to base.

And that's the story. Look I'll frankly admit that I didn't understand its take on gender and queerness. All I can say is that those aspects seemed to me to be superficially tacked on to a simple story in a way which didn't really clarify anything.

### **Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super** by A T Greenblatt

Sam is a "Super", that is, he has Powers. Except that in his case his powers seem to be restricted to setting his head, and occasionally his hands, on fire. And he has trouble keeping this talent under control.

Regardless of his limitations, he longs to join a team of superheroes and save people from disasters, so he auditions for the job with the Super Team. The audition doesn't go well, and he's humiliated, but despite that, he's offered a job with the Team. As an accountant.

People with super powers, mutants, if you like, are not welcomed by society despite their good deeds. They are considered to be The Other, often treated with contempt, and many shops and bars refuse them entry.

Sam starts work trying to clean up the team's paperwork, which is literally paper-work because the previous Super who was their

accountant had some superpower which tended to interfere with computers working (why this person wasn't re-assigned is never explained). Sam isn't comfortable working with all this paper around him because he can't always control his own power and is scared he is going to set fire to everything (again, you'd think the HR department ought to have taken this into account). Nevertheless he perseveres.

He gets to tag along on a major mission of the Super Team, which goes pretty well except that a teenage boy is crushed by a car dropped by one of the superheroes. Shit happens.

There are various bits of action, and an arson attack on the headquarters of the Super Team by ordinary humans who hate them, and Sam eventually comes to terms with himself and his special abilities. End of story.

I guess I'll give the story points for the human interest story of Sam's character arc, from being a scorned outsider to becoming a respected member of a team. But I don't think you need a background of super heroes to tell that kind of story, and Sam really isn't all that interesting a character.

As it is, it's kind of a very low energy version of an X-Men comic book.

### **Monster** by Naomi Kritzer

This story starts with the protagonist Cecily Grantz arriving in China. She's headed for Guizhou province, a rural area where few tourists go. She doesn't speak Chinese, but is relying on one of those translator apps on her phone.

She has told her friend Jeanine that's she's going to this particular province in China "Because no one I know has ever been there," but in fact, she tells us, that's a lie. She's going there to find someone called Andrew.

The story is told in interleaved passages of Cecily's travels through China with flashbacks to her childhood, where she made friends with a boy called Andrew because he was a fellow nerd who loaned her books like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* and David Brin's

**Startide Rising.** So they become close friends but not boyfriend and girlfriend. In fact Cecily is warned off Andrew by another girl, who tells her that he likes to kill and dissect animals at home. Still, Cecily remains friends with him, though they lose contact after she goes to college. Cecily dedicates herself to an interest in biochemistry and eventually earns a doctorate.

Twenty years pass before Andrew gets back in contact and asks her for a copy of her paper on gene-editing technology, which she innocently gives him. A few years later she's contacted by the FBI. Andrew has been using her findings to conduct unauthorised research. He's been offering a home to runaway teenagers but then experimenting on them without their consent. Many of the teenagers died or were left mentally damaged. At this stage the FBI started to close in on him. However, Andrew has come up with a potent serum which gives him inhuman speed, reflexes and strength. He breaks free from the armed officers sent to arrest him and disappears.



Now Dr. Cecily Grantz is looking for Andrew in China, acting for the FBI and CIA. They want her to bring Andrew back, to make him an offer of a safe return if he gives them the formula for his serum. As it turns out, that's not what Cecily has in mind.

I liked this story a lot, probably the best of this bunch of novelettes. It's well-written and engaging and the characters are solid and interesting. The only thing I would say against it, is that I'm not sure that it's really SF. Setting aside the extreme powers claimed for Andrew's serum, which we never see demonstrated, it would work just as well as a straightforward thriller with a somewhat scientific theme.

### **Two Truths and a Lie** by Sarah Pinsker

This story starts with an account by a young woman named Stella who offers to help out an old schoolfriend, Marco, to clear up his

older brother's house. The brother, Denny, was a compulsive hoarder and has recently died, possibly by suicide.

Stella hasn't seen Marco for almost 20 years until they meet again at Denny's funeral. When Marco asks her about her life since school, she compulsively lies to him, telling him that she's divorced but has a son called Cooper, and that she works for a coffee distributor. None of this is true, and there's no real reason for her to lie, it's just that she can't help herself.

While going through Denny's stuff, Stella comes across something which makes her ask Marco whether he remembers a television show for kids called *The Uncle Bob Show*. There was no such show. She's made this up on the spot, too. Or thinks she has. So she's surprised when Marco says, "Yes" and talks about how creepy the show was. Only then does Stella start to remember it. Marco tells her that Denny was in the audience a few times, and actually part of the filming.

Stella's mother, too, remembers the show and tells her that Stella was a participant. Stella slowly begins to recall this.

We get more details about the Uncle Bob Show, and it does sound very creepy, kind of the antithesis of the *Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood* show. No friendly smiles, just an dour host, Uncle Bob, who sat down and told the children very strange and disturbing stories. Stella goes hunting for more details and eventually is able to view tapes of the episodes in which she appeared.

We eventually start to understand that Uncle Bob's stories influenced the children's future lives. A tale about a boy who liked to speed influences a young boy who grows up to love driving fast and dies in a horrific car accident. Stella starts to suspect that a similar story drove Marco's brother Denny to his hoarding obsession. And as for herself: Uncle Bob told her a story about "a little girl who didn't

know who she was" and who therefore started to tell so many lies she couldn't tell reality from the stories she made up. Stella realises this is exactly who she has become, and in fact starts to doubt everything she has been recalling of her life.

I thought this story had promise, and there's some interesting material in there, but the end just seems to drop the ball. We never do find out who Uncle Bob was, or why he was doing what he did, it's all just left up in the air.

### **Perry Middlemiss –**

#### **The Inaccessibility of Heaven** by *Aliette de Bodard*

At first glance this appears to be another in the author's *Dominion of the Fallen* series (*The House of Shattered Wings*, *The House of Binding Thorns*, and *The House of Sundering Flames*, plus a number of shorter works). But it is actually set in an alternate Dominion universe. Here we have the same Fallen angels though in this version of Paris there has been no destructive war, and the city functions mostly as normal.

The angel Calariel has, some time in the past, attempted to open the gates of Heaven, but her efforts backfired and she, and a number of other angels, have been exiled to earth as the Fallen. And now someone is killing the Fallen in a very gruesome manner, basically eviscerating them. Sam, a witch who runs a shelter for the Fallen and is a companion to Calariel, sets out to find the perpetrator.

This novelette is basically a murder mystery cloaked in Biblical overtones which takes some time to get going. There is a lot of background material that is hinted at, but the story is really too short to be able to provide anything more than a superficial look at the urban environment in which it takes place. Nor of the history of the Fallen angels.

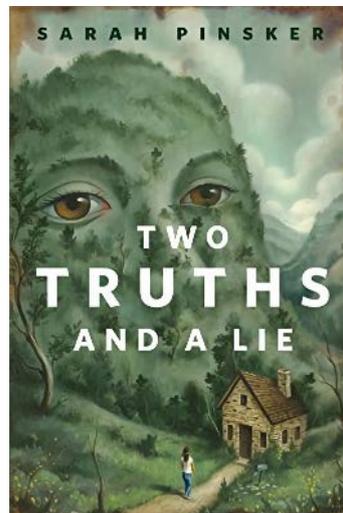
By the time we get to the deus ex machina ending we still have a lot of questions

unanswered, and the reader is left with a sense of what might have been, rather than what has been delivered.

This novelette was also nominated for the 2021 Locus Award for Best Novelette.

De Bodard has been nominated 8 times for the Hugo Award; 7 times for the Nebula Award – for 3 wins; and she has also won a British Fantasy Award, 4 British SF Association Awards, and a Locus Award.

#### **The Pill** by *Meg Elison*



Munchkin is a fat woman who comes from a family of fat people, a description that she supplies herself. Her mother is continually on the look-out for a magic bullet, a treatment that will cure them all of their fatness for good. She tries diets, treatments, exercise and pills, anything that has a promise of working. Finally she is offered a place in a clinical trial of The Pill of the title. She takes it and it forces her to defecate fast amounts of fat from her body on a regular basis. This process,

while effective, is incredibly painful, but it does result in her becoming thin and beautiful.

The Pill passes its trial but it has a side-effect of killing one in 10 people who use it. But the demands for access to it are so great that it is approved and gradually begins to change the face of society. Munchkin's father dies after taking it but her brother survives and then the pressure starts to mount on Munchkin to follow the rest of the family.

This is an interesting story about the pressure to conform and the effects on society and modern life after the introduction of a new medical technology. It's main aim is rather obvious from the beginning, however, and this tends to diminish the impact the story might have.

This novelette was also nominated for the 2021 Nebula Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award.

Meg Elison is the winner of the 2015 Philip K. Dick Award for her novel ***The Book of the Unnamed Midwife*** and has been previously nominated for the Otherwise Award (which was previously known as the James Tiptree Jr Memorial Award).

### **Helicopter Story** by Isabel Fall

If, as some commentators would have it, gender is as much a social construct as a physical one, then why not mechanically construct new genders as required? Or manipulate an existing gender to fit a mechanical shell?

I have no idea what this story is trying to achieve other than to say that all genders are fluid and that they should be represented and respected.

This is Fall's first nomination for any award. It was originally titled "I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter", but the author changed the title after an inordinate amount of attacks on them and the story, especially as the original title co-opts a transphobic meme. If that is the case then I can only assume they were attempting to subvert the meme by utilising it in the text. Not a good basis for a start I would think. The last question remaining is "who really is Isabel Fall?" Are they a new writer or an existing, established one writing under a pseudonym? You could argue equally well on both sides of that question.

### **Burn, or the Episodic Life of Sam Wells as a Super** by A T Greenblatt

Sam Wells lives in a world where some people discover their super powers in their mid-twenties. As the story starts Sam's powers, the ability to set himself on fire and survive, have just started to develop. He longs to become a member of the Supers, a group of super-powered who fight crime and rescue people, but he doesn't have much control over his flames. As a result he is accepted into the group, though only in a position that utilises his existing accountancy skills, more so that the group can keep an eye on him. He gradually integrates into the group, and finally, one day, he discovers how he can

actually use his powers for the good of others, though not in the way he first expected.

This is as much a coming-of-age or wish-fulfilment story as anything else. Competently written and engaging, it doesn't, however, remain in the mind for long.

A. T. Greenblatt has been nominated for the Nebula Award three times for one win. This is her first Hugo nomination.

This novelette was also nominated for the 2021 Locus Award and 2021 Nebula Award for Best Novelette.

### **Monster** by Naomi Kritzer

Cecily Grantz was a loner at high school until she met Andrew, an intelligent but lazy science fiction Chinese-American fan, just like her. Both seemed destined for great things but only Cecily puts in the hard work and ends up as a faculty member at a university and a gene editing researcher. Andrew takes a different path and eventually disappears.

Twenty years later Andrew gets back in touch with Cecily and requests a copy of her new gene-splicing paper. But this leads to complications a few years down the track when the FBI informs Cecily that he has been using her research for illegal genetic treatments. Now Cecily is in China trying to track down Andrew to confront him about his activities, but is she being manipulated by other forces? Are they Chinese or American?

An interesting story, well-told which in other years might have had a chance of the award.

## THE 2021 HUGO AWARD SHORT STORIES

### Introduction

As with the finalists in the Novelette category of this award, none of the entries here are from the traditional print professional magazines: Vina Jie-Min Prasad's story was originally published in an original anthology edited by Jonathan Strahan, and the rest are from online publications. You can read into that just about anything but I would presume that the most common conclusion would also be the most accurate.

Short stories here are defined as stories within the sf&f genre with a word count up to 7,500.

### Final ballot:

- "Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse", Rae Carson (Uncanny, Jan-Feb/2020)
- "Metal Like Blood in the Dark", T. Kingfisher (Uncanny 9-10/2020)
- "Little Free Library", Naomi Kritzer (Tor.com 8/4/2020)
- "The Mermaid Astronaut", Yoon Ha Lee (Beneath Ceaseless Skies 27/2/2020)
- "A Guide for Working Breeds", Vina Jie-Min Prasad (Made to Order)
- "Open House on Haunted Hill", John Wiswell (Diabolical Plots 15/6/2020)

### Claire Brialey

#### "Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse" – Rae Carson

Expectation is everything, and since this is *What to Expect When You're Expecting* in a World Full of Undead Cannibals it's unsurprising that it's a female-centred story. I was expecting to be a bit irritated – I'm not into zombies or relentlessly positive stereotypes of motherhood – but the female characters

are well-drawn, there are no illusions presented about the way that childbirth really, really hurts and can do terrible things to a human body, and I found the descriptions of the world in the time of zombies genuinely engaging.

Maybe it's about archetypes more than stereotypes. Men appear here in what might be a male version of the maiden, mother, and crone: the new baby, the faceless trucker who got quite a lot of sex in return for his unwitting fatherhood (I assume it was

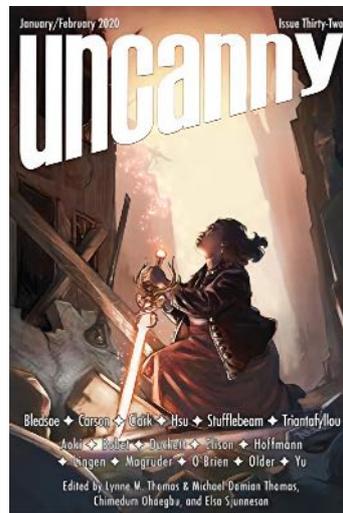
unwitting; the sex, at least, was clearly consensual), and the stern religious father of the pregnant woman. I read the zombies as male too, so that says a lot about either my expectations or how the author was leading me.

