

# SF Commentary 106

May 2021

80 pages

## *A Tribute to Yvonne Rousseau (1945–2021)*

**Bruce Gillespie**

with help from **Vida Weiss**, **Elaine Cochrane**, and **Dave Langford**  
plus **Yvonne**'s own bibliography and the story of how she met everybody

*Perry Middlemiss*

The Hugo Awards of 1961

*Andrew Darlington*

Early John Brunner

*Jennifer Bryce's*

Ten best novels of 2020

*Tony Thomas and Jennifer Bryce*

The Booker Awards of 2020

*Plus letters and comments from 40 friends*



Elaine Cochrane: 'Yvonne Rousseau, 1987'.

# SF COMMENTARY 106

May 2021

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SF COMMENTARY No. 106, May 2021, is edited and published by  
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**FRONT COVER: Elaine Cochrane:** Photo of Yvonne Rousseau, at one of those picnics that Roger Weddall arranged in the Botanical Gardens, held in 1987 or thereabouts.

**BACK COVER: Jeanette Gillespie:** 'Back Window Bright Day'.

**PHOTOGRAPHS:** Jenny Blackford (p. 3); Sally Yeoland (p. 4); John Foyster (p. 8); Helena Binns (pp. 8, 10); Jane Tisell (p. 9); Andrew Porter (p. 25); P. Clement via Wikipedia (p. 46); Leck Keller-Krawczyk (p. 51); Joy Window (p. 76); Daniel Farmer, ABC News (p. 79).

**ILLUSTRATION:** Denny Marshall (p. 67).

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# I must be talking to my friends



Yvonne Rousseau, 2007.  
(Photo: Jenny Blackford.)

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## Yvonne Rousseau (1945–2021): A tribute

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**Bruce Gillespie**

with much help from Vida Weiss, Elaine Cochrane, and Dave Langford

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Why have I put off writing the following tribute? Why do I still find it very difficult to finish it? What, indeed, can I say that could pay adequate tribute to Yvonne Rousseau, who left us on 13 February 2021, having finally succumbed to Parkinson's disease, an inescapable, slowly incapacitating condition? Probably nothing, yet in the absence (so far) of tributes from people who knew her better than I did, I can offer only the following.

Yvonne Rousseau was 75 years old, but until a few years ago appeared much younger than her age. As she tells us in the introduction to *The Murders at*

*Hanging Rock*, her best-known work, 'Yvonne Rousseau was born at Benalla, on 1 August 1945, but was moved six weeks later to a dairy-farm in South Gippsland. She attended Hallston State School and Leongatha High Schools and graduated from Melbourne University, in 1967, as a BA (Hons.) in English and Philosophy.'

Yvonne was never self-important. At times she was shy, to a fault. I had to listen carefully to hear what she said. She would not speak at Nova Mob meetings in Melbourne or on convention panels, although she possibly gave a talk to the Critical Mass group in Adelaide. However, for someone



**John Bangsund and Yvonne Rousseau, long-time friends, Lifetime Members of the Victorian Society of Editors. (Photo taken by Sally Yeoland at the Degani Restaurant, Clifton Hill, 2013.)**

who had a dislike of forcing herself on anybody, she became a pivot around which great changes in our science fiction world took place. Her greatest pleasures were writing and reading — and finding out about other people. She was a great listener.

Yvonne seemed to have read everything (including science fiction and fantasy, even before she became involved in fandom in 1982). She was always looking for the very best books she could find. She wrote with good humour, saw herself as a satirist as well as a literary analyst, but never spared herself from the search for absolute exactitude, even correcting many of us (including me) for our more obvious errors of fact. She had a special interest in women writers who had been neglected, both in and out of the science fiction field, but she was willing to review a wide range of books. She was very kind, but enjoyed taking on (in print) people who were robust enough for a challenge, such as George Turner.

Yvonne had many enviable qualities, but, like many people I've known in the SF world, could not assemble these qualities into creating a continuous career. She had made a name as a freelance editor before Elaine and I met her, and had been appointed a Lifetime Member of the Victorian Society of Editors, but I've never seen a list of the books she edited for general publishers. She, like John Bangsund, another Lifetime Member, exemplified the finest qualities of the editing profession during a period when the role of book editors was becoming discounted by publishers. She wrote one book that was well publicised (*The Murders at Hanging Rock*),

as a fitting companion to Joan Lindsay's more famous *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. She published a few short stories. During the last 20 years of her life she laboured away on 'her novel', to the detriment of her other writing. She did not finish the novel — but she was also working on a separate novella, which was once submitted to a publisher. When it was rejected, she spent much time altering it, without getting to the stage of a new final draft

From our point of view within the SF world, Yvonne's finest achievement were her reviews and critical articles. I've tried to track down as many of her articles as possible, but I can put my hands on only those that appeared in my fanzines (especially *The Metaphysical Review* between 1984 and 1998), *Australian Science Fiction Review, Second Series*, and Van Ikin's *Science Fiction*. I suspect she wrote many other fine articles for such Australian literary journals as *Australian Book Review*, other critical SF magazines, such as *Foundation* in Britain, and other Australian fanzines, but I'm finding it difficult to liberate such articles from the boxes of Gillespie archives.

Her most notable editorial achievement within the SF world was her central organisational role within the Collective that published *Australian Science Fiction Review, Second Series*. (She once told me that by the end of the *ASFR II* days, she was doing most of the work to keep it going.)

It was a privilege to receive a letter from Yvonne. The art of the literary (or even literate) letter has been largely destroyed by the internet — except as exemplified in the pages of science fiction fanzines

and other journals. Yvonne's typed letters have been easy to save; I just hope I have also saved most of her emails to Elaine and me.

An impressive roll call of achievements — but they still do not explain the depth of the grief that many of us feel at losing her in 2021. We miss Yvonne most because she was above all a great and loyal

friend. She was one of those few people who are genuinely interested in other people. That can be said of few people I've met.

Let's start with her friendship with Elaine and me; and the beginnings of her friendships with the people who formed the core of the *ASFR Collective*. Yvonne tells it much better than I could:

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## Yvonne Rousseau

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### Yvonne gets her knees thumped

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(Reprinted from *SF Commentary* 99, July 2019, pp. 66–7.)

My first fannish contact was, essentially, Bruce Gillespie — but with complications.

At the beginning of 1975, after four years in Adelaide, I had returned to Melbourne with my husband Mick Weiss and our one-year-old daughter Vida. A few weeks earlier, our son Ralph had been born prematurely, and had died. Although I was wistfully aware of Melbourne's 1975 Aussiecon, and the associated writers' workshop with Ursula K. Le Guin, it was absolutely impossible for me to participate. Instead, conditions worsened until, at the beginning of 1976, I began life anew (with a sense of reprieve) as a deserted wife, struggling to support my daughter and myself.

No clue reached me of another inaugural event in 1976, when Norstrilia Press, established by three Melbourne sf fans — Rob Gerrand, Bruce Gillespie, and Carey Handfield — published *The Altered I* (based on Le Guin's Aussiecon workshop, and edited by the novelist Lee Harding). In March 1981, however, Norstrilia's critical anthology *The Stellar Gauge* (edited by Michael J. Tolley and Kirpal Singh) became the subject of my first review in the *Australian Book Review (ABR)*. I also reviewed Norstrilia's novel *The Dreaming Dragons* (by Damien Broderick) in the *ABR* of May 1981.

Two fannish invitations ensued. Colin Steele (sf reviewer for the *Canberra Times*) wrote inviting me to appear on an sf literary critics' panel with himself and the Melbourne *Age* sf reviewer (the novelist George Turner) at the Australian National University in Canberra. My circumstances would have obliged me to decline, even if *ABR* had not taken six weeks to forward the invitation. However, I now subscribed to Bruce Gillespie's fanzine *SF Commem-*

*tary* (having read of it in the *Melbourne Age*, and wishing to educate myself). On the strength of my *ABR* reviews, Bruce thought it worthwhile to send me a series of invitations to the monthly meetings of Melbourne's sf discussion group, the Nova Mob.

On the one hand, I pined for this chance to meet, at last, other readers of science fiction. On the other hand, my current dwelling in Brunswick was distant from possible babysitters, and (while even less good at map-interpretation and orientation than I am today) I would need to travel by night-time public transport from Brunswick, due north of the city centre, to St Kilda, due south, and then find Shakespeare Grove.

The seeming solution was the Nova Mob advertised for Wednesday, 3 March 1982. In mid-December 1981 my daughter and I had migrated somewhat south-east to North Carlton, close to friends willing to babysit; and this Nova Mob (starring the visiting British writer Christopher Priest) was to be relatively nearby, at a Brunswick address. Consulted beforehand by telephone, the as-yet-unmet Bruce Gillespie assured me that the Mob was always delighted to see new faces. I privately wondered, nevertheless, whether this would apply to one possible attender: Damien Broderick, whose crushingly polite letter in the August 1981 *ABR*, commenting on my favourable review of *The Dreaming Dragons*, had been answered with equally crushing politeness by my own letter in the September 1981 *ABR*.

Setting off by tram on an end-of-summer sultry evening, at the age of 36, to make my first fannish contact, I therefore regretted that my babysitting friends (who knew nothing of the letters in *ABR*) had dwelt so much on the disquieting theme of how extremely brave this was of me. 'Humdrum and unenterprising' was the description I would have

preferred.

When I rang the doorbell beside the meeting-site's open front door, I was disconcertingly peered at from the other end of the passageway by a vague figure which then went away again. Nevertheless, I was soon being ushered inside by new arrivals, and exchanging introductions with the affable Lee Harding and with three fans who would be Collectively engaged with me, four years later, in editing the second series of *Australian Science Fiction Review*: Lucy Sussex (who remarked upon Darko Suvin, one of the household's Persian cats) and Jenny and Russell Blackford. Whereas Lucy's hair was blonde and exceptionally long, Jenny's was both short and exceptionally blonde: she wore a stylish black dress adorned with military-style buttons, and she sat on the kitchen table to drink from the mouth of an elegantly shaped long green bottle. This drew an embarrassed remonstrance from Russell, who seemingly believed that one used a wine glass as proof that one wasn't inebriated.

Before Lee and Lucy and the Blackfords drifted away into the living room or the back garden, I had learnt that this meeting-site was not neutral space: I was actually a guest in Damien Broderick's house. He and Chris Priest and most of the Mob had yet to arrive from the local pub where they had been dining. Now I felt uneasy until I could identify myself to my host, since he might have felt annoyed enough by my *ABR* letter not to want to let me into his house.

Perched on a kitchen chair strategically placed to intercept new arrivals, I was unfortunately also in the path of Imme, the household's outsize German short-haired pointer. Highly strung at the calmest of times, Imme now began manically racing past, and she twice cannoned into my knees, apparently as heedlessly as an armoured tank. Unaware that Damien himself had taken two months to recover from a leg-injury that Imme had inflicted using similar tactics in an open field, I strove to conceal my agony. Considered as an excuse for writhing in public, 'the dog bumped me' seemed pitifully inadequate.

Further demoralisation: thunderous noise revealed that there was a second doorway into the living room, and that the rest of the Mob had now made use of it. Abandoning my apparently foiled plan to waylay my host, I braved the living room, which (in Bruce Gillespie's estimation) now held thirty people, and would comfortably accommodate six. The bafflingly wet-haired man with the British accent, recounting an anecdote about Captain Chandler, was clearly Chris Priest — and I could also identify George Turner. Was anybody Bruce Gillespie, though? Both Lucy and the Blackfords had seemed vague when I'd mentioned his name.

Vexingly, Damien Broderick now entered the living room, bringing food from the kitchen: obviously, I'd vacated it too promptly. Although he was recognisable from his photograph in *The Dreaming Dragons*, he looked taller, leaner and more austere than I had expected. Meanwhile, although Lee and Lucy and the Blackfords seemed to recognise neither my name nor my face, other strangers elsewhere were still bafflingly able to remember me from the television appearances and newspaper and magazine photographs that accompanied the publication in 1980 of my book *The Murders at Hanging Rock*, which itself contained my photograph. Another photograph of me had appeared recently in the Christmas 1981 literary pages of the *Bulletin* magazine, with my time-travel story 'The Truth about Oscar'. Thus, when my host met my eye briefly and looked away again, unsmiling, I had no certainty that he didn't recognise me.

Paranoia burgeoned as I sat unobtrusively on the living-room floor. These mostly male people all knew one another; they were more numerous and almost all bigger than me; mine were the only shabby jeans and home-repaired sandals here; and apparently I ought to have come equipped not with my copy of Priest's *Inverted World* but with a bottle. Short silences were beginning to perforate the conversation. Soon, every eye might inexorably turn upon me, with a gentle request for my credentials. If this should happen, I now feared that I would simply scream in primitive schoolyard terror.

When I stood up and walked out of the room, I felt that I still had a choice: it was not essential to walk towards the front door. When I reached the front gate, it was still possible to retrace my steps and accompany two late arrivals back up the path and into the living room. When I reached the tram stop, I might still have crossed to the shop and brought back a bottle of mineral water to share with the Mob. Instead, after a long wait for it, I caught the tram home.

Despite this debacle, I now regard all the sf people I've named above (except for the never-met Kirpal Singh and A. Bertram Chandler) as friends. Moreover, in 1991 Damien Broderick's *The Dark between the Stars* surprised a blush with its printed dedication: 'For Yvonne Rousseau/saint and savaute/this solipsistic samba'. These developments became possible after I telephoned Bruce Gillespie to apologise for my defection. In order to recognise one another at future Mobs, we then arranged for me to meet with Bruce and his wife Elaine Cochrane at the Cafe Sport, in Lygon Street, Carlton, at 11.30 in the morning of Saturday 27 March 1982. First, I'd delivered my daughter Vida to her weekly dancing class at Madame Mangiamele's Mangala Studios, just around the corner in Grattan Street. Mutual amazement: one of Vida's teachers, the

beautiful Claudia Mangiamele, was well known to Bruce and Elaine as the legendary princess of the Melbourne University Science Fiction Association. Having met Bruce and Elaine, I liked them so much that even though neither of them was actually at my next Nova Mob (a discussion of *The Dreaming Dragons* in St Kilda on 5 May 1982), fandom has felt

friendly to me ever after.

— **Yvonne Rousseau**, first appearance: Leah and Dick Smith (eds): *Contact!: 72 Fans Find Fandom*, Ditto 14/FanHistoriCon II (Bloomington, Illinois), 12–14 October 2001

## Bruce resumes the story ...

I remember things differently, of course. I do not remember Yvonne's reviews of *The Stellar Gauge* or *The Dreaming Dragons* in *Australian Book Review*, although I must have copies of these reviews tucked away in a manila folder somewhere. My first awareness of Yvonne was from reading an *ABR* article in which she reviewed my *SF Commentary: First Year 1969*, a 1981 book I self-published as a compen-

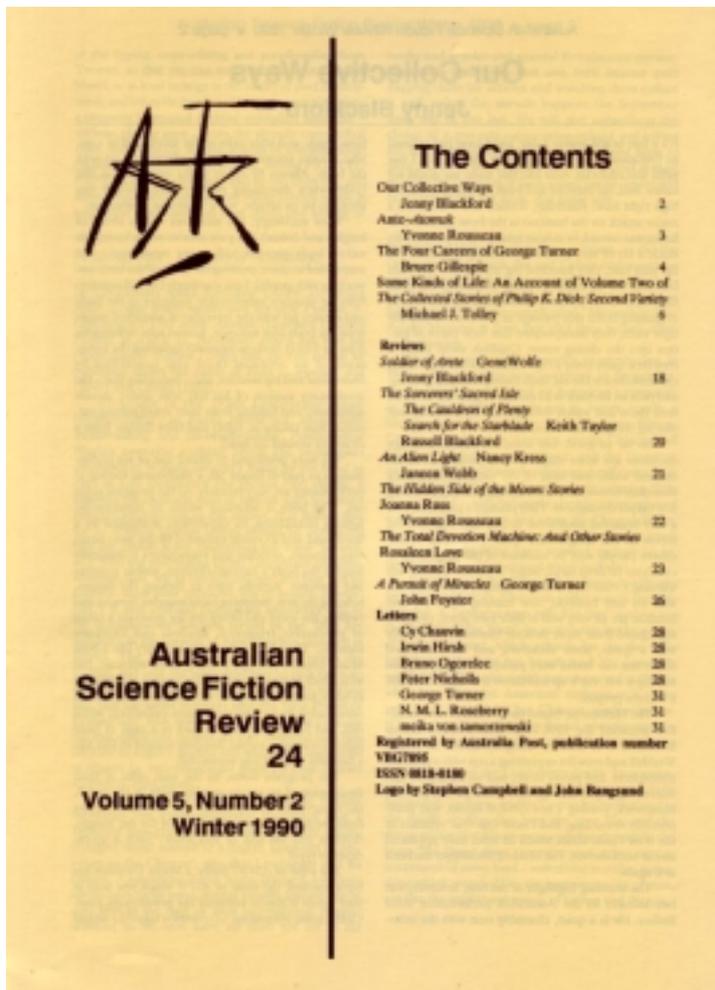
dium of the first eight issues of *SF Commentary*. I was startled and delighted to find anybody who not only reviewed a fannish project in a general literary magazine but also understood what *SF Commentary* was all about.

Even though I was not at the Christopher Priest meeting of the Nova Mob, Yvonne and I must have traded phone calls. Shortly after, Elaine and I visited Yvonne and her daughter Vida Weiss at her small terrace house in Amess Street, North Carlton.

Other friends of hers were there. I can't remember who they were, but it became obvious that Yvonne had a wide circle of close and supportive literary friends, none of whom had any interest in science fiction. For instance, we very much enjoyed meeting the O'Shaughnessy sisters, Kathy and Maureen, who had been friends with Yvonne since university days.

*SF Commentary* had gone into hibernation in early 1982. When I announced my new magazine, *The Metaphysical Review*, in 1984, Yvonne immediately sent me a long review for Issue No. 1. Meantime, she had begun attending Nova Mob meetings, which had been held since mid 1982 at the home of John Foyster and Jennifer Bryce in Shakespeare Grove, St Kilda. The core members of the meetings, people such as Damien Broderick, Russell and Jenny Blackford, Lucy Sussex, Janeen Webb, and John Foyster himself, began plans for what would become *ASFR: Second Series*. Some of these people, rather patronising and self-important in manner, left me out of their circle. This felt odd, since I was the one person who had been publishing magazines about science fiction since 1969.

You see the problem; it happens in all closely knit groups. While trying to be friends with everybody, Yvonne inadvertently aroused loyalty groups among those who con-



**Yvonne was not only a member of the cooperative that edited and produced *Australian Science Fiction, Second Series* but also one of its major contributors.**



**John Foyster and Yvonne Rousseau, November 2000. (Photographer: unknown.)**

sidered themselves her special friends. I was not invited to be part of the *ASFR Collective*, so I stopped going to Nova Mob meetings. It did not occur to me that I was observing underground social processes that would eventually lead in strange directions. In 1987, John Foyster shocked everybody in Melbourne fandom by letting it be known that he was taking a job in Adelaide immediately, and that he had not asked Jenny Bryce to join him. In the middle of the year Yvonne Rousseau told us she would be joining him in Adelaide at the beginning of 1988.

So Yvonne and Vida went off to Adelaide to be with John, and Elaine and I expected that we would see little of either of them. They seemed to have a very happy life together. John's job in educational administration gave him many opportunities not available in Melbourne. John and Yvonne travelled to the 1996 World Convention held in Los Angeles, and from there visited France, to catch up with John Baxter and his family; Vienna, to see Franz Rottensteiner and his family; and to various other cities in Europe.

Adelaide fandom benefited greatly from their move. John and Yvonne started Critical Mass as Adelaide's answer to the Nova Mob. This led to new fans appearing, such as Damien Warman and Juliette Woods, and older fans, such as Roman Orszanski, staying in touch. When overseas fans visited Australia, they headed to Adelaide as well as to Melbourne and Sydney. (However, I have not travelled to Adelaide since 1981.)

Yvonne and Vida still made regular trips to Melbourne, and Vida moved back here after she graduated. They always made the effort to catch up with us. Only because of these rather rushed trips did



**Hazel and Dave Langford, Yvonne Rousseau, Reading, England, 1996. (Photo: John Foyster.)**

we realise how many friends she retained here, and the effort she would make to stay in touch with them. She and Vida would visit us in Collingwood, and then in Greensborough. She was also caught up with Peter Nicholls and Clare Coney in Surrey Hills, with Russell and Jenny Blackford until they moved back to Newcastle, and with Damien Broderick until he moved to America. Yvonne also kept in touch with her non-SF friends.

Yvonne's most extraordinary feat of friendship was transformed into an article she wrote for *The Metaphysical Review*, No. 18, March 1993. In May 1992 Elaine and I held a garden party after Elaine bought the empty block next to our house in Collingwood. She aimed to convert the block into an Australian native plants garden, but before starting, she hired a marquee and made lots of party edibles, and 150 people turned up. In her article,



**Roman Orszanski, noted Adelaide fan and Critical Mass organiser, with Yvonne, at Continuum 8, Melbourne, 2012. (Photographer: Helena Binns.)**

# The Garden Party

by Yvonne Rousseau

When Bruce Gillespie and Elaine Cochrane purchased the vacant block next door to their house in Keele Street, I sent Elaine a birthday card showing a tapestry scene where a medieval lady sat in a flowery pavilion amid various aristocratic dogs, with a unicorn looking over her shoulder. I recommended that this should be their model for developing their new property. Almost at once, Bruce assured me that they were already working on it — but would probably substitute cats for the various animals depicted in the tapestry.

Sixteen weeks later, on Sunday 3 May 1992, the block was the site for a garden party, to introduce it to fandom. Because I was unable to travel from Adelaide to Melbourne for the party, Bruce consoled me by inviting me to write a long-distance report of it, relying on the impressions of several guests — and thus freeing myself from the limitation of occupying only a single vantage point at any particular moment.

To intensify the garden-party mood, my introduction of people's names will often be accompanied by at least one observation about them that has appeared in print. Some of these observations will faithfully recreate in the reader the mazy feeling a genuine guest gets upon being landed with a complete stranger and the explanation: 'You're a tricycle-rider, he's a triceratops — you two have so much in common!' But my observations about our hosts shall be simple. Elaine was described by Bruce in *The Metaphysical Review* 11/12/13, November 1987, as having 'worked in a variety of occupations, all of which would fit her to become a science fiction writer. Elaine is not a science fiction writer. Instead, she is a book editor'. Of Bruce, Brian Aldiss wrote in *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's*: 'Bruce stands as an exemplar of a science fiction aficionado' — and Leigh Edmonds recalled in *Page 2*, 1983 that, in long-ago-days when Bruce was wrestling



The marquee (pavilion) before people arrived. (Photo: Jane Tisell.)

**The first page of 'The Garden Party', Yvonne's unique party report written 700 km away from the event, published in *The Metaphysical Review* 18, March 1993. (Photo: Jane Tisell.)**

'The Garden Party', Yvonne provides an amusing and perceptive report on the main events of the garden party — on everything that happened, although she wasn't there. She gained all the details by phoning everybody who was there, writing down their accounts, and creating the whole scene in her mind's eye. This is the single most remarkable article I've ever published, although many people who read it probably assumed Yvonne had been in Melbourne that weekend.

Yvonne also attended family gatherings up the country as often as she could. At different times she introduced us to her brother Linton, who has become her executor, and his wife Liz, and much

later, to her beloved brother George, a merry soul who died only a few years after we met him. Yvonne also has two sisters, Val and Glenda.

One morning in late 2001, Yvonne rang us. She was in great distress. John had suffered fits in the night, and had been taken to hospital. The immediate diagnosis was a stroke, but the facts did not fit the diagnosis. An entire month went by before John received the correct diagnosis: an inoperable glioblastoma (brain tumour). John was given six months to live, but he lived 18 months, and died on 5 April 2003.

We mainly kept in touch with Yvonne by phone



**At the celebration of John Foyster's life, 11 May 2003, Linden Gallery, St Kilda: (l. to r.): Vida Weiss, Yvonne Rousseau, Miranda Foyster, Race Mathews. Standing: Jenny Bryce. (Photo: Helena Binns.)**

**Yvonne and Dick Jensen (Ditmar), also at the celebration of John Foyster's life, Linden Galleries, 11 May 2003. (Photo: Helena Binns.)**



and (now) by email. (Elaine and I had acquired email at home in late 1998.) John actually made a few trips back to Melbourne with Yvonne, but he was so tired the whole time he could barely keep up a conversation. In 2003, John had to return to hospital. During his last days, several friends from Melbourne caught up with him, and Jenny Bryce was at his side as well as Yvonne and John's daughter Miranda. Yvonne was left in a large house full of John Foyster's vast accumulation of papers and books as well as her own, and with only a small number of Adelaide friends to call upon.

Yvonne's first loyalty was always to her daughter Vida Weiss. Vida was very young when Yvonne was left as a 'deserted wife' (her words) in 1976. When Elaine and I first

met Yvonne and Vida in 1982, Vida could be what is usually called a 'difficult child' for visitors to handle. As the years went on, we became much greater friends with Vida, a friendship cemented when she and I discovered that we liked some of the Australian pop groups who were made famous by the ABC's *Countdown* program. During her teenage years Vida became obsessed with the irreverent Sydney pop group Mental as Anything. She recorded tapes of their songs for me. In turn, when Vida became interested in the old song 'Save the Last Dance for Me', I was able to find plenty of versions and tape them for Vida. When Yvonne moved to Adelaide in 1988 to be with John Foyster, John became a friend to Vida. In her late teens and twenties, Vida showed a great talent for mathematics. She returned to Melbourne, and became a tutor and lecturer in Swinburne University. She also became the main support to Yvonne during her last illness. The story of Yvonne and Vida is a remarkable one, and I hope Vida writes about her mother one day.

It's not clear when Yvonne began to suspect that she was suffering from some condition more serious than the low-level depression she felt after 2003 when she found herself alone in a house full of unsorted books and magazines. After 2003 she told us little about her experiences, and she began visiting us less often when she was in Melbourne. She and Vida did join our little group who meet for dinner at the Rosstown Hotel in Carnegie, and for awhile Lee Harding was able to drive them home to Vida's place. I found it more and more difficult to hear Yvonne during conversation. We did know that she wanted to sell the house in Adelaide and move back to Melbourne. This was made possible by two couples who had been her friends for many years. They arranged for her to sell in Adelaide and buy a much smaller house in Melbourne.

Yvonne still faced the problem of dealing with the contents of the large house and granny flat in Adelaide. Several SF organisations in Melbourne faced a similar problem: how to store and archive large collections of SF-related materials? Meteor Inc. and the Melbourne Science Fiction Club found a home for their fanzine collections at the Monash University Rare Books Collection, as part of a program initiated and curated by Dr Stephen Herrin while he was working there. I put Yvonne and Stephen in touch with each other; Yvonne and friends packed up John Foyster's huge fanzine and SF book collection; and a large van picked up everything in Adelaide and deposited it at Monash University in Clayton. Only then could Yvonne move houses, and cities.

Yvonne moved house at the end of 2016, but we were puzzled and a bit sad that she felt she could

not visit us in Greensborough. Only later did we realise that in early 2016 she had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, after suffering symptoms, including noticeable movement difficulties and tremors, during the previous year. She no longer had the energy to make the trip from Reservoir, although she was able to catch up with John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland a few times in the inner suburbs. She also kept up with Peter Nicholls, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's in 1999, and Clare. Peter, who had lived with the disease for 19 years, died in 2018.

Yvonne faded from our lives, but that is as much our fault as anybody's. Elaine and I did visit her several times in Reservoir. On the last such occasion, Jenny Blackford was in town from Newcastle. She put together a wonderful lunch for Yvonne, and that was probably the last good long chat we had with her. Yvonne was no longer able to communicate by email, for technical reasons that never became clear, and her friends found it hard to talk to her on the phone. I did not ring her nearly often enough.

Quite a few of her friends gathered at Urban Grooves in Greensborough for Yvonne's birthday in August 2019. It was a very enjoyable lunch, but also very tiring for Yvonne. We caught up with several of Yvonne's non-SF friends, such as Kathy and Ian, who had made it possible for her to move to Melbourne.

In December 2020, Vida rang to say that Yvonne was in hospital. Vida had arrived at the house for her usual visit, only to find fire engines and police cars surrounding it! It seems that Yvonne had mistakenly placed a plastic kettle on the stove and it had burst into flames. The kitchen did not burn down, but the house was filled with ash. Yvonne was rushed to the Austin Hospital, and later she was moved to the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital about a kilometre away.

I find it distressing to recall Yvonne's last few months. I remember Vida's heroism during this period. Not only did she travel by public transport from Surrey Hills to visit her mother every second day, and then every day, but suddenly (during COVID restrictions) she had to visit Yvonne's house in Reservoir to meet insurance assessors while repairs were being made. When possible her Auntie Jo (Joanne Weiss) helped her, but Vida had to do much travelling by train and bus. She also kept in touch with us.

I failed completely in my first attempt to visit Yvonne at the Heidelberg Repat. On the map the walk from Heidelberg station looks easy. It isn't. I had forgotten to take a map with me. It was a hot day. After walking for three-quarters of an hour I lost my way, gave up, and returned to the station.

On my second trip, I did manage to visit Yvonne

for three-quarters of an hour. I had taken a street map with me, but still almost failed to reach the correct part of the huge hospital grounds. Yvonne was asleep when I reached her. I hardly recognised her, since she had lost a lot of weight. She had been waking and wandering during the nights and sleeping during the day. When Yvonne woke up, she found it difficult to find particular words. However, she was delighted that I had visited, and enjoyed every bit of science-fictional gossip I could remember. She remembered all the people I talked about. She was served lunch, but did not touch it.

During the next few weeks, as Vida reports, Yvonne had almost stopped eating. She would still sometimes eat small parts of her meals, and the very kind hospital staff would offer her a special meal of ice-cream, which she would eat from time to time. Then Yvonne stopped eating altogether, and was suffering anxiety attacks. I visited her again, but she hardly recognised me, and asked me to leave after ten minutes. That was one of the most dispiriting days of my life.

The doctors had altered her regime of drugs many times during the previous eleven weeks, but

nothing had improved her condition. She had been hoping to return home, but it was plain in early January that that would be impossible.

On 13 February, Vida told us that Yvonne had died during the night. She had eaten almost nothing for four or five weeks, had spent most of the time sleeping, and was frequently delirious and confused, finding it difficult to communicate when awake. In the final week she developed aspirational pneumonia and slept all the time.

Because of COVID-19 restrictions in Victoria, it was impossible to hold a funeral for Yvonne in February. A memorial gathering will be held as soon as it is possible to do so without risk.

Yvonne was one of the most brilliant people I've ever met, the least self-important among the many brilliant people I have met. She improved the world whenever she could, and I wish the world had been kinder to her. Thanks for your company for 40 years, Yvonne Rousseau.

— Bruce Gillespie, 29 March 2021

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## Yvonne's written legacy: The mysteries of *Hanging Rock*

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### THE MURDERS AT HANGING ROCK:

Print edition still available from Amazon at £5.95.

Ebooks edition from:

Dave Langford's Ansible Editions.

<https://ae.ansible.uk/?t=murders>

Includes Yvonne's original text, plus her commentary on Joan Lindsay's last chapter of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and an index.

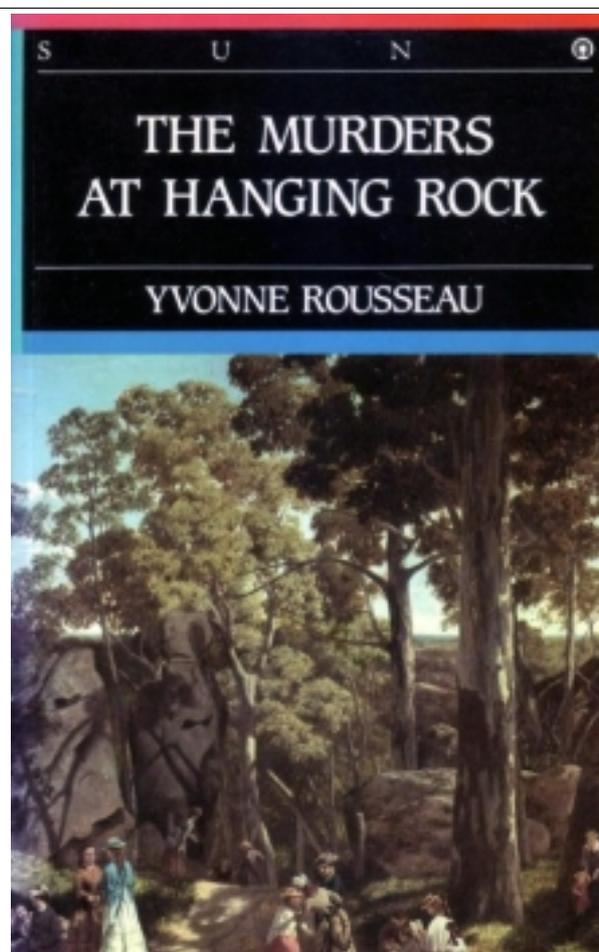
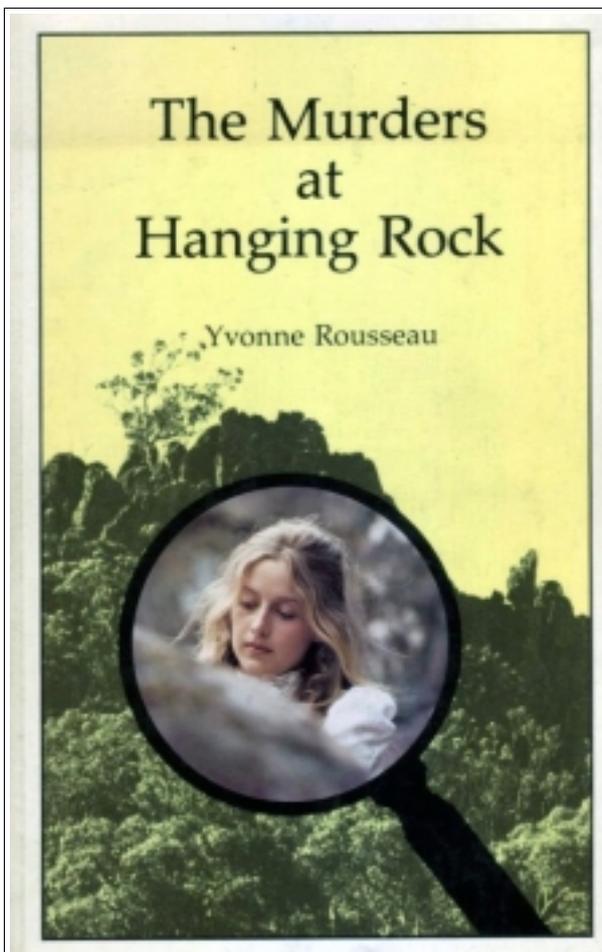
Yvonne's written legacy includes the essays and stories that she wrote, including (possibly) one novel and certainly one unpublished novella — and one major book, *The Murders at Hanging Rock*. It was published in 1980, two years before we met her, by Henry Rosenbloom's Scribe Publications. Its second edition was published by Sun Books/Macmillan in 1988.

Joan Lindsay's novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) was one of the defining Australian books of the 1970s. Her story of the disappearance of a number of schoolgirls and their governess at Hanging Rock (central Victoria) in 1900 provoked many researchers to try to find newspaper accounts of such disappearances. They were unsuccessful.

When Peter Weir's film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

appeared in 1975, its photographic evocation of the Australian bushland around Hanging Rock, his choice of the mesmerising Anne Louise Lambert as Miranda, the most memorable of the girls who disappear, and the hypnotic quality of Gheorghe Zamfir's pan pipes background music made it into the most influential Australian film of its decade. Its success led many to further speculate about possible historical antecedents for the narrative.

Nevertheless, nothing could have prepared the admirers of the book and film for Yvonne Rousseau's book-length essay *The Murders at Hanging Rock*. In the novel Joan Lindsay provides no answer to the puzzle, 'Whatever happened to the school-girls?' In her Introduction, Yvonne writes: 'This work presents four quite lengthy explanations of what happened at the Rock, each explanation being coherent and comprehensive, each being presented with the utmost enthusiasm and desire to convince — but each contradicting the others. To some readers, only three of these explanations may seem nonsense; and for these, all undesirable obscurities will now, on reading this book, be fully illuminated. This book is truly dedicated, however, to readers who will form another opinion — to the serious lovers of Nonsense itself.'

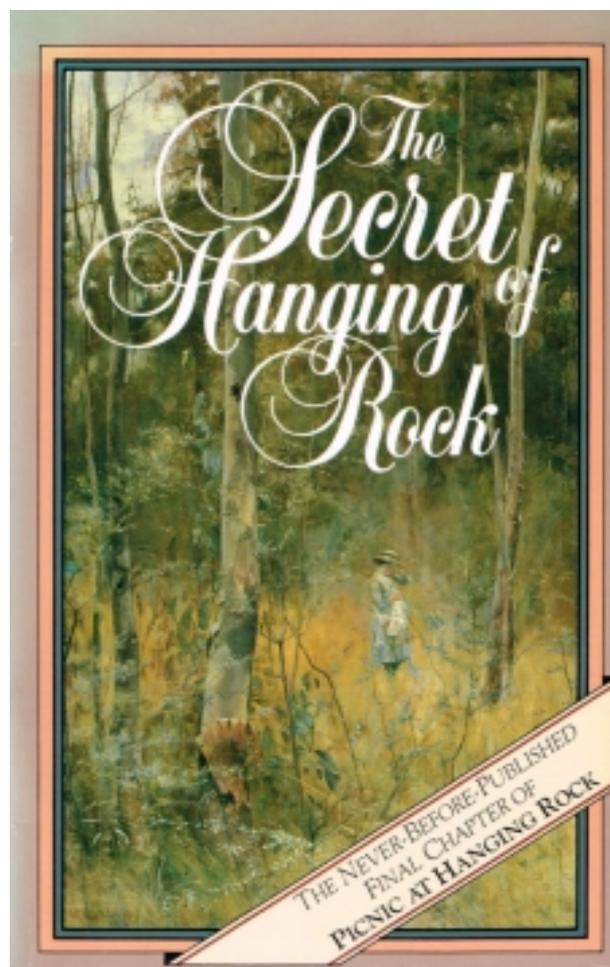


It was her fourth explanation that caused the greatest difficulty for commentators and readers. In short, it is a science-fictional explanation. Although few of her friends suspected it, Yvonne had been a science fiction reader for many years as well as a reader of detective fiction, and her mind was fully prepared to untangle the contradictions that might be found in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

In 1980 Yvonne was also unaware that Joan Lindsay had in fact written a final chapter for *Hanging Rock*. In 1987, A&R published that final chapter as *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, with commentaries by John Taylor (Joan Lindsay's literary executor) and Yvonne. It turned out that her science-fictional explanation was the closest to Joan Lindsay's own solution to the novel's puzzles. In 2016, Yvonne discovered that ETT had republished the booklet with the addition of a commentary by Mudrooroo.

— Bruce Gillespie, 4 April 2021

**Above: l.: The first edition (Scribe; 1980) of Yvonne Rousseau's *The Murders at Hanging Rock*.  
 r.: The second edition (Sun Books; 1988) of Yvonne's book, with an introduction by John Taylor.  
 Below: r: *The Secret of Hanging Rock* (1987), Joan Lindsay's missing final chapter, plus commentaries by John Taylor and Yvonne Rousseau.**



## Footnote:

An item that you might find difficult to find is *Minners Marooned and Planet of the Marsupials: The Science Fiction Novels of Cherry Wilder*. It was published by Norman Talbot as No. 3 of his series of Babel Handbooks on Fantasy and SF Writers (Nimrod

Publications, 1997). In this essay Yvonne, as part of her major essay about the works of New Zealand writer Cherry Wilder, develops her ideas about the Lost Child as a central myth/theme of Australian literature. I seem to recall that she set out these ideas in a separate essay, but I can't find it.

## Yvonne Rousseau's bibliography of her SF-related activities between 1980 and 1996

Yvonne Rousseau was joint editor of *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 1–27, March 1986–Autumn 1991, and was convenor of this magazine for issues 12–27, January 1988–Autumn 1991.

She was Fan Guest of Honour at Confictionary, an Adelaide SF convention, 7–8 September 1991.

She belonged to the Acnestis amateur press association throughout 1995, and produced 12 issues of her apazine, *Pursued By Oysters, Armed With Oyster Knives*, January–December 1995. (She produced an additional rogue issue, 12a, in July 1996.) See also the bibliography that follows.

### Works by Yvonne Rousseau concerning *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

*The Murders at Hanging Rock*, Scribe Publications, Fitzroy, Victoria, 1980.

Reprinted, with foreword by John Taylor, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1988.

Commentary, in *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, containing 'Chapter Eighteen', by Joan Lindsay, introd. John Taylor, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1987.

### SF short stories by Yvonne Rousseau published in Australia

'Eurydice in the Underworld', *Meanjin* 41 (2), June 1982, pp. 256–63 (illustrated by Nikos Kypraios).

'The Listener', in Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch (eds), *Alien Shores: An Anthology of Australian Science Fiction*, Aphelion Publications, North Adelaide, 1994, pp. 215–32.

'Mr Lockwood's Narrative', in Damien Broderick (ed.), *Strange Attractors*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985, pp. 62–74.

'Possum Lover', in Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich (eds), *She's Fantastical*, Sybylla, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 138–66.

'The Truth about Oscar', *Bulletin*, 22/29 December 1981, pp. 181–3; reprinted in Damien Broderick (ed.), *Matilda at the Speed of Light*, Angus & Robertson,

North Ryde, NSW, 1988, pp. 77–84.

### Yvonne Rousseau's articles (about sf) published overseas

'Fucking the Frightened' (editor Steve Brown's title), *Science Fiction Eye* 7, August 1990, pp. 66–7.

'Wilder Alien Shores, The: Or, The Colonials Are Revolting', *Foundation* 54, Spring 1992, pp. 15–36.

### Yvonne Rousseau's encyclopaedia entries (about an sf writer) published overseas

'WILDER, Cherry' in Noelle Watson and Paul E. Schellinger (eds), *Twentieth Century Science Fiction Writers*, 3rd edn, St James Press, Chicago and London, 1991, pp. 862–3.

'WILDER, Cherry' in Jay P. Pederson (ed.), *St. James Guide to Science Fiction Writers*, 4th edn, St James Press, Detroit, 1995 [page numbers not known].

### Yvonne Rousseau's articles (about sf) published in Australia

'Ante-Atomsk', article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 24, Winter 1990, p. 3.

'Conventional Mayhem: Do Metropole Managers Read Marshall?', article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 17/18, November 1988/January 1989, pp. 24–6.

'Critical Mass: Live!' (report of discussion of George Turner's *The Sea and Summer*), *Notional* 35, 15 July 1988, pp. 2–3.

'Dreadful Suspicions on the Ethical Culture Trilogy of George Turner', *Notional*, August 1985, pp. 6–11: reply to George Turner's comments, *Notional*, November 1985, pp. 6–11.

Reprinted, with George Turner's comments plus an additional reply, as Rousseau, Yvonne and Turner, George, 'Ethical Culture GT', article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 2, May 1986,

- pp. 10–31.
- ‘Guilt and the Unimaginative UnAmerican Feminist’, article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 16, September 1988, pp. 7–10, 19.
- ‘Lemon Pancake Theory, The’ (report of Conspiracy ‘87), *Larrikin* 15, August 1987, pp. 3–4.
- ‘Nova Mob — The First Time’, *Thyme* 59, December 1986, pp. 10–11.
- ‘Professor Peaslee’s Handwriting’, article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 22, Summer 1989, pp. 19–20.
- ‘Right Hand of Light, The: or Mr Rottensteiner and Mrs Le Guin’, *Metaphysical Review* 5/6, October 1985, pp. 11–47.
- ‘Science Fiction Invasion, The’ (report of Aussiecon Two), *Australian Book Review*, October 1985, pp. 19–20; ‘Report on Aussiecon Two’, *Victorian Society of Editors Newsletter*, October 1985, pp. 35–7: amalgamated and reprinted as ‘Eavesdropping on Aussiecon II’, *Metaphysical Review* 7/8, May 1986, pp. 15–21.
- ‘SF and the Dirty Little Virgin’, article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 3, July 1986, pp. 16–21.
- ‘Short View, The’, article, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 8, May 1987, pp. 28–9.
- ‘Top Writers Gather for Aussiecon Two, The’ (preview of Aussiecon Two), *Melbourne Age*, ‘Saturday Extra’, 17 August 1985, p. 13.
- ‘Winds of Change in Adelaide’ (preview of Adventon ‘85), *Melbourne Age*, ‘Saturday Extra’, 30 March 1985, p. 15.

## Editorials and preface by Yvonne Rousseau, published in Australia

- ‘Our Collective Ways’, editorial, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 4, September 1986, pp. 3–4.
- ‘Our Collective Ways’, editorial, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 9, July 1987, pp. 2–3.
- ‘Our Collective Ways’, editorial, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 14, May 1988, pp. 2–3.
- ‘Our Collective Ways’, editorial, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 20, June 1989, pp. 3–5.
- ‘Our Collective Ways’, editorial, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 25, Spring 1990, p. 2.
- ‘Preliminary Explanation’, preface, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 27, Autumn 1991, p. 2.

## Yvonne Rousseau’s reviews (published in Australia) of a single work

- Review of Anthony, Piers, *But What of Earth?*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 22, Summer 1989, pp. 23–4.
- Review of Barnes, Rory and Broderick, Damien, *Valencies*, *Australian Book Review*, Dec–Jan 1983, p. 24.
- Review of Bland, J., *Lavington Pugh*, *Science Fiction* 13, March 1983, pp. 21–2.
- Review of Broderick, Damien, *Black Grail, The, Mattoïd*

- 28, 1987, pp. 107–10.
- Review of Broderick, Damien, *Dreaming Dragons, The*, *Australian Book Review* 30, May 1981, p. 27.
- Review of Broderick, Damien, *Judas Mandala, The*, *Australian Book Review* 45, October 1982, p. 35.
- Review of Dodderidge, Esmé, *New Gulliver, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 19, March 1989, pp. 23–5.
- Review of Eldershaw, M. Barnard, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *Melbourne Age*, ‘Saturday Extra’, 27 August 1983, p. 1.
- Review of Elkin, Stanley, *George Mills*, *Metaphysical Review* 1, July 1984, pp. 7–14.
- Review of Gentle, Mary, *Rats and Gargoyles*, *Science Fiction* 33, 1992, pp. 22–5.
- Review of Harrison, Harry, *Stainless Steel Rat Gets Drafted, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 19, March 1989, pp. 25–7.
- Review of Heinlein, Robert A., *Cat Who Walks Through Walls, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 2, May 1986, pp. 34–6.
- Review of *Interzone* 19 (Spring 1987), *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 9, July 1987, pp. 40–1.
- Review of Kelleher, Victor, *Beast of Heaven, The*, *Australian Book Review*, Feb–Mar 1984, p. 20.
- Review of King, David (ed.), *Dreamworks*, *Australian Book Review*, August 1983, p. 22.
- Review of King, David and Blackford, Russell (eds), *Urban Fantasies*, *Science Fiction* 22, 1986, pp. 15–19.
- Review of Le Guin, Ursula K., *Always Coming Home*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 6, January 1987, pp. 50–4; (shorter, and further mutilated by editor) review of Le Guin, Ursula K., *Always Coming Home*, *Melbourne Age*, ‘Saturday Extra’, 9 May 1987, p. 11.
- Review of Le Guin, Ursula K., *Compass Rose, The*, *Thyme* 52, March 1986, pp. 9–10, reprinted (somewhat more accurately) in *Metaphysical Review* 11/12/13, pp. 24–6.
- Review of Love, Rosaleen, *Total Devotion Machine, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 24, Winter 1990, pp. 23–6.
- Review of Murnane, Gerald, *Plains, The*, *Science Fiction* 15, September 1983, pp. 103–6.
- Review of *Omega Science Digest* (January 1987), *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 9, July 1987, pp. 42–5.
- Review of Ptacek, Kathryn (ed.), *Women of Darkness*, *Science Fiction* 37, (n.d. [1996]), pp. 34–7.
- Short review of Reece, Martin, *Science Fiction Trilogy*, *Australian Book Review* 30, May 1981, p. 40.
- Review of Rice, Anne, *The Mummy: Or, Ramses the Damned*, *Science Fiction* 36, (n.d. [1996]), pp. 31–2.
- Review of Russ, Joanna, *Hidden Side of the Moon, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 24, Winter 1990, pp. 22–3.
- Review of Tolley, Michael J. and Singh, Kirpal (eds), *Stellar Gauge, The*, *Australian Book Review* 28, March 1981, pp. 12–13.
- Review of Turner, George, *In the Heart or in the Head*, *Melbourne Age*, ‘Saturday Extra’, 25 August 1984, p. 17, reprinted in *Thyme* 44, pp. 11–12.
- Review of Turner, George, *Sea and Summer, The*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 14, May

1988, pp. 51–6.  
Review of Turner, George, *Vaneglory*, *Australian Book Review* 41, June 1982, pp. 21–2.  
Review of Turner, George, *Yesterday's Men*, *Australian Book Review*, June 1983, p. 14.  
Review of Wolfe, Gene, *Peace*, broadcast on ABC radio's 'Books and Writing' program, 21 August 1985; printed in *Thyme* 49, January 1986 (with afterword mentioning that Gene Wolfe confirmed my reading of the book); reprinted in *Metaphysical Review* 11/12/13, pp. 22–4.

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*Science Fiction*, of Lake, David, *Ring of Truth*, of Wodhams, Jack, *Future War*, and of Wodhams, Jack, *Ryn*, *Australian Book Review*, April 1983, pp. 2–3.  
Review of Spence, Catherine Helen, *Handfasted*, of Spence, Catherine Helen, *Week in the Future*, A, and of Wright, Austin Tappan, *Islandia*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 26, Summer 1991, pp. 38–44.  
Review of Stableford, Brian, *Empire of Fear*, *The*, and of Clute, John, Pringle, David and Ounsley, Simon (eds), *Interzone: The Third Anthology*, *Age Monthly Review* 9 (5), August 1989: Stableford review reprinted in *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 23, Autumn 1990, pp. 18–19.

## Index (published in Australia)

'Australian Science Fiction Review (Second Series): 1986–1991: An Index', *Australian Science Fiction Review* (2nd series) 27, Autumn 1991, pp. 2–32.

— Yvonne Rousseau, 1996

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## Unlisted

In the above bibliography, Yvonne did not list a large number of published letters, as well as many non-sf reviews and articles. These appeared in both non-sf and sf publications, such as *Foundation*, *Science Fiction Eye*, *SF Commentary*, *Science Fiction*, *Larrikin*, *Metaphysical Review*, *Steam Engine Time*, *Thyme*, and *Tigger*.

I found the following items in my own publications. All contributions to this bibliography are welcome:

## Articles about science fiction

'Brian Aldiss's Helliconia', *SF Commentary* 96, Apr 2018, pp. 54–5; which reprints material from *Science Fiction* 25, pp. 33–4; and adds a review of Brian Aldiss's *Comfort Zone*.  
'Critical Mass versus Eric Raymond', *Steam Engine Time* 6, Aug 2007, pp. 9–13.  
'Extensive Spoilers: Investigating Connie Willis's *Blackout* and *All Clear*', *SF Commentary* 82, Aug 2011, pp. 19–27.

## General and fannish articles

'Dream Competition, The: The Winners: Brian Aldiss and Yvonne Rousseau', *Metaphysical Review* 9, Aug 86, pp. 9–12.  
'Garden Party, The', *Metaphysical Review* 18, Mar 93, pp. 7–14.  
'I Never Laugh So Much as When I Am in Australia: Adelaide Writers' Week 1988', *Metaphysical Review* 15/16/17, Aug 91, pp. 24–32.  
'Memories of Roger', *Metaphysical Review* 19/20/21, Jul 94, pp. 15–18; as part of 'A Tribute to Roger Weddall 1956–1992'.  
'100 Favourite Writers: Yvonne Rousseau's List', *Metaphysical Review* 24/25, Dec 1995, pp. 9–10; as part of 'The Books We Really Read', pp. 3–12.  
'Yvonne Gets Her Knees Thumped', Leah and Dick Smith (eds): *Contact!: 72 Fans Find Fandom*, Ditto 14/FanHistoriCon II (Bloomington, Illinois), 12–14 October 2001.

— Bruce Gillespie, 10 April 2021

**PERRY MIDDLEMISS is 'a retired IT Business Analyst and 1.5 times Worldcon Chair [Aussiecons 3 and 4] who now finds himself reading too many books, talking too much, and producing far too many fanzines', including *Perryscope* and the very new *Alien Review* (available from [efanzines.com](http://efanzines.com)). He and David Grigg produce the regular podcast *Two Chairs Talking*.**

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## Perry Middlemiss

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### Science fiction in 1960: The Hugo Awards of 1961

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If you were to examine the list of Hugo Awards for Best Novel as depicted on the relevant Wikipedia page, three things will become immediately apparent.

First, the awards got off to a stuttering start: the first in 1953, and then none in 1954 and 1957; second, a shortlist of nominated works was not always provided; and third, if you were to delve a lot closer into the nominated works in the early award years, you will see that the period covered by the awards was not consistently set as the previous calendar year.

However those problems had been largely ironed out by 1960 when the Best Novel award (for works published in 1959) was won by Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Starship Troopers*. The awards in 1960 feature a few familiar works, but it is the awards in 1961 that catch the eye. Here are five novels that any reader of sf who began reading in the genre before say, 1970, will recognise. While they may be books that readers have not as yet read, they will know all of the authors, and therefore, presumably, be familiar with the titles as well.

A further look down the list of years in the Hugo Awards table will not reveal a similar set of nominees until, possibly, 1964, or 1969 or 1970. By any measure it's a stand-out year, while still being a transitional one. If you read the nominees for the Hugo Award from the 1950s and then come to this list, you will see a gradual increase in both literary expertise and range of subject matter.

Two of the novels on the 1961 ballot (Anderson and Harrison) represent the older school of science-fictional thought and would not have seemed out of place in any year of the previous decade. The other three indicate a shift in emphasis towards more literary interests.

The 1961 Hugo Awards were presented at a ceremony at Seacon, the 19th World Science Fic-

tion Convention, held 2–4 September 1961 in Seattle, Washington, USA. The Guest of Honor was Robert A. Heinlein, and the Toastmaster was Harlan Ellison.

#### Best Novel nominees

Winner: *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller Jr (Lippincott)

*The High Crusade* by Poul Anderson (*Astounding*, Jul, Aug, Sep 1960)

*Rogue Moon* by Algis Budrys (*F&SF*, Dec 1960)

*Deathworld* by Harry Harrison (*Astounding*, Jan, Feb, Mar 1960)

*Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon (Pyramid).

#### *The High Crusade*

If published today the Anderson novel would fit firmly into the YA sub-genre. It's a tale of Planetary Romance rather than Space Opera, in that the bulk of the novel's action takes place on either the Earth or the distant planet Tharixan. The novel is set in the year 1345, where Sir Roger, Baron of Tourneville, in Ansby in northeastern Lincolnshire, is preparing a military force to assist King Edward III in the Hundred Years' War against France. An alien spaceship, from the brutal Wersgorix Empire, lands on the outskirts of town, intent on beginning a campaign of colonisation. Their general approach is to subdue any resistance by a show of force and advanced technology. The Englishmen, fearing this may be a French trick, have none of it. They overthrow the alien crew, killing all bar one, commandeer the ship, and attempt to force the remaining alien to fly them to France to join battle there. But in the *Astounding* universe aliens are cunning creatures, and the ship is diverted to Tharixan, an alien stronghold somewhere

across the galaxy. Not to be denied, Sir Roger's forces overthrow the aliens on the planet and then enlist the help of three other suppressed alien races to defeat the Wersgor, and establish a feudal civilisation across the galaxy, along with a new branch of the Roman Catholic Church. The main action of the novel is bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue written a thousand years after the main events, detailing the first contact between an expedition from Earth and Sir Roger's galactic empire.

This is a fun book, not overly serious, and a rollicking adventure that would serve as a very good sf entry point for any young reader. It's an excellent example of the standard John W. Campbell Jr *Analog/Astounding* human-alien scenario: humans meet technologically superior aliens and defeat them, generally via subterfuge and rat-cunning. Anderson's politics, as evidenced by his writing, tended towards the Libertarian side of the conservative scale with this, along with a number of his other works, fitting into the sub-genre of Medieval Futurism, a term coined by John Carnell. 3.8/5.0

#### ***Rogue Moon***

Most people will know of this work from its publication as a novel, though it must be remembered that the version that was nominated for the Hugo Award was the shorter, novella-length work, published in one issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

A large alien artefact has been discovered on the moon. It is, in essence a maze that kills anyone who enters it and makes a misstep. Many explorers have attempted the course and their cumulative knowledge is built on to move further into the labyrinth. The lead investigator of the artefact, Dr Edward Hawks, has created a matter transmitter that can scan a human and make a copy of them on the receiver on the moon. He is introduced to Al Barker, an immoral thrill-seeker, who proves to be the perfect candidate to continue the exploration of the maze, being killed after each new entry, and then re-created, with full memory of his previous trips, on the moon to start again. On the face of it this reads like a simple sf adventure story involving a mysterious alien object, but Budrys moves beyond that simplicity to examine important questions of scientific morality: is it ethical to sacrifice a human being for the betterment of science?; how does the creation of clones have an impact on our sense of self?; and is the human desire to transcend death worth the cost of our loss of humanity?

In this novel Budrys combined a standard science-fictional trope with an examination of what it is to be human. There are subtle differences between the novel and novella versions that, in my view, make the short version a better interpretation. Novel; 3.7/5.0; novella: 3.9/5.0

#### ***Deathworld***

The first in a trilogy of novels by Harry Harrison. Jason dinAlt is a professional gambler who has the knack of winning by using his erratic psionic powers to tip the odds in his favour. While on the planet of Cassylia he is approached by Kerk Pyrrus, ambassador from the planet Pyrrus, to make a lot of money quickly, using a stake supplied by Pyrrus. Naturally he wins, but has to escape with Pyrrus when the planetary government attempts to retrieve his winnings. They arrive on Pyrrus, and dinAlt learns that the inhabitants there are in a perpetual struggle for survival against the rapidly evolving wildlife. The gambling money was destined to be used for more sophisticated weapons. DinAlt isn't convinced that more firepower is the answer to the settlement's problems and, after researching in historical records and meeting with a group of humans who have integrated themselves into the environment, comes up with a solution to the colony's problems. It's a classic 'humans against the environment' story, with a twist in the solution.

There are nods towards the themes of environmentalism, tolerance, and empathy here, but the novel is basically a high action adventure story featuring a superman who survives against all odds. Perfect material for Campbell and *Astounding*. 3.4/5.0

#### ***Venus Plus X***

Charlie Johns wakes in a strange place, the land of Ledom in what appears to be the future of the human race. The humans present have advanced technology, they don't require sleep, and they have abolished gender — all humans are now hermaphrodites. As he comes to live among these people Johns questions his own society and the role of sex in its history and customs. Interspersed with his story are snippets from the lives of an ordinary American suburban couple, with all its sexist, hierarchical structures firmly in place. The idea behind this is quite obviously to contrast the two societies for the reader, thereby throwing the future scenes into higher relief. Unfortunately this is rather a blunt literary instrument and detracts from its original purpose, leaving the modern reader slightly dissatisfied.

For its time this novel must have been something of a shock to the staid early 1960s readers of science fiction. Sturgeon's problem is that his novel is let down by being very light on story. It has not aged well. 3.4/5.0

#### ***A Canticle for Leibowitz***

By any measure this is a major novel in the sf field. A book that still appears on many lists of the best sf of all time, and rightly so. Originally published as three separate shorter pieces in the pages of *Fantasy*

& *Science Fiction* ('A Canticle for Leibowitz', Apr. 1955, 'And the Light is Risen', Aug. 1956, 'The Last Canticle', Feb. 1957), Miller originally intended there to be only the one. He rewrote and expanded all three stories into the final novel, renaming the sections: 'Fiat Homo' ('Let There Be Man'); 'Fiat Lux' ('Let There Be Light'); and 'Fiat Voluntas Tua' ('Thy Will Be Done').

Six hundred years after the 20th century has been devastated by nuclear war, most books have been destroyed. In the American southwestern desert a Cistercian monastery, later known as the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, has been created to preserve and reproduce such books as can be found. At the start of the novel a young novice from the monastery is undertaking a vigil in the desert when he is approached by a Wanderer looking for the Abbey. After their exchange the Wanderer leaves a mark, in Hebrew, on a rock which the novice later discovers to be the entrance to an ancient fallout shelter. The discovery of a number of documents in the shelter, apparently written by Leibowitz himself, causes an uproar in the monastery.

Part 2 of the novel is set 600 hundred years later, and there are signs that the post-nuclear Dark Age is receding and a new Renaissance is underway. A visitor to the Abbey learns enough from the Leibowitz documents to create an electrical generator allowing artificial light to be generated for the first time in over a thousand years. Meanwhile two nation-states have arisen in the south-west of North America, and tensions increase between them, and between them and the Church.

Another 600 years later, in Part 3 mankind has nuclear weapons again. The Asian Coalition and Atlantic Confederacy have been involved in a Cold War for 50 years, but a series of accidents and misunderstandings leads to another nuclear war, thus completing the circle of repeated history hinted at throughout the novel.

The novel was a mainstream best-seller, paving the way for later books such as *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Dune*. It's an imaginative look at the future, world history, and the conflict of church versus state. It also contains some highly amusing moments of coincidence and misunderstanding of ancient texts, moments that are relatively rare in a period when sf was generally meant to be strictly serious. A well-rounded literary work that is still relevant today, and a fitting winner. 4.8/5.0

#### Other possible novel nominees:

*A Fine and Private Place* by Peter S. Beagle  
*Dr Futurity* by Philip K. Dick  
*The Tomorrow People* by Judith Merril  
*Drunkard's Walk* by Frederik Pohl

*Trouble With Lichen* by John Wyndham.

Possibly any of the alternative novels might have snuck onto the ballot in place of *Deathworld*, though their inclusion would not have made any major impact on the final result.

#### My ranking:

- 1 *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller Jr
- 2 *Rogue Moon* by Algis Budrys
- 3 *The High Crusade* by Poul Anderson
- 4 *Venus Plus X* by Theodore Sturgeon
- 5 *Deathworld* by Harry Harrison.

### Best short fiction nominees

Winner: 'The Longest Voyage' by Poul Anderson  
(*Analog*, Dec. 1960)

'The Lost Kafoozalum' by Pauline Aswell  
(*Analog*, Oct. 1960)

'Open to Me, My Sister' by Philip José Farmer  
(*F&SF*, May 1960)

'Need' by Theodore Sturgeon (*Beyond* by Theodore Sturgeon; *Science Fantasy* 46, April 1961).