The story is generally well-written, including a neat but not overemphasised metaphor of birth and escape, although it doesn't quite solve the problem of getting background into a short story (including what seems to be a really clunky way

of revealing the pregnant narrator's partner's ethnicity). On the other hand, if one character's going to tell another what they both already know, doing that as encouragement and exhortation when they're under extreme stress isn't the worst approach.

There are some thought-provoking points about why anyone would have a child when life is terrible, although – perhaps wisely – no attempt at a definite answer is given beyond the great inexplicable wanting to that everyone accepts is just a thing; it's countered by characters who are equally clear that they wouldn't ever want to. I smiled to myself about the people wanting children, in these circumstances, being the ones recognised as selfish.

I was wondering how dark this was going to be, although a first-person narrative can still provide some reassurance about outcomes; but I was forgetting that this is as much about women supporting one another across



the generations as it is about the Miracle of Life. And despite how sardonic I'm being, I thought this was a pretty decent story. It's just that it could never quite live up to the expectations – good and bad – that I had when the font, looking through the wrong part of my glasses, and a word I don't use made me think I was about to read about Badass Morris in the Zombie Apocalypse.

**"A Guide for Working Breeds"** – *Vina Jie-Min Prasad*

An epistolary short story, which I think works because it combines two ideas which would be less engaging individually: two very different work colleagues getting to know and appreciate one another, and AIs modelling behaviour we (almost certainly erroneously) think of as uniquely human – in this case with added cute dog photos. Since there are only two characters, their situation is quickly and deftly revealed in the course of the story, and all of the action and concepts are clear and straightforward, this avoided many of the problems I often find with short stories; although it probably isn't Great Literature I enjoyed it a lot.

**"Little Free Library"** – *Naomi Kritzer*

"A Guide for Working Breeds" inevitably had some echoes, for me at least, of Naomi Kritzer's "Cat Pictures Please" (which won a Hugo for Best Short Story but turns out to be over six years old now; oh good grief), although I think that Vina Jie-Min Prasad's is a better story – as is "Little Free Library". Told from the perspective of a woman recently moved to St Paul who needs to declutter her book collection, it's very much an in-community story as she begins 'by unloading the books she'd enjoyed but knew she'd never read again', with the named titles mostly YA and SF. And gradually she finds herself in dialogue with someone whose need for the books is significantly greater than she could have imagined, and who leaves beautiful little things in exchange.



This is another story which includes letters and touches on a growing relationship – although in this case one that never has a chance to develop more closely. And it ends in a rather poignant way that gave me sensawunda; I hope very much that it doesn't turn out to be the prologue to a novel, because I feel it's so much more interesting with all of the surrounding details of this short story sketched only in outline and left to the imagination.

**"The Mermaid Astronaut"** – *Yoon Ha Lee*;  
**"Metal Like Blood in the Dark"** – *T Kingfisher*

I was looking forward to both of these stories because I've liked longer works by their authors; in both cases I found them as well-written and competently plotted as I'd expected, but not really meeting my other expectations. They're comparable in other ways, as well, both having a fairytale quality to them as well as strong sibling bonds. Both have rather beautiful descriptions of space travel and some hints of a bigger picture, but in each case the lead characters and their adventures and experiences didn't really engage me sufficiently. I found myself wondering if the people who nominated these stories appreciated the writing, or the characters, more than I did or found a more resonant analogy in them so that they were more moved. There was a pleasing circularity in "The Mermaid Astronaut" and some emotionally comforting resolution in both stories (particularly so in "Metal Like Blood in the Dark", where the two siblings had each experienced considerable suffering), and I've read many far worse stories on Hugo shortlists; but I didn't feel that either of these stood out.

**"Open House on Haunted Hill"** by *John Wiswell*

This one is a story with a sympathetic – although possibly unreliable – and rather lonely narrator, in a way that is itself a different take on a more familiar story. The

other characters are not all so sympathetic, and I found myself wondering what outcome we should be hoping for. I enjoyed the story but found myself slightly uneasy; was it because of the ambiguity of some of the characters or the best resolution, or was it because the plot rested on the absence of two dead women?

In the end, I think it was because I was distracted by a very practical problem: there's a viewing for a possibly haunted house, in the course of which the layout of the whole place is described and some uses suggested for different rooms as well as a couple of limitations on that. And at the back of my mind, while reading much of the story, I kept wondering about how to make the house work for the family featured – as if that could somehow also solve the question about what would be the right conclusion to the story and ensure that it happened. I did like this, but I still have a sense that it's problematic; I just don't know if actually the problem here is me.



## David Grigg

### “Metal Like Blood in the Dark” by T. Kingfisher

It's an interesting story about two intelligent machines—robots, if you like—created by an old man living by himself at a base on a remote planet.

He calls the robots Brother and Sister, and gives them the ability to re-shape themselves using nano-robots called nanites.

The old man has created the robots as company, and he sees them as his children. They call him “father”. But he's old and sick and eventually has to send for help, which will take him away from the planet and from his robot children. This worries him greatly, but he knows that if he stays he will die soon and they will be left alone anyway.

His parting instructions to them are to leave the planet and venture into space. He's worried that the authorities who come to help him will want to exploit the technology he's developed to build these intelligent robots.

So Brother and Sister venture into space. They travel from asteroid to asteroid, seeking metal, without which they will stop working. But metal is extremely rare in this system.

At last, though, they come across a huge metal artefact, a space station in orbit around a gas giant. It appears to be abandoned, and so they start joyfully drilling and cutting. Until the owner returns, an entity they call The Third Drone. It is malevolent and enslaves them, putting Brother in a cage and setting Sister to do repair work. Eventually it promises to let them go if Brother will design and build the Third Drone a set of wings which will allow it to fly down into the atmosphere of the gas giant, which is apparently where it came from.

Brother and Sister are extremely naive and don't understand deception, and so they don't realise that they can't trust the Third Drone's promises. Only gradually does Sister begin to understand and learn how to lie in order to save their lives.

All great stuff, well written and engaging. I liked it a lot. But the night after finishing it, I suddenly realised the children's tale on which it's solidly based, and I had to laugh. It's “Hansel and Gretel”, of course, with the Third Drone being the wicked witch. I should have spotted that from the opening sentence: “Once upon a time...”. Making that connection doesn't detract from the story at all, it just enhances it. Cleverly done.

### “Badass Moms of the Zombie Apocalypse” by Rae Carson

I thought this was a strong story despite the rather hackneyed idea of a plague of zombies out to get ordinary people, because the

author puts an interesting spin on it: that the zombies are particularly attracted to the smell of blood. This puts women who are menstruating, or worse still, giving birth, at great risk.

Brit is living in a small protected enclave occupied only by women. Men exist only as travellers visiting such female enclaves. This separation of the genders isn't something which is explicitly explained in the story, though it may have arisen as a defensive strategy. An interesting concept.

Brit has deliberately become pregnant to a travelling trader and as the story opens, she is beginning to have labour pains.

Because of the extreme danger to the whole enclave from the zombies when a woman gives birth, Brit and her partner Mari have to leave the enclave to shelter inside an old shipping container while she has the baby.

There's plenty of tension as the zombies cluster at the container and remorselessly try to get in while the baby is born. Finally, one of the wooden bars keeping the container hatch closed is broken, and disaster seems imminent as Mari and Brit desperately struggle to keep the zombies out.

Look, I thought this was a very well-written story, interesting scenario, good characters, plenty of tension. I liked it a lot.

#### **"Little Free Library"** by Naomi Kritzer

I thought this was a charming and interesting little story, well told, if not very profound.

Meigan is a woman living in a suburb of St. Paul, which I take it is in Canada. Doesn't matter, anyway.

She's entranced by the idea of having a Little Free Library outside her house (basically "a box of free books, sheltered from the weather") and so she sends away for a kit, builds it and customises it with pretty rocks

and paint. Then she sets it up with a sign which says "take a book, return a book".

Over the days, her neighbours take the books she leaves out and occasionally contribute one or two of their own.

One day, though, after she's left out a paperback copy of Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* and some Terry Pratchett novels, the box is completely empty, which annoys her a bit. She leaves a note to ask whoever took all the books just to take one or two and ideally to leave a book in return.



Instead, the next day, after another book is taken, someone has left in its place a small whistle hand-carved from a twig. A little later, there's a note written on a blank page pulled from an old paperback, asking if there was a book which follows *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Surprised, Meigan finds an old copy of *The Two Towers* and leaves it in the box.

As this kind of dialogue goes on, trading books for gifts, Meigan eventually realises that whoever is taking the books isn't human.

As I say, a slight story, but it's charming and with an unexpected conclusion.

#### **"Open House on Haunted Hill"** by John Wiswell

This an amusing but slight little story about a sort-of-haunted house. It's not so much haunted as sentient, self-aware, but in a benign rather than evil way.

It's written in the omniscient third-person point of view, and we're told from the first sentence that this particular house isn't a "killer house".

It's currently up for sale and so the real estate agents are bringing different families to inspect it. The house apparently longs to be inhabited again and when a man and his young daughter turn up to have a look, the

house decides it likes them and tries to encourage their interest.

There's a bit of byplay because the little girl, whose mother is dead, wants to believe in ghosts and her father is trying to convince her that ghosts don't exist. The house, of course, is on the side of the little girl in this debate.

Through the house's benign supernatural actions, the man does decide to buy the house.

And they all lived happily ever after.

**"The Mermaid Astronaut" by Yoon Ha Lee**

This is a sickly-sweet tale of a mermaid whose name translates as "Seek the Stars". An alien spacecraft lands, and she wants to get on board and travel the galaxy with it. She visits a sea witch who gives her a knife to cut her tail into two legs. The aliens agree to take her with them. She travels the galaxy, while time dilation means decades pass on her home planet. She returns in time to find her sister before she dies.

It's basically Hans Christian Anderson's "The Little Mermaid" with few changes other than a science fiction spin and a much happier ending.

**"A Guide for Working Breeds" by Vina Jie-Min Prasad**

This is a very slight story indeed, and I ranked it last out of five of the nominees.

It purports to be the discussion between two robot entities, one who has been set as the mentor of the other, newer one. The older one, who really objects to be being assigned as a mentor, is a murderbot called Constant Killer, whereas the younger one is a kind of daffy, naive being initially fresh created in the factory and then taking up a job in a cafe. Constant Killer's advice is thus not all that useful...

It's all mildly amusing, but the humour is, to be honest, pretty juvenile. Mistakes in communication, the juvenile robot continually

changing its user name, becoming obsessed with dogs...

Maybe I'm missing something here, that's always possible. But I really don't have much more say about it than that. I thought it was pretty poor stuff to end up with a Hugo nomination.

**Perry Middlemiss**

**"Badass Moms in the Zombie Apocalypse" by Rae Carson**

The zombie apocalypse has happened and a small band of women are scratching out a sparse existence in an isolated community. When one of their number is due to give birth the mother and midwife must move to a distant birthing centre - which sounds like some sort of shipping container - in order to protect the others from the blood-lust of the zombies. This story is slight but it does pose the question of whether it is advisable to bring a child into a world that is devastated and whether it is selfish or fair to impose the burden of the birth on others. Interesting.

Also nominated for the Locus and Nebula Awards.

**"Metal Like Blood in the Dark" by T. Kingfisher**

You know you're in for a variant on a fairy tale when the story starts: "Once upon a time there was a man who built two enormous machines, and he loved them very much." And what we have is a science fictional re-telling of Hansel and Gretel.

The two machines are called Brother and Sister, with their creator named Father. They live on an old planet that has nearly been mined out so the two machines, who eat metal for food, are starting to struggle. Father is getting very old and cannot care for them as he wants so he arranges for them to be able to leave the planet to mine the asteroids and space debris in their system, while he, Father, is taken off planet for treatment. During their explorations and mining the two machines come across a renegade machine they call Third Drone. This Drone captures Brother and Sister and forces

them to build it new wings which had previously been torn from its body by others of its kind. Brother and Sister do what they can and slowly Sister realises that she is able to lie to the Drone and keep her plans for escape a secret.

This is a grim story – like most fairy tales – though it does end on a high note. Fair.

**“Little Free Library”** by Naomi Kritzer

A young woman builds a little free library on her front fence and stocks it with books. The next day all the books are gone but not have been replaced. She re-stocks and adds a note that one-book-borrowed and one-book-deposited is the rule. The next day she receives a note for her mysterious borrower stating that they are unable to leave any books but have left a small gift behind instead.

After a while it becomes obvious that the little library has opened a portal to another world, and the books the woman is putting out are helping the recipient in some form of struggle on their world.

As interesting story, which has a life outside the bounds of its end.

This story won the Locus Award for Best Short Story.

**“The Mermaid Astronaut”**, Yoon Ha Lee

Essarala is a mermaid who has dreams of one day visiting the stars. A starship lands on her planet and, after some reticence, she goes along to listen to her people talking to the aliens. Essarala decides that she only has one chance to fulfil her dream so she goes to visit a sea witch who gives her the ability to transform her tail fin into two legs – with the price for this to be paid later. She approaches the ship’s captain and is accepted as a crew-member and travels with the ship among the stars until she yearns to return home to see

her friends and family before they die. When she returns she goes to see the sea with again and then learns the price of the gift she was given.