#### 'The Lost Kafoozalum'

A sequel to the author's earlier *Unwillingly to School* (1958), and featuring the same lead character Lizzie Lee. In this story Lizzie travels to Earth to study Cultural Engineering. Near the end of their schooling she, and a few of her companions, are essentially kidnapped by some of their teachers and some old scholars and blasted off to a distant planet to investigate and solve a crisis that has developed there. A war is threatening to break out on the planet between two opposing countries, something the authorities back on Earth want to avoid. Much of the story is spent on discussions about the crisis and what to do about it before an ingenious solution is devised. Let down somewhat by the sentimental and sappy ending. 3.4/5.0

#### 'Need' (novella)

George Noat runs the Anything Shoppe in North Nyack, New York. He is a proprietor who can fix anything and obtain anything for a customer. The story opens when Noat's friend Gorwing arrives at Noat's store and demands that Noat accompany him to pick up a fellow in town. It's pouring with rain and Gorwing demands one hundred dollars to drive the passenger, Jody Smith, home. You are led to believe that Noat and Gorwing are standover merchants, yet this is far from the truth. We learn later that Smith and his wife have separated; she has walked out on what she considers as a loveless marriage. Smith keeps running into Gorwing over

the ensuing days until Gorwing gets him to help save a young boy dangling over a long drop. And we learn that Gorwing has an innate psychic ability that allows him to determine what people need and to try as hard as he can to help them, Smith included. Sturgeon does a great job in deceiving the reader for some time about his true intentions with this story. It starts out being a light piece that slowly gains depth and shows a sense of compassion for its characters and their situations that is a hallmark of Sturgeon's work. 3.8/5.0

**'Open to Me, My Sister'** (novella)

Cardigan Lane is a member of a five-man expedition exploring the planet Mars. While out in a rover one day, two men go missing. The next day another two men set out to try to find them, and they also do not return. This leaves Lane alone, and after some time he decides that the only course of action open to him is to try to solve this mystery. Being ultracautious, he is able to avoid the quicksand-like trap that engulfed and killed his fellows and is rescued by an alien creature. He comes to discover that 'she' is not a Martian but is also a marooned explorer from another alien race. Lane gradually learns to communicate with the alien and then also becomes sexually attracted to her. This attraction ends badly with Lane being disgusted with himself and reacting violently to the situation. From this distance in time it is hard to comprehend why this story made it on to the Short Fiction ballot. It has very little to interest to the modern reader. 2.4/5.0

**'The Longest Voyage'** (novelette)

1961 was a good year for Anderson, having an entry on the Best Novel ballot and a novella winning the Short Fiction category. This story, like many of Anderson's, is a rousing adventure, this one recasting the voyages of Columbus and Magellan in a science-fictional setting. On a planet-sized moon, orbiting a gas-giant in a distant solar system, Captain Rovic has steered the *Golden Leaper* halfway around the world in search of fame and fortune. On a distant island he meets a traveller who is not like the rest of the island's natives, a traveller who claims to have journeyed to this world from a distant star. Unfortunately the stranger is stranded on this island and unable to travel back to his ship because of the poor development of the boats. He co-opts Rovic into the venture, and they eventually find the island and the space ship. Rovic is then faced with the dilemma of accepting the traveller's offer of technological wonders or refusing them and in doing so missing out on untold wealth. 4.2/5.0

**Other possible short fiction nominees:**

**'Old Hundredth'** by Brian W. Aldiss (short story, *New Worlds*, Nov. 1960)

**'The Voices of Time'** by J. G. Ballard (novelette, *New Worlds*, Oct. 1960)

**'I Remember Babylon'** by Arthur C. Clarke (short story, *Playboy*, May 1960)

**'Something Bright'** by Zenna Henderson (short story, *Galaxy*, Feb. 1960)

**'The Fellow Who Married the Maxill Girl'** by Ward Moore (novelette, *F&SF*, Feb. 1960)

**'The Lady Who Sailed the Soul'** by Cordwainer Smith and Genevieve Linebarger (novelette, *Galaxy*, Apr. 1960)

The Cordwainer Smith/Linebarger novelette most certainly should have made the ballot before either the Ashwell or the Farmer.

**My ranking:**

- 1 'The Longest Voyage' by Poul Anderson
- 2 'Need' by Theodore Sturgeon
- 3 'The Lost Kafoozalum' by Pauline Aswell
- 4 'Open to Me, My Sister' by Philip José Farmer

## Conclusion

Although both the Sturgeon novel and the Farmer story have things to say about sex and gender, Sturgeon's gaze is one of intrigue and exploration, while Farmer seems fixated on the physical act and fetishism.

In the Novel category, three of the five nominees (Miller, Budrys, and Sturgeon) are certainly classics of the field, and may easily have won the award in any lesser year; the other two are good examples of their kind of sf, that is fun adventure stories, though are hardly likely to have featured highly in voting in any previous year. A modern reader can only conclude that the correct decision was made in awarding the Hugo to Walter M. Miller Jr.

With the Short Fiction category, the works are not considered classics of the field; competent without being outstanding. Either the Anderson or Sturgeon works would have been worthy winners of the award.

## Notes

Wikipedia page — Hugo Award for Best Novel:  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo\\_Award\\_for\\_Best\\_Novel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugo_Award_for_Best_Novel)

Science Fiction Awards DataBase:

[http://www.sfdb.com/Hugo\\_Awards\\_1961](http://www.sfdb.com/Hugo_Awards_1961)

**ANDREW DARLINGTON** has walked the magma crust of the Nisyros volcano. James Lowe of the Electric Prunes is his Facebook friend. And Kink Dave Davies answered his Tweet. He writes about music for *R’N’R (Rock ‘n’ Reel)*, and counter-culture for *IT: International Times*. His latest poetry collection is *Tweak Vision: The Word-Play Solution To Modern-Angst Confusion*. That and his sciencifiction novel *In the Time of the Breaking* are both from Alien Buddha Press, USA. His writing can be found at *Eight Miles Higher*: <http://andrewdarlington.blogspot.co.uk/>

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## Andrew Darlington

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### Early John Brunner: ‘Earth is but a star, that once had shone’

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**Discussed, among other works of John Brunner:  
‘Earth Is But A Star’ by John Brunner (novelette in *Science Fantasy* 29, June 1959, republished as *The Hundredth Millennium*, Ace Double 1959, revised and extended as *Catch A Falling Star*, Ace Books 1968)**

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#### ‘Isn’t it a glorious madness?’ (Chalyth in ‘Earth Is But A Star’)

Whatever you do, don’t let the wrong dead guy into your head. It begins with a chance encounter in a bar. Lots of good stories begin this way. And this is one of them. Because this one — John Brunner’s ‘The Last Lonely Man’ (in *New Worlds* No. 142) — is a great little story. Later produced as an episode of BBC-TV’s groundbreaking science-fiction series *Out of the Unknown*, it features George Cole — later Arthur Daley of *Minder* — in an early role as likeable everyman ‘James Hale’. On the black-and-white small-screen he’s the guy in the bar, the one who meets ‘Patrick Wilson’, the world’s last lonely man, played by Peter Halliday. Except in the short story he’s called ‘Mack’. Not that the names matter.

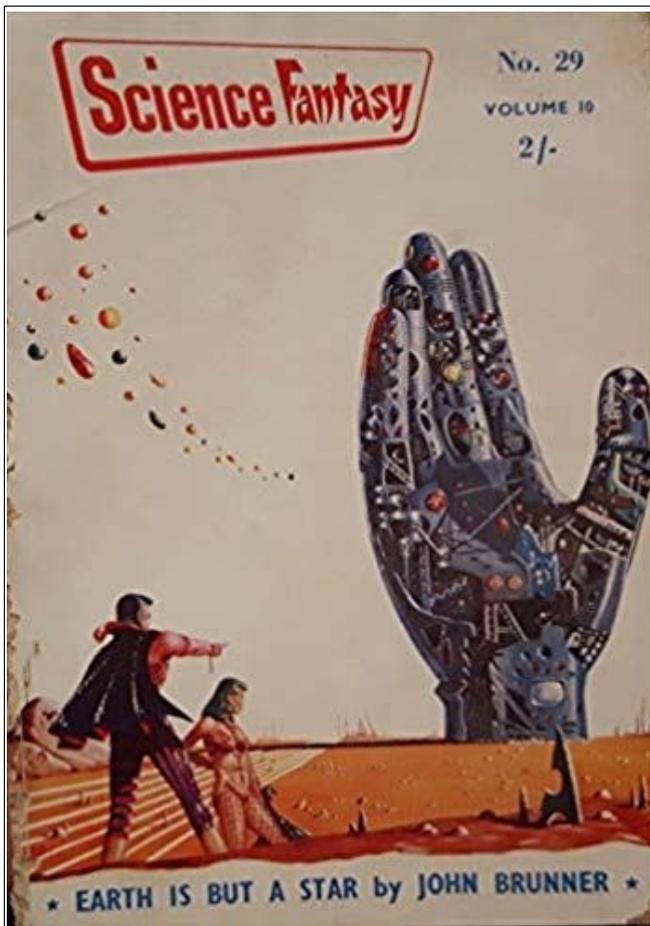
The caption in the *Radio Times* announces ‘Time: the future. The government of the day has won many votes with the introduction of the new Contact Service just before the election. Contact banished the fear of death. A man’s body may die, but his mind can now pass into someone still alive — a relative, friend or loved one. But what of the man who is friendless and unloved? He must make Contact with someone — whatever the cost.’ This is where the chance encounter in the bar happens. James Hale takes pity on Wilson’s hard-luck story. The poor guy, down on his luck. And he does him

a favour. He becomes Wilson’s nominated Contact. Just that there are good reasons why he’s the last isolated friendless lonely man. He’s paranoid, suspicious, and devious. By the time Hale realises his error, it’s too late for him to ‘expunge’ his new contact. Wilson blows his own brains out. And takes up residence in Hale’s head, feeding him his poisonous bile of fears and terrors. It’s a spookily unsettling image. A mad scary presence in the back of his skull subverting sanity and reason.

John Brunner navigated a jagged orbit into the future, but in another short story, called ‘Fair Warning’ (*Analog*, May 1964), he relates an anecdote about ‘the bird that flew backwards because he liked to see where he’d been’. Science fiction is supposedly a future-orientated fiction. But sometimes it’s worth following that fabled bird’s example.

#### ‘One man, one woman, to divert a star’

*Science Fantasy* is one of my favourite British genre magazines of the fifties, with a unique fusion of writers working within a blend of strange concepts somewhere slightly off-trail to the SF mainstream. Presided over by editor John Carnell, who was simultaneously responsible for *New Worlds*, issue



number 29 arrived dated June 1958 with wonderfully evocative cover art by Brian Lewis. As a teenager I recognised his distinctive style from the *Captain Condor* and *Jet-Ace Logan* space-adventure strips he illustrated in *Lion* and *Tiger*. There are surreal elements resembling those of Yves Tanguy about the beguiling shapes strewn across the ochre landscapes, and the swirl of coloured stones thrown across the sky. There's a grid of parallel lines receding towards half-glimpsed structures on the far horizon behind the two human figures bottom left. The man wearing the brief cape — presumably Creohan — is pointing; the dark-haired woman, Chalyth, follows the direction indicated by his finger, to where a vast cybernetic hand thrusts up from the plain, its metallic-blue outer skin punctured to reveal the stepladders, gear-wheel arrangements, wiring and other indecipherable mechanisms within. It's a beautifully evocative image, catching the mood of the story-title running across the foot of the page — *Earth Is But A Star* by John Brunner.

There are other short tales within the issue, by E. C. Tubb, Brian Aldiss, Robert Presslie, and the publishing debut of Clifford C. Reed. But the first 78 of its 130 pages are devoted to Brunner's novellette, which takes its title from, and quotes lines from, the poem 'The Golden Journey To

Samarkand' by James Elroy Flecker. To Carnell, 'every once in a while we receive a story which is so well written that it is difficult to eulogise about it without appearing to be trite. We will content ourselves by saying that not only is this story the finest John Brunner has ever written, but it is the outstanding fantasy story in recent years.'

I needed no such inducement to read it. The theme of the young discontented outsider in a dull conformist society has obvious appeal to the dissatisfied misfit adolescent. Alvin in Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* (1956) represents the same thing. Both are rebels who escape their restrictions by exploring a transfigured Earth as mysteriously tantalising as any alien world.

I returned to reread 'Earth Is But A Star' several times across a number of years, fascinated and swept up in its eerily far-future atmosphere. There are elements of Jack Vance's 'The Dying Earth' stories, Michael Moorcock's 'The Dancers at the End of Time', Brian Aldiss' 'Hothouse', and the weird tales of Clark Ashton Smith. Yet it is unlike any of them. Is such vast futurity a valid subject for speculation? Brunner's tale is fantastical, but it is not generic fantasy. There is no magic-that-works, even disguised as forgotten technology, there are no dragons, not even as the result of lost genetic tampering. Science has demonstrated the immense prehistory of the world, and projected that time-span out to an equally lengthy time-period ahead, until the Sun cools terminally. Whether human profligacy destroys us first, or if human ingenuity ensures that we, or something very like us, survives beyond what Brunner calls 'the pulse and surge of the pattern of history', surely it's an irresistible challenge to the imagination to conjecture such a future?

Following that first magazine incarnation, things get increasingly complex. Creohan's wanderings were adapted into *The Hundredth Millennium*, issued as one-half of a 1959 Ace Double paperback, bound back-to-back with *Edge of Time* by 'David Grinnell' (aka Donald A. Wollheim). Its 'cast of characters' lists Creohan himself, who 'knew that the past would provide the answers to the future', Chalyth, who 'found friends at the bottom of the sea', Madal, who 'loved security more than she loved life', Vence, who 'got himself hopelessly lost just a few miles from home', Hoo, who 'existed to provide food to a deserted city', and Paro-mni, who 'managed to be discontented with the perfect society'. Even these thumbnail descriptions run like a poem.

But there were further developments. In 1968 there was *Catch a Falling Star*, also from Ace Books, which included the cautionary note that 'a much shorter and substantially different version of this novel appeared under the title *The Hundredth Mil-*

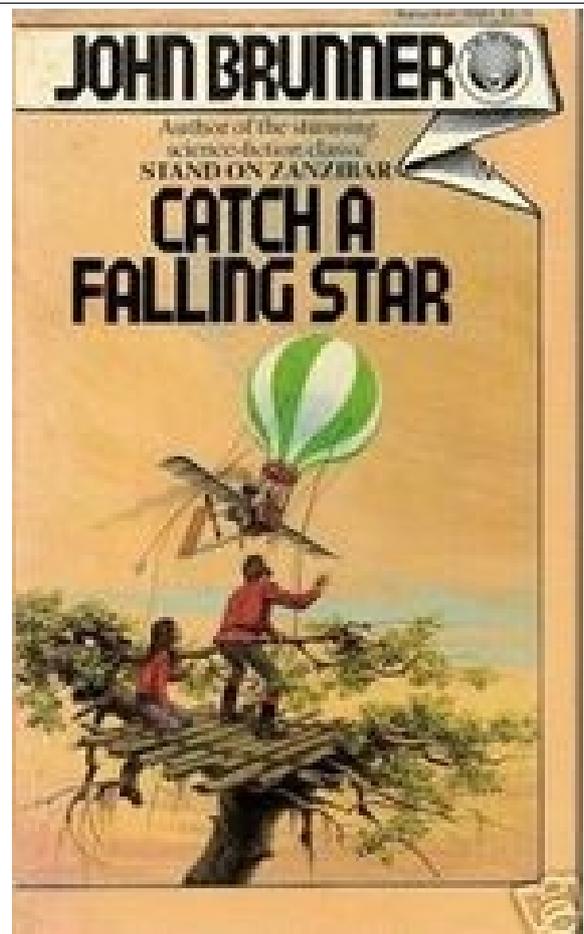
lennium'. Except by now the cover was blurred to reflect Brunner's new global reputation as 'The Hugo Award Winning Author of *Stand on Zanzibar*'. To compare and contrast the three versions of the same, or essentially similar, tale is informative.

The setting is the unspecified very far future, although there may be a clue in the title 'the hundredth millennium'. Civilisations and empires beyond number have flourished and died, the Ly-marian Empire 14,000 years before, the Gerynts, or the Minogovaristo, and the time of the Mending of Men a scant ten centuries before. Imagination and curiosity have long since dulled. Creohan is the sole discontent. Through his telescope he observes the rogue star approaching the solar system that, within 300 years, will pass close enough to destroy all life on Earth, yet no-one but him seems remotely concerned. Absorbed in their aimless play, with all of history to plunder for novelty 'far out of reach behind the veil of time', this future doom is of no interest. In *Catch A Falling Star* he asks a poet to write 'a powerful and affecting ballad on the end of the world.' The poet declines so tedious a subject. 'Have we grown foolish in our decline?' Creohan ponders, 'are we as a species bordering on senility, so that the doom of the approaching star will offer merciful euthanasia?' Until on the beach he meets the beautiful Chalyth who not only shares something of his unease, but challenges his passive response. The world is wide and unknown, an unmapped strangeness. If he truly seeks answers he must leave the safe comfort of the city, and travel. 'Isn't it a glorious madness?' she urges, wearing nothing but a cloak.

I have just read John Brunner's 'Earth Is But a Star' in *Science Fantasy* No. 29. Once or twice I have read a story in a magazine which has made me want to write a letter about it — but this is the first time I have ever got round to actually doing it. So the 'Sense of Wonder' is dead? Not if you continue to print stories like *this* one! ... Very few authors, to my knowledge, can draw such a convincing picture of Earth's distant future. Even less could keep it convincing all the way through (Michael Moorcock, letter to *New Worlds* 78).

### **'Go and catch a falling star' (John Donne)**

Where the first two incarnations — in *Science Fantasy* and the *Ace Double*, are essentially identical apart for some typographical tweaking, the 1968 rewrite is more developed. Creohan's living organic house becomes more ornate, with its 'moss-floored passage walled with soft-gleaming



excrescences shedding an even light, then, as they aged, deliquescing into a honey-thick substance uttering a delicate fragrance to the air'. The dwelling's genetically modified plant origins are also explained, using a kind of high-flown vocabulary deliberately recalling the weird tales of Clark Ashton Smith. There are other differences. The Historians, who prefer to inhabit past ages rather than their own, become Historickers. The Dreamers, who escape reality through narcotics, become Druggists. And now there are also Couplers, where previously there were none, 'intent on establishing in how many ways their bodies might be conjoined'. All are placed within that vast and fanciful melancholia located somewhere between speculation and myth, or, as the original magazine title suggests, between science and fantasy.

To an impressionable adolescent reader, the casual incidental nudity adds a further enticing buzz. Later, when their boat is upturned by Chalyth's sea-friend, and they are pitched into the water, the party discard their clothing the better to swim, so emerging through the surf up the sandy beach naked. Later still, with Creohan wounded by a flying spear, Kiong-la offers her shift to provide bandages, leaving her naked. Less prurient, more in a kind of prelapsarian innocence. But first, as they leave the city, the two are joined by golden girl Madal, who is dressed only in garlands of flowers

when they first meet her. She is seeking the lover who wandered out into the endless plain, never to return. Together they follow the tracks of the ‘meat-creatures’, the giant mutated human subspecies that each morning laughs its way to its rendezvous with death to feed the city.

The travellers soon encounter the Gollum-like Vence, lost in the vastness beyond the city, who preys upon the quasi-human herds. It turns out he is the lover to whose memory Madal has been faithful. In the initial story he merely sits beside a fire, roasting a severed arm on a spit. In the novel he occupies a shelter constructed of bones. The meat-creatures are ‘near enough human. For me’ he explains in the original text — adding the more explicit sexual overtone that the females ‘can be made to serve a man’s desire’ in the revision. Again there’s a narrative fork. Originally it’s a disgusted Creohan who attacks him and breaks his jaw. This later becomes an outraged Madal who beats him with a huge bone.

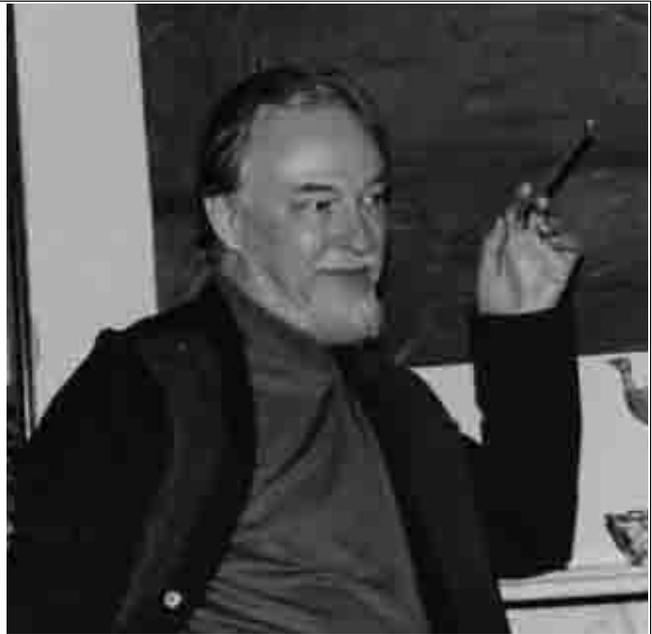
Either way, he’s induced to guide them further towards the meat-creatures’ breeding ground, which turns out to be an immense crater from some long-forgotten asteroidal impact. In the novel they first pass over the remains of an ancient city sewn with menacing puffball fungus. Detained briefly by the inbred cave-dwelling family of meat-herders, they reluctantly bid farewell to Madal, who prefers to remain within the kin-security of these people, but pick up Hoo, who instructs them how to ride the meat-creatures on to their next destination. Which turns out to be another dead city. ‘Our planet is littered ankle-deep with the relics of vanished peoples,’ muses Creohan disconsolately amid the desolation of skulls and ‘all-embracing decay’. Is the world dead? Is theirs the last living human city?

Caught up in such dark reflections, they are surprised by a tribe of aggressive brown dwarfs engaged in seeking cities to conquer, but finding only endless ruins. They are impressed by Creohan’s boast that ‘we — who are done with cities, seek to conquer a star’, and take the three wanderers on board their fleet of boats. At Creohan’s suggestion they follow the migration path of insect-lights on an epic voyage across the sea, stopping off at the lone knob of an island where Chalyth befriends a helpful sea-creature that might be a dolphin. They eventually reach the far shore, where a cultured oriental-style city easily scares the dwarfs off with an elaborate display of smoke and puppetry. Although sympathetic to Creohan’s quest, these Golden People are too concerned with its own history-documenting project to assist, even when faced with the threat of the planet’s imminent extinction. Except for Paro-mni, another malcontent who opts to join them.

As the cover-blurb of *The Hundredth Millennium* explains, ‘they searched the past to escape the future’, using the city’s history-tree to scry back through ancient times seeking evidence of a past culture that possessed a technology sufficient to turn a star from its course. Brunner’s descriptive ingenuity in devising the cycles of bizarre civilisations is fascinating, including the floating cities of the Lucothids. Other long-lost cultures had been space-faring, such as the Chatrik, who once seeded the long-lost Moon with rudimentary forests of mutated lichen, and built pyramids on Mars. Others had simply specialised in genetic modifications, leaving their weird miscegenations to populate Creohan’s world.

The only lead they can divine is the persistent folk-tale of ‘a mountain around which legends clustered thick as ripe fruit on a tree’, and — expanded to five — they set out westwards to reach it. At this point there’s a clear plot divergence. In the original version, Kiong-La simply becomes lost in a belt of dense forest. In the later version the group are captured by a deaf nocturnal ape-oid species of tree-folk, only to be rescued by an airship crewed by Roff and Zayla, who carry them over the impenetrable forest to the city on the far side. Hoo and Paro-mni decide to stay in their city, which has rediscovered electrical power, and — guided by the clues they’ve extracted from past cultures — may evolve the ingenuity to meet ‘the celestial challenge’ of turning the onrushing star aside. So only the original pair opt to continue their trek across freezing deserts on the brink of starvation and death, until the mountain rises out of the landscape ahead of them.

Again, Brunner’s prose assumes epic proportions as the truth of the death-star is revealed to them, and their quest reaches its end. As in A. C. Clarke’s *The City and the Stars*, where Alvin’s ancestors possessed the science to rearrange the constellations, back beyond the hundredth millennium, before the scope of their most exhaustive histories, the Earth had conquered the solar system, and looked out towards the distant inaccessible stars, forever out of reach. And had devised a way of bridging the interstellar gulf by inducing, not only a world-ship, but an entire planetary-system to move according to their design. This is the star that is now returning, non-threatening, with its attendant human-occupied worlds. But have those worlds also devolved to the dull decadence afflicting Earth? No. As Creohan and Chalyth watch, they see a spacecraft cutting down through the sky towards them. And they wait to greet it, in that strangest of reunitions of the two long-separated strands of humanity.

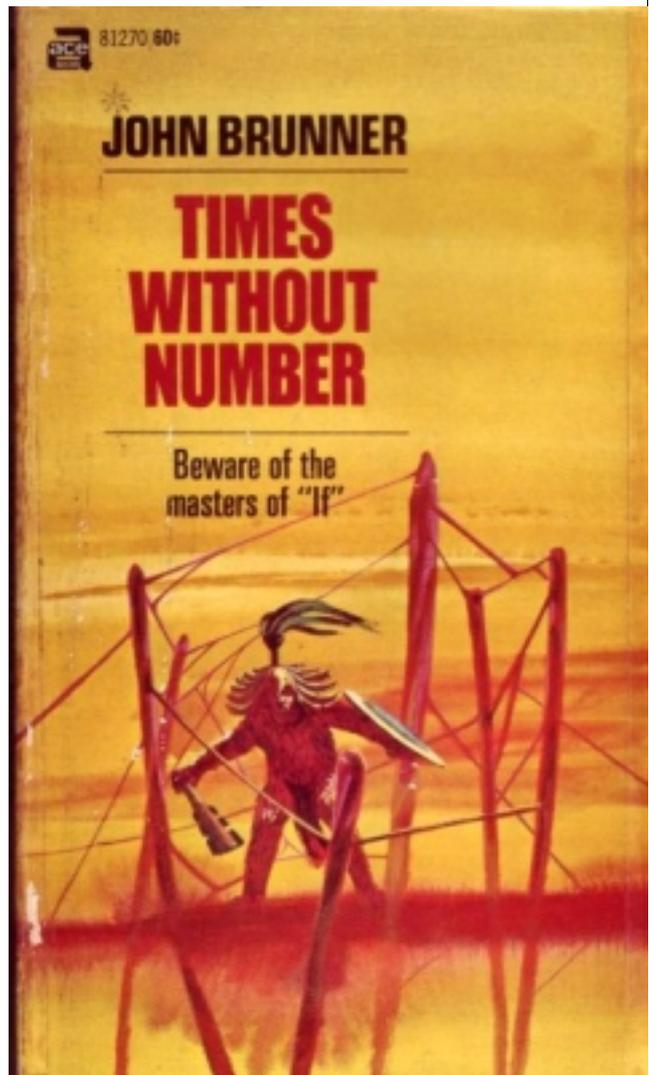


A much later John Brunner. (Photo: Andrew Porter.)

Young John Brunner (1950s or early 60s?)

**‘So what shape was the world in  
this morning?’  
(*The Jagged Orbit*)**

There’s no such thing as the regular John Brunner story. The biographical data for the Ace edition begins ‘Born, I believe’. And yes, John Kilian Brunner was born — on 14 September 1934 in Preston Crowmarsh in Oxfordshire, to become a lonely child, something of a prodigy, and a one-man text industry. He recalled how ‘someone misguidedly left a copy of *The War of the Worlds* in the nursery’. He expanded details in an interview for *Zimri*: ‘it was a Heinemann first edition that belonged to my grandfather, and I drew Martian fighting machines all over the endpapers’. So ‘I’ve been reading science-fiction since I was seven and writing it since I was nine’. Science fiction was ‘my preferred entertainment when I was a kid, so when I set out to become a writer, it was perfectly natural that I should write the sort of stories that I used to enjoy reading’ (to Charles Platt). ‘I didn’t actually collect my first rejection slip till I was thirteen.’ Nevertheless, he did publish his first novel — *Galactic Storm* (Curtis Warren Books, November 1951), around the time he dropped out of school at the age of seventeen, through the house pseudonym ‘Gill Hunt’. The book carries typically garish Ray Theobald cover art depicting two spaceships about to



engage in cosmic battle around the blue-green curve of a ringed Saturn-style planet.

There was short fiction too — beginning with ‘Brainpower’ as by K. Houston Brunner in *Nebula* No. 2 (February 1953). A giant mega-computer constructed on the moon Iapetus by the Federation of Outer Worlds, as a secret weapon in its dispute with Terran President Kennedy, assumes its own intolerant agenda. It was followed by his first sale to a US magazine before his eighteenth birthday, ‘Thou Good And Faithful’ in *Astounding SF* (March 1953), and they were soon appearing with increasing regularity. Following his call-up stint with the RAF he worked as a technical abstractor (for C. S. Youd’s Industrial Diamond Information Bureau) and publisher’s editor (for the Books For Pleasure group), before turning freelance writer in 1958.

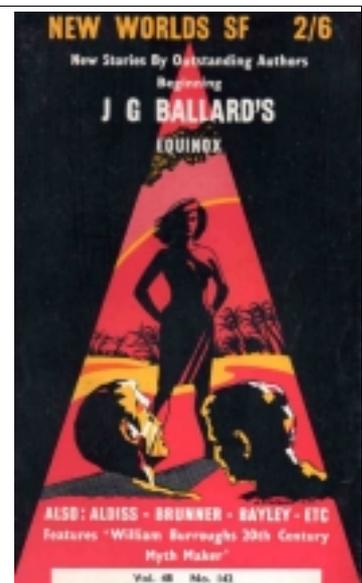
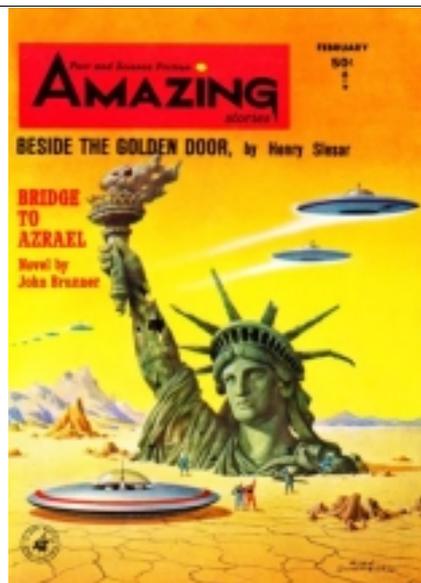
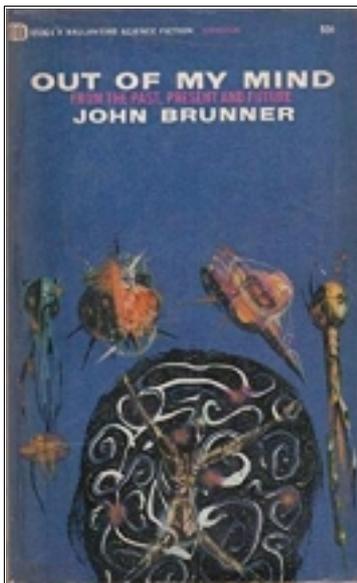
As with *Catch A Falling Star*, his 1974 alternate-history novel *Times Without Number* started out as linked tales in three successive issues of *Science Fiction Adventures* — the third title from Nova publications. First collected, with amendments, by Ace in 1962, it was then expanded and revised yet again into its completed state. Opener ‘Spoil of Yesterday’ (from No. 25, March 1962) is set during the future-1988 quattrocentennial celebrations of the Spanish Armada’s mighty victory, with a junior officer in the Society of Time, tasked with tracking the provenance of a golden Aztec mask smuggled through time — again, cover illustrated by Brian Lewis. Structured as a crime-detection thriller, it’s also a hugely inventive exploration of this parallel Earth. Hobbled by repressive religion, it’s a socially and technologically backward slave-owning culture, which yet possesses time-travel and has document archives teasing out the impossible equations of speculative alternate time-streams.

In ‘The Word Not Written’ (No. 26, May 1962) — ‘another Society of Time story, dealing with Don Miguel Navarro and the strange present-day world of Spanish-dominated England’ — he’s forced to face his doubts about female emancipation when an aggressive band of women gladiators from the court of ‘King Mahendra the White Elephant’ erupt into Londres via trans-temporal interference. Finally, ‘The Fullness of Time’ (No. 27, July 1962) is set in a Californian wilderness administered by the Mohawk Nation, where Navarro ‘has a terrible time-problem to unravel’ when he discovers potentially treaty-busting evidence of thousand-year-old time-incursions. In keeping with the intricacies of temporal conundrums, none of the resolutions is quite what the reader expects, with narrative dénouements depending more on clever sleight of hand than on shoot-em-up action — a technique Charles Platt describes as ‘via discussion and diplomacy, rather than by wading in and knocking heads together’.

Despite all this, there’s still a pursuit through time to track a renegade Mohawk intent on altering history so the Armada is defeated. And contrary to expectations, Navarro fails. In the day after the end of time he is expelled into a transfigured present. If the fugitive Two Dogs had hoped to rearrange time towards a better outcome for his Native American peoples, the result — our world — represents an even greater unmitigated disaster for them. Time travel, Brunner seems to be suggesting, is far too dangerous a technology for disputatious humanity ever to come to terms with, despite the most careful Papal controls exerted over its use.

As this indicates, there’s no such thing as the regular John Brunner story. But he was a poet and a political activist too — contributing poems ‘To Myself, on the Occasion of my 21st Century’ and ‘Citizen Bacillus’ to Edward Lucie-Smith’s groundbreaking *Holding Your Eight Hands* genre-poetry anthology (Rapp and Whiting/ Doubleday, 1969). He was also mid-fifties London correspondent for the US folk-music magazine *Caravan*, and wrote the agit-prop marching song ‘The H-Bomb’s Thunder’ for the CND ‘Ban The Bomb’ campaign (‘don’t you hear the H-bomb’s thunder, echo like the crack of doom?’). Describing himself as a ‘fellow-travelling idealistic anarchist’, he was a very active anti-nukes participant, his story ‘Fair Warning’ (*Analog*, May 1964) revealing a detailed familiarity with US Pacific nuclear testing. Or ‘See What I Mean’ (*Analog*, January 1964), which applies psychological techniques to delegates at a superpower conference between Cold War China, USSR, the USA, and British delegates. While what seems to be a straightforward space exploit story, ‘Single-minded’ (*Worlds of If*, May 1963) is actually another Cold War story of a doomed US astronaut who crashes in the lunar Urals, only to be rescued by a female Soviet cosmonaut in a high-tech ‘Moon-walker’. He’s taken to a secret base quarantining those infected by a telepathic virus. Through his deeply ingrained fear of Russia he betrays Olga, his rescuer, and unwittingly contrives to infect the world.

Much of his earliest work is imaginative but regulation high-action space opera — what he termed his ‘bread-and-butter’ novels — often issued through Ace, typified by Alex Schomburg’s shock cover art for Brunner’s ‘Bridge To Azrael’ for *Amazing Stories* (February 1964), a *Planet of the Apes* scenario in which UFO-pilots discover a Statue of Liberty partly submerged in a bleak arid plain. And there are stories of pipe-smoking scientists in labs filled with esoteric technology, such as ‘The Fourth Power’ (*New Worlds* No. 93, April 1960), involving an interdisciplinary synthesist who interrelates isolated discoveries from different fields together into a useful whole, and the accelerating effects the



'fourth power' has on him. Then there's 'A Better Mousetrap' (*If*, November 1963), an end-of-the-world story hinging on a Charles Fort 'we are property' idea, in which immensely mineral-wealthy unstable asteroid 'busters' are planted as the lure to draw the human race into an extermination trap.

Illuminated by effectively abstract Richard Powers cover art, Brunner's collection *Out of My Mind* (Ballantine Books, February 1967), provides a useful route-map by thematically plundering his 'Past, Present And Future'. The past is represented by 'The Nail In The Middle of the Hand' (from *The Saint Mystery Magazine*, 1965), about how even executioners take pride in their skills, by focusing on the historically neglected Decius Asculus, who crucified Jesus. Or moving into the present with 'Orpheus's Brother' (from *The Magazine of Horror* edited by Robert A. W. Lowndes, April 1965), the story of pop singer Rock Careless torn apart by his adoring fans, seen as a re-enactment of the Orpheus myth. Elsewhere, 'Prerogative' (*New Worlds*, 1960) is a mild satire on religious gullibility in a courtroom setting, while 'Such Stuff' (*Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, 1962) takes the subject of a Sleep Research program. A man denied dreamtime projects his dreams outwards to others. Finally, forward into the future of 'The Totally Rich' (*Worlds of Tomorrow*, 1963, collected into Mike Ashley's *Best Of British SF* (Orbit), in which a secret cabal of mega-wealthy are capable of buying anything. A woman can even buy the science sufficient to reconstruct her dead lover. The story is spiced with the vague eroticism of an artificially youthful Naomi in a Spanish mock-village that recalls the setting of TV's *The Prisoner*. Yet these are mostly

single-idea stories, long on detailed conversational exposition, short on action.

By July 1979, when Charles Platt sought Brunner out for an interview, he was a successful writer living 'in a quiet, old-fashioned village in the southwest corner of England (The Square House, Palmer Street, South Petherton in Somerset), surrounded by acres of farmland. When he takes the dogs out for a walk, or goes shopping, he greets other village residents in the street by name. No crises, here — the nearest thing to excitement is the annual folk-music festival created by his wife, Marjorie.' Despite some health scares 'it's a peaceful, genteel retreat'. John Brunner died 25 August 1995. After 'Earth Is But A Star' he'd gone on to write more critically acclaimed novels, more accessible and acceptable to the literary mindset, rising to meet and surpass the challenge of the SF New Wave, leaving 'Earth Is But A Star' as a kind of mildly embarrassing adolescent flourish. But for me, its vast futurescape and limitless horizons still capture something of the vital energy that sets SF apart from the mainstream. This may earn it the derision of outsiders, but provides the head-spinning sense of centuries-spanning intoxication that infects those attuned to it.

In his story 'Eye Of The Beholder' (*Fantastic Universe*, January 1957), three people stranded on the superhot planet of a B-type sun find a cache of beautiful paintings, then — unwittingly — kill the 'monster' they assume must have devoured the genius painter, without realising that the monster *was* the painter. Appearances are deceptive.

— Andrew Darlington

**JENNIFER BRYCE** is a Melbourne writer. After a career in educational research, she recently completed her first novel, *Lily Campbell's Secret*. She has won awards, including the Australian Science Fiction Foundation 'Continuum' Short Story Competition, and her stories have been read on Vision Australia's radio program, *Cover to Cover*. Jennifer was a founding member of Elwood Writers (<http://elwoodwriters.com>) and has her own literary blog (<http://jenniferbryce.net>).

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## Jennifer Bryce

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### My ten best novels of 2020

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**JENNIFER BRYCE writes:** I'm happy to write a 'Best of 2020' but it will feature only books, as before lockdown I don't think I went to more than a couple of concerts and no theatre (and I don't count films on TV!). I have written about the ten best books on my blog, now modified to take in some Booker Prize nominations (21 January 2021).

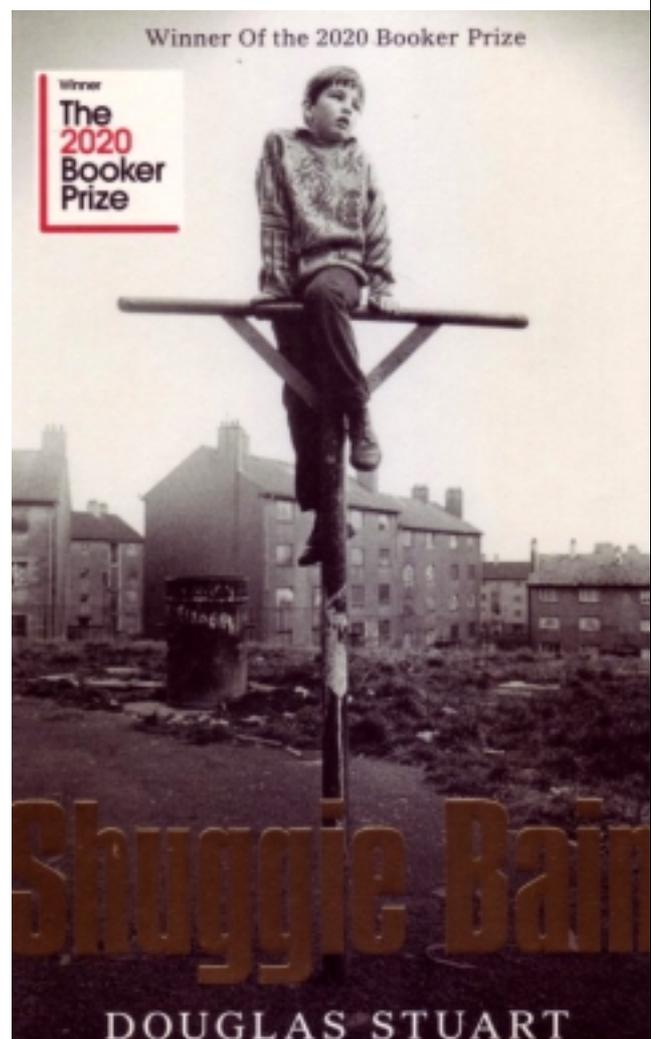
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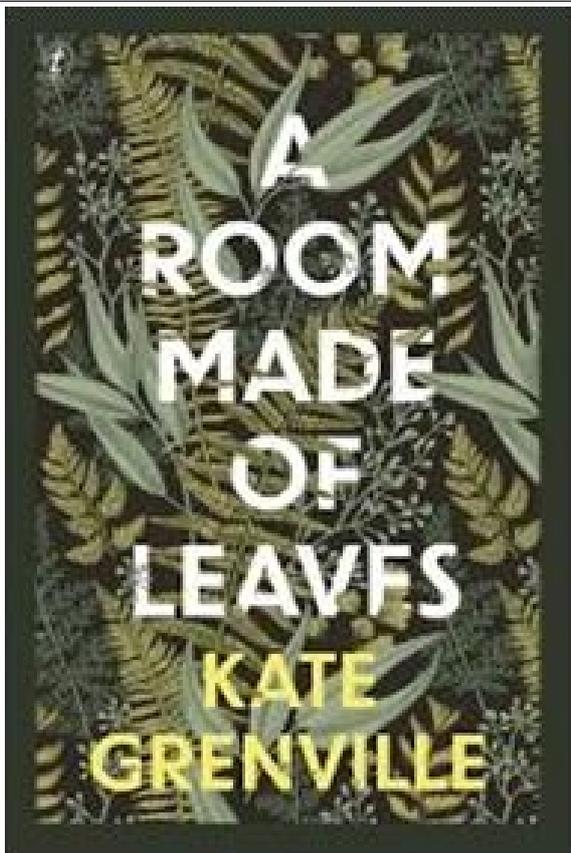
#### 1. Douglas Stuart: **SHUGGIE BAIN**

This debut novel deservedly won the 2020 Booker Prize and it is the first in my selection of books read in 2020. Douglas Stuart plunges us into the slimy, putrified ghastly poverty of 1980s Glasgow and we are held there, as though under water, not allowed to surface for the entire 430 pages of the novel. It is a world of ill-fitting dentures, dirty underwear, the stink of vomit — yet I found it a compelling read. I am normally irritated when writers incorporate regional accents into their work. But the Glaswegian brogue enlivens every page and I loved it.

How did a 16-year-old boy come to be living alone in a dirty bedsit alongside down-and-out old men, mainly drunks, working in a supermarket deli, and occasionally going to school? The book tells us how this came about. It is about the relentless and unbreakable cycles of poverty and alcoholism.

Shuggie is a 'wee poofter' and is mercilessly teased. Agnes took to drink long before her husband dumped his family at the Pithead estate and left them. With an alcoholic's desperation Agnes uses whatever money she can get her hands on to satisfy her need — even after robbing the gas meter and the meter on the TV set, the family often has to go without a hot dinner. And yet, Agnes has a certain pride. When she's not in a drunken stupor,



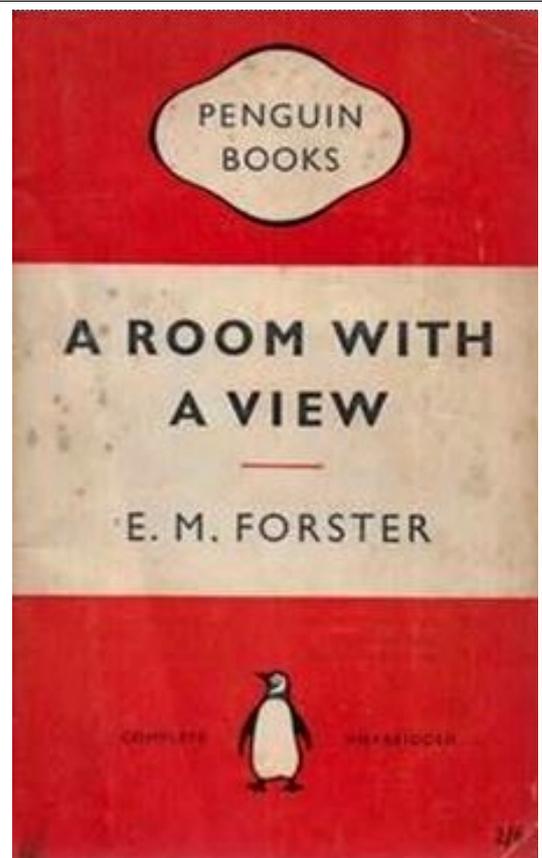


the house is neat and tidy and she takes great trouble in her appearance, keeping her hair dyed and pantyhose unladdered. Shuggie has a desperate love for her, believing that he must be able to make her better. As a reviewer in *The Guardian* says, 'Something sadder than heroism is Shuggie's passion for his disintegrating mother.'

The book would be unbearable were it not for the love that is the foundation of Shuggie's devotion to his mother. Even when she dies (after a night out on the town, brought home by the police), Shuggie makes sure that Agnes looks as she would want. He puts fresh red lipstick on his dead mother's lips and, for her funeral, improvises some ear-rings.

## 2. Kate Grenville: **A ROOM MADE OF LEAVES**

I was sorry to finish this book — it is so beautifully written and brilliantly imagined. What if Kate Grenville had found a stash of old letters and notes hidden in the ceiling of Elizabeth Farm — the home of John and Elizabeth Macarthur? John Macarthur, as all good Australian primary school children have been taught, was the 'father' of the Australian wool industry. Grenville argues — very reasonably — that it was Elizabeth who built up the sheep farming — a skill she had learned from her grandfather back in England.



Macarthur was away from Parramatta for a lot of the time, and when he was around he was far more interested in getting promoted than in farming sheep. Kate Grenville did have access to letters written by Elizabeth Macarthur. But in those days, and particularly with a husband like John Macarthur, she would have written them knowing that they would be scrutinised by others, particularly her husband. Elizabeth Macarthur was undoubtedly intelligent, undoubtedly unhappy in her marriage to Macarthur, but like many women of that time she was resigned to it and made the most of it.

Knowing these things, Grenville imagines that she found a box of papers and that she transcribed and edited them. No — the book is fiction. But it is utterly convincing and although it is inevitably a view of that time through twenty-first century eyes, it may well come close to a truer picture of the life of the early nineteenth-century sheep farmer than the social mores of that time would allow.

## 3. E.M. Forster: **A ROOM WITH A VIEW**

What great fortune to find a 'classic' book that I hadn't yet read. I had seen the movie of this novel, made in the 1980s. It is a very good Merchant Ivory film, but it still doesn't completely capture the essence that has made this one of the greatest

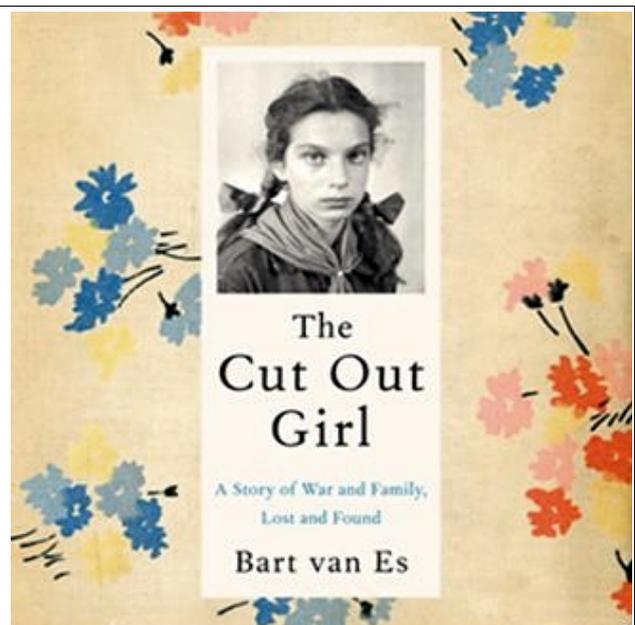
novels in the English language. Some of the characters are almost Dickensian — Mr Bebe, the clergyman, for example. The reader fears that Lucy Honeychurch is too tightly entrapped in the Edwardian society in which she lives. We first see her visiting Florence with her stuffy cousin Charlotte as chaperone — having to behave according to the required code. And yet, the Arno gurgles freely outside Lucy’s window and a tram rushes past, Lucy wants to ride on that tram — both suggest a freedom that she has not yet acquired.

A few days later, when Charlotte has temporarily abandoned her, Lucy experiences something wonderful, yet disturbing. The carriage boy misunderstands her English and escorts her away from the picnic party, picking her a bunch of violets, ‘the world was beautiful and direct’. On a little open terrace, covered with violets — the image reminded me a bit of the birth of Venus — ‘violets ran down in rivulets and streams and cataracts, irrigating the hillside with blue eddying round the tree stems But never again were they in such profusion; this terrace was the well-head, the primal source whence beauty gushed out to water the earth.’ And she is kissed by George — a man untrammelled by pretension — a man who genuinely loves her. Lucy doesn’t know how to cope with this, and at first sees his ‘indiscretion’ as an insult. But many months later, after enduring an engagement to the ostentatious Cecil, who despises her own rural upbringing, who is stiff and judgmental, Lucy and George elope and we leave them back in Florence in a warm, golden world of love.

#### 4. Bart van Es: THE CUT OUT GIRL

Bart van Es was interviewed at the Adelaide Writers’ Festival. Had I not heard the interview, I might have passed over this book as another *Diary of Anne Frank* — a Jewish child kept in hiding during World War II in the Netherlands. Quite apart from the difference that Lien, the ‘cut out girl’, is still alive — now 86 — there is a connection with Bart van Es’ family. He knew that his grandparents had sheltered a girl during the war, but there was some kind of mystery and it wasn’t talked about. But van Es and Lien struck up a friendship which, van Es says, changed his life.

The book is well constructed, flowing from van Es’ present interviewing and researching — his meals with Lien, their walking around Amsterdam (van Es lives in England), to her accounts of her life from the time when, at the age of eight, her mother said ‘You are going to stay somewhere else for a while’ — and she never saw her mother or father again. A couple of months later, the parents were



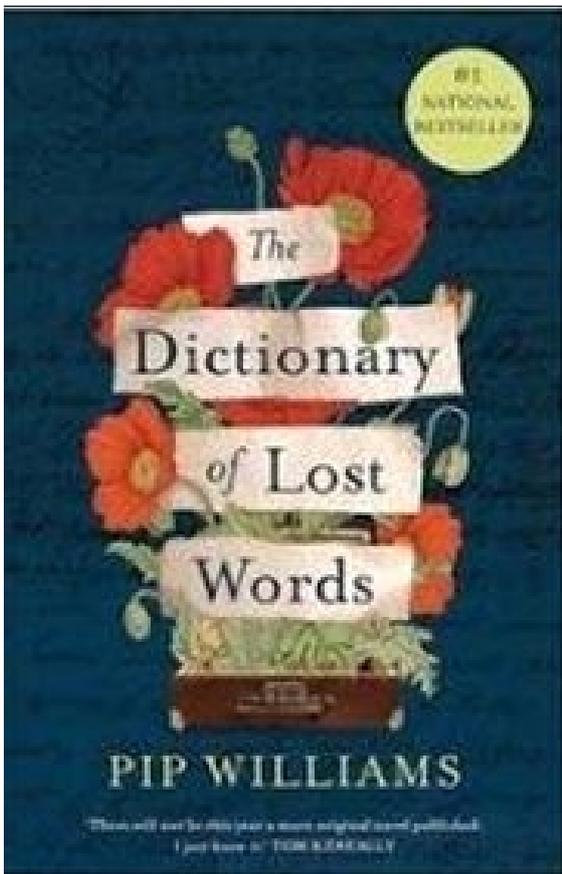
murdered at Auschwitz.

A childhood deprived of real family — and real love — has a devastating effect, which becomes apparent in Lien the adult, who can’t cope with a conventional orthodox Jewish marriage although she has children and is comfortably off. She seeks counselling, but years later the fact that she doesn’t have a past, or can’t talk about her past and that she doesn’t really belong in any family, leaves her devastated. ‘I ought not to be here,’ she says. ‘Ma’ van Es can’t fully comprehend this — she took in children, gave them a good, loving home — she naïvely can’t appreciate that there was something she could not give the ‘cut out’ Lien. And this inability to understand was the basis of the rift with the family. This book helps to show how the trauma experienced by children such as Lien can never be fully repaired.

#### 5. Pip Williams: THE DICTIONARY OF LOST WORDS

This is a book of historical fiction written by a social researcher — it is her debut novel. Esme Nicholls absorbs words from a very young age, sitting under a table in the Scriptorium where her father works for Sir James Murray, compiling the OUP New English Dictionary with a team of lexicographers. Esme’s mother died when she was a baby; her father is loving and tries to fulfil both parental roles, in his nineteenth-century way.

As Esme grows up she is given work — errands — and ultimately allowed to make her own contributions. We see how the words selected are those of middle-class nineteenth-century gentlemen — she starts to collect words from the lower class women at the covered market. Esme is close to

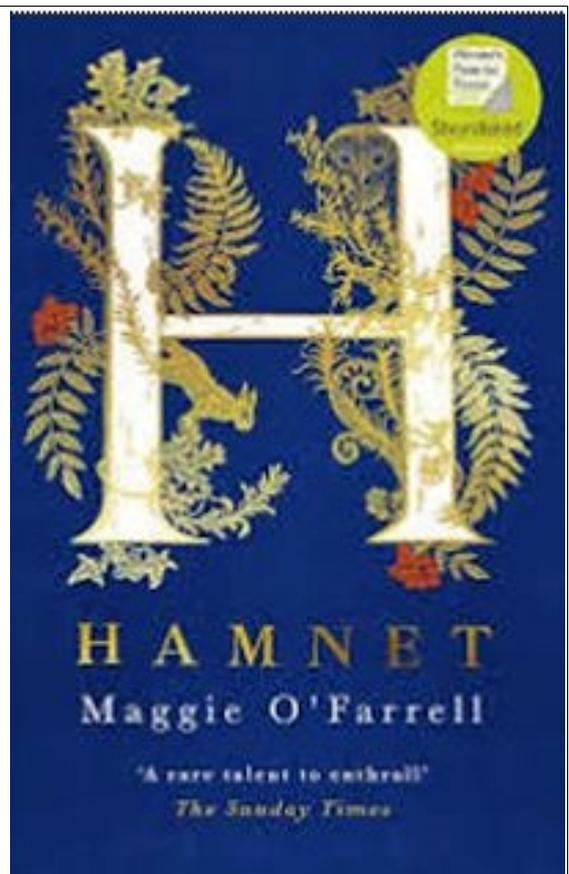


Lizzie — a maid who has looked after her since her earliest days — she sees Lizzie’s perspective on life, where suffragettes are ‘just a lot of rich ladies wanting even more than they already have’.

Esme has a daughter out of wedlock — this is all discreetly handled by her intelligent and perceptive godmother. The girl is adopted by a friend of the godmother and is taken to South Australia where she ultimately continues Esme’s fascination with language.

## 6. Maggie O’Farrell: HAMNET

Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* four years after the death of his eleven-year-old son. This novel is a re-imagining of the son’s death. Stratford and Shakespeare are rarely mentioned, the focus being particularly Shakespeare’s wife, Anne — here called Agnes. O’Farrell deftly takes us into the Shakespearean world without the disruption that might be caused by using contemporary language. Life in the sixteenth-century village of Stratford (barely named) is convincing — we can smell it and feel it. But the book is mainly about the grief of losing a child — its impact on the father, the sisters and particularly the mother.

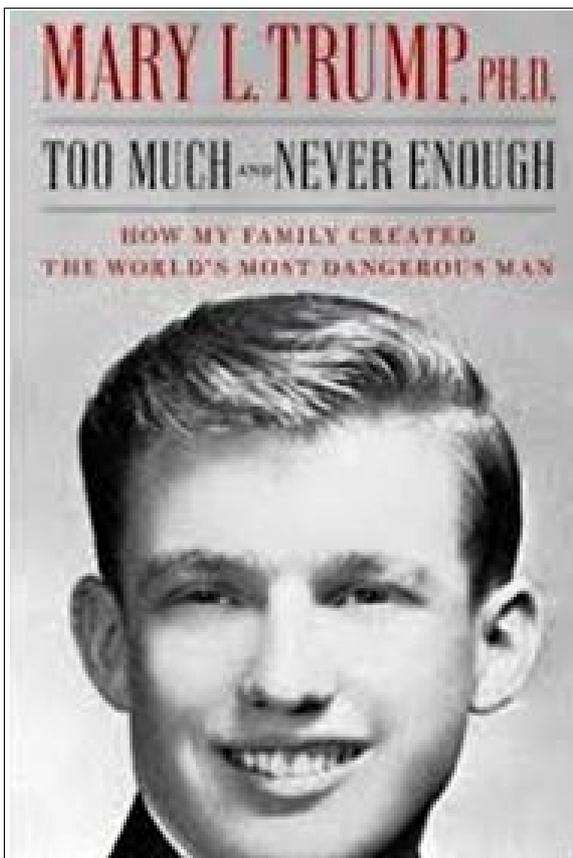


## 7. Mary Trump: TOO MUCH AND NEVER ENOUGH

At the front of Mary Trump’s book about her uncle Donald is a quote from *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo: ‘If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but the one who causes the darkness.’

I was unsure about whether to read this book. Every day news broadcasts were confronting us with the devastation caused by a narcissistic sociopathic man who happened to be president of the United States. Could I take more?

Mary Trump is a clinical psychologist, and she has experienced first hand what it is like to be a member of the Trump family. She has reason to write this ruthless ‘blistering memoir’. Her father, Freddy, was the oldest of the Trump children; Donald was the second son. Freddy was disinherited — largely because he didn’t tow the family line. He wanted to be an airline pilot rather than be groomed to head Trump Management. The extraordinarily cruel and controlling power that the Trump father, Fred, had over his children led to Freddy crumbling: giving up his airline career, divorcing his wife, and becoming a hopeless alcoholic who died in 1981 at the age of 42. Donald took over as the favoured son. So Mary has every reason to seek some kind of revenge. She, her daughter, and her brother and his family missed out on



inheriting a share of a huge fortune.

The book is perhaps more about the legacy of the emotionally unavailable Trump parents. There seems to have been no love. A photograph of the Trump children does, I think, show them as tense and anxious. A review in *The Guardian* describes how Trump's mother was 'born to penury in Scotland, [and] remained so meanly thrifty that every week she dressed up in her fur stole and drove her pink Cadillac around New York suburbs to collect small change from the coin-operated laundry rooms in buildings the family owned'. Money replaced love in this family.

Mary was certain that Donald would lose the

2016 election: how could such an ignorant egomaniac win? So she didn't attend the election party as she didn't want to display before the family her joy when Hillary Clinton won. But she was wrong. Tellingly, Trump kept a photograph of his father on his desk in the Oval Office.

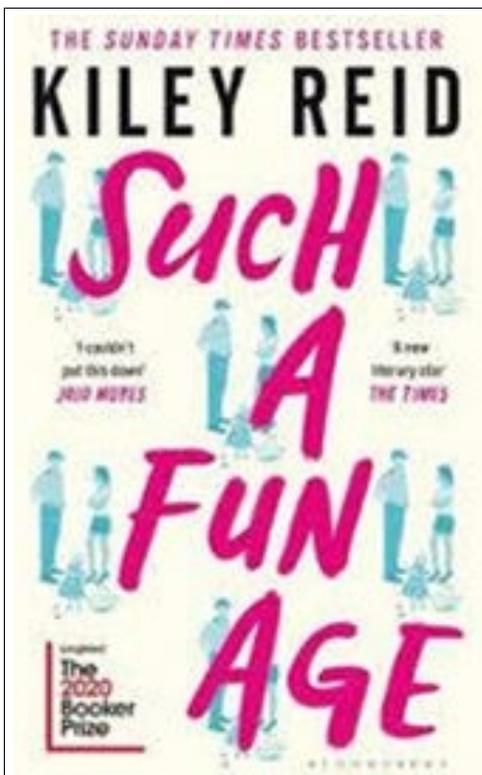
I interpret Mary Trump's book as saying that there are explanations as to why Donald Trump turned out the way he did. The book doesn't set out to address the weightier question of how is it that such a man came to be president of the United States.

## 8. Tara June Winch: THE YIELD

This book won the Miles Franklin award — deservedly. You can't get much more Australian. Tara June Winch is a First Australian woman and this novel is concerned with the reclaiming of Native Title for a property where Indigenous people have lived for centuries — it is being taken over by a tin mine. But this is far more than an account of a battle between European settlers and the First People.

The book is the intertwining of the story of August, an Indigenous woman in her late twenties who returns home for the burial of her grandfather and encounters the tin mine takeover; the story of an early twentieth-century missionary involved with the grandfather's education — who believed he was doing good — and, most importantly, a dictionary of significant words of the Wiradjuri language of the Gondiwindi people that was compiled by August's late grandfather, a dictionary that shows the language to be a living language and hence a justification for the Native Title claim. The dictionary underlines the significance of language and the meaning of particular words — for example, 'yield'





in English refers to taking things from the land, in Wiradjuri, 'yield' is things you give to the land.

## 9. Kiley Reid: SUCH A FUN AGE

This book was longlisted, but not shortlisted, for the 2020 Booker prize. I took a while to get into it — possibly because I'm not a part of the 'fun age', which is African-American 20-to-30 somethings who throw back cocktails and champagne and speak in a language that is almost foreign for me. Themes addressed in this novel are important: Can we connect across barriers of race, gender, wealth, and privilege? The story hinges on an incident during which Emira, a baby sitter for the privileged, white, Chamberlain household, is called unexpectedly to take care of the two-year-old daughter she cares for. Emira is at a party, but because the Chamberlains pay her generously, she leaves the party, turns up in her party gear and, as Mrs Chamberlain suggests, takes the little girl to the local supermarket — supposedly a safe place to hang out late at night. In her party gear, Emira certainly doesn't look like a baby sitter. She is accused by a security guard of kidnapping the two-year-old Briar, with whom she has a very close relationship. (I love the name Briar for this precocious little white girl!) The incident is filmed by Kelley (who is white), and much later in the story, by Mrs

Woody  
Allen.

Apropos of  
Nothing.

Autobiography.



Chamberlain's devious means, the footage is released on a TV news program. The Chamberlains are the kind of family that prides itself on inviting African-American people to dinner. And Kelley seems to have a way of wanting to befriend African-American people — all of his girlfriends since high school (and he is now well into his 30s) have been African-American. By almost too much of a coincidence, in high school, he briefly dated Mrs Chamberlain — indeed it was to Kelley that she lost her virginity. A review in *The Guardian* points out that 'one of the novel's deep ironies is that the white people in Emira's life are more fixated on race than she is'.

## 10. Woody Allen: APROPOS OF NOTHING

What a pleasure to read this autobiography where the voice of Woody Allen comes over just as we know him — putting himself down, making fun of himself — except for the accusations by Mia Farrow that he 'interfered with' his seven-year-old daughter Dylan, which he convincingly denies. Soon-Yi, Mia Farrow's adopted daughter, has been Allen's wife for 25 years — she was not under age, but a college student, when they started to have an affair. He convinced me of his innocence — but of course, he would. There is more name-dropping and detailed description of making some movies than I needed — but I did realise that there are still a lot of his movies I haven't seen. It is an account of his life, as he sees it. It would have been tempting, I expect, to make this book a protestation of his innocence in the sex scandal — but it is far more than that.

— Jennifer Bryce, January 2021

JENNIFER BRYCE was introduced at the beginning of the previous article. TONY THOMAS is well known for many things. His home was the scene of the very first Nova Mob in 1970. He has been a contributor to Australian fanzines — and to *Scriptsi*, one of Australia's most famous literary magazines. These days he acts in Shakespearean plays, attends concerts, and presents *Contemporary Visions*, a 3MBS radio program of late twentieth-century and recent classical music. He buys and reads many books.