This is a reasonable re-telling of the Little Mermaid fairy tale in a science-fictional setting.

Also nominated for the Locus and Theodore Sturgeon Awards.

**“A Guide for Working Breeds”**, Vina Jie-Min Prasad

This is an attempt at a comic short story involving robots which doesn’t quite come off.

It is told in the form of a series of text messages between the robot Default Name and its mentor Constant Killer. Default Name finds a job in a cafe and the mentorship continues with Constant Killer staying patient and understanding of DN’s

dumb questions and lack of any experience. Eventually the two meet and help each other out of difficult circumstances.

A light story with little going for it apart from the format. I have no idea about the title – yes, dogs feature but not to any great extent. Maybe there’s a subtext that I’ve completely missed.

Also nominated for the Nebula and Theodore Sturgeon awards.

**“Open House on Haunted Hill”** by John Wiswell

The house at 133 Poisonwood Avenue isn’t so much haunted as practically sentient, or as sentient as an old house can get. But it has been empty since 1989 when its last inhabitant died there.

Now the house is once again on the market and prospective buyers are looking it over. The house is desperate for people to live in it. Not so much to haunt them as to feel useful



once more. A man and young girl come to inspect the property – the girl’s mother has died and they need a new start. As the inspection continues the house attempts to make itself as comforting as possible, even opening up a room that the realtor didn’t know existed.

This is an atmospheric and interesting twist on the haunted house theme.

Winner of the Nebula Award for Best Short Story and also nominated for the Locus Award.

**“Two Truths and a Lie”** by Sarah Pinsker

Stella has returned to her home town to visit her ageing parents when she hears that the Denny, the brother of her old friend Marco, has died. As a chance to re-connect with her past she attends the funeral and then offers to help Marco clear out Denny’s house.

The house is a hoarder’s dream, boxes and junk everywhere. As the two first clear out the dining room and then the rec room, where they find boxes of old VHS tapes. Some of these tapes contain recordings of an old local television program called The Uncle Bob Show. This was a children’s program which mainly consisted of Uncle Bob sitting in a chair telling stories to local children who

made up his audience. Denny was a frequent visitor, so Stella and Marco play the tapes while they work, in order to remember him as he was as a child, before he got big and strange.

Later that night, talking to her parents, Stella discovers that she also appeared on the show, although she does not have any memory of it. She decides to investigate further and is able to access the recordings of the program at the local television station. And then she starts to discover things about herself she never realised, and which help explain why she acts like she does.

This is a light piece of work until the end, and I really enjoyed this story. It’s just the right length for the material and has an actual beginning, middle and end. In tone it reminds me somewhat of Jeffrey Ford’s work.

This novelette won the 2021 Nebula Award for Best Novelette, it was nominated for the Locus Award, and has been nominated for the Bram Stoker Award.

Sarah Pinsker has been nominated for 5 Hugo Awards (all for shorter fiction), 10 Nebula Awards for 3 wins; 3 World Fantasy Awards and 8 Locus Awards. She is also the winner of the Philip K. Dick Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Award. ◀◀

**My Books**

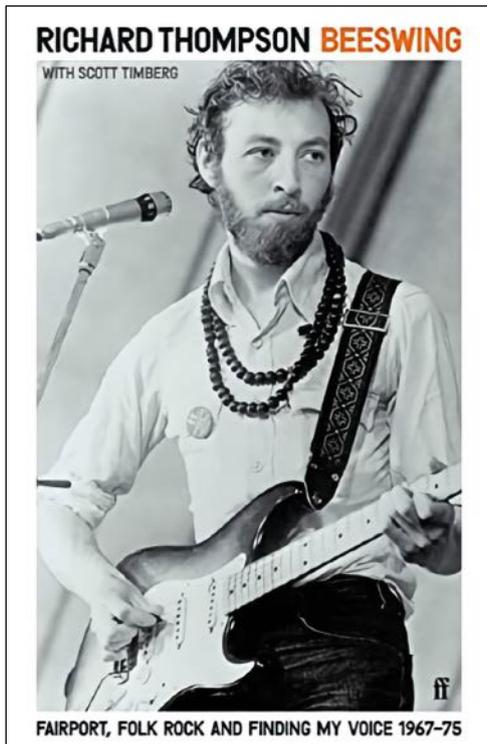
by Dierdre Tregarthen

Old friends of mine, who stay when humans leave me,  
 Whose presence, like the stars, in darkness shine,  
 I never need to fear that you will grieve me,  
 Old friends of mine.  
 Here, one will fire my blood with laughter's wine,  
 And this, with faery arts, from care relieve me:  
 And that one charm with poetry divine.  
 Well tried and proved, from age you still retrieve me,  
 All moods you cater for with wisdom fine;  
 And until life may end, I pray, receive me,  
 Old friends of mine.

*First published in The Sydney Morning Herald, 15 October 1927*

# The Alien *Review* of Music

## Julian Warner and Friends



**Beeswing: Fairport, Folk Rock and Finding My Voice, 1967-75** by Richard Thompson with Scott Timberg

Faber & Faber, 272pp (2021)

**How Many Times Do You Have to Fall? - Let's walk awhile with Richard Thompson.**

Julian Warner

**Beeswing – Fairport. Folk Rock and Finding My Voice 1967-1975 (2021)** by Richard Thompson with Scott Timberg.

Let's assume that anyone who picks this book up in a bookshop for a closer look, does so because they recognise Thompson's name or picture. Who buys and reads biographies randomly? So let's assume that our bookshop browser has also listened to some of Richard Thompson's guitar work and singing with the group Fairport Convention and later with Linda Thompson. They're probably a fan of Richard and/or the Fairports (and possibly also a Science Fiction fan given the confluence between the fandoms of SF and folk music, but that's a topic for a separate discussion).

If you are such a fan – should you read this book? Yes, you should.

End of review.

Well, no.

Here's a few observations. The cover shows a very recognisable Thompson, holding an electric guitar and wearing wooden beads, emblematic of his conversion to Sufi Islam. If you take off the slipcover, the bare book underneath is white with black text – an unusual choice these days. Possibly also emblematic? The book was written with Scott Timberg, and according to Thompson, was Timberg's idea. The untimely death of Timberg in December 2019 undoubtedly complicated the release of the book. Although Timberg was reportedly a passionate writer on music and culture, there is no sense of him intruding into Thompson's story. A co-writer without ego is a fine and good thing. There are a couple of appendices: the first being lyrics from Thompson's own songs quoted in the text; and the second being some of his recurring dreams. The latter sounded a bit odd but if Bob Dylan can write a stream of consciousness novel, why can't Thompson tell us some of the fishy tales that swim around in his head?

There's also an index which reminds me of just how many names and places get mentioned. I got no great sense of showing off when names and deeds are recounted. There are photos – some stock but many I don't recall seeing before.

The book starts with childhood memories and ends effectively with the death of Sandy Denny. In between the history of wee Thompson, gangly diffident Thompson, boozy folkie Thompson, nascent guitar-hero Thompson, mildly naughty lover-boy Thompson, spiritually inquisitive Thompson and grief-stricken Thompson is recounted – possibly with a few other Thompsons thrown in.

If you are (like me) a keen reader of the covers of records and CDs and of music magazine articles, you will already know a fair bit of the history of Fairport Convention and of Richard's music and his relationship with Linda. Do not fear. You do not know it all already. Stories are fleshed out. Interesting snippets are imparted. I could cite a few but I don't want to spoil the fun.

If you want to read gory stories about life on the road with the fighting Thompsons after their relationship had already fallen apart – that isn't in the book. Richard visibly holds back in places where there could have been ill-feeling and recrimination. There is a strong sense that he wants to retain or re-vivify old friendships and not offend. If you read interviews conducted with some of the people mentioned in the book as part of publicity around the launch, you also get this sense.

Islam is in the book. It continues to be a significant dedication in his life. He isn't going to try to convert you. He recounts both good and bad experiences about being a Sufi. Selah.

Richard has earned enough plaudits to be able to boast but does very little of this. He admits to being involved in the invention of folk-rock.

**Beeswing** is the title of the book, taken from the title of one of his songs, about a woman who will not be constrained. The song was inspired in part by singer Anne Briggs, who

was a close friend of Sandy Denny. Thompson did not play on any of Briggs' recordings but I do recommend that you listen to her work if you can find it. A few clips exist on Youtube.

It is worth listing the records which Thompson was involved in during the scope of the book. This is by no means exhaustive and I get the impression that even he may not remember all of the sessions he worked on as a young guitarist-for-hire.

*With Fairport Convention:*

- Fairport Convention
- What We Did on Our Holidays
- Unhalfbricking
- Liege and Lief
- Full House
- Fairport Convention Live at the BBC
- House Full - Fairport Convention Live In L.A. 1970

*Solo as Richard Thompson:*

- Henry the Human Fly

*As Richard and Linda Thompson:*

- I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight
- Pour Down Like Silver
- Hokey Pokey
- ...In Concert, November 1975

Notable other appearances:

**Rock On** by The Bunch (which is basically the Fairports playing old rock and roll).

**Morris On** by Ashley Hutchings and friends (yes - music for Morris Dancing).

And as session musician on albums by (amongst many): The Incredible String Band; Nick Drake; Al Stewart; Iain Matthews; John Martyn; Shirley Collins; Sandy Denny; Mike Heron; Shelagh McDonald; Lal & Mike Waterson; John Kirkpatrick; Stefan Grossman; John Cale; and Geoff Muldaur.

So where to from here? I would be interested to hear the perspectives of other people who were in those same circles at the same time. Ashley Hutchings and Dave Swarbrick come to mind most immediately given the close connections with Steeleye Span and the broader folk/rock scene. There is a Hutchings bio from about ten years ago. I might have to find a copy. Not that I've read it, but Rob Young's *Electric Eden* gives a very broad coverage of the history of British folk and its place in the broader tapestry of music.

I'd also be interested to hear Linda Thompson's perspective. Richard and Linda continued working together for some years after 1975 – outside the scope of *Beeswing*. However, it would need to be a story about her life rather than simply a commentary on her relationship with Richard.

The big question for the Thompson-o-phile would be whether there is another keen enough ghost-writer who could prod Mr Thompson in documenting the years between 1975 and now. There's a lot to cover.

–

Following this book review are reviews of the major albums from the period covered by the book.

In order:

- Joseph Nicholas contemplates the early evolution of Fairport Convention over their first three albums.
- Marc Ortlieb looks at the mid-period classic, *Liege & Lief*.
- Julian Warner considers Richard Thompson's swansong with Fairport Convention - *Full House*.
- Lucy Sussex provides fond reminiscences of *Henry the Human Fly* – Thompson's first solo album.
- Perry Middlemiss arrives late but accommodates *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* into his appreciation of Thompson.
- Bruce Gillespie digs back into how and when and why he fell in love with *Pour Down Like Silver*.
- Paul Voermans does his own little hokey cokey with *Hokey Pokey*.



...And this is just the 'early career' of Richard Thompson. For the Thompson fan there is a long, long, way to go.

### ***The Ledge Not Taken***

*Joseph Nicholas*

To contemplate Fairport Convention's first three albums – *Fairport Convention*; *What We Did on Our Holidays*; and *Unhalfbricking* – is also to realise the

disconnect between what they recorded when they started out and everything they did afterwards. Indeed, listening to them again one might be forgiven for wondering if it's the same group at all – never mind wondering, if the group hadn't changed direction and pretty much invented folk-rock with *Liege and Lief*, the albums would be remembered at all; whether they might have faded into the general alternative/psychedelic/underground/experimental noise that was British rock and folk in the late 1960s, and now be entirely forgotten save for a track or two being exhumed for inclusion on a box set of curiosities from the period. (Indeed, one is so included: “Autopsy”, from *Unhalfbricking*, appears on ***Dust on the Nettles: A Journey Through the British Underground Folk Scene, 1967-72***. For the record, “Tam Lin”, from *Liege and Lief*, pops up on ***Sumer is Icumen In: The Pagan Sound of British and Irish Folk, 1966-75***, but much of that compilation is less obscure than most – anything which includes

Traffic and Steeleye Span obviously isn't digging that deep into the vaults! – and of course post-*Liege and Lief* Fairport is all over the classic collection **The Electric Muse/The All New Electric Muse: The Story of Folk into Rock**, which by virtue of being a historical survey of the key points doesn't touch on obscurities at all.)

Half of the first album is covers of songs by other people; but all of it, in terms of its sound and musical approach, indicates that the group was more influenced by US West Coast outfits such as The Byrds, The Lovin' Spoonful and The Turtles than anything here in the UK.

But there is nothing on it which particularly stands out, then or now, with the possible exception of Judy Dyble's vocals: she at least has the distinction of sounding quite different from Sandy Denny (although she was, as she put it, "unceremoniously dumped" before the album was released)\*. Although

Dyble and Denny were both peripherally associated with the British folk scene (as it then was – see the subtitles of two of the box sets mentioned above), it seems to me that bringing in the latter to replace the former – she is credited in the sleeve notes on the second album by her full name, Alexandra Elene McLean Denny; what a mouthful! – certainly turned the group in a folkier direction: only two of the songs are covers, there are two "trad.arr."s and, more importantly there are more of the group's own compositions, written in a softer, less rockier style. But the stand-out track, by Richard Thompson, is "**Meet on the Ledge**", which was released as a single but failed to trouble the charts (although it was my first point of



contact with the group). In any case, it was a perverse choice of song to release as a single, since it is so very clearly about death and the afterlife:

Too many friends who tried  
Were blown off this mountain with the wind  
We're gonna meet on the ledge  
When my time is up I'm gonna see all my friends

– although where folk songs about death are generally dark and tragic, this one is more wistful in tone. Even so, it was hardly a lyric likely to appeal to teenagers into bubblegum pop.