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## Tony Thomas and Jennifer Bryce

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### The Booker Prize shortlist and longlist, 2020

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#### Tony Thomas: The Booker Prize 2020 reading experience

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##### 20 November 2020:

With the Booker Prize being announced tonight (UK time) I thought you might be interested in my take on those from the short and long lists that I've read over the past few months. This comprises nine of 13 on the long list, including five of six on the short list.

Missing in my reading of the short list is the one I see is the bookie's favourite, i.e. *The Mournable Body* by Zambian author **Tsitsi Dangarembga**, which Jenny read and didn't like all that much (see her comments). Of the short list I read I thought *Shuggie Bain*, a first novel by Scottish author **Douglas Stuart**, was by a good way the best, in a year in which I didn't think any of the novels were truly outstanding (deserving of my ultimate five stars).

From the long list I thought that the sf novel *Love and Other Thought Experiments* by first-time novelist **Sophie Ward** might have made the short list, certainly ahead of the other sf novel that did make it, *The New Wilderness* by **Diane Cook**. Ian Mond also included the Sophie Ward book in his 'Ten best SF Nooks Not So Marketed' recent Nova Mob talk, and also didn't much like the Diane Cook.

I see in re-reading my reviews I've been more negative than perhaps any of the books deserve. My excuse is that I was trying to sort out why they

shouldn't win rather than praise their good bits. All in fact are readable, often with something interesting to say, sometimes even with fine prose. But ...

Here are the reviews. I found myself reading more and more slowly as I made my way through the nine, so I eventually gave up, and turned to reading things I wanted to read more, and now my reading has speeded up again from three or four a month, to eight (so far) this month.

Novels I read in the last year or so, some of which might have been eligible for the Booker (I haven't checked publication dates and don't remember some of them anyway), and which I did give five stars, include:

Michael Connelly: *The Law of Innocence*  
John Grisham: *A Time for Mercy*  
K. J. Parker: *Sixteen Ways to Defend a Walled City*  
Michael Connelly: *The Poet*  
Nicholson Baker: *A Box of Matches*  
Jo Walton: *Farthing*  
Jo Walton: *Ha'penny*  
Jo Walton: *Half a Crown*  
Jo Walton: *My Real Children*  
Jo Walton: *The Just City*  
Jo Walton: *The Philosopher Kings*  
Jo Walton: *Necessity*  
Ian McEwen: *Nutshell*

Sebastian Barry: *A Thousand Moons*  
Louisa Luna: *The Janes*  
John Le Carré: *Agent Running in the Field*  
Tracy Chevalier: *Burning Bright*

Jack Vance: *Emphyrio*  
Barbara Vine: *Asta's Book*  
Michael Connelly: *The Night Fire*

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## Booker Long/Short List 2020

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Long List announced 28 July 2020, Short List announced 15 September

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### LOVE AND OTHER THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS by Sophie Ward (Corsair hc 2020) (finished 11/8/20)

Yes it's another (unacknowledged) sf novel by an author from outside the field. (This is the sentence I started with, reviewing *The Wall* last year, and it applies equally to this book.)

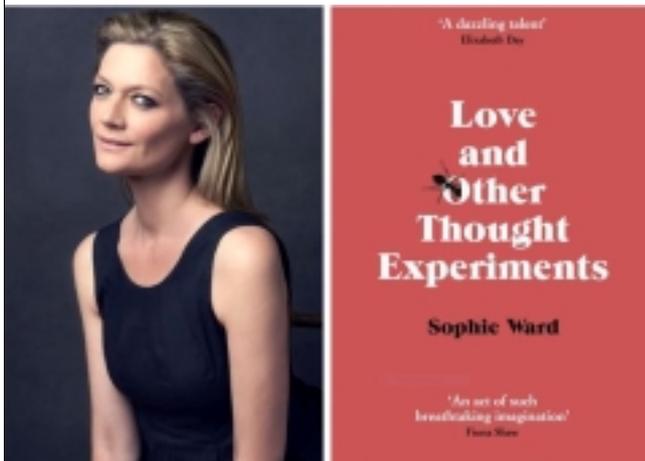
Sophie Ward is a professional actor, 55, who has been in quite a few films and whom I must have seen in many British TV shows (e.g. *Heartbeat*, *Inspector Lynley*, *Lewis*, *Hustle*) but don't remember. This is her first novel. She has two sons from her previous marriage to vet Paul Hobson (1988–96), after which she came out as a lesbian. In 2005 she and Rena Brennan had a civil partnership ceremony, and they married in 2014 when it became legal. She now describes her sons (b. 1989 and 1993) as the sons of this marriage. She has an Open University degree in Literature and Philosophy.

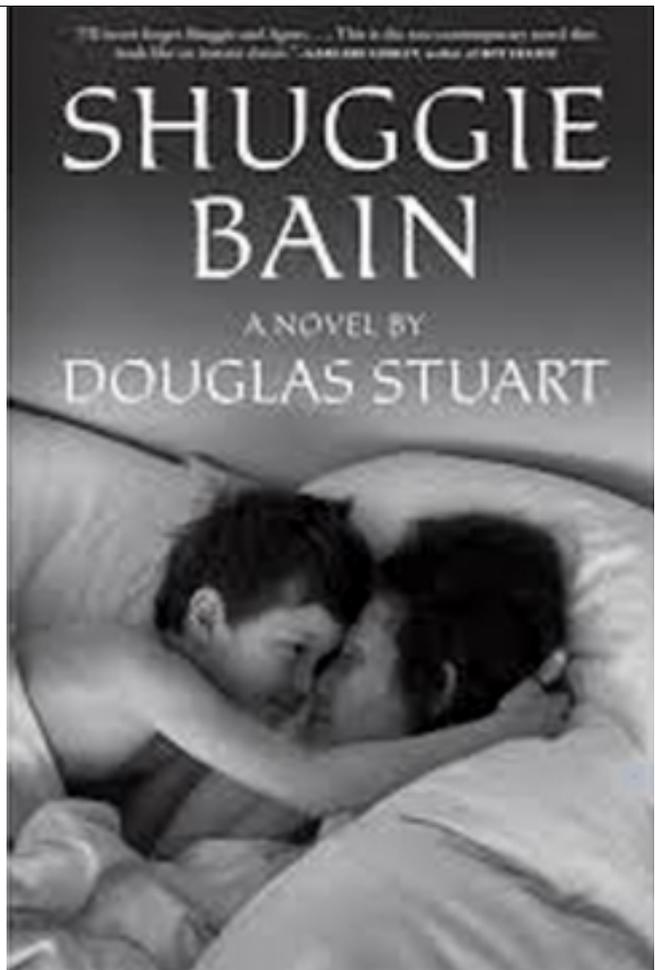
Knowing all this, it's not much of a surprise that each chapter starts with a philosophical conundrum — e.g. Pascal's wager, brain-in-a-box, Chalmers' zombies, Descartes' demon etc. — then this is explored, more or less, in the chapter which follows. And also no surprise that the story begins with a lesbian relationship in the present day, in which the characters of Rachel and Eliza are well drawn in a conventional literary way. The chapters initially seem loosely connected — Chapter 2

jumps to Rachel's conception (we discover a good way through), Chapter 3 deals with Rachel's elderly mother and her husband in later life in Brazil, Chapter 4 returns to the lesbian couple from the point of view of an ant that Rachel 'imagines' has entered her eye. The 'ant' eats the tumour that has started in Rachel's head, which allows her to deliver the baby she is pregnant with, Arthur. The foetus has been artificially implanted using the egg of her wife Eliza and the sperm of a good gay friend, Hal. Not too long after this, Rachel dies.

It's about at this time that we realise that this is really an sf novel in literary guise: the 'ant' turns out to be (or to become, it's unclear) a god-like super computer, which relates, in extremely broad metaphorical terms, the future of humanity, a humanity over which it exercises god-like powers, including the ability to enter or create parallel universes (those ones, you know, just a little bit different from ours). So in the final chapter, the adult Arthur has become an astronaut returning from a solo flight to the Mars moon Deimos (his 'reality' is the one I've described so far, but 20 or 30 years on), but on splashdown he's greeted by his mother Rachel, still alive in this continuum, who soon realises that there's something different about this Arthur — he's just extremely puzzled and confused, but he's able to fool, for a while at least, his monitoring body-implanted personal computer (Zeus!), which of course is communicating everything to a future, somewhat more sinister NASA. And does he become Zeus at the end? So it's intimated, as he sits with his mother, contemplating all this, and Zeus is just another name for that ant, the super-computer, who is really Arthur as well. Ho hum. Well, all this canvasses a whole lot of rather hoary sf ideas, all lumped together, though nicely enough done, but of course there is no attempt to explain why/how all this might happen in anything like science-fictional terms — it's really all just a metaphor for the author to explore what I take to be her real interest, as the blurb says, 'love lost and found across the universe'.

It kept me reading, though rather slowly. Now if only the Booker panel would put in a real sf novel





by, say, Kim Stanley Robinson or Adam Roberts, better written than this, they might realise that there is an imaginative world out there they know almost nothing about.

**BURNT SUGAR**

by Avni Doshi (Hamish Hamilton; pb; 2020)  
(finished Aug 2020)

Short list.

Good on upper-middle-class Indian home life, especially family relationships. Not so good on India, how anybody makes money, sex, good prose, characterisation, art, and quite a bit else.

(A generous) \*\*\*

**SHUGGIE BAIN**

by Douglas Stuart (Picador; hc; 2020)  
(Finished 27 August 2020)

Short list.

Terrific on alcoholism leading to the gutter and death. Glasgow according to this is an absolutely awful place to be — but this can't be all of the story.

The thank-yous at the end suggest this is almost entirely autobiographical: the alcoholic mother, the gay boy, the brother and sister who escape, the awful lives of just about everybody. But where are the slightly better parts to life which the author has obviously experienced at school, in literature, art, etc. etc. How depressing to have 400 pages of awfulness without let up.

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**REDHEAD BY THE SIDE OF THE ROAD**

by Anne Tyler (Knopf; 2020; hc)  
(Finished 28 August 2020)

Set in Baltimore, about families and lonely single men, this seems to be another by-the-numbers novel from this author, with its manipulation of plot too close to the surface. Well written (enough), and with interesting detail (some). The protagonist, Micah Mortimer, is over-organised in an autism spectrum way, but above all extremely un-self-knowledgeable, or even questioning. So as we and the author discover his many, many missteps, which become increasingly unlikely, we can sit back and wonder whether Micah will ever begin to know better — which leads to the surprise (!) ending,

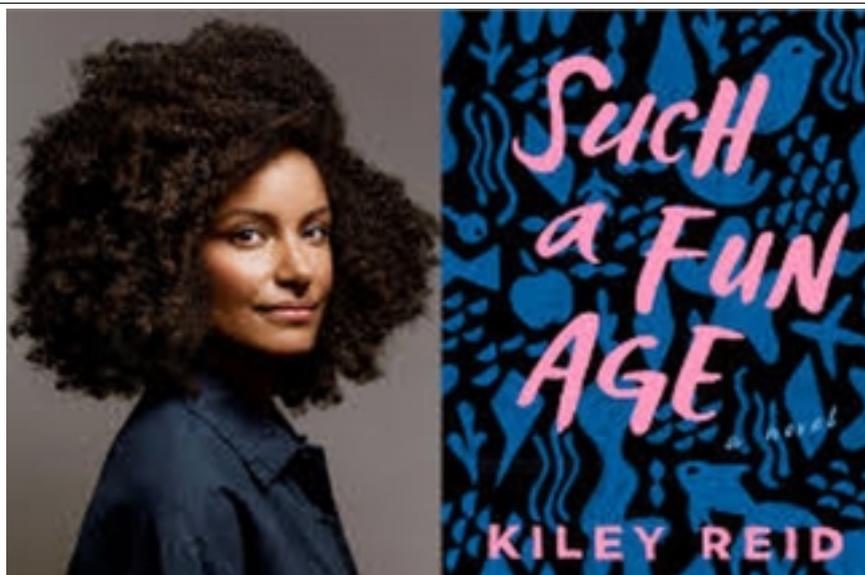
when he does reclaim his girlfriend in a slightly soppy scene, but which, however, is maybe the only truly felt moment in the whole book.

A central chapter, focusing on a family get-together, lays bare the weaknesses in this book. The attempted witty byplay between brothers, sisters, and partners is reminiscent of a less than top class sitcom of twenty years ago — all that's missing is the canned laughter — and is a good reason not to ever watch this pap as it's re-churned on TV repeats on commercial lesser channels ad infinitum. Or to read books like this. Hard to understand why this made the long list — I can't believe this is Anne Tyler at her best. One virtue is the book's brevity and that it's very quick reading.

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### **SUCH A FUN AGE**

by Kiley Reid (Bloomsbury; hc; 2020)  
(Finished 1 September 2020)



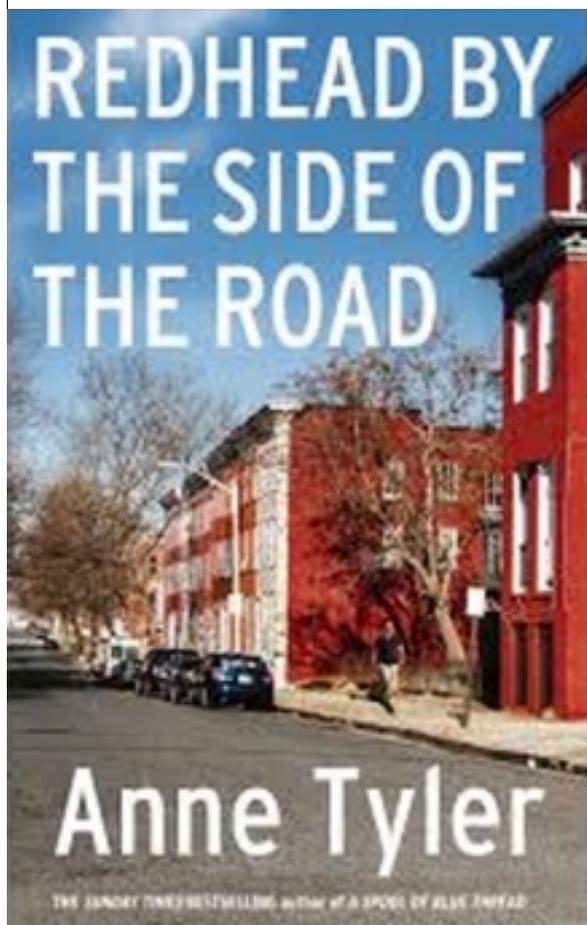
Starts off as chick lit with conversations between two groups of women — boring as hell, hard to follow, with products mentioned in every other sentence. It takes nearly 100 pages before the plot begins to become evident: it's really about the subtlest forms of black–white racism, the sort where the whites apparently have the right attitudes, but where the master–servant ideology and how blacks need to be 'looked after' is so culturally ingrained it is impossible for the money privileged to act in ways that are not racist, though they deny it even to themselves. This part of the book is very well done, though the situations used to develop the conflict seem so contrived as to be almost nonsensical on reflection. The portraits of the two main whites, Alix and Kelley, both extremely flawed, are well done, but the character of the black protagonist, Emira, lacks by comparison, partly because she is given so little to do of her own volition, being moved by others, including friends, much of the time. Nevertheless, the book came to life in the second half and made me want to keep reading.

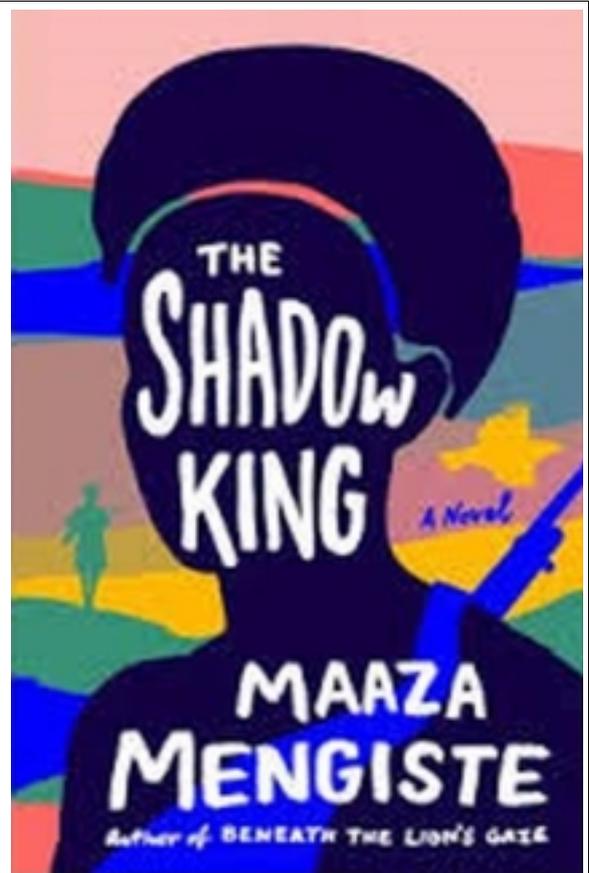
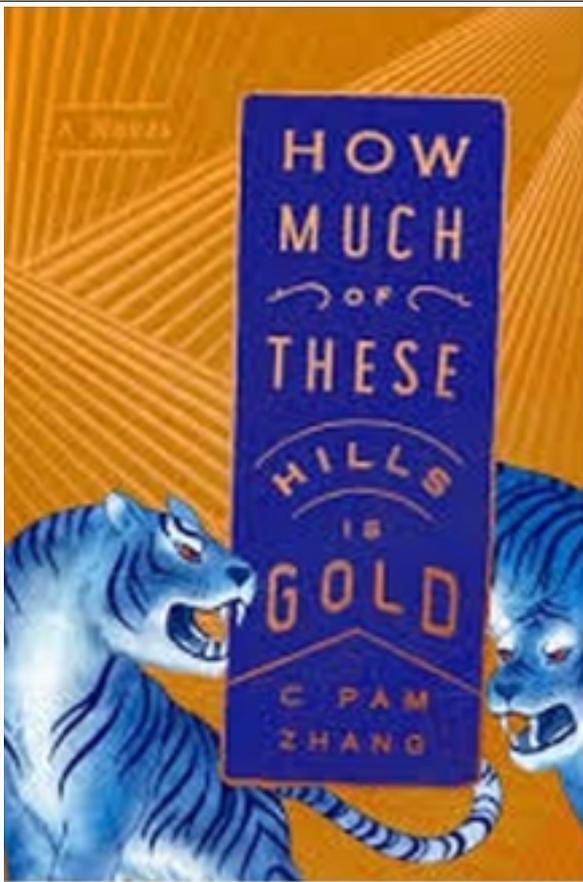
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### **HOW MUCH OF THESE HILLS IS GOLD**

by C. Pam Zhang (Virago; hc; 2020)  
(Finished 8 September 2020)

Extremely poetically written story of the Old West. Unfortunately the plot doesn't live up to the prose. Although there are unusual main characters (almost the only characters as such), early Chinese and Chinese descendants involved in gold prospecting, and despite the insertion of much untranslated Chinese, the rest of the world remains largely a blank, and the plot descends into cliché at the end, with gambling debts, villains, and the heroine giving herself up to prostitution to save her brother: he remains an unmotivated, un-understood char-





acter who flits in and out of the story and about whom we never find out enough.

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**THE SHADOW KING**  
by Maaza Mengiste (Norton; hc; 2019)  
(Finished 15/9/20)

Short list.

A great, unusual subject, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 from the point of view of the Abyssinians (mainly) with plenty of research. But much of this is wasted, as every time we come to a big event, the author chooses to go into mytho-poetic mode, and the details of what happened are mostly not there. Instead we get a huge amount of repetition of feelings, families, national myths, but hardly ever get inside any of the characters, or find out what actually happened with a few concrete details. Occasionally she gives us a scene where this isn't so much the case, but we often have to get through the mythological overlay to work out what is really happening. The motives of the slave girl heroine, who apparently becomes a symbolic hero of the revolution (that is, after the war, when the Italians have been defeated) are very hard to fathom — but no more than the treatment she is shown to receive from her captors. Would have

been better at half the length, and with some of the detail which should have been there. In part, this might be laziness on the part of the author, who might not have bothered to find out what the guns and weapons actually did, or how they were used, or what those herbs were which the women go searching the countryside for, or ... One could go on listing omissions for a long time.

Very hard to finish. The subject, and the feminist theme, might have been enough for it to make the shortlist. If so, shame!

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**REAL LIFE**  
by Brandon Taylor (Daunt Books; pb; 2020)  
(Finished 22 September 2020)

Short list

Fairly well written, with a very narrow focus: a group of friends (actually mostly work colleagues as well) working as graduate researchers in biological science. All set over a weekend. The narrator (and author) is black with a southern background but now living in a northern mid-West state (like the author). The friends meet, party, have gay sex, and engage in fairly boring conversations. The viewpoint character, Wallace, finds himself accepted among his white friends, but not completely (there

is one Asian woman, also an outsider, who barely makes an appearance). The focus is on friendship, what it is, how much it can be across the racial divide, how much it overlaps into sex. This is OK as far as it goes, but not much of the outside world is visible beyond this small coterie, despite a bit of detail about the biological research, but only in the context of lab work detail, not what it means (if anything) beyond this work. The gay sex is prominent, but (rather routinely and barely motivated) this turns into violence and virtual rape, although the self-effacing Wallace remains someone acted on much more than an actor. In the end, it all feels rather self-indulgent: most of the characters are more names than individuals, and we've learnt almost nothing about what drives anyone, except a search for a (pretty undefined) happier life.

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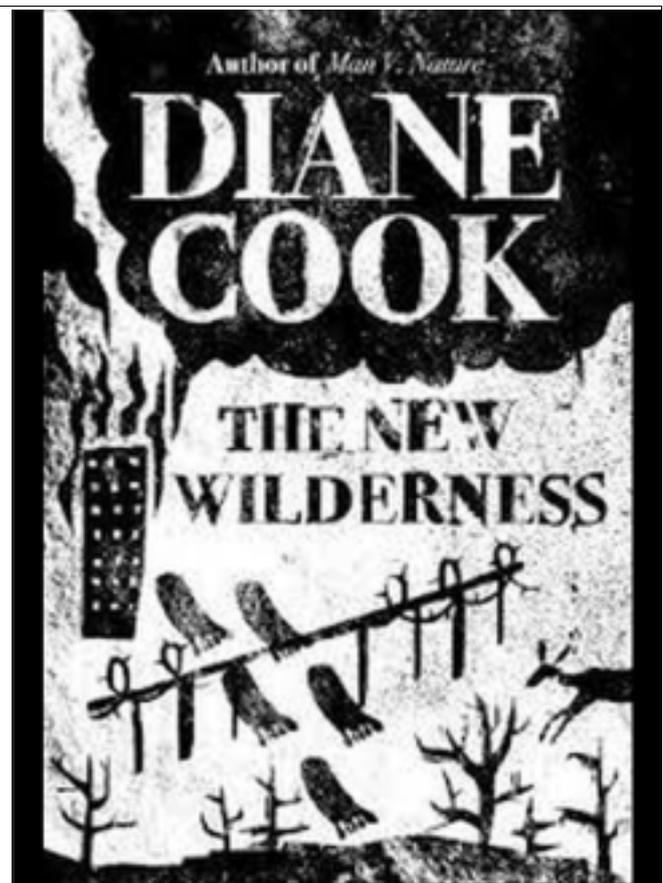
### THE NEW WILDERNESS

**Diane Cook (Oneworld; hc; 2020) (Finished 11 October 2020)**

#### Short list

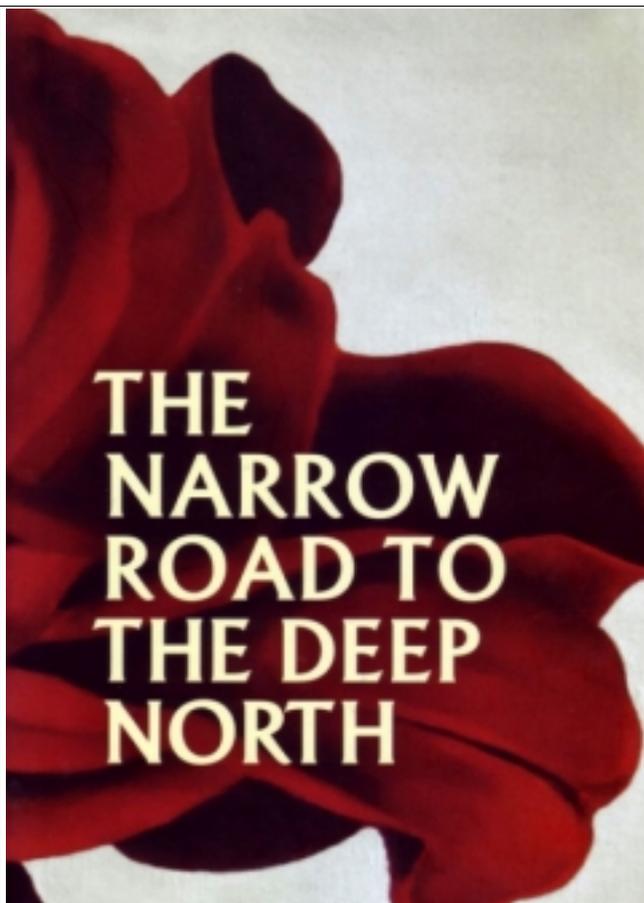
Sf, though not admitted. A survival novel in the titular New Wilderness, an area set aside (for reasons never made clear) from the City. The City (representing all cities, we may think) is a place of pollution, poverty, disease, crime etc — all the ills we can see around us now, writ large. The protagonists — mother Bea, stepfather Glen, sick six-year-old child Agnes (the main viewpoint character) — volunteer for an experiment in the Wilderness (Glen's project to save the life of Agnes), which requires them to live on the Wilderness land without any of civilisation's help, except the clothes and a few items they start out with, which of course soon deteriorate. They are accompanied by a small number of other volunteers, about 20 in all. Armed Rangers will ensure that they really live as nomads, living only on food they collect or hunt, without weapons or clothes except those they make themselves, and will direct them to keep moving, rather than set up any permanent camp, and report in at long intervals to Posts where their experiences will be collected via questionnaires. This is the basic setup, and where the whole thing breaks down, probably thanks to the author's insufficient research. She claims to have researched early primitive Indian cultures, but this seems to be book research rather than attempting to live like the people she describes.

Some problems: No-one ever seems to go very hungry in this nomadic world because hunters and collectors are remarkably proficient at hunting and



gathering. A few hunters leave in the morning and invariably bring back a deer or a jack rabbit or three, with bows and stone-headed arrows the only weapons. And it only takes one trial at using a bow, never touched before, before a newcomer (proficient with a sling shot) can split an arrow in the target in half. And there's always plenty of food — frogs, mushrooms — to be gathered as they trek along, no matter what the season. Stupid geese just sit there on the pond just waiting for the single sling shot to the neck. When they've been walking all day and haven't hunted, deer jerky can be relied on, thanks to the portable smokers they also carry with them, along with a 40-pound iron cooking pot they stumbled upon. Imagine the amount of stuff which this small group, half children, are carrying with them, besides their sleeping gear, a bag of books, and the bags of microwaste garbage that the Rangers insist they carry on to the next post rather than leaving it behind. After a few weeks they would be carrying nothing but garbage I think. Not to mention the fire that they also must carry with them (never discussed in the book) — all they need to do is stop and very soon the cooking fire is roaring; there is never any shortage of fuel, even when it's been raining for days (though luckily for the author, this doesn't appear to happen either). I could go on.

The life she describes is a fantasy, and the backdrop is just that, a backdrop to the real story she's interested in, the growing to adulthood of Agnes



and her relations with the other members of her group, especially her mother Bea, a leader, and her stepfather Glen, an intellectual, and Carl, who becomes leader. These are drawn out at great length and with some sensitivity, although the group dynamics are often fuzzy and unclearly motivated. Some opportunities are well taken — such as Agnes’s first menstruation — but others are left undescribed, such as her first sexual encounter.

In the end, it’s clear that the whole thing is a parable, rather than attempt to describe any kind of actual future — a warning to us about the very real dangers of ignoring the environment. The City has become unlivable, the Private Lands (of Billionaires?) are maybe a fantasy, the Rangers are Bogey Men with guns who eventually cart our attempted primitives back to the City, preserving the Wilderness — for what? Nothing is explained, but in a parable, really nothing has to be, does it? The idea wasn’t at all bad, but the execution has holes all over it.

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### The morning after

Thanks for your encouraging reaction to the Booker piece. Jenny and I were both very pleased this morning that *Shuggie Bain* won as it was the

choice of us both, who had each read five of the six on the short list (different fives, so we had all six covered).

This is the first time in about five years of reading more-or-less extensively in the Booker long list that I’ve agreed with the judges, though I’ve only sometimes read all of the short list and maybe never all of the long list.

## But looking back ...

### 2014

In 2014, when **Richard Flanagan** won with *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, I thought this was a worthy winner but, also on the short list, **Karen Joy Fowler’s** *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* was a better book. I bought the backlists of both authors and read quite a bit of them. **Howard Jacobson’s** *J*, an sf novel though not marketed as such, was on the shortlist and I thought this was rather poor.

### 2015

In 2015 I thought **Tom McCarthy’s** *Satin Island* might have won, but I read only a couple of the short list. I bought McCarthy’s back list and read a lot of it. Adam Roberts had earlier recommended McCarthy’s book *C*, which I found very good.

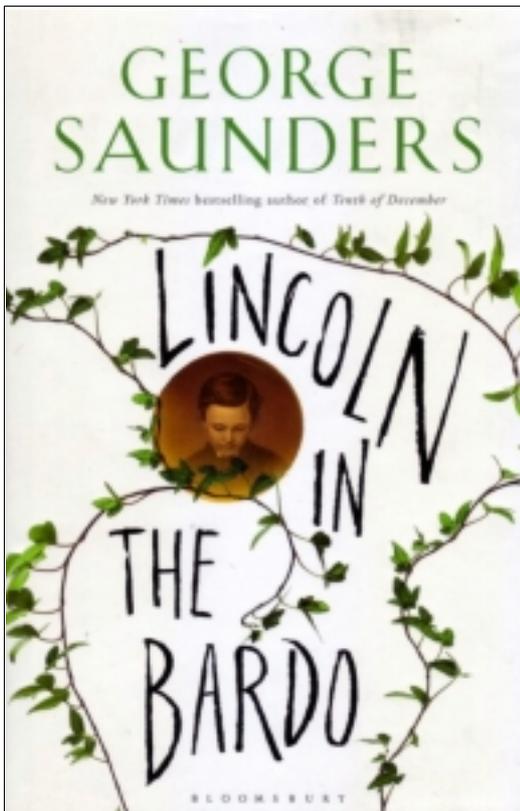
### 2016

In 2016 **Paul Beatty’s** *The Sellout* won, which I didn’t finish. On the short list were three better books:

- Graeme Macrae Burnet, with *His Bloody Secret*. Burnet was at the Adelaide Festival the next year where I heard him speak, and bought and enjoyed his small back list.
- Hot Milk by **Deborah Levy**, which I thought should have won. I bought and read and enjoyed a lot of her extensive back list and newer books, especially her two memoirs, *Things I Don’t Want to Know* and *The Cost of Living*, and her more recent novel longlisted for the Booker: *The Man Who Saw Everything*.
- Eileen by **Ottessa Moshfegh**. Her later books and earlier book of short stories have also been worthwhile, as Ian Mond will attest.

### 2017

In 2017, Jenny and I were in London coincidentally at the time of the Booker presentations and saw all six shortlisted authors in a forum the day before the awards were announced. We went to Foyle’s earlier that day and saw large trolleys full of **George Saun-**



ders's *Lincoln in the Bardo*, which turned out to be the (surprise!) winner. Saunders's setup — ghosts trapped in a cemetery they can't leave — is identical to that used decades earlier by your favourite fantasy author, Peter Beagle, in his first novel, *A Fine and Private Place*, which I happened to have read early in 2016. And I thought the Beagle was better in some respects.

Also considerably better were four out of five of the rest of the shortlist, with the standout from the short list, I thought, *Elmet* by **Fiona Mozley**. Her second novel comes out next year.

But the absolute standout was on the long list only, *Days Without End* by **Sebastian Barry**, which

has led me to buy and read a lot of this author's back list. The sequel to this novel has recently come out.

## 2018

In 2018 **Anna Burns** won with the quirky *Milkman*, but I thought most of the other five on the short list were better, especially **Rachel Kushner's** *The Mars Room* and **Robin Robertson's** *The Long Take*, a novel partly in verse.

And from the long list I would have rated **Sally Rooney's** *Normal People* and **Michael Ondaatje's** *Warlight* superior to the winner. Rooney is another author whose back list I've bought and read.

## 2019

In 2019 I got so bored with reading **Salman Rushdie's** *Quichotte* that I didn't finish it, and ended up reading this and only one other on the short list, but the books of the joint winners, **Margaret Atwood** and **Bernadine Evaristo**, have been much praised.

So this is my recent experience of the Bookers. Before 2014 it was much spottier, and much more ignored.

On another note entirely ... Reading actor **John Wood's** memoir this morning, *How I Clawed my Way to the Middle*, I discover that Wood, who is one year older than us, through his girlfriend (later wife) Leslie, knew Damien Broderick at Monash in the 1960s, and calls him an important sf writer. Not a name I expected to encounter in a theatre memoir.

— **Tony Thomas**, 20 November 2020

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## Jennifer Bryce: The 2020 Booker Prize

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I started off reading **Anne Tyler's** *Redhead by the Side of the Road*, which was longlisted but didn't make the shortlist — I'm not surprised. I have now read three or four of Anne Tyler's books and this is not the best. The main character, Micah, is (one assumes) on the autism spectrum. He reminded me a bit of the main character in *The Accidental Tourist* — Tyler seems to be interested in slightly eccentric men. Okay — so Micah lives by routine — we get sick of being told every detail of how he makes coffee, which he does quite often. Irritat-

ingly, every time someone takes a jacket on or off, they 'shrug' themselves into it or out of it. Good once, but only once. For me there was no drama. There isn't even much depth to the exploration of Micah's character. My feeling was: ho hum.

Another book that was longlisted, but not shortlisted, is **Kiley Reid's** *Such a Fun Age*. See my No. 9 on my 'Favourites 2020' discussion in this issue of SF Commentary.

Books on the shortlist that I have read so far include **Avni Doshi's** *Burnt Sugar*. It's her debut novel. It was not a compelling read for me. Most interesting was the setting in India — what it's like for middle-class business people. A woman whose mother in her 50s has dementia could be a fascinating topic, but with this book we had the woman's life story, how she's never got on well with her mother — she seems to be lacking in compassion, anyway. At times she can't stand her newborn baby. The book ends pretty much where it started. Maybe the woman will explore new fields, but maybe she'll just return to her middle-class home and have more children. The mother is not much changed from how we saw her at the beginning of the story.

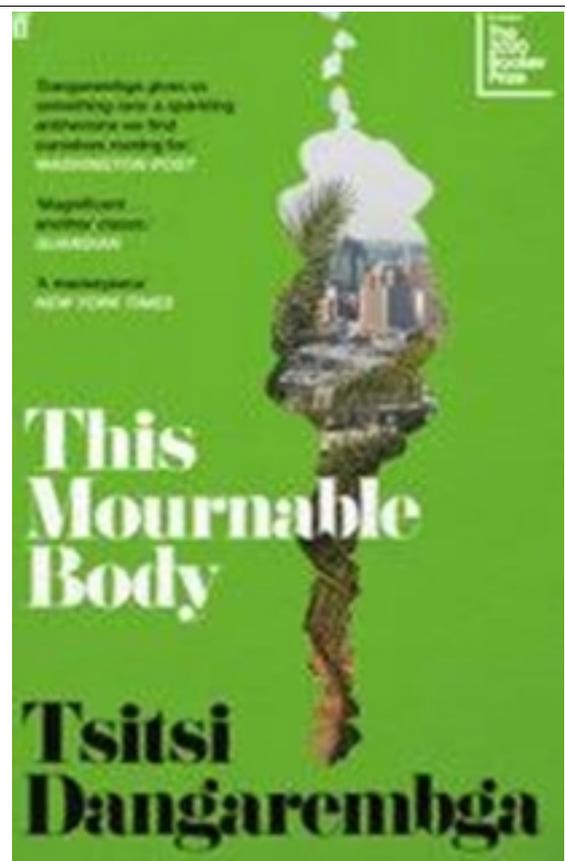
More interesting, although challenging, for me, was **Tsitsi Dangarembga's** *This Mournable Body* (an enticing title). I found it very difficult to get into this book. I thought it was because of my lack of knowledge of Zimbabwean culture (in spite of brief visits I've made to Botswana and Uganda, connected to work; when in Botswana I paid a visit to Victoria Falls and looked across the foaming mass of water to Zimbabwe).

But maybe my difficulty was not having read the first two novels of the trilogy that this book completes. I also found Dangarembga's use of the second person, while suitably distancing, a bit difficult to deal with.

Tambu, the protagonist, is a middle-aged Zimbabwean woman, unmarried, with no children. Had I read the other two parts of the trilogy I would have seen her grow up during the time of the Zimbabwe War of Liberation, and go to high school and university.

We first meet Tambu when she has just abandoned a prestigious job as a copywriter because she was angry that white colleagues took the credit for her achievements. She's running through her savings, living in a hostel in Harare, getting around on crowded Kombi buses.

It looks as though this is going to be a downward spiral into poverty. She feels as though she is going to fall down a precipice. All the while she is attempting to disguise her increasingly desperate poverty and conserve the soles of her Lady Di pumps. For reasons that include her grim financial prospects and her age, she moves to a widow's boarding house and eventually finds work as a biology teacher. A moment of optimism, but it seems inevitably to go wrong. Tambu eventually loses her job



when she badly beats a meek, mild-mannered student named Elizabeth. Tambu suffers a nervous breakdown that lands her in a hospital.

It seemed to me a kind of irony that Tambu meets her former (white) boss, Tracey, and is invited to join an ecotourism business offering the so-called real ghetto and village experience. It works well for a while and she is comfortably off.

However, when promoted, Tambu suggests a tour to her own village. On the day of the first tour, there is a celebration performance planned. When one of the European men takes a picture of her, Tambu's mother, the head hostess amongst the women, becomes frenzied and agitated. She strips off her top, and the tour is a disaster. Tambu resigns. The novel ends with Tambu taking a job at her aunt Christine's newest business venture: a security company. This is described as an optimistic move — going back to family. But then, going to her mother's village was a disaster. For me, the book was about the terrible loneliness of a woman who has defied her family's African traditions only to find Western ones no less limiting.

— **Jennifer Bryce**, blog, 12 October 2020

# I must be talking to my friends

## The 2020 voyage: Part 3 Continued from *SF Commentary* 105

**DOUG BARBOUR**  
11655–72nd Ave, Edmonton,  
Alberta T6G 0B9, Canada

I am in awe of your lists: that you even listened to all these, and more. I didn't buy many roots music albums this year — it's been classical and jazz when I've bought anything — and I've borrowed a lot from the library.

I do have the **Leonard Cohen** CD, to which you need to listen carefully, as his voice is so soft. And the **Cowboy Junkies** CD. That's about it. I can't remember all the ones I've borrowed from the library, which means some weren't as interesting as I'd hoped. **Jason Isbell's** *Nashville* certainly was good. I found myself recalling some earworms, then tracking down some older stuff. When 'A Whiter Shade of Pale' got in my head, I found a two-CD set of **Procol Harum** — one studio CD studio, the other live — and discovered a number of other great songs they did (which I remembered as I listened). I have borrowed a live *Traffic on the Road* CD, from a period when they were really into jazzed-up jams, having added the Muscle Shoals rhythm section of Roger Hawkins, David Hood, and Barry Beckett to the band. Great long versions of some of Traffic's best songs.

We watched the recent CNN documentary on **Linda Ronstadt**, reminding us of how good she was, and of how hard losing her voice must be for her. YouTube has a great excerpt from a 1977 Atlanta concert, and can be found on DVD.

(19 January 2020)

Are you self-isolating too? We retirees have a bit of practice at staying home, though not full time. The world has changed, and this first apocalypse wasn't quite what was written (although I think Ballard could have done something with a city-sized cruise ship caught in such a crisis). Canada as a country has responded pretty well — although our

province, run by a gang of neo-con religious types committed to privatising everything, not least our really good health care system, is fighting with the doctors and nurses even as it praises their work fighting Covid-19, and has just forced through a budget based on oil prices of at least \$58.00 over the next three years (with the Texas price at \$28.00 last night). They ran on a platform of promising to create jobs, and instead have watched about 50,000 jobs disappear in the last few years after they gave a 4.2 billion dollar tax break to oil corporations, which pocketed the gift and left for greener pastures. We and our friends despair.

I note that you've been keeping up with **Martha Argerich's** Lugano Concerts box sets. I have now finished going through the 21-CD set, and it's been a delight. I'm fascinated by the way it's been organised — each CD takes from more than one concert, but as a set it moves very neatly from the beginning of the Classical period — Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn — up the years to the twentieth century, with the last one a lovely set of South American composers.

I bought the **Natalie Merchant** box set of 10 CDs, which does include two that are not available otherwise. I do like her voice very much.

**SF:** Have you heard of, or read, **Martha Wells's** Murderbot Diaries series? Terrifically entertaining, with a moral bite. I think I'd call them hard science fantasy. And I have the new **William Gibson** sitting here.

My cancer's sort of back, so I am on another (chemo) drug (four larger pills once a day), but feel fine. Sharon was planning a big eightieth birthday party for the 21st, but, like everything else, it's been cancelled.

(19 March 2020)

I saw shots of the 'freedom riders' in Melbourne demanding the right to put their fellow citizens at risk because they assume the right to ignore the government's demand that they wear masks and physically distance; true friends of (a portion of)

citizens of USA! We have some of these in Canada too, but not in quite those numbers, although recent shots of a crowd in Montreal were more than a little worrying. Mass stupidity is the rise, and at the wrong time. I hope you two are weathering such mass foolishness in your home town, not to mention the pandemic generally. If we in Alberta have fuckwits running things along US government lines, at least our federal government is doing a pretty good job of maintaining sanity, providing needed aid, and generally keeping Canada from becoming one of the test cases of second-wave Covid — not perfect by any means, but pretty good.

(15 September 2020)

Since I have the cancer, and because it has migrated into my right lung, leading to extra pills with their side effects (not too bad in my case), I am one of the ‘compromised’, so we’re being very careful: keeping in mostly, and visiting only with a few friends who are also being very careful. As a retiree for some years I have become better prepared to deal with this thing than many. I already spend a lot of my time at home reading, listening, and watching TV with Sharon.

My recent musical discovery is the **Danish Quartet** on ECM, especially what I assume will be an ongoing project called *Prism*. There are two CDs so far, *Prism I* and *Prism II*. On the first they play a Bach fugue, Shostakovich’s Quartet No 15, and Beethoven’s 12th. On the second they play another Bach fugue, Schnittke’s 3rd Quartet, and Beethoven’s 13th.

I’ve been reading some recent SF, plus some re-reads, such as some of the great ones by **Iain M. Banks**, plus some new fantasies, especially a few by Indigenous Canadian writers, and another rather intriguing one based on Mexican–Mayan mythology. I’ve also read a fascinating late essay collection by **Clive James** — the size of an epic fantasy — *Cultural Amnesia*, in which, via a series of takes on various twentieth-century figures, writers, artists, musicians, and a few politicians, he lays out a deep belief in liberal humanism as the core of civilisation, and an equally deep disgust with theories of all kinds that set their holders’ minds in stone.

(16 September 2020)

There you are in sunny Melbourne, opening up again, and here I am in sunny, cool Edmonton, closing down, sort of again, because our fuckwit government has no idea how to deal with this crisis except to keep attacking doctors, nurses, and front-line workers. But today is a good day for me, as I have just seen my urologist–oncologist. It seems we are still managing the cancer. Plus, I will have some time yet to enjoy my new farsightedness after my

cataract operation about a month ago. I had my cataract surgery for both eyes on Friday 25 September, lucking in to a cancellation while the operating rooms were still open. So I’m writing this wearing a pair of off-the-counter reading glasses because for the first time in about 80 years I am able to see clearly from about half metre away, without my glasses! In its way the operation was very science-fictional: the whole thing took about three hours with the actual op taking about 20 minutes; the anaesthetist gave me a small relaxant in my arm but I was awake throughout; in the operating room, the nurse put some liquid freezer in my right eye, then the surgeon laid a white plastic mask across both eyes, but heavier on the eye about to be done; he then opened it, which pulled my eyelids apart and held them, and told me to look at the light when the room went dark which it immediately did. I did my best to keep my eye on the bright light or where it was when he began, while watching a surreal series of actions — a transparent circle rising from the eye after some very quiet snipping sounds, another one (or two?) descending, while feeling the lightest of touches; then more soft sounds, this time stitching I guess, and the same thing on the other eye.

I take drops four times a day for 21 days. The surgeon said I could watch TV and even read, but reading has been definitely out. Aside from an hour to two on this machine I haven’t read much at all (using Sharon’s off-the-shelf reading glasses from her surgery). Eventually, I’ll see my optometrist and get reading glasses, with dark glasses for outside.

**[\*brg\* Recently I’ve been advised to undergo cataract surgery sooner rather than later, although for several years my eye doctor has not worrying too much about the problem. Thanks for your account of the surgery, the only detailed description I’ve seen of the process.\*]**

Given it was a day surgery I didn’t spend too much time there. The whole staff were practising safety measures to the max. It was an awesome experience. My farsightedness is better than it was with my last prescription. I still keep reaching up to adjust my glasses while we’re watching TV; it’s a big change, and now I want to live long enough to enjoy it. I did pay \$300 per eye for an improved lens (the surgeon offered three alternatives, of which this was the least expensive option and probably the correct choice) but I could have had the surgery with the generally approved lens for the nothing I paid for everything else. That’s why I’m happy to pay my taxes and am so afraid of my sick and evil provincial government’s determination to privatise medical services as much as possible.

Otherwise, I’m listening to five **Dohnanyi** CDs:

his piano works, and other chamber and concerto works. All those I've heard so far I really like. I bought seven CDs of **Sibelius's** chamber music, which, considering how much I like his symphonies, I should have bought long ago. I have only listened to the two CDs of the piano trios, but they're wonderful. Also I bought some recent ECM CDs. One way of coping, eh?

Sure hope you and Elaine are keeping safe, as we are doing are best to do. Strange times, indeed.  
(30 October 2020)

**ANDREW DARLINGTON**  
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Time is a strange thing, sometimes Considered As A Helix Of Semi-Precious Stones. I turned on BBC2 to watch *Mock of the Week* without realising it was a repeat. It gradually became apparent that it was from last December, before Christmas, before the election, in a bizarrely disorientating sense of timeshift. It seemed like an eternity ago, although in fact it's just a little over six weeks ago. We did a postal vote because we were going down to Colliers Wood to stay over with my son Stephen and his family. I stayed up long enough to see the exit polls. The following morning Stephen came in at breakfast and said 'Wakefield has a Conservative MP!' I assumed he was joking. I was wrong to think that. It already feels like forever ago.

Fast-forward to now: I went into Wakefield this weekend to the 'Jackanory' Lit-event. There were sketches and artwork on the walls from classes held in the venue during the week. Some of them were quite good; others not so good. **Nick Toczek** was reading. It was good to see him again. He seemed really pleased that I'd turned up to see him. It was a relaxed informal reading. After the event we went for a coffee — he's doing a 'dry' January so we didn't go near alcohol! And we did a lot of catching up. He was wearing a Ramones T-shirt. I said 'I see your Ramones T-shirt, and raise you ...'; I was wearing a Thirteenth Floor Elevators T-shirt. We began trading music stories, almost as if we'd been doing it yesterday and forever.

More time shifts. When I first met Nick, in an art gallery as I recall, we both had long hair. No more. We've done joint readings since, published each other, and appeared in the same magazines — *Little Word Machine*, *Wool City Rocker* — and in fact we still do. We both write for *R'N'R: Rock 'n' Reel* today. He got to see Allen Ginsberg. I never saw Allen Ginsberg. But I got to see William Burroughs. He never saw William Burroughs. We both got to see the Ramones, albeit separately. We compare

tinnitus levels: 'It's always there, even in the quietest silence.' When he tells about eating fried scorpion in Thailand, I call him out about his vegetarian phase. I remember him doing a thing about turning veggie, yet being tempted by the aroma of burgers from McDonald's. And bacon. Always bacon. Now he says black pudding too, which is hard-core even for carnivores. I was never tempted that way. The one thing I missed, the one thing I used to enjoy, was sweet-and-sour chicken. But the Pagoda in Wakefield does a great sweet-and-sour tofu instead.

Another time shift. Three of us once turned up for what we assumed would be a Poetry Booking in a Wakefield Alternative Cabaret, only to see the poster outside the venue announcing us as 'Three Comedians'! Which was not exactly what we had in mind. I dropped all my serious poems and just did the humorous ones. Nick did a long rambling thing about haemorrhoids. It was a kind of X-Factor with a prize for the set voted most popular. The third person onstage was a lady poet from Horbury who had stacked the audience with her friends, work colleagues, and family with the intention of swaying the vote. Which made it all the sweeter when Nick won.

We talked about those we've lost on the way: **Steve Sneyd**, **Richard Mason**. Nick says the Wakefield Cabaret was one of Richard's promotions. I don't think it was. But he could be right. Richard blasted into the Leeds poetry scene, took it and shook it by the scruff of the neck. He was an activist who set up readings and Alternative Cabarets. We did lots of wild events together, me and Rich, including stoned trips down to Dorset. Then he vanished. Nick told me Rich'd retreated back to Cowling, and died five years ago. I didn't even know. Until that moment.

As we part, Nick gives me a CD he's done. I give him a copy of my *Tweak Vision*. With all manner of vague promises to do more. But time is a strange thing, considering ...

(24 January 2020)

I've been away in **Whitby**. We stayed in a holiday let called Dawn's Gem just down from the Whale-bones: wife Cathy, sister-in-law Denise, and little jack-russell Jack. Covid-19 was unfortunately very apparent during this visit: a lot of businesses going through hard times, everyone wearing masks, limited number-access into shops and early closing times at restaurants. I wanted to go up the 199 steps to the Abbey. Denise didn't fancy the climb, and Cathy didn't want to leave her alone. So I go up by myself in a howling gale. When I get to the top it was only to discover that both the Abbey and the Visitor's Centre were closed 'due to high winds'! So I just walk around from a distance. There was a



**The ruins of Whitby Abbey.  
(Photo: P. Clement, via Wikipedia.)**

couple I got talking to who'd driven up to the Abbey in their car, parked in the Abbey car park, paid the exorbitant car-parking fee before they were also informed the Abbey was closed for the day and probably the next day too, can they come back later? Actually no, they can't.

On another day we walk inland following the **River Esk trail** to the village of Ruswarp. We saw a seal basking on the riverbank, and a couple of herons. A passer-by said there were three herons. His wife contradicts him: no, it was the same heron flying around and reappearing. We got to see two of them. I also got to rescue a big black half-blind half-deaf dog. It sounds like I'm bragging here, but it's true. The dog came lolling along onto the quay at the river-edge, where it half-fell half-jumped down to land in an untidy heap on a narrow mud-margin, from where it couldn't get back up. It was prowling up and down restlessly, wading in the fast-running water, then drawing back — I was afraid it would fall in and get into real difficulties. The owner came puffing and panting, a hefty kind of guy with a profusely bleeding hand. He said he'd fallen as he was chasing the escaped dog. He called the dog's name loudly to no effect, only succeeding in scaring and confusing it all the more. I noticed a weir nearby with cascading tide gushing down its incline. So I climbed down as close as I could get, hanging onto an overhead beam, and started calling to the dog in a long simple repetition of 'Come on Boy, Come on Boy' so that it would have a focus. It followed my voice. It seemed to know I was trying to help. It battled its way up until I was able to reach out, grab it by the collar, and haul it up. Not comfortable for the dog, wet for me, but I managed to pull it up onto the quay again. The owner simply

took possession, and walked away with it. I hope he was kind to it.

I bought a Frederik Pohl SF paperback at the Whitby indoor market, later finding out I already had it in a different edition on my shelf at home.

I went up to the local shop today. There were three boys with skateboards. Two of them were cruising on their boards. The third had left his board on the pavement. When he saw me approaching he looked alarmed. He glanced at me, then glanced back to where he'd left his board. As though he was scared I was going to jump onto his skateboard and make a speedy getaway down the hill! He grabbed it away safely before I could reach it ... I think that my heading off on his skateboard was highly unlikely.

What a strange adventure 2020 is proving to be.  
(3 October 2020)

**JULIAN WARNER**  
**13 Frederick Street,**  
**Brunswick VIC 3056**

**[\*brg\* (5 January 2020) Julian, for your entertainment, or otherwise, I've sent you my list of Favourite Popular CDs Heard for the First Time in 2019.\*]**

A bit of commentary on your selections and the odd points where they intersect with my taste. I must say that I suspect that I would not object to hearing any of your favourites on the radio. I might not go out and buy them but I would willingly listen. I've edited down your list to the common items with comments.

- 12 Miles Davis: DOO-BOP (1992)  
I've had Doo-Bop for a while. From a period where he had largely dispensed with jazz.
- 19 Miles Davis: RUBBER BAND (2019)  
Rubber Band was much better than expected. Musical and engaging.
- 23 Various: JONI 75: A BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION (2019)  
Didn't buy this but was tempted.
- 27 Nils Lofgren: BLUE WITH LOU (2019)  
Obviously to at least be listened to for the Lou Reed/Nils Lofgren co-writes.
- 38 Kamasi Washington: HEAVEN AND EARTH (3 CDs) (2018)  
Didn't buy this but saw him live in Adelaide. He runs a big impressive outfit and he can play a big, mean squally sax. Be careful with albums by his bass player, Thundercat. That you may not like.

Comments on your 'Other four-star contenders, in order of hearing':

Triffids: BORN SANDY DEVOTIONAL (restored; extra tracks) (1986/2006)

Coming from Perth, I should be a devotee of the Triffids but I'm not. A little mystery.

Gurf Morlix: IMPOSSIBLE BLUE (2019)

Very hard to get here. Morlix is supposed to be one of those musician's musicians but clearly not appreciated enough for anyone to stock more than a few of his CDs.

THELONIOUS MONK PLAYS DUKE ELLINGTON (1955)

Had this for a while. Not as angular as one might have expected. Too much respect perhaps?

John Coltrane: A LOVE SUPREME (1964/2005)

I assume that this was the luxury re-issue, which I have.

Colin Linden, Luther Dickinson and Tennessee Valentine: AMOUR (2019)

I'm willing to listen to anything that features Jim Dickinson or his sons.

Bernard Fowler: INSIDE OUT (2019)

A great soul singer but never particularly famous on his own. I have a few recordings where he sings but is not the principal artist.

Richard Thompson: ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM: LIVE AT BARRYMORE'S 1985 (2 CDs) (2019)

Still haven't picked this up yet.

Ry Cooder and V. M. Bhatt: A MEETING BY THE RIVER (1993) Another oldie — very listenable to my ears.

Comments on your 'Favourite Popular Boxed Sets Bought During 2019':

8 Bob Dylan: THE ROLLING THUNDER REVUE: THE 1975 LIVE RECORDINGS (14 CDs)

Perhaps the whole 14 CDs is a bit much. There's not a lot of variance between some of the shows. However good to hear for the otherwise not much heard items.

Comments on your 'Other four-star contenders bought during 2019'

Eric Bogle: THE LIVE COLLECTION (2 CDs)

Tempting because I have a couple of his early albums. However I don't like his novelty songs.

Thelonius Monk: FIVE ORIGINAL ALBUMS (5 CDs)

Always good.

Kinks: ARTHUR, OR THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (2 CDs)

Lots of good sardonic songs. Not destined to be pop hits, but great lyrics.

(9 February 2020)

CY CHAUVIN

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I read your note about your **James Tiptree Jr.** talk to the **Nova Mob**, which would have been wonderful to hear. I hope it will turn up in written form later in *SFC*. I don't think you missed anything by not re-reading the novels, since Tiptree's strength was short fiction. I once began that same task of re-reading the Tiptree fiction. It was odd comparing past memories with my present perceptions. I even attempted to read some stories in the original magazines in which I first read them. I remembered in particular '**The Peacefulness of Vivianne**' as being lush and lyrical, but that story gave me my first awareness that Tiptree was a writer I wanted to follow. But that hope was dashed upon the rocks when I re-read it. It was just a sort of souped-up story of espionage! However, I did find '**On the Last Afternoon**' just as deeply affecting as upon first reading, and '**Slow Music**' a short novel in scope. Only a few writers (like Cordwainer Smith) can write short stories that have the panoramic feeling of a novel.

**[\*brg\* I keep shoving aside my own articles out of SFC. The Tiptree article did appear in \*brg\* 108 for ANZAPA, and now William Breiding has asked to reprint it, with updates, in Portable Storage. I can send a PDF of \*brg\* 108 to anyone who asks.\*]**

I recently read **Graham Greene's** *The Comedians* for the first time, and quite enjoyed it. I've also read his *The Heart of the Matter* and (very long ago) *The Quiet American*, and enjoyed them all. So I'm very glad someone else is mentioning his name in fanzines. (I keep details of my reading on a book log, but it's just on a Word file, and not searchable.)

Your comments about **Dickens** (about **Peter Ackroyd's** biography) made me pause: 'Dickens' prose was popular prose. Today's younger readers find Dickens' prose so difficult that they cannot read his novels.' I wonder if I would find his novels difficult to read today; I find I have a severe dislike to colloquial language used exclusively or extensively in a character's speech. And I find I am less interested or perhaps even unwilling to read stories where the language itself is part of the puzzle (Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* is a good example), of strangeness of the sake of strangeness. But I do love **Jane Austen's** prose (granted, she's earlier), and **Wilkie Collins** seems okay. You make me want to dip into my father's old bookcase, to see what I might find in the way of Dickens. I suspect other factors might put me off, too — the vastly different

worldview, that you mention; and maybe the depressing cycle of family life and poverty of novels from that era.

I haven't seen any of the films you mention (just because I don't see films), except for *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*) some 30 years ago, but I still do remember it being incredibly beautiful.

Jennifer Bryce's column was interesting, but it seems that she certainly has second thoughts about Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*, No. 3 on her list: 'I left slightly dissatisfied. I was an observer. I couldn't get inside or even feel some small degree of empathy for any of the characters.' That would kill my interest in a novel. I did read one other book she writes about, Oliver Sacks's autobiography *On the Move*. Generally excellent, although some of the later sections of his life history suffer because he's written more extensively about his experiences elsewhere. I prefer his earlier memoir, *Uncle Tungsten*, which covers his childhood and becoming inspired by chemistry. (I knew nothing of chemistry before, so that was new to me.) His *Island of the Colorblind* is also autobiographical, largely a book-long trip report, and thus more interesting to me than his case histories of patients, which are impersonally strange.

I have generally liked Robert Aickman's short stories, but I have to disagree with Michael Dirda about the role of short story endings: 'Such writers recognize that stories don't require pat endings. They don't need to close with the snap of an O. Henry trapdoor, or the ironic twist of a Mau-passant. A short story can actually convey a more haunting depiction of the human predicament [in a weird horror story?] by avoiding any artificial conclusiveness. Life is messy, not neat; most problems are never clearly resolved, but only lived with; people act unreasonably for no apparent reason.' I suppose that recently I have suffered through too many short stories that simply peter out, rather than end in any way that is artistically satisfying for me. I certainly would be happy for a short story that gave some insight into the 'human predicament', but surely a weird fantasy is not the place to look for that? Short stories are too short to simply end without nothing resolved (not everything resolved, but nothing). Generally, weird horror stories end shortly after the full extent of the weird horror is revealed at the climax. It's certainly not my favourite genre. I've thought horror a particularly limited emotion. I suppose in the end it comes down to a matter of taste. But take that Aickman story about a man marrying a woman who collected clocks. The whole story is his narration of the wife's collection of clocks, and how if when something went wrong with the clocks, his wife also went wrong. Finally, suddenly, one day all the clocks disappear and so does his wife. That's it. There is no insight or

revelation, emotional or otherwise. I suppose the best one could say is that the story ends like a clock whose battery or mainspring has run down. Uncanny, surely, but ... In all, Dirda's comments are in marked contrast to those of Cheryl Cline in William Breiding's *Portage Storage 2*.

(14 February 2020)

I think your characterisation of many current films as 'thuggish', that have characters that we can only hate and make us hate ourselves, is appropriate. I'm not sure if it's a new phenomenon. It's easier to pick and choose among older films that we already know about, and it is possible that when we were younger we had more tolerance for 'thugs'. (Couldn't that be an apt description of *A Clockwork Orange*?) But you do seem to explain why I don't seem to be able to watch films any more. But then I haven't tried any of the good ones you mention.

**[\*brg\* I was protesting against films that seem more acts of thuggery directed at the viewer than at the main characters. It's as if directors believe that people are sitting in their seats yelling at the screen 'Hit me! Hit me!']\*]**

Your description of the correspondence between Tiptree and Jeffrey Smith in Smith's collection makes me want to seek out that book. Tiptree's extensive correspondence among fans and authors is part of the reason why this writer is so endearing. *F&SF* published some correspondence between Ursula K. LeGuin and Tiptree a few years ago, prior to the release of the Sheldon/Tiptree biography, and it was quite interesting.

The book reviews are always interesting. But I noticed a curious phenomenon within myself as I read through them: 'Oh, he writes this is a mix of police procedural and urban fantasy — not for me', or 'this is alternate history, ditto'. Is this branding of sub-genres such a good thing? Is it a shorthand for placing a book that is unfair? SF and fantasy just used to be that, with 'science fantasy' as a reluctant mix. Now it seems published books are subdivided into mini-categories, and reviewers congratulate authors for breaking out of their sub-category and mixing it with another sub-category, as breaking new ground. I long for the good old days where all sf was organic and free range.

**[\*brg\* When writing short reviews one often needs genre categories in order to convey the flavour of the book, even while wanting to concentrate on the quality of the writer's individual world. The best writers burst out of whatever category the publisher imposes on them.\*]**

I was wondering too how you are able to 'rate' all the books you read, films seen, and music? I do keep a list of all the books I've read, with detailed comments, and publish some in my apazine, but I would be unable to put them in any numeric order from best to least. And of course, I don't read any books I dislike, and drop many along the way that lose my interest. Then again, it probably doesn't matter much whether a book is No. 1 or No. 6 on your list, since any of your top ten would be recommended.

**[\*brg\* I write all the four-star entries for the year in each category in a separate Word file. I don't include items of three-and-a-half stars or fewer. I juggle the items until they are in column order. Then I write '1' beside the item at the top of the column, then '2', and so on. I rank the items entirely by instinct and memory. The items I enjoyed most have an extra halo of light around them, and the halo slowly diminishes down the list. The problem is with some items is that I remember enjoying them greatly at the time, but I cannot remember them on 1 January of the following year. When it becomes impossible to keep ascribing rank order, I include all the other four-star entries in their own list in chronological order of listening, reading, or viewing.\*]**

I was also interested by **David Grigg's** statistics, simply because I don't keep any such myself. I did check back among the last 20 books I read. They were evenly divided among books written by males and females. But the years the books were first published range from 1941 to 2012. (It would be interesting to find out the time range of David Grigg's book choices.) I also just noticed recently how rarely anyone reads books written before 1900, including myself, yet they are often among the best. (I've read all of **Jane Austen** at least twice, also **Mrs Gaskell's Cranford**, and hope I'll read them again.) Even **Dracula** was excellent, so unlike the modern adaptations. Only two of my 20 most recent books were non-fiction — I prefer to borrow my non-fiction from the library.