It's really only on the third album that a "trad.arr." song is played in what we'd now recognise as a "proper" folk style, when Dave Swarbrick guested on "**A Sailor's Life**" with that traditional folk music instrument, a fiddle. But, again, some of the songs (three out of the eight) are covers, one of them "**Si tu**

**Dois Partir**", a cod-French translation of a Bob Dylan original: this was another single release which this time did enter the charts and had the group appearing on the BBC's weekly Top of The Pops show wearing T-shirts with the message "Miming" and Simon Nicol pretending to play double-bass with a French loaf. As an audience-engaging performance this was clever enough; but would it have been enough to secure a place in British musical history?

We'll never know. As Joe Boyd later remarked, these first three albums were repertoire the group never performed again, because of the painful memories they brought back of the motorway crash that killed Martin Lamble and injured several others. (Never performed again, that is, until the 50th anniversary concert at Cropredy in 2017, which closed with "**Meet on the Ledge**" in memory of all the former members of the group who had passed on.) Instead, as we know, the group retreated to the countryside, brought in Dave Swarbrick as a full member, and re-emerged

\* Partially relevant footnote: after a long break from performing and recording, Dyble played an intimate concert for 30-odd people, including ourselves, in a Wood Green bookshop in 2016. One of the songs in the set was "If I Had a Ribbon Bow", from that first album. She died of lung cancer last year.

with *Liege and Lief*: an album for which the group would probably be revered even if it had never recorded anything else. But that change of musical direction, and everything which came afterwards, seems to me to leave these first three albums in something of a cul-de-sac, abandoned on a road not taken. In many ways, they have little to recommend them; equally, they are remembered in spite of that because they are by Fairport Convention, a group which went on to greater and better things.

### ***Come All Ye – Fairport Convention's Liege and Lief from a Thompson point of view***

Marc Ortlieb.

If you're looking for an album of Richard Thompson at his blistering best, then this is not it. It is a key album in the development of English electric folk and contains excellent contributions by the members of the group, including Thompson, but this is more a group effort, showcasing the potential for the genre as much as anything else. It was conceived as a result of Dave Swarbrick, and Sandy Denny having strong roots in the folk club scene and because Ashley Hutchings had developed a penchant for searching through the archives at Cecil Sharpe House. (Hutchings would go on to expand his interest in English folk music as a founder member of Steeleye Span and of the Albion Country band.) The album followed a road accident in which the band's drummer, Martin Lamble and Richard Thompson's girlfriend Jeannie Franklyn were killed. They retreated to a shared country house – Farley Chamberlayne – where they worked on their new direction which, while cited as a seminal album in the development of English folk rock, still contains traces of an American West Coast ensemble vibe with more than a hint of sadness.

Fiddler and mandolin player Dave Swarbrick had formally joined Fairport after guesting on

*Unhalfbricking*. It was also the debut for drummer Dave Mattacks, replacing Martin Lamble. Thompson contributed lyrics to two of the songs on the album – “**Farewell, Farewell**” and “**Crazy Man Michael**” the former using a traditional tune “**Willy o' Winsbury**” while the latter sat on music created by Swarbrick. One cannot help but see the road crash in such lines as “The winding road does call” and “Your true love will die by your own right hand.” Thompson was no stranger to bleak lyrics, having contributed “**Genesis Hall**” to *Unhalfbricking* and “**Tale in a Hard Time**”:

Take the sun from my heart  
Let me learn to despise.

Thompson's real skill can be heard in the traditional songs “**Tam Lin**” and “**Matty Groves**”. Neither song has particularly complex music. Indeed, in a much later performance of “**Matty Groves**”, Dave Pegg (who replaced Hutchings after the release of *Liege & Lief*) is heard to comment about the fun that can be

had with just three chords. But what this ignores is the way that Thompson fills the songs, along with Swarbrick's violin and the rhythm section of Mattacks, Hutchings and Simon Nichol. That you also get Sandy Denny's pure vocals soaring above it all is simply the icing on the cake. Thompson's solo on “**Tam Lin**” presages similar work on the live versions of “**Calvary Cross**”.

“**Matty Groves**” is so typical of electric English folk that an almost note perfect version of the song was used in an episode of English murder mystery series *George Gently*, where Gently is investigating the murder of a young folk singer, played by Queensland singer Ebony Buckle. Thompson throws in his guitar version of a strathspey and the band round off the piece with a jig where Thompson once more displays his guitar wizardry, playing off against Swarbrick's violin.



The jig “**The Lark In The Morning**” is quite wonderful, with Thompson showing that he can more than keep up with Swarbrick’s manic fiddle. I think it was Fairport chronicler Patrick Humphries who described Fairport’s jigs and reels to be fast enough “To knacker a Whirling Dervish”.

There are a couple of dud songs on the album. “**The Deserter**” suffers from an attempt to sound “authentic” which just comes across as boring and “**Reynardine**” is similarly uninspiring. Not even Sandy Denny’s vocals can save either track. She was capable of far better interpretations of folk songs as she did with “**Wild Mountain Thyme**”. Thompson adds atmosphere to both songs but they seem to be added as a sop to those singers who find it necessary to cup one hand over an ear when singing, to show how traditional they are.

The CD release of the album adds two tracks – “**Sir Patrick Spens**” with Sandy doing lead vocals and Richard Fariña’s “**The Quiet Joys Of Brotherhood**”. The former would appear on the subsequent album **Full House**, with Swarbrick while the latter would surface on Denny’s second solo album **Sandy**.

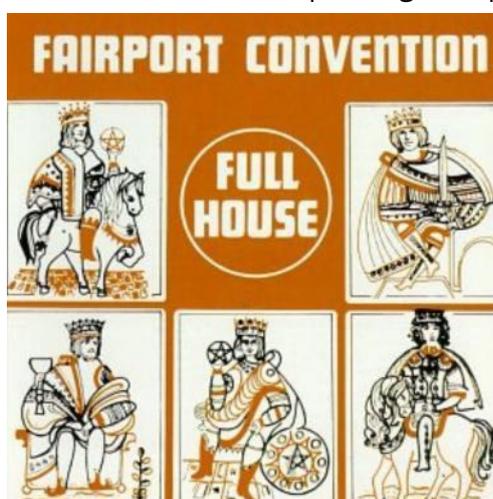
Is it a good album? Yes. It’s worth the cost for “**Tam Lin**”, “**Matty Groves**” and the jigs and reels. Does it stand the test of time? Yes, given that some of the songs had notched up a few hundred years before Fairport brought them to a wider audience. Does it deserve its reputation as the starting point for English electric folk? Probably. There were other bands sniffing at the edges of the music, but this album drew the threads together nicely. Is it a good sampling of Thompson’s electric folk? Not really. I’d cite his work on **Full House** as a better sample, especially when you include tracks like “**Poor Will and the Jolly Hangman**” and “**Now Be Thankful**”. Will I continue to listen to it? Yes. It’s the best chance to hear the musical genius of

Thompson, Denny, Swarbrick and Nichol, Hutchings and Mattacks all together.

### **Open the door Richard - a review of Full House by Fairport Convention**

*Julian Warner*

On the cover of **Full House**, the band are represented as figures from a tarot deck. Richard Thompson is mounted, like the Knight of Cups but crowned like the King of Cups. Perhaps there was a joke going on with the Cups thing. The period of recording **Full**



**House** (1970) is well recorded in Thompson’s **Beeswing** biography. Simon Nicol provides plenty of detail about the album in the sleeve notes – written for the CD version in 2001. This version of the band had just lost Sandy Denny and founder Ashley Hutchings. The previous **Liege & Lief** album had set the path for using Traditional, arranged by songs. Gone were the covers of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell

and other U.S.-based folk luminaries. For Full House there was an even split between Trad material and the new Dave Swarbrick and Richard Thompson songwriting team.

Music for the songs was recorded in Chelsea in England but the vocals were recorded in the U.S. alongside some live dates. A live album from L.A. in 1970 has appeared under the name **House Full** – with several of the tracks from Full House. The music follows the template set by **Liege & Lief** with Dave Swarbrick’s violin now in full evidence. There appears to have been a bit of diffidence over who was now ‘the singer’ with band members taking on individual songs without sounding as if they are taking charge of the group. This gives more of a folk group feel to the album with more accent on ‘authenticity’ rather than operatic qualities of singing (which suits me just fine!).

The first track, by Swarbrick and Thompson, is “**Walk Awhile**”, which is as close to pop

music as they could get but still in a folk style. “Sloth” (originally “Slowth” apparently) is also by the two and became a concert favourite, often lengthened out considerably for guitar workouts. What did not appear on the original album was “Poor Will and the Jolly Hangman”, as decided by Richard Thompson, and a single, “Now Be Thankful” which was possibly one of their best songs from the period. The wisdom of those decisions can be debated but thanks to the wonders of re-issued music on CD, we get to hear it all, along with the lengthily titled B-side from the “Now Be Thankful” single.

It would have been good to hear more from this version of the band but Richard had other ideas and would thereafter only join as a guest. Luckily there are quite a few live recordings from this period. If Discogs.com is to be believed (and why not?), there are up to 60 different iterations of this album on multiple formats in different countries. This speaks for the enduring popularity of a band who were not reliant on being number one in the charts. Richard Thompson claims that Fairport Convention invented folk rock, or at least a British version of it. Once the definitive statement of *Full House* was made, Richard opened other doors to other opportunities. The rest of the band, in multifarious incarnations thereof, jiggled on without him.

### Richard Thompson's *Henry the Human Fly*

Lucy Sussex

*Henry the Human Fly* I first encountered thanks to a review in that much-lamented radical rag, the *Nation Review*. Now most recall it for scurrilous political articles, and early Leunig. It also had some ace music reviewing, giving space to non-mainstream material. One praised album was Robert Wyatt's *Rock Bottom*, which like *Henry*, has aged remarkably well.

Now I am properly suspicious of a rave review, as my tastes are unpredictable. As a student, I had little dosh to spend on a record I had not heard. I knew Fairport, and had even seen a lineup sans the Big Stars, Thompson and the divine Denny, at Robert Blackwood Hall, Monash. That same year, same venue, I also saw the Stranglers. Thompson and Hugh Cornwell were once in the same band, Emil and the Detectives, as teenagers—a very unlikely combo.

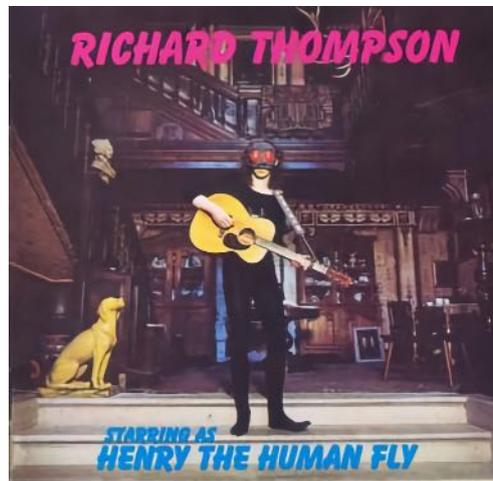
I bought the album, and continue to play it.

Never have I found an album of Thompson's to compare, good though he is, and IMHO some of his best songs—“Now be Thankful”, “End of the Rainbow”—are not on *Henry*. Yet there is not a dud on the album.

Small wonder: Thompson had basically spent a year as a jobbing muso, refining songs he considered too ‘weird’ for Fairport. It shows not least in the skill

and sophistication of the arrangements. His library of influences ranged from the avante-garde to jazz, and he just about used all of them here. XTC called an album *Drums and Wires*; *Henry* could have been called *Drones and Modes*.

As it was Thompson's first solo album, he began with a statement of intent: “Roll Over Vaughan Williams”, which must have had the record company perplexed. Nothing to do with Chuck Berry's merry iconoclasm: Thompson is not-so-modestly announcing himself as competition for Williams re the British Folk heritage. It starts with a circular, crystalline riff that owes nothing to Berry, more Scots bagpipe music. An accordion drone reappears, distorted. Thompson admits in *Beeswing* he needed more voice training, but is effective here, with vibrato, clear diction and phrasing. What he can't express vocally goes into the guitar work. Also the lyrics:



But don't expect the words to ring  
Too sweetly on the ear,

he warns. The chorus follows: 'Live in Fear'.

Dark subjects feature, as Thompson had been reading Thomas Hardy. Hence working-class misery galore: tinkers, travellers, tramps and ditchers. And yet the guitar playing is singularly joyous. It draws on various influences, some old, like the Berry-style riffs in "**The Angels Stole my Racehorse Away**", one of the great song titles. "**Wheely Down**" begins and ends with random guitar notes produced via milk-bottle, a new trick borrowed from David Bedford. Oddest piece is "**Mary and Joseph**", imagining the Bible in contemporary terms, to the accompaniment of a trad jazz band. It shouldn't work, but it does.