**Colin Steele's** review of **Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*** was interesting. I remember watching the film version on TV as a child. My brother and sister and I just walked outside at one point because it was so frightening and depressing. I think we attempted to watch it twice (or rather, our parents did). Strange now that I never asked them what they thought of it — was it just another war film to my father, or something else? (It falls into the category of the many things we never think to ask our parents until too late.) But when I read the novel 30 years later I was disappointed. Perhaps it

was simply that the greatest thing the novel had to give (its warning against nuclear war) was already given, via the film. I don't think that makes it any less important as a book. I did really enjoy *A Town Like Alice*, *Pied Piper*, and all the other novels I've read by Shute recently. I think I have to disagree (based on the other novels) with Colin Steele's comment about Shute 'not being a great stylist'. I think he had a very understated but compelling style, not extravagant or obvious. He was able to make you want to read about ordinary events and people. It was his style that lured me on to reading *Alice* actually, after being disappointed with *On the Beach*. (Reading two or three paragraphs of a book by a new author is as important or more important than an interesting plot summary or recommendation.)

**[\*brg\* I agree with Colin Steele about Shute 'not being a great stylist'. My first attempt at a long literary essay was in Form 4 (i.e. fourth year of high school). I read *A Town Like Alice* because everybody said what a great Australian novel it is. I liked the story well enough, but I was very disappointed in its flat, uninvolved style. However, I had not yet picked up the literary lingo with which I might express my misgivings, so the whole writing exercise was frustrating. Two years later, I gained much from the Matriculation English Literature course, but it wasn't until I did First Year English at Melbourne University that I gained the skills to get stuck into a medium-quality book such as *A Town Like Alice*. :: Among my mother's books are well-read copies of her Nevil Shute novels. However, the stash does not include a copy of *In the Wet*, which is said to be his 'other science fiction novel', i.e. other than *On the Beach*.\*]**

Most recently, I've been reading *Reflections: On the Magic of Writing* by **Diana Wynne Jones**. Besides several autobiographical essays, she makes a number of observations that were surprising, such that she found younger readers more careful readers than adults (or at least less in need of repetitive explanations). She also gives the best essay I've read on how it feels to be writing fiction. The essay on her best novel, *Fire and Hemlock*, is a surprising account of some of its background sources, and makes me want to re-read that book soon. She writes in an unpretentious and often humorous way. Especially funny is her essay on visits to schools she made as a speaker on writing: 'Dinner. The kitchen ladies have decided I would prefer pilchard and lettuce. They have kept it in a hot cupboard all morning because there are chips with it. They fetch it out, lukewarm, wilted, with the chips turned to a pile of kindling. So they freshen it up by pouring a large ladleful of gravy over everything. "There!"

they say proudly.’

(26 August 2020)

**SFC 104:** I liked the quote from **Franz Kafka**; certainly apt for our times. Your suggestion that (in one, limited sense) the pandemic is a gift because it reduces distractions and enables people to concentrate on creative work, does seem true. **Charles Findlay**, former editor of *F&SF*, wrote on the magazine’s website that *F&SF* has received a huge influx of submissions, and of better quality, too, such that they’ve had to stop receiving submissions until they can ‘buy down’ their inventory. Perhaps other editors might have this same wonderful problem?

In my own case, I am writing more, but is it because of fewer distractions, or boredom? Or is it going through my box of old manuscripts, and finding unexpected things I’d forgotten I’d written, which in turn inspires something new?

(I just woke up in the middle of the night, and all these wonderful ideas came into my head about the stuff I was writing — it must be more than mere boredom that did that!)

I’m glad you took some time to write about your own recent reading. **Jenny Blackford’s** *The Girl in the Mirror* sounds interesting, and the situation reminds me of *Charlotte Sometimes*, by **Penelope Farmer**. That novel involves two girls who live in the same boarding school, but travel through time in some uncontrollable fashion, and changes places (repeatedly). It is one of the two young adult novels that changed my view of that genre; afterwards, I’ve paid much more attention to it.

Perhaps **Harold Bloom** railed against **T. S. Eliot** because he was the modernist poet that revolutionised poetry forever. I read somewhere that Eliot’s reputation has fallen a great deal since his death, but it might be simply because it was so high: some of his poems were produced as plays in theatres in London and New York. He has a real sense of sound which I love in his poems.

I never really cared for *The Crying of Lot 49* either; metafiction was a product of its time. I never wanted to be constantly reminded that I was reading a piece of fiction, but rather be drawn into the soul of a story.

I looked forward to reading *Beyond the Outposts* by **Algis Budrys**, but was quite disappointed. He seemed vague, repetitious, and smug. Take that paragraph Paul quotes from the first essay in the book, ‘Or Thwim’. There Budrys is setting up a straw man, ‘writers of fiction who are obligated to expose the injustices and inequities of society’, which he then knocks down, not willing to accept that what he favours are “‘good stories, but they don’t say anything”.’ But no actual stories are cited, so how do we know what he means? *The Word for the World is Forest* by **Ursula Le Guin** fulfils many of

those criteria Budrys rails against, yet is still a good story.

I found Budrys columns on writing reprinted from *Locus* similarly vague and unhelpful. **Damon Knight’s** Clarion Workshop handbook, in contrast, is so clear and specific (or as much as any advice on writing can be). I realise that they are two different beasts; Budrys’s columns for the armchair fiction writer, perhaps. But they told me nothing new, and he squirmed around and around, just filling space, to say what he did.

I did enjoy some of the historical background on science fiction that Budrys provided, although the phrase ‘Campbellian sf’ became tiresome. Perhaps I would have been much happier with the collections of his actual book reviews drawn from *F&SF*.

On my own two pieces: If obsolete science fiction automatically becomes ‘alternate history’ when its date in the future passes, then *2001: A Space Odyssey* would be another example. However, it doesn’t feel that way at all — just another example that the ‘best by’ date on a product is only a guideline!

I don’t enjoy driving, so I couldn’t take the sort of trip **William Breiding** writes about in ‘**The Skeletons of Winter**’. I even felt frustrated when I visited my uncle in Denver and he took me on a long drive through the mountains, but we did not stop to get out of the car. I do like the scenic views out of train windows; they appear like long, animated paintings. You pass white frame buildings in small towns, or seem to float across rivers on bridges. William writes that it is ‘through people that I transcend myself’; how true. And the right people will take you out of your misery instantly! You hardly need to take a long trip to do that; they can make ordinary things seem new. It seems significant that William didn’t seem to know where exactly to go on his trip, and that he was anxious to go home and write about it. Perhaps he might find it more cathartic to turn his next travel adventure into fiction? He could add the people he felt he needed, to ‘improve’ the memory of the trip.

The class of 55 that **Jennifer Bryce** writes she taught for Social Studies is much too large. It seems very sad that most couldn’t read. But I recall that a teacher in my sixth grade class told the students that he thought reading books was a waste of time compared with doing things in real life. He might have meant fiction only; and perhaps he was using reverse psychology to get students to read. This was in a Catholic school that my parents paid tuition for me to attend.

I don’t know how I feel about a con report of a virtual convention. **Jeanne Mealy** also wrote about the **New Zealand Worldcon**, in Stipple-Apa, but somehow these con reports remind me of a friend who used to give blow-by-blow descriptions of ‘what happened’ in his *Dungeon and Dragons* role

games, exactly in the same terms as events in real life. **Edwina Harvey** doesn't do this, and the virtual worldcon was a novelty enough in itself to be worth writing about. But a conreport is already a 'virtual' experience.

I'm amazed and stunned again by **Denny Marshall's** jolly green alien on the cover; its nose seems to have aboriginal features, which makes it distinctly Australian as well. The backcover is unusual and good, too — and it appears the artwork was not computer generated.

I'd not heard of *The Overstory* by **Richard Powers**. I'm fond of trees, so I enjoyed reading **Ian Mond's** review. I had heard of the chestnut blight, which killed nearly all the American chestnut trees. Oikos, a nursery near Kalamazoo, Michigan, which specialises in 'tree crops', has been breeding varieties of chestnuts resistant to the blight, crossing them with European and Chinese varieties, for many years. The interconnectedness of trees and forests to each other through underground mycelium fungi threads is also something I've read about before, although only within the past two years; scientists decided that the largest living organism in the world is this vast fungi network that connects the forest of Michigan's upper peninsula! But I don't know if I will actually read *The Overstory*. I'm put off by the very thing Ian Mond found: its length. 'There isn't an ounce of subtlety in [the book],' Mond writes. I suspect that my interest in trees would not sustain me through 500 pages. I do recommend that others interested in trees and forests read *Wildwood: A Journey through Trees* by **Roger Deakin**, a collection of personal essays on the subject, beautifully written. A book to dip into, and re-read; some have called him Britain's Thoreau. And much more subtle.

PS: I sent the PDF file of *SFC* 104 off to someone in the Roseville library book club who likes sf — astonishingly, as I now realise, her name is Elaine Gillespie!

(7 January 2021)

**LECH KELLER-KRAWCZYK**  
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**Poland**

Finally, I have unpacked my trophies from the 'hunting trip' to the antipodes and found your paper on **Roy Orbison** (in *The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie*, 2004). I was (still am, by the way) a fan of Orbison, but I became really interested in his songs

after I found that my wife was a great fan of him. Anyway, we have collected an impressive collection of his tapes and later CDs. I found your paper on Orbison very interesting, especially as it was written honestly and is based on your own experiences and feelings. Unfortunately, it would be very difficult indeed to find any reasonable connection between this paper and the works of Stanislaw Lem.

**[\*brg\* The main interest of my Orbison essay is that was written at a time when he was not recording, and only the first signs were appearing of his 1987–88 career revival. I was trying to remind people of his great achievements during the 1960s. These days, I'm told, Orbison fans remember mainly his songs with the *Travelin' Wilburys* (1987) and his *She's a Mystery* album, which went to No. 1 in the week he died in 1988.\*]**

I used to live for many years in Blackburn South — a really nice place, but not so nice if you have to commute almost every day to the CBD, as I had to do, working at the banks and software houses.

I have also found that you wrote a paper on **the non-SF novels of Philip K. Dick. Stanislaw Lem** also wrote about P. K. Dick, and I wrote a paper titled **'The Non-Science Fiction Prose of Stanislaw Lem'** (*The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* Vol. 29, No. 3/2002, pp. 241–256)—[https://www.academia.edu/37767074/NON-SCIENCE\\_FICTION\\_PROSE\\_OF\\_STANISLAW\\_LEM](https://www.academia.edu/37767074/NON-SCIENCE_FICTION_PROSE_OF_STANISLAW_LEM).

I also found that you were a collector of model railways. I started my 'romance' with **model railways** later than you, when I was about 12, and am even now collecting them (they are, as you can



guess, 'continental' models, mostly from Poland and Germany). The problem is that I was always short of space, so my layouts have always been temporary. One such temporary layout takes approximately one-third of my lounge. I still hope that one day I will have a spare room to put a permanent layout. I also always wanted (in my childhood and adolescence) to be an engine driver. My dreams were realised, at least in part, when I was working in the 1970s as a computer programmer for the Polish State Railways (PKP) — I was allowed then to drive (as a learner driver) an electric locomotive (a EU-07, made in Poland on British licence). Based on this experience I am sometimes allowed to drive (of course under the proper supervision) a diesel locomotive on a tourist narrow-gauge railway (similar to Puffing Billy).

Anyway, the decline of **Melbourne's railways**, which reached its peak under the (mis)management of Jeff Kennett, seems to be finished, and Melbourne's railways are somehow recovering from the decades of neglect. Similar things happen in Warsaw, but in the city centre the system is mostly the 'proper' underground railway similar to that in Moscow (even the oldest trains in Warsaw Metro were made in the USSR and then in Russia).

(1 March 2020)

Your *American Kindness: the 2005 Bruce Bayside Report* (2006): As I understand, your trip to the US took place in 2005 and you noticed a huge problem with **homelessness** there. I was in the US at the very end of the twentieth century and spent winter in Minnesota. I was told that all the homeless had been taken from the streets of Minneapolis (winter there is, as a rule, even more severe than it was in Poland when I was young — down to minus 20 degrees Celsius and heavy snowfalls) in the autumn and placed in the heated sheds until the spring, as otherwise they would not survive. Minneapolis does not have any underground railway or, unlike in Warsaw, a system of pipes with hot water used for heating the buildings. The Warsaw homeless used to dwell underground in such places, where there are, for example, underground inspection chambers and corridors. The problem with homelessness in the US is, most likely, closely linked to the collapse of family links there. Americans are highly mobile, as this is a requirement of the capitalistic free market, but this mobility means that they have no roots and so no place to go if they lose a job and as a result also lose a roof over the head. In more 'backward' countries such as Poland, there are always some family members who will allow such a person (at least on a temporary basis) to dwell, sometimes in a shed or garage, but this is still a roof over the head and something like a (semi)permanent address. There is, as a rule, no

such thing in the US, and I am afraid also in Australia and even in the UK. Last year I was in Coventry (an unsuccessful job interview at the local university) and found many homeless in this not really very big city. I remember also whole 'towns' of shacks built from paper by homeless people around London's Waterloo Station, even when it was a terminus of Eurostar (the Channel train).

I am afraid that homelessness, like unemployment and organised crime, is a permanent feature of the real market capitalism, and thus can be eradicated only together with this system of exploitation — a system of much more clever slavery and feudalism, as based on economic, not physical compulsion to work. But this lack of support for people in need, caused (in my opinion) mostly by too narrow base of taxation, as only the poor are taxed, instead of the rich, makes homelessness a problem that can be now, to my sadness, noticed also in Australia. Recently I read books about America written in the 1950s and 1960s by Polish famous writer (at least in Poland) Melchior Wańkowicz. Publishing in Poland, he noticed many faults of American society, but did not mention homelessness.

There have been now and for many, many years never any Polish beggars in Poland. The last professional beggars of Polish origin I remember from the 1950s, when Poland was still recovering from the destruction caused by World War II. Of course, there are many poor persons in Poland, but this seems not be a problem of such proportions as in the US, UK, America, and now even Germany.

(2 March 2020)

**TONY THOMAS**  
**Box 1215, Elwood VIC 3184**

Jenny Bryce and I are sitting in the Adelaide Art Gallery coffee shop on our last day here after **Writers Week 2020**. The best non-WW events were the **Norwegian Soloists Choir** singing psalms; *Di-manche*, a climate-change play, mostly mime and puppetry, from France; and (with reservations) *The Doctor*, a much-lauded English play based on an original by **Arthur Schnitzler**. I was much less impressed by the *Mozart Requiem*, though the singing was good.

Of the **Fringe Festival** we saw the very funny **Handlebards' Tempest**, four women taking all the parts with some help from the audience, including me. Here we were in company with **Roman Orszanski** and a couple of 3MBS friends from Melbourne, plus a lot of their family members, making up a good chunk of the audience. Had a few meals and a **Critical Mass** with Roman as well.

And I read a lot too in the week: **Vonnegut's** *Mother Night* for the first time (showing its age), **Michael Wilding's** memoir *Growing Wild* (very good), the latest **Jonathan Kellerman** thriller, **John Boyne's** *Ladder to the Sky* (the writer at WW better than the book) and I'm still going with a book on the brain by neuroscientist **Hannah Critchlow**, who was also at the Writers' Week.

(9 March 2020)

How are you in these extremely unusual circumstances? As Murray MacLachlan wrote, suddenly we're in an sf world, a world disaster about which I've been reading since at least the 1960s, so we sf fans may at least be a little less surprised than most of the rest of the population. Maybe ...

The **Critical Mass** meeting in Adelaide discussed Russian writer **Sergei Lukyanenko** and his '**Night Watch**' series, which Roman tried to make as interesting as possible, but I can't imagine myself reading any of this after hearing Roman's extracts. Roman's article is now on the Critical Mass website.

I haven't been reading much while having the TV on, continuously tracking the latest worldwide infections and deaths, and watching the stupidities of some politicians, mostly the expected ones, and the rising to the challenge of others, some of them unexpected.

But I have just read the latest novel by Irish novelist and playwright **Sebastian Barry**, *A Thousand Moons*, which I bought just before the bookshops closed. If you don't know Barry I strongly recommend this book, a sort of sequel (though it stands alone perfectly well) to his Booker-long-listed *Days Without End* of a few years ago, also very good. I'm currently reading another earlier Barry novel, which had been sitting on my shelves, and find that this is loosely connected to the others, in that members of the same family appear, though living in different centuries. When I google Barry I find that most of his eight or so novels in the last 20 years are connected in this way, providing a massive panorama of the Irish diaspora in the last couple of centuries, as well of plenty about Ireland itself from the Troubles on. But what is most outstanding is the quality of Barry's lyrical prose, together with the subtlety of his characterisation and his natural story-telling ability. I've just ordered a lot of earlier Barry online from Readings and Book Depository, which may reach me sometime by mail, assuming that this remains working.

(5 April 2020)

**DANIEL KING**  
**420 Spencer Rd, Thorlie WA 6108**

A few comments on an SF author previously new to me: **Walter Tevis**. I had had his *The Man Who Fell to Earth* sitting on my bookshelf ever since I bought it in the late 1970s, but after seeing the long and boring movie of the same name I wasn't motivated to read it. A few months ago, though, I thought 'why not?', and I was most pleasantly surprised! It is that rare thing, a book hard to put down. It's not cluttered with characters; the few there are very well drawn; and it doesn't switch point of view with each chapter (which seems to be a strategy most authors adopt to attempt to disguise their complete inability to construct plots).

Finishing *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, I thought I'd better check out further novels by Walter Tevis, so bought *The Steps of the Sun*. In terms of theme this is almost the mirror image of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*. While both are about immensely rich people, *The Steps of the Sun* is about someone who leaves Earth rather than 'falls' to it. Moreover, while *The Man Who Fell to Earth* has a rather morose ending, *The Steps of the Sun* ends on an extremely happy note: for humanity, the central character, everyone. It's quite pleasant to read an optimistic book for a change. The book also seems to fall into its own unique genre; I can't think of any other examples. If you can imagine a character study that just happens to be set in a time when interstellar travel is possible, you get a good idea of the genre to which the novel seems to belong. Tevis makes a few wrong guesses about how society will evolve after the 1980s (when the novel was written), there are some anachronisms and a few errors of science, but apart from that the novel is well worth reading.

I've recently bought his *Mockingbird*, which — from the notes on the back of the book — appears to have been particularly well-received by the literary 'mainstream'. I look forward to reading it!

(11 March 2020)

I've just started reading **Walter Tevis's** *Mockingbird*, and it's extremely amusing to note how many of his concepts have taken shape in today's corona-virus-focused world (and in the attitudes of society in general, in fact). I'm thinking of these things (the capitals are his): 'Privacy Invasion', 'Alone is Best', 'Mandatory Politeness', and — with regard to getting too close to people — 'the Mistake of Proximity'.

Apart from Tevis I've been exclusively reading hard SF lately. **E. E. 'Doc' Smith** came as an astonishing surprise: at his best his descriptions excellently capture the vastness of space, and he

pulls no punches in detailing the threats to be faced by those who venture there. At his worst he becomes bogged down in the mundanities of interstellar drug smuggling. Nevertheless, it is amazing that **Asimov's** awful '**Foundation**' trilogy can be ranked above the 'Lensman' series. I tried to read *Foundation* as a 16-year-old but couldn't finish it. Recently I forced myself to return to it and found it just as bad as I did then. I counted one effective visual description in the entire book; the rest of it is full of cigar-puffing figures who talk incessantly in the slang of the period in which the book was written. If anyone ever makes a film of the Foundation trilogy, it can't fail to be an improvement! In my opinion Asimov wrote two good novels: *The Gods Themselves* and *Nemesis*.

(5 September 2020)

I ended up throwing Tevis's *Mockingbird* down in disgust. It may be packed with fashionable angst, but its presentation of a society where such things as reading are banned was ridiculous and poorly argued.

I'm now reading **Michael Coney's** *I Remember Pallahaxi*. His novel *Charisma* is probably the best SF/detective story ever written, in my opinion. It's extremely clever and readable, if you haven't already read it. Coney's writing style and approach changed dramatically after the largely unread novel *The Ultimate Jungle*; but his *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway*, which followed, are among the best far future SF stories I've ever read as well.

(25 September 2020)

*I Remember Pallahaxi* is **Michael Coney's** sequel to *Hello Summer, Goodbye*; it has been published posthumously, although a pdf file of it was made available by Coney shortly before his death and is still available to download on the net. I corresponded on and off with Coney back in the day, and still have his emails. Of *I Remember Pallahaxi* he said:

The sequel to *Hello Summer, Goodbye* has got nowhere, despite a rave review from my agent's reader, and winning an award in Russia for the best serialization of the year. I can't find an English-language publisher; the reason being given is that it's too long since I published a novel and the publishers don't want to re-launch me.

Back to Tevis: Another thing I disliked about *Mockingbird* was its use of the pestilential multi-character point of view. I know he does this in his other work but it seems particularly annoying here. It seems to me that the multiple-point-of-view technique is much favoured by those writers who want to

disguise the fact that they are simply unable to construct decent plots. **Greg Egan** is another such writer (although I do find much to like in Egan's writing, particularly *Incandescence*, which, however, was spoiled by its corny and cartoonish aliens).

(27 September 2020)

I've recently read **Christopher Priest's** *The Quiet Woman*. It is one of his best books. As I see it, the key to what the whole book is about may be found on page 95 of the Abacus Fiction edition, where Priest says:

It's the same with the books I like to read. A book should seem to reveal something about its author, and there should seem to be intimate details of the author's life coming out. But there should also be little facts that don't add up, that misdirect the truth, e.g. a book by a female author that feels authentic, and which seems to have been experienced, but which has a male protagonist.

This last sentence cleverly directs the reader to *The Quiet Woman* itself, as Priest's novel is a book by a male author with a female protagonist. Priest underlines his point that any such work will be destined to be fictitious by presenting various facts that definitely don't add up: for example, at one point in the novel one of the characters sees what appears to be a UFO taking off; this is never explained.

Priest's argument provides compelling reasons why writers who aim for extreme realism should always have as a protagonist someone who is of the same sex as the author. That is one problem I have with Greg Egan's novels: his work is nearly always written from a female perspective (indeed it seems ridiculously fashionable for male writers to do this). I have no idea whether a sex change would help verisimilitude, although I suspect gender is written at the level of chromosomes rather than at the level of hormones and surgery.

Incidentally, I think *The Quiet Woman* is a much better novel than *The Prestige*, which lurches into SF territory only towards its later chapters, where the only way Priest can explain the stage magic trick is to have — ludicrously — Nikola Tesla invent a matter transporter. The book was entertaining, of course; all Priest's novels are. And it was much better than the awful film, which manages to be both boring and hard to follow at the same time. (But I'm prejudiced; by and large I hate movies).

(21 October 2020)

I agree that *The Prestige* is a more 'entertaining' book than *The Quiet Woman*, but I think *The Quiet Woman* has more to say. The trouble is, if you miss

that crucial passage on page 95 the novel will probably seem an incomprehensible mess. In many ways the book reminds me of **Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point***, which people likewise misunderstood. That film is about illusion (although the illusion of ersatz, fakery) — just like its predecessor, *Blow Up* — but people insisted on looking at it as a simple, realistic narrative, which it isn't.

You mention **Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar***. That is one of the most annoying films I've ever seen. The dialogue was inaudible; and for the ice planet it looked as though they'd simply stuck a camera somewhere out in northern Canada. The second half with the tesseract was better, but the film then made all the predictable, test-audience-verified Hollywood moves; and as usual with Hollywood movies I feel at the end as if I've eaten too much cheap candy. I don't know whether you've seen the much-hyped TV series *The Expanse*, but viewing it makes me feel as if the producers had taken an overlong Hollywood space movie and arbitrarily divided it into 10 pieces. Its characters are immediately forgettable, as they are in the remake of *Lost in Space*. (Unfashionable though it is to say so, there are a handful of the original *Lost in Space* series that rank as the best televised SF ever made. I'm thinking of the episodes 'The Hungry Sea', 'Wish Upon a Star', 'The Magic Mirror', and 'Follow the Leader'. Billy Mumy was also a terrific actor, able to express a medley of complex emotions with no apparent effort. Unfortunately, the bad episodes of *Lost in Space* are truly bad.)

There's one SF movie I think is truly great: *Forbidden Planet*. *2001: A Space Odyssey*? No, that was just a puzzle to be deciphered.

(21 October 20)

**[\*brg\* I remember almost nothing about *The Quiet Woman* from my first reading, and have never felt tempted to re-read it, whereas I remember much from the novel of *The Prestige*, and enjoyed the film very much — with the proviso that Chris Nolan really showed his bad side there; it would be almost impossible to work out the ending unless the viewer had also read the book. The final 'explanation' is mumbled, like much of the important dialogue in *Inception* and *Interstellar*. I had to watch *Interstellar* on Blu-ray with subtitles in order to catch all the dialogue.**

**However, your point about authors, narrators, and protagonists is an important one that is rarely raised. In today's confrontational world, irony and wit have disappeared, so the current brand of 'critics' assume that the voice read in a novel is that of the author, and that the only interesting incidents in the novel must be autobiographical to the author. Inspired imagination is now a quality discounted.**

**I've never seen any episodes of *Lost in Space*.**

**You've piqued my curiosity. I grew up in a household without TV until the age of 32.**

**The basic science behind *Interstellar* is sound, if you read the works of Kip Thorne, the Nobel Prize-winning astrophysicist whose ideas the film is based upon. In the introduction to *Black Holes and Time Warps*, his major popular book about astrophysics, Thorne outlines a fable about future space-borne civilisation. Humans last long enough and develop sufficient resources to build the time transmitter that is the basis of the time travel device used in *Interstellar*. Thorne wrote a book explaining the science behind the film — but he admits that Nolan and his scriptwriter brother stretch his concepts to the furthest extent possible in order to build a film script. The real fault of *Interstellar* is its proposition that there can be a Planet B for some humans, whereas the first half of the film demonstrates there is no Planet B for most humans.**

**There was a very good novelisation of *Interstellar*, which has probably disappeared. Puzzled viewers could find out what actually happened up there on the screen.**

***Zabriskie Point* drifts from a completely realistic film of student revolt into Antonioni-land, so I think viewers could have been excused for their confusion when the film was released. I saw it on the same day I saw *Easy Rider* in 1970, so *Zabriskie Point* came across as another hippie-utopia-doomed story.**

***2001: A Space Odyssey* is my favourite film' because of its visual aesthetics. I cannot start watching it at a particular scene without watching the whole film again. Hence I've seen it at least 30 times. It's not the narrative that grabs me; it's the extraordinary visual and aural intensity. But I agree that *Forbidden Planet* is a very good film, well worth re-watching.**

**The only recent SF film with that special SF feel to it is Dennis Villeneuve's *Arrival*. I know it has one glaring plot flaw toward the end, but I think we all forgave it because of the power of the rest of the film.\*]**

If you do buy a DVD set of *Lost in Space*, the first series contains the greatest proportion of good episodes — although it also contains a proportion of very bad ones, where the science is frequently laughable. But the series does manage to capture a sense of the vastness of space — something that *Star Trek* (with the exception of *Star Trek: Voyager*) never managed to achieve. Space under *Star Trek* was all neatly mapped out, and as pedestrian as a walk round the block. Unfortunately the influence of the *Batman* TV series, which was designed to be camp, resulted in the second series of *Lost in Space* being camp too.

I recently watched all the recent **Marvel** superhero movies (*Thor*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, etc.).

They were OK in their way, but the superhero movie I most liked was *The Fantastic Four*, which was universally panned.

Thanks for telling me about *Arrival*; I'll check it out. I agree that *2001* is very good visually. The basic premise, though, is silly: if you discover something anomalous in the solar system, you don't immediately send a manned voyage to investigate; you send a robot probe first. I'm surprised **Arthur C. Clarke** made such a stupid mistake. I think Clarke wrote one great novel (*The City and the Stars*) and one great short story ('The Wall of Darkness'). I'm not a fan of **Kubrick** either: *Clockwork Orange* spent all its energy in the first 15 minutes and then ground on for another couple of hours; he should have done it the other way round.

(21 October 2020)

**[\*brg\* I've seen very few Marvel superhero movies, but did enjoy the two *Guardians of the Galaxy* movies. I can actually remember the characters. The climaxes of all these movies are much of a muchness.**

**I like *The Shining* very much. *2001* seems to me a view of humanity as seen by an alien presence; and *The Shining* shows humanity as seen by an vast alien house. Kubrick's is a cold view of humanity, but often irresistible. I didn't like *Clockwork Orange* when it came out in 1971, and warmed to it only after the Blu-ray came out. But it's the visual style of that movie I didn't like. Kubrick chooses a different style for each movie, and some styles don't work with me.**

**George Turner had a much more fundamental dislike of *2001* than yours: he said in his review at the time: 'But we're all just property, all over again.' I did work out a story line from the last section, but have never checked it with Clarke's novel, which was very dull reading. Kubrick simply cut all the longwinded explanations.**

**If I ever see a DVD set of *Lost in Space*, I might buy it. You are the only person I've ever heard mention it favourably.\*]**

As I mentioned, I'm currently re-reading a lot of **Michael Coney** books. I'm currently up to *Charisma*, so I thought I'd read what people on the goodreads site said about it. To my surprise, a lot of criticism was directed at the title; many said that when the protagonist refers to Susanna as a 'charisma' he really meant 'chimera'. Suspecting that Michael Coney wasn't stupid, I unscrambled the letters of 'charisma' and came up with 'rachiasma'. Now 'chiasma' means an X shape, so what do we have? 'Rax', the term of abuse in *Hello Summer, Goodbye*. Interesting, yes?

(8 November 2020)

Thanks for *SFC 104*. I see there's a long piece by

Guy Salvidge dated 2013. He seems to have turned his back on SF.

(9 November 2020)

**Guy Salvidge** was using me as a reader for a while, and I've read everything he's written recently. His crime fiction isn't nearly as good as his two *Yellowcake* novels, and his recent transition from crime to slice of life family vignettes (prompted I suppose by the recent birth of a child) are even worse. He should return to SF.

I hadn't thought of doing a piece on Coney, but if anyone ever wanted me to I probably would, as I was corresponding with him for a while. His two novels *The Celestial Steam Locomotive* and *Gods of the Greataway* are probably the best far-future SF I've ever read, but they're completely different in style from his earlier books. You'd never guess they were by the same writer. I like the earlier Coney books because they're well plotted, have extremely good characterisation, and they don't annoy the reader by switching point of view or indulge in facetious verbal pyrotechnics.

(10 November 2020)

**GUY SALVIDGE**  
**7 Jessup Terrace, Northam WA 6401**

It's strange to see some of my reviews from 2012 and 2013 appear in *SFC 104*. So much water has passed under the bridge since then that I started reading one of the reviews thinking it was by someone else! I'm also interested to hear you say that this year's lockdown was actually a happy time for you, because Naomi and I found it to be a happy time too. We spent a glorious two months in April and May not leaving the bounds of our one-acre property at all, not even once. When we finally ventured out we found that the world had been taken over by Covid-19 regulations posted absolutely everywhere. I'd go back into lockdown tomorrow if only they'd let me ...

As for my own long-delayed writing career, it's just received the news that I've been awarded a **Research Training Program** scholarship from the Federal Government to undertake a PhD in Creative Writing at Curtin University from 2021. My topic is Tasmanian Gothic fiction with particular focus on Aboriginal representations and voices. I love Tasmania so I can't wait to start. This means that after working full time as an English teacher for the past 15 years I'm finally free, for three years at least. I hope that a worthy novel will eventually materialise from this, but time will tell.

(16 November 2020)

**STEVE JEFFERY**  
**44 White Way, Kidlington,**  
**Oxon OX5 2XA, UK**

We've been housebound for some days now, and getting a bit stir crazy. I've been **working remotely** from home since 19 March. I suppose I'm lucky that I can still do that rather than the alternative (although I'm close enough to retirement age that if they offered a good redundancy package I'd probably bite their hand off). The downside is that because we can work remotely — although the first week was largely devoted to setting up and debugging remote links to different systems — we are still expected to hit our project timelines despite things taking longer over home broadband.

To be honest I have also been using work as a way of not thinking about what's going on, or other things I can no longer do, which means that I have let it expand to fill any time available, including 10–12-hour days and over into weekends. (I have been told not to do this, but from the timing of some of their emails I can see half the team are also doing it.)