**Henry** most resembles is a contemporary album Thompson also played on: Lal and Mike Waterson's **Bright Phoebus**, full of original—and sometimes very strange—songs in the folk tradition. The voices dominate on **Phoebus**, particularly eerie harmonies; **Henry** shines most in the guitar work.

I once saw Thompson in Melbourne city, unmistakable in his beret and black outfit, tremendously tall, very rock and roll. He was in the company of what were likely relatives and I didn't disturb his privacy. But if I was to go all fangirl, I would thank him for **Henry**. That might annoy him: no creative person likes to consider their best creative work behind them, and he was only 23 at the time.

One final comment. The review that alerted me to the album was headed: **His bitter thoughts so sweetly fly**. Apt, that.

## **From a Crowded Room to the Bright Lights**

Perry Middlemiss

A Reaction to **I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight** by Richard and Linda Thompson (1974)

10 songs. 36 minutes and 55 seconds. It seems hard to reconcile now, having to get up after only 18 minutes or so to change the vinyl record: put the record on the turntable, make a cup of coffee, settle into the armchair, flip the record cover over a few times, get started on the liner notes, and then suddenly it's time to turn it over. So hang on, what's that first side again?

This second solo album by Richard Thompson, and the first he recorded with his then wife Linda, was not the first record by him that I bought and listened to. That would have been

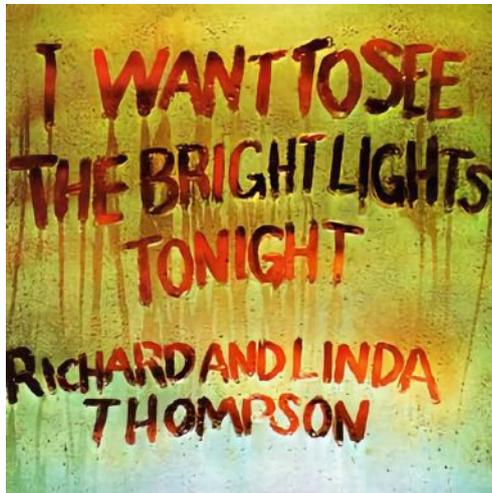
**Across a Crowded Room** in

1985, which I picked up after reading a Rolling Stone essay that listed Thompson as one of the greatest living rock guitarists.

Richard Thomson? Who? Never heard of him. Thought I'd better rectify that.

I knew of Fairport Convention, though probably had never listened closely to anything by them. So Thompson's work on **Crowded Room** was a bit of a revelation for me. And what's a young bloke to do when he makes a new discovery? Go back and buy anything else I could find by him of course. **Shoot Out the Lights** was next as that was readily available in the shops. Yep, still good, mostly. And next appears to have been **I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight**. (I can track this as I still have the vinyl recordings.)

And suddenly we seemed to have moved to a completely different musical dynamic and style. And, at the time, not one that I was overly interested in. At that time I was listening to a lot of American music, Spring-



steen mainly, and some West Coast stuff, principally Warren Zevon and Jackson Browne, with some Joni Mitchell and Neil Young thrown in for good measure. Thompson's work on **Bright Lights** didn't resonate with me. The later stuff yes, but not this. So I left it, and while I continued to buy the newer Thompson albums as they came out, I didn't go back and fill in the gaps between **Bright Lights** and **Shoot**. Just wasn't interested.

Until I came across a live recording of "Calvary Cross" sometime in the 2000s. I sort of remembered it. Though didn't know from where. Until I unearthed my old vinyl, and there it was. "I don't remember it sounding like this," I thought. And, of course, it doesn't. It's almost a completely different song. And yet listening back to the original version, and to songs like "The Great Valerio", I started to get an appreciation of what Thompson was doing and how he had developed from those original folk rock albums to what he offered in such great albums as **Mirror Blue**, **Mock Tudor** and **Sweet Warrior**.

It struck me that Thompson couldn't be "here" if he hadn't been "there" first. And with that came a greater appreciation of this uneven album, as fine as it is. I'm guessing the more I listen to it the more my appreciation will grow. And you can't ask for more from a piece of art than that I'm guessing.

### **Richard and Linda Thompson: Pour Down Like Silver (1975)**

*Bruce Gillespie*

Consider the cover of **Pour Down Like Silver**, by Richard and Linda Thompson. A full-face photo of Richard Thompson is on the front cover, and a similar photo of Linda Thompson (née Linda Peters) on the back. Both appear rather gloomy, Linda looking more distressed than Richard. Both were wearing Sufi clothing, and the record was released about the time when both dropped out of English society altogether, and were living in a Sufi retreat. Few people would have bought **Pour Down Like Silver** because of the cover art. According to Richard Thompson in his recent autobiography **Beeswing**, few people did buy the album.

So why did I buy it? I don't know. When did I buy it? I can't remember. The corridor of memory is dark. Did I hear any songs from it, or did I buy it because of a review? Did I buy the original Island LP of 1975, or the Carthage reissue of 1983?

So here is an attempt at speculative autobiography.

—

There was a little shop facing Flinders Street station, between Elizabeth and Swanston Streets. It was called Pop Inn. I discovered it after the first cohort of import record shops closed up throughout the 1970s. Gaslight remained, but Disk Shop closed, as did Archie 'n' Jugheads. It became Missing Link, and no longer stocked my kind of LPs. Professor Longhair's in Lygon Street, Carlton, became Readings Records, but it was not my first source of imported LPs until the 1980s.

Pop Inn was ruled by a big bluff bloke called John. He always sported an enigmatic smile. He never disclosed anything about himself to his customers. Every week he featured in a special bin all the new LPs from America. When I ordered something special, he got it in. My only source of LP reviews was the US edition of *Rolling Stone* magazine. Pop Inn was the only place in Melbourne that imported the US edition rather than selling the vastly inferior Australian edition. My guess is that I read a review of **Pour Down Like Silver** in *Rolling Stone*. I cannot have heard it on Melbourne radio, which broadcast nothing but the most trivial Top 40 songs. FM rock radio arrived in 1978 or 1979, but I'm pretty sure I owned **Pour Down Like Silver** by then.

Maybe I'm wandering down the wrong corridor of memory. Why did I know the name Richard Thompson? Because he was lead singer in a group called Fairport Convention. I could not have heard Fairport Convention on radio. My sister Jeanette was becoming more and more involved with Victoria's folk music movement during the late 1970s, and it's my memory that the people she met worshipped Fairport Convention. But I also knew the name of Sandy Denny as a sometime member

of the group, and I was already a great fan of her records by the time she died in 1977. She and Richard Thompson had been lead singers of Fairport Convention on some of their early LPs. But I was not a collector of Fairport Convention or British folk music during that period. The only Fairport Convention record I owned for more than 30 years was **Unhalfbricking**.

I simply don't know why I bought **Pour Down Like Silver** and I placed it on the turntable sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s. I was deeply moved by what I heard. Few LPs of the 1970s have had made such a strong immediate impression on me, apart from the early albums of Loudon Wainwright III and the McGarrigle sisters.

The lyrics of the songs made no reference to religion, despite the visual cues of the cover. Nearly all the lyrics seemed to foretell the future, relating to an event that happened after the LP was recorded. After Linda had suffered through months of deprivation and boredom and Richard had got his shot of religion, he announced to Linda that he had fallen in love with someone else, and they were splitting up. A heartrending account of this event can be found in an interview with Linda in an issue of Rolling Stone from the late seventies or early eighties. Unfortunately, my cutting of the interview disappeared into the recycle bin, along with a vast number of other newspaper and magazine cuttings, when Elaine and I moved house in 2004.

The lyrics of **Pour Down Like Silver** mostly deal with split ups or feelings of intense loneliness. Take the song "Night Comes In":

Night comes in  
Like some cool river  
How can there be  
Be another day ...  
We'll dance

dance till we fade away.

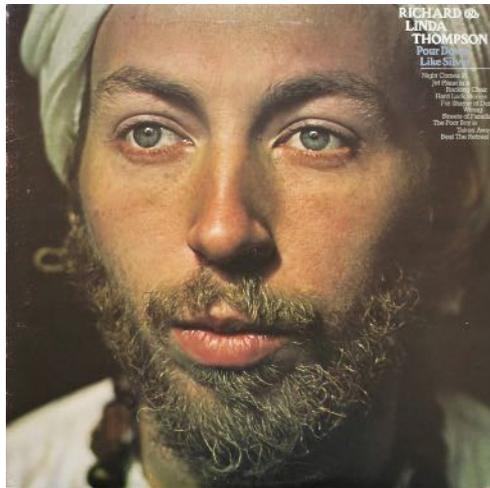
From the song "Streets of Paradise",

He's got nothing to look for  
Walking down the streets of Paradise.

That's the first song on the album. In the second song,

When I see lovers holding hands and sighing  
I hang my head for shame of doing wrong.

From the last song, one of the greatest songs of the 1970s:



I see you on the street in  
company  
Why don't you come and  
easy your mind with me  
I'm living for the night we  
steal away  
I need you at the dimming  
of the day.

These songs, drenched in  
the despair of loneliness  
and separation, were  
written by Richard  
Thompson at some time, I  
assume, well before the  
split up with Linda

Thompson. Yet most of them are sung by Linda, one of the finest folk rock vocalists of the last fifty years, and foretell her unfortunate future.

Why is this the greatest album by Richard and Linda Thompson, or either on solo LPs? I don't have the musical language to describe what I hear. The melodies of the songs are based on the oldest British folk songs. They are the kind of melodies that stretch across centuries, steeped in loss and disaster, as are the songs on the Fairport Convention albums. Yet the melancholy runs deeper than tradition – they are also romantic tunes, filled with every aspiration anyone has ever felt for a life better than the ordinary. The saddest, most beautiful tune is reserved for the song "Pour Down Like Silver", sung by Linda, which is followed without pause by a solo guitar melody "Dargai", played by Richard. Later cover versions of the song (including the incandescent version by Emmylou Harris) omit "Dargai", but it seems

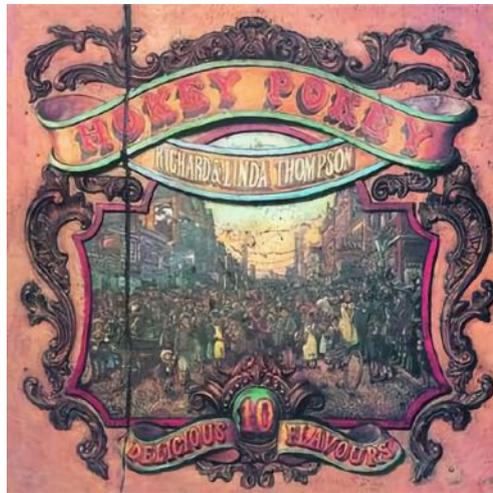
an essential part of the main song. "Dargai" is one of three instrumental solos on the album that establish Richard Thompson as one of the greatest guitarists of the folk rock era.

Do we learn much about this album from reading Thompson's recent autobiography *Beeswing*? Not really. Rock stars usually write boring autobiographies designed to hide everything you wanted to know about them and the people they have worked with, and Thompson's is no exception. He simply tells us that he was looking for something extra in his life during the Sufi conversion episode, took Linda along for the ride, and tells us that he later fell in love with somebody else, without even naming her. Did she become the second Mrs Thompson? Were there others after her? The autobiography tells us almost nothing about Thompson's inner life, although it does tell us much about the artistic aims of Fairport Convention itself. (I'd always assumed that the group had had great success during the 1970s, but this was not so. The albums did not sell; their greatest success was a Top 20 hit of their French-language version of Bob Dylan's "If You Gotta Go, Go Now".)

Why is *Pour Down Like Silver* important to me? Because, in buying all five of the Richard and Linda Thompson albums after they were re-released by Carthage Records in USA in 1980s, and every solo album by either Richard Thompson or Linda Thompson I've been able to find, I've been hoping that either would re-create the miraculous feeling I gain from listening to this album. The nearest I've found is Linda's first solo album on LP, *One Clear Moment*.

Over the years, Richard Thompson has assembled a portfolio of great songs, but never recorded the best of them on one LP or CD. All his albums contain songs that could well have been left on a tape somewhere in a cupboard. In the 1990s he did write two astonishing story-songs that he could not

have written in the 1970s: "Beeswing" and "Vincent Black Lightning". Elaine and I saw him perform them in 1997 when Elaine took me for my fiftieth birthday to the National Theatre in St Kilda to see Thompson and his good buddy Loudon Wainwright III on the same bill. Loudon was having an off night, but Richard Thompson displayed his astounding guitar and vocal skills armed only with one acoustic guitar and a microphone. Elaine hadn't been a Richard Thompson fan until that night, but these days she's quite willing to listen to each new album.



I don't have every Richard Thompson album. Many have been released on his own label, available only by mail order, and I haven't heard about them until after they've sold out. But despite never making a Top 10 album or even breaking through into the top tier of guitar stars, he keeps performing around the world. When interviewed by Brian Wise on 3RRR, he sounds just as cheeky and

sarcastic as ever. But deep in his heart he must regret that he was never able to make another album as brilliant as *Pour Down Like Silver* because he was stupid enough to fall out of love with his true muse, Linda.

### *I Fall Down to Pray*

Paul Voermans

*Hokey Pokey*, Richard and Linda Thompson (1975)

Underestimated, this album started in places similar to other early recordings, songs played live together on a happy tour. If written with *Bright Lights*, it was recorded right in the middle of the Thompsons' religious conversion, the jokey surface of some songs covering for many a more focused moral tussle with the substance abuse, violence, hedonism, and class conflict, resolved in the music's sheer live-gathered energy, like the guitar in the title track, and

even in its poignancy, some of which is also out of Sufism:

A man called Ziryab brought a science of music from Iraq, and another, ibn Bajjah, integrated it with Western styles. The different modes, arrangements and sequences of notes were designed to have a measured effect on the human heart. There are stories of music curing the insane and elevating men to spiritual heights.

(*Beeswing: Fairport, Folk Rock and Finding My Voice, 1967-75* by Richard Thompson, p.201)

You can hear bright music hall, Formby in "Smiffy's Glass Eye," but also slapstick cruelty, Marriot Edgar's Stanley Holloway monologues. (Linda's dad was a vaudevillian, her Scottish mother performed as a "Speciality Dancer".) Muslim Andalusia is present in the very same songs, not only in the Dylan-casted "Egypt Room" but also in "Old Man Inside a Young Man".

Linda Thompson has mentioned that their conversion involved suppression of even talking and laughing. This album comes from the middle of that renunciation which, one might speculate, was also a renunciation Linda's voice. The wonderfully comprehensive Dave Smith study of Thompson's songs mentions public prayer, presumably to Mecca, every couple of hours during the 12 week recording of *Hokey Pokey*.

Although some of it was written as early as 1969, underlying Thompson desolation combined with their new religious view of the sixties rock-n-roll lifestyle as grotesquery in this album, as well as the political dimension of his various characterisations, adds up to something Blakean. "Heart needs a Home":

Tongues talk fire and  
Eyes cry rivers

Even more in "Never Again" and "The Sun Never Shines on the Poor":

The urchins are writhing around in the mud  
Like eels playing tag in a barrel and the  
elderly are "hermit crabs". Thompson's old  
men wandering through these 25 year-old's  
songs are at the end of many things, perhaps

even music. He did declare his divorce from it not long after. You can just see Blake's illustration for "London" and hear his mind forg'd manacles. Music emerges into the lyrics in the form of a bleak Sally Army "ting-a-ling", robbing it, and Christianity at least, of hope, sweetness.

I scream for ice-cream. ◀◀

# Becky Chambers – a retrospective

## *by Simon Litten*



*Becky Chambers at a convention in 2017*

*Photo by Colibrette44, licensed under a Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 license.*

For an author who has only been professionally writing fiction since 2014, Becky Chambers has created quite a splash; winning a Hugo award and garnering a slew of nominations. Those nominations were for such awards as the Hugos (three others besides the win), two Locus awards, two British Science Fiction awards, two Arthur C. Clarke awards, and two Kitschies, plus four other one-off nominations. So, what has she written and why is she so lauded?

To date, Ms Chambers's output has not been extensive: five novels of which one is co-authored (with Yoon Ha Lee, S L Huang, and Rivers Solomon); two novellas; and four shorter works. And one each of the novels and novellas were published in 2021 and have yet to hit the award circuit, so to speak.

From all this her best-known works are the Wayfarer series. For these she received the 2019 Hugo award for Best Series. The series consists of the novels: ***The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*** (2015), ***A Closed and Common Orbit*** (2016), ***Record of a Spaceborn Few*** (2018), *The Galaxy, and the Ground Within* (2021); and the shorter work: "A Good Heretic", which appeared in ***Infinite Stars: Dark Frontiers*** (2019) edited by Bryan Thomas Schmidt.

The Wayfarer series is set in a universe where humanity has managed to trash planet Earth and the remainder population has moved to Mars, and from there controls the solar system. Contact has been made with intelligent life beyond the solar system, approximately 300 years ago, and, for those willing to integrate into the wider commonwealth of alien life beyond the home worlds, the wider galaxy beckons. Faster than light travel exists. And humanity is several rungs down the pecking order in this brave new future.

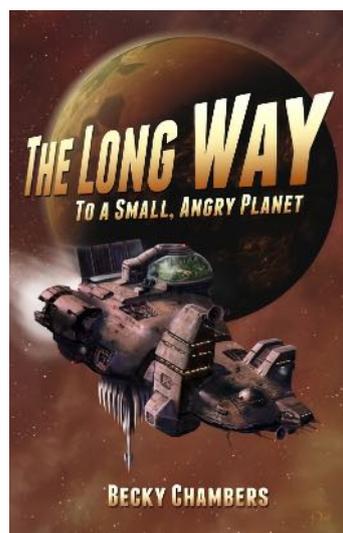
***The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*** concerns a young clerk, Rosemary Harper, from Mars who is running away from a family situation to anywhere and joins the multi-species crew of the starship *Wayfarer*. The crew are offered a very lucrative opportunity to build a hyperspace tunnel to a distant planet – the small angry planet of the title. As the journey progresses it becomes clear that the crew are hiding

secrets from each other. In the confines of a small vessel, with limitations on personal space, this could prove toxic to interpersonal relationships, but only strains established bonds. By the end of the journey all is resolved.

What could have been a twee book on love and understanding, or a gritty novel about the toxicity of the suppression of important information, instead is a pleasant and satisfying read about trust and allowing people to address their own issues.

***The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet*** was Becky Chambers's breakout work garnering several nominations. These were: the Arthur C Clarke award, Women's Prize for Fiction long list, British Fantasy award in best newcomer category, Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire (French literary award for speculative fiction) in the best foreign language category, James Tiptree Jr. award long list, and a Kitschies (British literary award) in best newcomer category. The author would possibly have picked up a John W Campbell new author ballot position too if the debacle of the Rabid and Sad Puppies wasn't infecting the Hugo awards at the time. Apart from the Kitschies, which is a 2015 nomination, all the rest are 2016 nominations. That oddity is because the novel was originally self-published in 2014 (funded by a Kickstarter campaign) and subsequently picked up by Hodder & Stoughton and Harper Voyager. I imagine both of these publishing houses have since been satisfied with the return on their investment in this promising new author.

The second novel, ***A Closed and Common Orbit***, the Wayfarer's artificial intelligence Lovelace wakes up in an android body following a total system shut-down and reboot. She has no memory of her life before the shut-down and must learn to negotiate life and the galaxy anew. As part of her growth



process, she makes friends with Pepper (an engineer/technician character introduced in the first novel) and they begin to explore the world together.

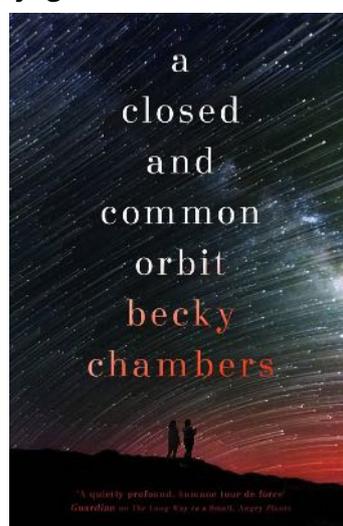
While ***A Closed and Common Orbit*** is a sequel it can also be read as a standalone novel; the actions of the first book only peripherally impact the second book. Most reviewers found this book to be stronger than its predecessor and liked the story. Indeed, with the action centred around only two characters, one of which is a naïf, in this book

compared to six in the other the narrative flow is tighter and thus more focussed. Again, any dramatic tension between the characters is washed away by Lovelace's need to understand and Pepper's insistence on aiding that understanding.

***A Closed and Common Orbit*** gained three nominations in 2017: an Arthur C Clarke award, a Hugo award in best novel category, and a British Science Fiction award in best novel category, and won the Prix Julia Verlanger (a French literary award).

The third instalment in the Wayfarer series was ***Record of a Spaceborn Few***. This is another standalone novel and deals with life aboard an exodus fleet vessel that has long since arrived at its destination. The exodus fleet vessels were generation ships, taking hundreds of years to reach their destinations.

Due to this isolation the vessels have developed their own culture distinct from that portion of humanity that travelled to the stars with the aid of alien technology. The story presented is a mosaic of viewpoints; lingering long enough to get a slice of culture but not long enough to identify with any one character. I found this to be the blandest of the Wayfarer novels and thought it could best be described as: a day in the life of a spaceship. In previous instalments dramatic tension was

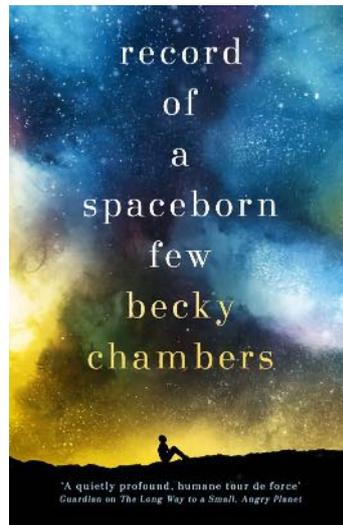


resolved by external events or another character suffering its own crisis. In **Record of a Spaceborn Few** dramatic tension is left begging by the wayside. For example, one character undertakes a risky and possibly illegal activity for a minor villain (not met in the story) and dies in suspicious circumstances. That death is noticed but not investigated or even remarked on by the residents of the ship, however, the recycling of the corpse is shown as a great cultural event. I was left wondering why the character had been introduced as its sole narrative purpose was to provide a cadaver.

**Record of a Spaceborn Few** gained three best novel nominations: the Hugo awards, Locus Award in the science fiction category, and a Kitschies. The *Wayfarer* series won the 2019 Hugo award for best series.

2019 saw the publication of the short piece "A Good Heretic", also set in the *Wayfarer* universe. The story concerns a race of aliens who deliberately infect themselves with viruses that give enhanced cognitive ability in exchange for shorter lives. The increased mathematical ability makes space travel possible. One alien refuses to be infected and feels incredibly lonely as a result. Unfortunately, this story was not deemed good enough to appear in any of the year's best anthologies separately edited by Neil Clarke, Jonathan Strahan, Gardner Dozois and Rich Horton, and the volume jointly edited by John Joseph Adams and Carmen Maria Machado. Nor did the story make the Locus readers' poll. A fate shared by Chambers' other three short works.

A fourth *Wayfarer* novel, **The Galaxy, and the Ground Within** (2021), has appeared this year but has yet to make my reading list. This is another standalone story. The publisher's blurb



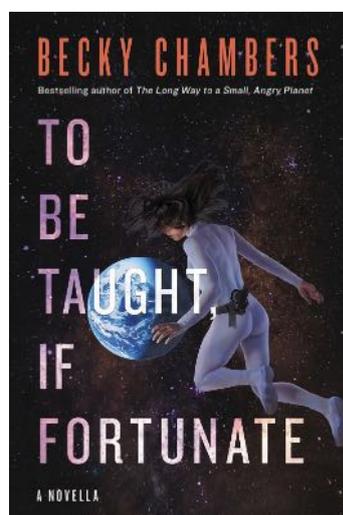
suggests character conflict will again be missing in action.

In a departure from the *Wayfarer* series, 2019 also saw the publication of the novella **To Be Taught, if Fortunate**. This is set in the twenty-second century and is about four astronauts who are tasked with investigating four potentially habitable worlds over a fifty-five year period (suspended animation is employed). The story is told in four parts as each world is visited. There is also a developing subplot regarding social-political attitudes back on Earth regarding the exploration programme and the returning astronauts. From fifteen lightyears away it seems that Earth has become dangerously antagonistic to the whole programme. So, at the end of their tour the crew of the exploration vessel decide to wait for a signal from Earth that they should return rather than risk probable death by returning now.

This was another tale where dramatic tension between characters was cast aside as not suiting the story the author wanted to write. In a significant scene after visiting the third planet on their itinerary one of the crew has to kill a life form that has accidentally boarded the ship. The crew member finds the killing very traumatic, which induces a personality change in the crew member. While shown in the narrative this personality shift is brushed aside by the other crew, who until now have been in each other's pockets, and left for nothing in the ongoing crew dynamic. The realism of the world of the story suddenly became that much less.

**To Be Taught, if Fortunate** was nominated for three awards in 2020: Locus and Hugo awards for best novella; and the British Science Fiction award for shorter fiction.

Ms Chambers has had another novella published in 2021, **A Psalm for the Wild-Built**. This



has yet to make my reading list but the publisher's blurb strongly suggests that dramatic tension won't be a feature of the story. There is to be a sequel, ***A Prayer for the Crown-Shy***, scheduled for 2022.

I have mixed views about Becky Chambers' writing. Her first two novels were vividly imagined, character driven pieces. The characters changed as the story unfolded – and at no time were they cartoons or cyphers. All her novels and novellas have been described as hopeful or optimistic – why those terms are used by reviewers escapes me unless they were reaching for something positive to say about novels that didn't use violence as the means of communication between the protagonists.

However, as an author she appears to have a deep-seated aversion to writing about interpersonal conflict, which means that storylines that could (and probably should) develop from that conflict never happen. For this reader that means her stories are all sugar and no salt. ◀◀

### ***The Library***

**by Alice Gore-Jones**

Set in the mellow silence of the room  
 Great carven bookshelves laden with grave books,  
 Dim faded rugs, spoils of an ancient loom,  
 Deep cushioned chairs, and dreamy inglenooks.  
 The atmosphere is fragrant with a scent  
 Where bowls of roses spill their rich perfume.  
 While to the whole austerity is lent  
 By a white statue shining through the gloom.  
 A garden slumbers where the sunlight gleams,  
 A bee is humming on the drowsy air:  
 This is the home of peace – and yet there seems  
 A subtle restless stirring everywhere.  
 High carven book-shelves laden with grave works  
 Of stern philosophy and staid desire:  
 Beneath some cover young Adventure lurks;  
 Romance is smiling with her lips of fire.  
 The sunlight weaves strange patterns on the floor.  
 The air grows tremulous with muffled strife.  
 If I but turned a leaf, through its white door  
 A thousand shining ghosts would leap to life.

*First published in The Bulletin, 1 January 1920*

# Alien Contacts

## The Alien Review Letter Column



### Regarding *THE ALIEN REVIEW 1*

David M. Shea –17 June 2021

William Breiding, a fan in Arizona USA, printed out a copy of *Alien Review #1* and sent it on to me. I am notorious for complaining that SF has almost entirely disappeared from fandom.

I am not familiar with James Bradley or his work, but the concept of genetic re-making unknown/extinct species is familiar. The idea was used in Janet Kagan's *Mirabile* (1991), including a specific reference to the Tasmanian wolf. Rediscovering an unknown hominid species was the theme of Roger MacBride Allen's *Orphan of Creation* (1988). You could make a case for McCaffrey's dragons, see *Dragonsdawn* (1988). I don't know if any of them are available in Australia. As for the Jurassic Park movies, I've given up on them. At some point you just have to start being on the side of the dinosaurs.

[*TAR*: It is a familiar trope, but utilising it for a close human relative such as the Neanderthal sets it apart from the others. It brings such more human element into the story. It is also good to see here that a new "creature" is created which has no intention of having us for breakfast. I'm with you on the side of the dinosaurs in the Jurassic Park movies.]

Cy Chauvin – 24 September 2021

I happened upon *TAR #1* on e-fanzines by accident while looking for something else, downloaded it, then slowly read it. You may be happy to know that you convinced me to read Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*. Renee Sieber had also mentioned using it as a text in her geography course at McGill University, and then I saw it at the library; the sheer bulk of it put me off. I also had been unable to read *Red Mars*, despite being fascinated by the idea of terraforming Mars.

What enticed me to try it was your comment that this Robinson novel was constructed like *Stand on*

**Zanzibar**, with invented non-fiction chunks inter-spliced into the main story. I've read to page 535 so far, and I have multiple opinions on it. It's an incredibly virtuous novel, to use the current term, and I do sincerely hope that it influences many people to take individual and collective action on climate change. I thought about the 2,000 watt challenge that some of the Swiss were taking in the novel, and tried to figure out how that applied to me (but my electrical bill is figured in kilowatt hours, and how does that convert?). (My house is already rated "super energy efficient" by the power company compared to similar houses in my neighborhood, but I suspect the neighbors are being wasteful.)

However, **The Ministry for the Future** is rather lacking in a storyline, and is even worse in terms of characters. Frank May is interesting, and the story starts dramatically, but it soon dissipates into nothing. Mary Murphy is a bland, boring best-seller type. Will anyone want to read this novel in five years? Or re-read it?

It's the common dilemma in virtuous sf: shouldn't we try to change the world, rather than (inner) ourselves?

[*TAR*: I found **The Ministry of the Future** remarkably easy to read, though rather harrowing in places. Yes, it is long but Robinson has a lot of ground to cover. Frank May's character probably undergoes the biggest change in the book, which is hardly surprising given the traumatic experience he undergoes in the first chapter. But I think some readers also disregard the changes in the character of Mary Murphy; they are subtle but important and, in a number of ways, reflect the changing attitudes to climate change within the novel.]

Irwin Hirsh needn't be defensive about taking a limited view of fanzines: I've found over the years that it's more enjoyable to participate in just two or three fanzines at a time, or one apa, rather than being an omnifan, playing the field. I like his choice of DUFF / TAFF trip reports, too, since those special one-shot fanzines are among my favorites. I just recently re-read Leigh Edmonds' *Emu Tracks*

and quite enjoyed it, as well as *Bruce's Adventures Bay-Side*. But Irwin seems to pose the question of what makes a good trip report. Does it matter who we know, or who they write about? I don't think it should, unless the writer believes we know them, and doesn't bother to describe them. Irwin thinks John Coxon's report leaves out a lot of necessary details. In contrast, I've never met Leigh Edmonds in person, but he wrote humorously and well about the people he saw (many of whom, even though they are in the USA, I don't see often or at all, either).

[*TAR*: I'm not fussed if a fan fund winner writes about people I don't know: in fact, I assume they will do exactly that. I took the view from Irwin's piece that he felt that the writer was assuming some sort of pre-existing knowledge of the people mentioned which rather took away some of the fun of the reports for a casual reader.]

I recently re-read a short trip report Linda Blanchard wrote about her first visit to England, to meet Dave Bridges, who became her husband, and she wrote so beautifully and funnily about people there it was like reading a novel. What especially appealed to me were the tiny little cultural differences between countries that you don't see until you're there. I remember being quite thrown by needing to bring your own washcloth to hotels and B&Bs in the UK. Instead of my washcloth, I had packed Ore cookies, a certain brand of biscuits that an American immigrant to the UK was craving.

[*TAR*: Ah, the fun of travel! We still take our own soap with us overseas as we find the usual hotel supply next to useless.]

David Grigg's review of **Piranesi** is wonderful. He puts in details about the novel that I never noticed, and the links to poetry he suggests are beautiful. I reviewed the book myself, and I'm envious. I think he pinpoints the real heart of the novel, when he quotes Susanna Clarke talking about how the Ancients had a different way of relating to the world, they experienced it as something that interacted with them, and that was how *Piranesi* thought. I also noticed that Clarke is not the first one to connect the artist

*Piranesi* to fantasy and science fiction – Brian Aldiss did in his book **Science Fiction Art** (the essay was reprinted in one of his later collections). I also have a strong desire to re-read the novel, although I'm going to wait a while.

[TAR: As I get older in life and nearer to the end of my reading capacity – still some ways off as yet – I think there will be fewer and fewer books that I would consider re-reading. However, *Piranesi* would be one of them. I'm fairly certain that David Grigg has read it at least twice do far. Thrice? Quite possibly.]

### Regarding **THE ALIEN REVIEW 2**

#### Graham Peters – 21 August 2021

Your mention of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" brought me back to a recurring "what if..." that I have toyed with over the years. A common theme is the scapegoat being swept up and saved (by dragon, guardian or whatever) but the alternative is coming prepared to wreak revenge if one is chosen. It is more appealing from inherent strengths than concealed weapon or magical / miraculous intervention. Candidate stories?

[TAR: None spring to mind.]

#### Leigh Edmonds – 23 August 2021

Your editorial comment about WorldCon rules introduced me to an unknown world, so far as I am concerned anyhow. I'm sure that the WorldCon has rules so that things run properly and legally, but also because a certain percentage of the fannish world entertain themselves with constitutions and the like. They are welcome to them. When they start introducing enforceable rules to the world of fanzine publication I will probably lose interest in that too, just as I did with being involved with WorldCons as I became many decades ago.

[TAR: The major difference between the fannish activities of running conventions and producing fanzines, it seems to me, is that the convention side of things became so big and complicated that it began to resemble running a small business. This is

certainly true of Worldcons where the budget is rather huge. As a result convention runners have to abide by local government commercial and consumer laws, along with a whole range of other regulations covering such areas as Occupational Health and Safety, Harassment and Vilification regulations and the like. In such an environment a constitution and specific rules are not only a necessity under the law but also act to protect the committee and attendees. And if you have rules then you really need to adhere to them. That didn't happen in the case I talked about.]

I liked the short Marc Ortlieb bio which echoes my own situation vis-a-vis science fiction but, whereas Marc has written 'after 1999', I'd have to write 'after 1988' which is when I embarked on my PhD. And, as all of those who have undergone that particular form of self flagellation know, that drives all kinds of innocent diversions from one's mind. The result is that while I read much of the rest of the issue (as I do with *SFC*) I feel quite unqualified to make any useful comment. I could, of course, make some kind of comment but whether it would be useful, that's a different matter.

I do, however, recall reading Asimov's "Nightfall" many years since. I came to it with its high reputation sometime in the 1970s and my response was one of disappointment. That's probably why I remember reading it out of the thousands of stories I must have read. Its reputation, having preceded it, was greater than the story itself. It seemed to me that Asimov had set out to make a point and the whole of the story was shaped (or misshaped) to make that point. So when we got to the end of the story and everyone goes mad I couldn't see it. I mean, what percentage of the world pays that much attention to what is going on around them so that they would notice whether or not it was day or night, and I don't know what percentage of folks look up into the sky enough that they would be shocked to the point of insanity to suddenly see lots of points of light in it. Sure, it would be a shock to those who paid any attention to such things, but I couldn't see a whole world of people going mad simply

because there were stars in the sky. Having recently looked again at the BBC production of *The Day of the Triffids* I will agree that a catastrophic event could (and probably will) lead to the collapse of civilization as we know it, but it seems unlikely to me that the collapse would be so great as to lead to an almost complete social and cultural amnesia.

Reading your commentators on the story made me wonder if setting the story in a contemporary United States setting with more or less normal conditions for that era hid a more fundamental difference between the people in that story and the people reading that issue of *Astounding*. If the people in that story all shared a similar brain chemistry that triggered insanity in the absence of light, well, perhaps. That, however, would have not been the point of Asimov's story. I think that Nick Price came closest to the mark when he concluded that "Nightfall" is about the nature of reality, with the proviso that everyone on that planet would have had to share the same reality to all go mad as a result of the lack of sunlight. And if the current state of our world is anything to go by, there is little shared reality going on here and now.

[*TAR*: I find it interesting that we can still discuss this story after all these years, and apply it to the current world situation. It is one of Asimov's better stories, yet, when you break it down, it really doesn't make a lot of logical sense. Still, I think the idea of having a number of different reviewers all looking at the one story from their divergent points-of-view was an interesting exercise. One I hope to repeat in future issues.]

The John Bangsund reprint was a delight. He captured beautifully the way in which governments like to report on themselves with just the right sense of the ridiculous and irony. I imagine that when he wrote that John was still under the influence of his time spent in Canberra working for the AGPS where he had read millions of words couched in exactly the modes of expression that he mimicked here. It almost made me go all weak at the knees with nostalgia for my own time spent in Canberra writing that kind of stuff.

[*TAR*: Nothing, absolutely nothing, makes me in any way nostalgic for the time I spent in the Public Service in Canberra. Actually, I could say that about a lot of my working life. But John's piece certainly captures that sense of the ridiculous that pervades the place.]

### Mark Olson – 26 August 2021

Regarding the nomination of Natalie Luhrs blog post. I also was appalled: by the post, by the people who nominated it, and by the Discon III committee's handling of it. But I disagree that the Hugo Subcommittee should have ruled it off the ballot. Technically, the Hugo rules are set by the WSFS Constitution and Discon III's code of conduct can not alter them. Pragmatically, I don't want to see Hugo subcommittees taking on a role as arbiter of morals – the subcommittee has enough trouble just administering the Hugos. Nonetheless, the blog post is clearly a violation of the CoC. What to do?

Actually, it's pretty easy: apply the Code of Conduct! The author of the post is plainly guilty of a violation and that needs to be dealt with according to the rules that the committee has set up. The people who nominated it are also guilty, though it's likely that they can be identified unless they reveal themselves. If they do, the CoC process needs to be applied.

[*TAR*: I'm of the view that the Code of Conduct is an overarching policy that must be adhered to by all committees and sub-committees associated with the convention. Otherwise, what's the point in having one in the first place? You can't apply the Code to some sub-committees and not others. Vincent Docherty (below) has a possible solution.]

Your point about the irrevocable assignment of powers to the Hugo Subcommittee sounds like you've heard one of the myths. Historically, the Hugos were administered by the Worldcon committee just like everything else. But when members of the committee got nominated, Concerns Were Raised and, after "Just trust us" didn't win favor, the WSFS Business Meeting made the rule that no

member of the Worldcon committee may be nominated for a Hugo unless it delegates administration to the Hugo subcommittee whose decisions are irrevocable by the Worldcon Committee.

As you note, that sets up an apparent tension. But it's not actually there. First of all, the Worldcon committee can administer the Hugos directly if it is willing to give up the right of committee members to be nominated. (N.B., no one knows who is a "committee member" under the rule. It certainly does include the decision-makers and it certainly does not include gophers, but there are a lot of people in the middle, too.) The right of non-members of the Hugo subcommittee to be nominated is a trade-off with the Hugo subcommittee's independence.

Secondly, while the Worldcon committee can't change the Hugo subcommittee's rulings, it can change its *membership* at will, just like it can any other part of the convention. The power to appoint and to fire is intrinsic to the convention's management and, while WSFS could remove that power, it can only remove explicitly – and this did not happen and was never written. I've heard a few people argue otherwise, but this is pure rules-lawyering to handwave their preference into law. Big changes are not hidden in obscure wording, or, as an American jurist wrote, "Congress does not hide elephants in mouseholes." Anyone who really believed that the Worldcon committee lost all power over the Hugo subcommittee once it was appointed would also have to assume that the Hugo Subcommittee could make its own schedule and extract arbitrary sums of money from the con treasury and quit while appointing its own, random successors. None of these have ever been allowed and none are at all reasonable. What you're hearing is hot air from people for whom a book of rules is all there is to life.

Bottom line: A Hugo Subcommittee isn't a sacred thing: it's merely a device to put enough distance between the Hugos and the Worldcon committee to satisfy fandom that there is no undue influence if a Worldcon committee member is nominated. If it misbehaves, you fire it and appoint a new one.

(And, yes, done badly this could hurt the Hugos and hurt the Worldcon. You can't legislate competence.)

[*TAR*: If we are arguing merely about the form of the words around the appointment of a Hugo sub-committee then maybe the wording needs strengthening a little. I'm not advocating a wholesale rewrite, merely an attempt to make it a little more clear. In all forms of human endeavour the real world will come up with exceptions that are hard to forecast. When they do arrive, such as in this case, we need to be able to respond and act accordingly. Yes, we will lag behind such instances, but that is the nature of all laws and real-world changes. We just need to be willing to respond in a responsible manner.]

As far as the fear of lawsuit goes, that's a valid fear that I share. I don't know Australian law, but I doubt that it's hugely different from US law in this. The bottom line is that there are a number of stupid things that Worldcon committees have chosen to do which left them wide open to being sued. My advice is (a) Don't do those stupid things and, (b) if you must, don't talk about it. (I also think I'd look very closely at getting Director's insurance these days. If I were fool enough to take a leadership position these days, that is.)

You'd think that half of fandom has joined the Futurians!

(Do you think that I find the decline of the Hugos annoying? Oh. It's that obvious, is it?)

[*TAR*: This "decline" has been duly noted in this part of the world as well.]

The series of articles on "Nightfall" was excellent. They helped me to resolve a nagging issue I've had with Asimov's writing ever since I first read his stories in my teens: (1) "Nightfall" is a *really* good piece of SF and (2) It's not a particularly good piece of writing. (Fifty years ago I placed #1 firmly above #2. Today? I still do, but I'll admit to now and then wishing for better writing...) I was taken by Nick Price's observation that 'Today, multi-volume works of fiction make

great world building efforts to set stories that, in the end, make no greater points than works written the time that "Nightfall" was crafted.' Looking back on Asimov's best-known works, they manage amazing things in spare, fairly bland prose. (I wonder if fancier writing – e.g., characterization, sub-plots, a few hundred extra pages of text – would actually improve them?)

[*TAR*: I wouldn't want to advocate the "bloat" we see in a lot of sf and fantasy these days as the best approach to improving a piece of work. In this story it appears that the author has been able to cover the shallowness of the story's concept by his use of sf writing techniques to create that "sensawunder" for which he was known. I'm sure that there are a number of authors who could have achieved the same effect, with better writing, in the same length. Heinlein, maybe? But all the other ones I think of came along later.]

### John Hertz – 10 September 2021

**World of Ptavvs** I know in its novel-length form. I agree with "complex", "fast-moving", "simply written". Larry Niven's spare style, his ability to do much with little, are in top form. "Interactions between the characters" – that is this book. Kzanol, Greenberg, their combination–Greenberg's wife Judy–Lucas Garner of the United Nations–Lit Shaeffer of the Asteroid Belt–Charley the dolphin–you could say the book is about interaction between Kzanol and Greenberg. And comedy. Niven is a comedian.

I'd speak in favor of "Becalmed in Hell, "One Face", and "Wrong-Way Street", but I've said enough about Niven for one letter.

[*TAR*: The more I read of Niven from that time I've come to see him as one of the bridging authors between the old Campbell-style of hard science and the newer character-driven works of the New Wave.]

An appreciation of R. A. Lafferty's short fiction is indeed worth gaining. I have this notion that anyone who read attentively

enough to get the juice in Niven will get Lafferty. He doesn't write simply, no sir. Another comedian, different wavelength.

For the attentive reader depths too appear in Zenna Henderson's work. Her immediate appeal for some can be distracting. So can Harlan Ellison's. If arguing what people are not weren't so dangerous I'd say Henderson is (literary present tense) not saccharine and Ellison is not a loudmouth. Instead, I propose, each offers a good occasion for A. J. Budrys' "Always ask, why are they telling us this?"

[*TAR*: Which is a question I keep asking myself when reading Ellison, and mostly can't find a decent answer. I agree that Lafferty and Henderson are both worth following up. And, as you imply, no-one wrote like Lafferty, ever. His stuff doesn't always work but when it does it is wonderful, and unique.]

Brother Griggs has written 3,500 words about Shirley Jackson without mentioning "One Ordinary day, with Peanuts". Fortunately it makes a cameo appearance. He says her writing is simple and pellucid, but ("but"??) very powerful, and leads you into strange places.

[*David Grigg*: Well, I said up front that I was new to Jackson's work, so it's not surprising that I hadn't then read *all* of her short stories. I agree that "One Ordinary day, with Peanuts" is a remarkable story. I might come back to talking about Jackson in *TAR* once I've read all her earlier novels and her other short stories.]

### David M. Shea – 27 September 2021

I like seeing a fanzine that actually discusses SF; there are few in this country [USA]. It does seem as if our approaches to writing about SF are different. Is it unfair to say that your approach is analytical, and mine is more thematic? [*TAR*: No, that seems like a fair description – of me at least.] It would not occur to me to break down the short sf of 1965. It would occur to me to write five pages plus footnotes on the dietary practices of the atevi in C. J. Cherryh's "Foreigner" series.

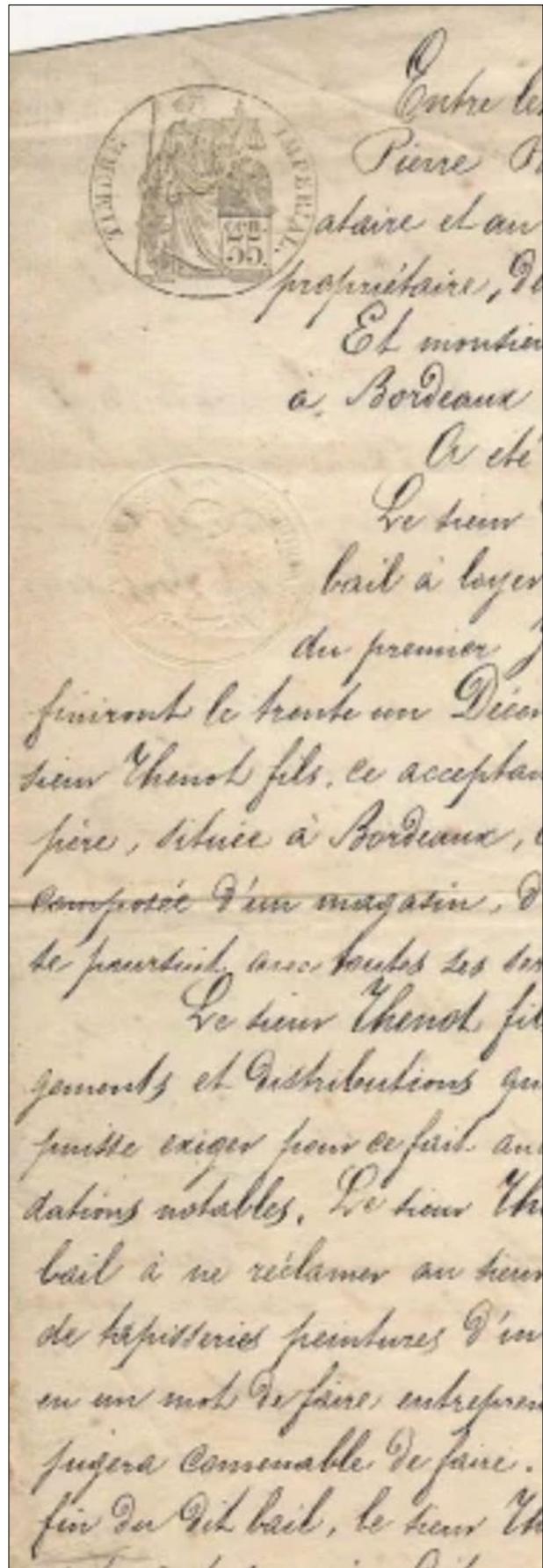
Though I am more a reader of novels, once I was involved in a discussion about naming one's favorite SF short fiction. I said I could not choose just one, but suggested several: Roger Zelazny, "A Rose for Ecclesiastes"; Arthur C. Clarke, "The Star"; John Varley, "Bagatelle"; Norman Spinrad, "Carcinoma Angel". I'm pretty sure I mentioned one by Harlan Ellison, it might have been "Pretty Maggie Moneyeyes". I recall citing a story by Samuel R. Delany but at this late date I don't remember which one. For a more upbeat note, Zenna Henderson, "The Closest School". Connie Willis, "Daisy, in the Sun"?

In a very different context, I once wrote about Delany's early novels – ***Nova***, ***Babel-17***, ***The Einstein Intersection*** – that they stood up pretty well and were still very readable.

[TAR: That they are. Delany is almost a new discovery for me this past year or so. I read some of his work back in the 1970s but didn't take to it. Going back with him to the start of his publishing career—as I appear to have inadvertently done recently—I find myself have a much greater appreciation of his work, and his style. It doesn't always work for me, though enough of it does for me to realise he's a major sfnal author that I've neglected over these past years.]

### ***We Also Heard From:***

Chong; Rob Gerrard; Marc Ortlieb; Bruce Gillespie; Werner Koopmann; William Breiding; Carey Handfield; Murray MacLachlan; Rob Jackson; Vincent Docherty ("I was also concerned about the Luhrs Related work and think the admins could have done more about it. As a minimum they could have chosen to use the second half of the title, just as they chose to use the alternate title of the 'Helicopter' story."); and Jerry Kaufman—thanks to everyone.◀◀



# Final Thoughts

## *by Perry Middlemiss*

This issue took a lot longer to get together than I had originally thought. The initial plan was for it to have been made available some time in late 2021, which then moved to early 2022, and now, here we are in March. The delays were caused by a number of events, most of which you could list under the general title of "Life": family events; Christmas/New Year celebrations; birthdays; holidays away from home. The usual list of excuses.

But, anyway, we're here now, and I hope you enjoyed the issue.

Looking forward to issue 4, our major piece will be a critique of the work of American sf&f writer Fritz Leiber, with an overview of his career and a number of reviews by various writers of his major works - award winners and favourite stories. Leiber was one of the few writers in the genre who could be viewed as being very successful in all of the science fiction, heroic fantasy, and horror genres.

In addition we'll have the usual book and shorter fiction reviews and a few other items of interest I'm attempting to get together.

Hopefully we won't be away so long this time. ■

**-Perry**

# Notes on Contributors

**Don Ashby** – is an ex-Melbourne sf fan who now lives in the remote eastern Victorian town of Mallacoota. He played a major role in the community recovery, in that area, after the devastating bushfires of late 2019.

**Claire Brialey** – Claire Brialey is a British SF fan and former civil servant whose tendency to agree to another little project is continually impacting on her reading time.

**Bruce Gillespie** – Bruce Gillespie is involuntarily retired from a poorly paid 'career' as an editor, indexer and typesetter. What he has really doing for the hell of it for more than 50 years is writing and publishing SF fanzines, including *SF Commentary* (1969 until now), *The Metaphysical Review* (1984–1998), and *Steam Engine Time* (2000–2013). For his efforts he has been given a number of Lifetime Achievement Awards, a paid trip to USA in 2005, a position as Fan Guest of Honour at Aussiecon 3 in Melbourne, three Hugo Award nominations, and many Ditmar Awards. All these attempts to make him *stop publishing* have failed so far.

**David Grigg** – is a retired software developer who lives in Melbourne, Australia. He is a long-time science fiction fan and sometime author, who was Chairman of the World Science Fiction Convention in 1985. In recent years he has collaborated with Perry Middlemiss to produce a fortnightly podcast called *Two Chairs Talking*, in which they discuss books, movies, science fiction fandom and many other topics. He also publishes two regular email newsletters on Substack: *Through the Biblioscope* which covers books and reading; and *A Flash in the Pan*, in which he publishes short fiction.

**Simon Litten** – is a semi-retired accountant and occasional grouch, who has too much time on his hands and which he fills by reading, watching TV and brewing and drinking.

**Perry Middlemiss** – once a convention runner and now a fanzine enthusiast, he wonders at times which is the more time-consuming of the two. He is currently trying to stop coming up with new ideas for yet more fanzines, though he seems not to be succeeding.

**Joseph Nicholas** – Joseph Nicholas has been active in fandom (on and off) since 1975 and was the winner of the first southbound GUFF race in 1981, where he met and married Judith Hanna (the recently deceased and irreplaceable love of his life). He has published innumerable fanzines, attended innumerable conventions, travelled to innumerable foreign cities, and for the past quarter-century has allowed gardening to dominate his life.

**Marc Ortlieb** – claims that he doesn't read science fiction. This is only true if you complete the sentence with the clause "written after 1999."

**Nick Price** – is undergoing self-administered adult onset dementia test by trying to read the recently published final Expanse novel without revising what happened in the previous ones. Amos? Holden?

**Lucy Sussex** is a writer/researcher with a fondness for arcana.

**Paul Voermans** – Paul Voermans was a butler, IT agitator, and punk physical actor in puppet booth and TV and film and various other spots. He's the author of the *Donohoe Counterfactuals*, of which *The White Library* is the latest. He lives down the country.

**Julian Warner** – Julian Warner is a sometime Science Fiction fan and aspiring *bon vivant* who spends his working hours suppressing creativity and the use of foreign words. He has a taste for music which is not easily explained.