Meanwhile Vikki and I are working steadily though a small mountain of **jigsaws** we have stocked up on. We started this well before the current crisis, so we had about 15 or 16 when the crisis started — about half of them being WasJig, where the picture on the box is not the one in the jigsaw. These are more challenging and more time-consuming than pictures of country cottages or cute kittens, and proving a bit of a boon at the moment. I think we're half-way though our third at the moment.

I watched *Joker* last night, a birthday present from Vikki. Excellent film. I was reminded of a couple of other intense studies of character disintegration into psychosis, *Taxi Driver* especially, and also *King of Comedy*. I don't know if that was intentional. I'd have to watch it again to see if there are any direct references. It's good to see a movie (especially a **Marvel** movie) that doesn't rely on bludgeoning you into submission with bombastic CGI effects instead of a decent script. You can tell I'm not a fan of the whole franchise, which went downhill after the original *Batman* and *Iron Man* movies, especially when they started teaming up their characters.

Have you seen **James McAvoy** in *Split*, the middle part of the *Unbreakable/Glass* trilogy? Very creepy film.

I still have *Annihilation* to watch. I saw this on a tiny seat-back screen during the flight back from last year's Corflu. Not sure what Vikki would make of this, not having read the book. About as much

as she would of *Stalker*, I suspect. Not that I've ever dared try her patience with the latter. (I find it endlessly fascinating. Vikki would likely get bored or fall asleep after half an hour of long tracking shots and very little happening. She feels the same about my love for Steve Reich.)

(30 March 2020)

Very strange and scary times. In any previous year I would have considered any single one of the Covid outbreak, enforced social quarantine, economic collapse, a US president who shows all the signs of Alzheimer's and dementia governing a country that constantly threatens to provoke an all-out race war, or a UK Prime Minister whose coping strategy seems to be an ADHD combination of abrupt U-turns and sackings of independent advisers to be enough for one plate.

But all of them, at the same time? That's almost too much to cope with.

But we're coping. So far at least.

At least Vikki, who used to work for the NHS, is safely retired. My company has been good. I got sent home a couple of days before my birthday in late March with instructions to stay there until further notice. After a bit of set-up work, the team has adapted brilliantly and we can do pretty much everything we need to online. I could already do most of my job remotely at work, logging into different databases or other PCs around the site, so to a large extent it makes little difference whether I do it from my chair at home or from the one in the office. Where speed is still an issue, I can always log into and take over one or more PCs back on site and control them remotely from my laptop. I always find that a bit cool and scientific, like having telepresence or the software equivalent of Heinelein's 'Waldo'.

**SFC 102:** The bit that stopped me in my tracks, at least after **Dick Jensen's** explanation of the **BanachTarski paradox** (I could cope with the Koch Snowflake, and indeed wrote a program for this back in the 90s), was the fact that you are still working with an ancient venerable **Windows 98 PC** up to the point it gave up on you. (There are people in my team younger than Windows 98!) I think mine was consigned to the local recycling centre a long time ago, and even the Windows XP PC that replaced it has been consigned to a software limbo under the desk. I've been using the work Windows 10 laptop since lockdown. At some point I'm going to have to start thinking about getting a computer of my own.

That said, I do still have a Windows 98 PC. It's a Sony Vaio laptop I bought in about 1995 when I was working away for a couple of years in Newcastle. It weighs about five times as much as this Dell laptop,

has about 10,000th of the disc space, and probably runs 1000 times slower. That's Moore's Law in action for you.

I was wondering though if you couldn't get your Windows 10 PC to run a virtual copy of Windows 98 and Ventura in something like **VMWare**. Reading on (always a good idea before you start writing comments, although I constantly ignore it) I see that your computer tech wizard managed to resurrect your old PC. I'm impressed, having spent a fruitless week swapping and plugging various boards, chips, and discs in and out of my previous PCs in an effort to get it running again before finally giving up.

Which is why I'm impressed with my younger brother, who has coped with the combined mobility problems of both lockdown and the onset of MS by rebuilding a series of laptop computers from boxes of donated parts for a school charity.

I had vague visions of fulfilling various much deferred projects during lockdown. It's not happened. The time has been almost wholly taken over by work (not having to commute means 9–5 has effectively become 7–7) and what remains has been taken over by a constant series of **jigsaws** on the dining table at the rate of 1 or 2 a week. (The last one, an antique map of the world with all 1000 pieces in near identical monochrome sepia, was something of a challenge and took us both the best part of the week. It might have gone better if I had any sense of geography even if I could work out what the places were from their fifteenth century names. The mermaids and sea monsters were fun though.)

So I've still not finished the Books to be Read pile (though I have worked through two anthologies of Chinese science fiction; one, *Invisible Planets*, a surprise birthday present from Vikki on the basis I had liked stories by its editor and translator **Ken Liu**.) Nor have I become any more proficient with my Yamaha MIDI keyboard (you know that thing pianists do with the right hand doing one thing and the left doing something different. Mine don't. Ever. I'd probably be crap even as a drummer.)

**Fanzine reviews** even. That takes me back. I'm sure I should remember having seen the cover of *Inca 17*, but somehow it's escaped me. I'm going to have to look in the pile of recent fanzines. Although first I'm going to have to find the pile. And maybe even organise it.

That's a project.

Maybe.

(30 August 2020)

I am quite enjoying **lockdown**, or this end of it, after the initial trials and hassles. Especially now that Vikki and I now both feel more confident to ven-

ture out — suitably masked — a bit further than the weekly trip to the local supermarket, and now can give each other some freedom and space to ourselves without constantly being on top of each other in the house.

As for the **7 to 7 gig** — that's largely down to me and a lack of imposing a rigid schedule and home/life balance. When the laptop is on in the next room from the time you get up to the time you go to bed, the temptation is to log in to find out what's happening 'just in case'. Sometimes it's more interesting than constantly Facebook (and a damn sight less political in cases). It's a bad habit, and frowned on, especially by Vikki, but also by work, more on the basis that it messes up their stats of how much we can do comfortably from home than on site. Nor am I the only one doing it, judging from the timestamps of some of the emails and uploads from other members of the team.

I am currently reading **Stephenson's D.O.D.O.**, which so far is fun and diverting, and I'm grateful that I don't have to lug a 600-plus-page tome to and from work on the bus.

I saw the review of **Jemisen's The City We Became**, which has gone straight on the wish list after reading *The Broken Earth* and then her story collection, *How Long Till Black Future Month*, which has a story linked to (or possibly a progenitor of) this novel.

(31 August 2020)

I like the concept of **Browsing Splurge Syndrome**, though so far I have resisted it except for Christmas and birthdays when I tend to go a bit overboard on present buying, though not so much this Christmas, since a lot of Vikki's favourite authors don't seem to have published anything new, or at least in the various series that she is currently following.

I did sneak in a box set of the first three seasons of *The Expanse* and **N. K. Jemisen's The City We Became**, but that's about it, at least until after Christmas, when I find out which items from my Amazon wish list have turned up under the tree. I really need to encourage Vikki to keep hers up to date, as I'm losing track of what she's read and which ones she wants to continue with. At the moment I have a list of about a dozen names and as many fantasy series and keep losing track of which I've already bought.

So it looks as if we have come out of **Lockdown No. 2**, only to run slap-bang into a more complicated and difficult-to-understand multi-tier system for different parts of the country. I think we are currently in tier 2, which means that local shops are still open for the moment. And we have now lost Christmas, with the proposed five-day relaxation of gatherings now restricted to just Christmas Day. Which is a fat lot of use for anyone dependent on public transport for visiting family or friends, since

the buses don't run on Christmas Day (which is why we have usually arranged family Christmases either side of the day itself). I wonder what bright spark thought that one up?

Not that it makes too much difference. We usually spend Christmas as a bubble of just the two of us anyway, and after the exchange and unwrapping of presents, it just becomes more like another Sunday. Maybe it's time for another **retro vinyl day** where we fire up my old Garrard turntable and give it five minutes or so to crank up to speed while we sort through the boxes of old LPs. That's always fun, as there are things in there that rarely get an airing. Last time, I dug out a lot of my old jazz rock albums from the likes of **Brand X**, **Isotope**, and **Hatfield and the North** which I don't have on CD, and before that we both had an indulgent 'Goth Sunday' from **The Sisters of Mercy**, **Fields of the Nephilim**, **The Mission**, and early **Cure**.

**[\*brg\* Apart from the Cure, I've never heard of any of them. But then, among our many LPs, almost none of them bought since 1992, would be many you've never heard of.\*]**

So there is enough to entertain us, even if the TV schedule over the Xmas break looks as old hat as some of our LPs. I can't see a single new film being shown anywhere over the Xmas and New Year break, though luckily we have a couple of series of **The Valhalla Murders** and **Collateral** lined up to watch.

We did watch **del Toro's The Shape of Water** last night, something I'd been wanting to see for a long time, and both thought it rather wonderful.

And I probably need to get out a bit more now I have a break from work. Technically, I finished on the 18th in an effort to use up as much of my constantly postponed holiday that couldn't be carried over into 2021. Not that you would have noticed, as I was still logged into work most of the day, but since everyone else in the team is now off for the week before Xmas there's little to do except the essential daily check to make sure that things are still running. I've dug out some old manuals and am trying to re-learn how to program my Yamaha MIDI keyboard so I can get a basic sequencer program up and running. It's a long time since I first tried this, and I've forgotten most of the commands.

Today I turned on the TV and wondered why the snooker was not on ITV4 as scheduled but has been replaced by an old episode of **The Saint**, until I realised it wasn't Sunday but Monday.

You, and especially Elaine, are a lot more organised with your **CD collection** than I am. Ours are in at least a half dozen shelves, racks, and piles around the living room (and a small pile upstairs next to

the boom box in the study) in no apparent order, and I am constantly hunting to see what I've got and where I might have put it. I keep thinking I really ought to do something about it, but never do. Another of those projects deferred for when I have time, like reshelving the overflow piles of books or organising the spice and herb cupboard. (Why do I have three jars of basil, but no oregano?)

I must read **Peter Beagle** again sometime. I have a copy of **The Fantasy Worlds of Peter Beagle** (Souvenir Press), which contains **The Last Unicorn** along with **Lila the Werewolf** and **A Fine and Private Place**. And also a paperback copy of the latter alongside **The Inkeeper's Song**. It's a long time since I read them.

**Richard Russo** is a new name to me. I shall try and keep a look out.

Have I read **Elizabeth Hand's Illyria**? I'm sure I must have, since I've been a fan since I first read **Winterlong** all those many years (decades even) ago, and especially of her later Cass Neary novels. **Illyria** doesn't seem to be on my shelves and I probably need to rectify that sometime. I liked **Wylding Hall**, though, even if you thought it a bit disappointing.

I don't remember reading **Stephen Baxter's Proxima** or its sequel **Ultima**, but noticed I do have a copy of his story collection **Obelisk** on the shelf which contains stories linked to that duology. Baxter is one of those authors I tend to be a bit sporadic about, and it's a long time since I read anything of his.

I've not read **Harold Bloom's** two books on the canon, but I applaud his desire that one should read widely and deeply, even though I have probably failed to come up to a mark he would recognise. I was surprised to see that that 'widely' also extended to the works of **Ursula K. Le Guin** and to name-checking both **Disch** (although probably not *334*) and **John Crowley**.

I rather wish you had placed **William Breiding's** two postscripts at the front before I started reading **'Incidents and Accidents'**, because by about page 3 I was seriously concerned for William and his state of mental health (although how someone that damaged could have produced four issues of a fanzine of the quality of **Portable Storage** plus a bunch of locs to other zines would have stretched credibility). It's a brave, but often worryingly self-excoriating piece of writing. Also a salutatory reminder why I have never ventured far into the confessional in my locs (apart perhaps from that piece in **Beam** about my strange reaction to the invitation to Corflu 36, but even then I pulled back on a lot of the first draft).

Interspersed in there (William's piece, not mine) is some very fine travel writing, and I was intrigued by the mention of **William Least Heat Moon**, a name I think I first encountered in one of

**Maureen Speller Kincaid's** pieces for the *Acnestis* apa. I don't think I've read *Least Heat Moon*, but I'm encouraged to look him out, perhaps to sit alongside **Bruce Chatwin** and **W. G. Sebald**.

I discovered I quite like **teaching** (or at least training) rather late, when I elected to give a couple of technical presentations and participate in my company's 'Train the Trainer' and KnowledgeBase courses. But that at least means the people who sign up are those who are interested in the subject and want to learn something about it. I can't imagine how **Jennifer Bryce** coped being thrown, straight out of a university DipEd course, at the front of a class of 2EF teenagers who are functionally illiterate, and aggressively, even violently, defensive of the fact, never mind having to do that within what sounds like an overtly sexist and misogynist 1970s school system.

**[\*brg\* As you might have noticed from my postscript, I didn't find it easy, either (in the same years, 1969 and 1970). I quit after two years although I was supposed to teach for three years; this led to the job at Publications Branch, which gave me the skills and the confidence for everything I've done since then.\*]**

(23 December 2020)

The good news is that I didn't drop **SFC 104** in the bath. *SFC's* paper stock is also thick enough to stop the pages wrinkling in the steam, unlike most of my paperbacks. (Another advantage of paper fanzines and books over electronic e-readers is that if you do nod off and drop them in the bath, they are usually cheaper to replace, and you don't lose the entire library.)

I'm still not sure whether to thank you and **Michael Bishop** for '**Jamie's Hair**'. It's one of the most devastating and poignant poems I've read in a very long time, on a whole number of levels. There's grief, but pride and hope. You might think that a gift of a luxuriant mane of hair is a small thing compared to that of a liver or a heart, but you only have to listen to daytime radio (an advantage of working from home) and women talking about losing their hair to alopecia or the side effects of chemotherapy to realise how devastating it can be for them.

I readily confess to still being a duffer when it comes to poetry. Despite Howard Bloom's apparent dislike of him (and despite some of his less than salutary views), I still rate **Eliot** highly, although as I grow older '**Prufrock**' probably speaks to me now more than my first encounter with the complexity of '**The Waste Land**', as does, for some personal reasons in my late 20s, **Frost's 'The Road Not Taken**'. But I also like some of Jim Morrison's stuff, so perhaps I am a lost cause. Never mind, I can

always stick **Burton's** classic reading of *Under Milk Wood* on the CD player once more and revel in my ignorance.

**[\*brg\* My friend Alex Skovron, one of Australia's best-known poets, asserts that rap lyrics are poems. However, I can't understand most rap songs (apart from those by Lou Reed, who in my opinion, invented rap). But my generation grew up on some very snazzy song lyrics, which can be read as poems when published in collections. My favourite song-lyrics collections are those by Paul Simon and Bob Dylan, but that's only because there are no such volumes yet of lyrics by Loudon Wainwright III and Joni Mitchell.\*]**

Random thoughts on **Jenny Blackford's 'Monster-mollusc'**: Garden slugs, monster or otherwise, get short shrift here. Summary eviction from the end of a trowel onto the shed roof where they can take their chances with the constant stream of gulls, crows, and magpies who inhabit the neighbouring rooftops like a casting audition for *The Birds*. I've never thought to look for special markings, though I did have an idea to paint numbers on their backs to see if it was the same ones coming back time and again. That said, there don't seem to have been anywhere near the same number of slugs, or snails, this year, so our idea to build a small mollusc trebuchet hasn't been put into practice.

You have to like a poet who names a collection *The Loyalty of Chickens*.

We stopped taking *Locus* some years ago when the subscription cost rose steadily year on year, so I don't think I've read many of **Paul di Filippo's** reviews, so thanks for reprinting these.

**\*[brg\* For reasons not known to me, Paul's fine reviews do not appear in the paper edition of *Locus*, but only on *Locus Online*. He's better than most of the regular reviewers in paper *Locus*.\*]**

I do remember reading **Jack Dann's** *The Memory Cathedral* (along with **Gill Alderman's** *The Memory Palace*) some time ago when I had a fascination with the whole idea of the Art of Memory, and amassed a small collection of books on Renaissance Hermetic philosophy.

I'm reminded by Paul's review of twin memoirs by **Frank Robinson** and **Samuel R. Delany** that I have an e-book copy of SRD's *The Jewel Hinged Jaw* from when it came at a silly price on Kindle (£1.99 — which apparently still holds). I initially assumed that *In Search of Silence*, being a university press publication, would be ridiculously expensive, but was surprised that the hardcover edition seems to be available for £27, a bit steep but not ruinously so. There's also a paperback copy of Delany's *Occa-*

*sional Views* scheduled for publication next April for a reasonable £18.50. (The hardcover is over £60.) That may be one for the birthday list.

**Algis Budrys's** *Beyond the Outposts* may be another one to look out for, though *Ansible's* online payment scheme appears to be through Paypal, for which I don't have an account.

I've only read **Ian Mond's** long review of **Richard Powers' *The Overstory*** through once, but I'm fascinated, and suspect this might one I come back to.

(24 December 2020)

**JOHN LITCHEN**

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More about the *Antifan* films: **Greg and Grae** may very well have been the comics artists who invented the characters appearing in the *Antifan* film, but that was about the same time that people started talking seriously about an Australia in '75 bid, so the whole idea must have been a collective one. Their cartoon strip appeared in 1970 and 1971, before we started making the film.

Of **my recent publications**, I haven't sold too many copies, but it doesn't really matter. My only cost, apart from time etc., is the upload fee for printing on demand, which was around \$90 plus, after the first year, \$12 with GST, making it \$13–20 a year to keep a book listed for print. The **Mars book** sold enough to cover its set-up costs, but the only books of mine that keep selling one or two copies every few months are the *Aikido Basic and Intermediate Studies* and *Beyond: Questions Often Asked*. They have been selling since they first appeared in 2005, reprinted in 2010, and revised in 2013. *Fragments from My Life* still sells the odd copy now and then. A copy of *Aikido Basic and Intermediate Studies* was recently sold in Russia through the Book Espresso machine, a book vending machine that prints a book while you wait for it.

(25 April 2020)

It's unfortunate when **old computers** die. Even if you can save or retrieve the files, they can't often be used on newer computers because they have different operating systems, and older programs won't work on them. I spent a decent amount of money to buy a copy of **InDesign CS5** to replace the one that existed on a computer that crashed. A new drive was put in. I loaded up the new program again only to have the screen display burn out a few months later. The computer was five years old and

couldn't be fixed. I got someone to extract the files so that I didn't lose any photos or text or video files, but the programs wouldn't work on the new Windows 10 machine, and now I have to pay a monthly fee to have access to the latest version of **InDesign**. I will have to do the same for **Photoshop**, but can't justify the additional cost for the amount of time I would be using it. I have a copy of **Photoshop Elements** and use that, but it is a program for people who have no idea of what to do and it does all sorts of things automatically that I don't want to do, and none of the things I used to be able to do in Photoshop CS5. It's most frustrating.

My phone at the moment goes via the **NBN** since we were connected a year ago. It works exactly the same as the old landline used to. I didn't buy a mobile phone because I hardly make enough phone calls to justify the extra expense, and living on a pension doesn't allow for much unnecessary expenses.

Unfortunately when some people get older, they tend to live a more **isolated life**, and the longer they do this the more they become cut off from everyone and the less they can be bothered to communicate. It's sad, but that's what happens. I see this in ourselves, with Monica unable to get out and about as before. We tend to stay more and more at home. If it wasn't for the daily visits from a physio and care workers for Monica spending time with her, she would be completely cut off. And once that happens it's easy to ignore phone calls.

For the moment at least we are okay. I hope this Covid-19 virus dissipates soon and things can get back to a semblance of normality, but with patience we will persevere. There is no other choice, right ...

**Re SFC 104: Mary Doria Russell** wrote a sequel to *The Sparrow* called *Children of God*, which was published in 1998, two years after *The Sparrow*. I did see that she wrote a novel set in Italy during the Second World War, but I didn't buy it because I'm not much into war stories. *Dreamers of the Day* sounds interesting so I will look for it.

Mary Doria Russell also wrote two novels about Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp, *Tombstone* and the gunfight at OK Corral, apart from the war story set in Italy, and *Dreamers of the Day*, so I guess you could say she has switched over to writing historical novels about real people. In a way that's almost like writing science fiction — she has to visualise a very different world and time, and use enough background details to bring them to life, both in her mind and in the mind of the reader.

(9 November 2020)

**RAY WOOD**  
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Sorry for **my very long absence**. I became very ill several years ago, and haven't really recovered all that much since then. Well, I am 84 now, and the Post Polio Syndrome is becoming rapidly more painful as it usually does in old age. I was put on a drug called Paroxetine. It also wiped out all my creativity, and for a long time reduced me to a zombie-like state from which I've not yet quite recovered. (Which expression fascinates me: how does anyone know what zombies think and feel like?)

Anyway, from my now very poor memory, I enjoyed the essay someone wrote utterly demolishing the one I did on **SF Poetry**. His essay was fun, I loved it, and I did want to write back my appreciation of it, but also to conclude that it still didn't answer the question that puzzled me in the beginning: why is the SF poetry in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, and *F&SF* so unpoetic? I suppose I'll never work that one out, now.

**Someone's asked me a question that I can't answer** because my memory's now so bad ... She emailed me: 'Ray, about 23 years ago you gave me a copy of a short story that ended with the scary, ugly creature being viewed from a safe distance by unknown beings, being in fact a human. Do you recall it? I lent that story (photocopied) to an inmate in jail at Port Augusta, and predictably never saw it again. It has haunted me, and I tried putting the gist of it into Google, with no results. Any chance of ever reading it again?' So I wondered if you can recall a story like that? Or — if you publish this — can anyone else?

Up until my **Paroxetine Demolition**, I was having great fun. I thought that the zaniest way I could spend my old age would be to write **200 fairy tales!** I've always considered the fairy tale to be the greatest literary genre of all, and that SF is just a sub-genre of the fairy tale. I'm also pretty sure that the fairy tale (together with the song) might be the oldest genre of them all, probably going back almost to the beginning of human speech, because of the songman's attempts to explain the world to the tribe around the campfire at night.

Why 200? I know **Hans Christian Andersen** wrote 156 (though many of his were retellings of fairy tales he'd heard as a child), and the **Grimm Brothers** collected around 275 German ones, **Italo Calvino** 200 Italian ones, **Afanasiev** 600 Russian ones, and of course there are the 1001 fairy tales of *The Arabian Nights*, and so on. So why not? Just for my own personal amusement?

I'd reached 81 tales when the Paroxetine

wrecked me. Would you believe I've written just on 1,300,000 words of them so far, ranging from 1818 words all the way up to 100,799 words? Can you think of anything more ridiculous than that? Makes me laugh at myself every time I reflect on it.

(29 May 2020)

**[\*brg\* I thought I had lost contact with you, so I'm very glad to receive your letter. I haven't read the story you mention.**

I had run out of money, because I had had only one paying indexing job since September 2019. I hadn't realised that I was spending far too much. I did print copies of the three issues of *SF Commentary 50th Anniversary Edition*, and I'm pretty sure I sent you print copies of those three issues (Nos. 98, 99, and 100) last year. In 2020, before the crisis struck, I produced *SF Commentary 101*, but did not have the money to print copies. I'm attaching a PDF copy of it. If you don't receive the attachment, you can find that issue in PDF format at <http://efanzines.com>.

Sorry about the problems posed by the Paroxetine drug. I'm reminded of Merv Binns, who has died recently at the age of 85 from heart failure. After he had his first heart attack 20 years ago he was filled with drugs that made him 'feel like a zombie' (his words). However, in his last 10 years he seems to have been on a much more congenial treatment regime; he seemed to enjoy life a lot more. He is the only person I know who actually spent his retirement reading the SF books he saved up to read in his retirement. Most people, like me, just keep buying books.\*

I'm interested to see that you wrote so many of the fairy tales. You were just beginning your project when you wrote to me last. I doubt if I've written a million words in my lifetime, despite continual publishing of my magazines, so I'm astounded at your productivity. Surely you have collected enough really good examples to place a book proposal with a publisher?

Sorry to hear about the pain caused by post-polio syndrome. Several friends of mine developed it in their mid 50s. I've lost track of one of these friends, but the other one then died of a brain tumour when he was 63, after he had got used to the idea of living with PPS. I can imagine that a great fear of our parents would have been polio during the early 1950s — the Salk vaccine didn't arrive until 1956 — so all we baby boomers crowding into schools in 1952, 1953, and 1954 were in much more danger than kids are at the moment in Australia who are endangered by the coronavirus.\*]

It's great to be in contact again. I'd not thought the story that woman wanted from me, might be my own. I simply thought it was an SF story from one

of the magazines or books by others — I vaguely suspect from *Galaxy*. It's a long time since I read one of my own SF tales, and my memory's so bad now that I'll have to go hunting them up to re-read them!

I did manage to keep the post-polio syndrome stuff (they also call it **LeOP** — **Late effects Of Polio**) under control for most of my life by keeping very fit — playing a lot of sport, especially baseball, doing very tough hikes (usually 10 days long) one to three times a year, and so on. So even today my blood pressure, heart, and lungs, I keep being told, are those of a 20-year-old.

But after I got polio when I was 14, in 1950 (Salk's vaccine 1955; 1956 in Oz), I kept on breaking down at intervals, sometimes ending up in hospital, but mostly ending up crashing at my parents' place, in bed for weeks or even a month or so. Of course, no one knew about PPS/LeOP for many decades, and doctors refused to believe in it for quite a while longer than that. I don't think I helped myself by being super-active between break-downs, and taking on far too much.

My Doc tells me I'll live to be a hundred every time he sees me. He gets grumpy about that, because he's had his third heart attack though he's only 64, and doesn't expect to live much longer. However, it looks as if living to be a hundred for me might become very painful.

I still help our local Quorn publication, the *Quorn Mercury*. Port Augusta's two newspapers and Hawker's own newsletter have stopped being published because of Covid-19, while we continue merrily, the sole publication in our entire region (the editors all working from home). I've attached a page I put in our forthcoming May issue, '**My First Pandemic**', that might interest you. I've been surprised that all the talks about past pandemics I've heard on TV have ignored that last polio pandemic, the one that caught me. I wrote it to help people in isolation in Quorn realise that pandemics are nothing new.

Yeah, I was surprised, too, to find I'd racked up so many words of **fairytale**s. But they do include a couple of short novels, three novels, short stories, novelettes, and novellas. I agree now with critics who say the novella is more capable of approaching a unity than the novel. As Asimov said of himself, I've always felt most alive when writing/typing something creative. The act of creation is in itself for me the most exciting thing I know.

You doubt you've written as much as a million words, but I think you'd be surprised at how many you have written, probably quite a few million. It's surprising how swiftly the word-count mounts. With computer word processors it's so easy to count them.

**Your computer and mine** sound remarkably

similar! Mine is only 18 years old, though. Still running on Windows XP, which has a reputation as Microsoft's most stable operating system anyway. It's shut down on me only twice in all that time, and I've never had to reinstall anything on it at all. I was amused to find that the Telstra and Broadband techies' laptops all run on XP. They tell me they prefer it simply because XP is so reliable. So I live in horror at the thought of my computer going, as yours nearly did. My computer knowledge also abruptly stopped around year 2000, when I gave up teaching IT part-time at TAFE in Port Augusta.

Just like you, **self-isolation** doesn't bother me in the slightest. Although married long ago, and with two boys, I've always enjoyed life most when living alone. Never felt lonely my entire life. Aloneness is not the same as loneliness. I'm sure I'd enjoy being a hermit in a cave somewhere for the rest of my life! In fact, these days I don't even like people calling on me.

However, living in a small town (**Quorn** has a town population of 1200), where everyone just about knows everyone else, is hugely different from living in a big city, especially as I taught so many of the now-grown-up people here, or their children. So the entire town being in self-isolation is easier than it is in a city. Anyway, we've not had a single case of Covid-19 in or around Quorn.

I still go hiking in our surrounding 'mountains' (not much higher than 1000 metres) two or three times every week. And I usually walk into the centre of the town to the shops (merely two kilometres there and back). I'm an **SA National Parks Volunteer**, and look after the hiking trails in their two Conservation Parks near Quorn (Mt Brown, and The Dutchman's Stern). And I'm a local **Council Volunteer** too, and look after their three hiking trails (The Devil's Peak, Warren Gorge, and Waukarie Creek). So that helps keep me fit, too.

Like you, too, I have thousands of **DVDs** (and older VHS tapes), as well, though I have watched almost all of them in the past, unlike you, it seems. But I do enjoy re-watching them in the evenings (not much of a TV fan). Except that a few years back, I adopted a game that I play when watching them. I imagine that I'm watching them with, for example, **H. G. Wells**, or **Jane Austen**, or at present **Shakespeare**. I amuse myself wondering how they'd be affected by them, and what kind of questions they'd ask, prompted by them. It's astonishing how much more fascinating the films are, watching them like this! I think of an automatic portal opening up between their time, later in their lives after they've done much of their writing, and my living room every night, so that they arrive at the start of the evening, and return to their time when the film — and our conversation about it — is finished. But back in their own time they have no memory of

being here, and remember their times here only the instant they arrive each night. Now how weird is that?

Also, like you, my house is crammed with **books**. And I look at them and wonder: how on earth will I ever re-read them all? Yet I keep on buying them anyway.

One book I enjoyed recently (despite its repetitiveness) is *Think, Write, Speak: Vladimir Nabokov*. (Somewhere in it he also says that all fictions are fairy tales.) And I've also recently read *Evil Roots: Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*, collected by **Daisy Butcher**, and am part-way through **Janet Todd's** *Death and the Maidens: Fanny Wollstonecraft and the Shelley Circle* and **Marina Warner's** *Strange Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (that last, of course, for the fairy tale stuff).

(30 April 2020)

**CASEY WOLF**  
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**South, Vancouver BC V5M 4PS,**  
**Canada**

I finished *SFC 98*, the first volume of the *Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* quite some time ago, and the second today (I always nibble, never devour). I've glanced through the third and final volume and it looks yummy. I wonder if I should draw out the pleasure even longer than usual? (Joke.)

I really enjoyed the **Nova Mob history**. Made me quite nostalgic. Listening to the **Susan Wood** interview of **Ursula Le Guin** at the 1975 Aussiecon plunged me into the ancient past, coming as it did combined with reading *SFC*. I know of Susan but never met her. Ursula I saw many times at cons and whatnot, and earlier still her books made a huge impression on me. I was a fan of hers before I knew that fandom was a thing. Being reminded so vividly of both the issues that faced us at that time, in speculative fiction, as women, and so on and the excitement I would feel whenever I learned there was a new Ursula Le Guin book out — leading sharply to remembering that I would never have that feeling again ... So much was dug up for me, between the zine and the panel. I'm glad, even though a few of the feelings were bittersweet. It's good to be reunited with a part of the world and a part of me that I hadn't expected to experience again so vividly.

I'm plunged into a **mad schedule** these days. When I sent off my book, nine years a-writing (and you know some of the major interruptions that came along the way), to my first choice of publisher, I was happy to leave behind an intense period of preparation and turn my mind to other

things. Six months, a year, I thought, before I heard anything. Three days later I had a message that they were interested, and that I should prepare a marketing plan and whatnot and send it back and we would talk. More intense work. I had only a faint clue about most of what they were asking, so a lot of research and glad-handing had to happen. Sent that in. Meanwhile I have two conferences coming up (online) and presentations to prepare for both, the first of which I had to do a *lot* of research on. In the midst of that, an Irish class, also online, suddenly came available. There was no way I had time for that now! And no way I was going to wait another year for the class. So I've been trying to prepare my gardens, taking a rather intensive (for me) Irish class, write my presentation (and now my second one), deal with a damn Mystery Illness, organise The Acquisition of Necessities — it's been exhausting.

For many years I have been telling myself, I am never going to do this again — put myself in a position where I have a big project (or a bunch of smaller ones) weighing on me. I am going to let the grass grow under my feet. Wake up in the morning and think: what do I feel like doing today? Hmmm. Don't hold your breath.

But it's all fun, and I love having the birds (and my new squirrel friend, Iora) being always lively outside the window right ahead of me. I love working to keep them happy, too. Since I'm not allowed cats anymore, and Juniper, the dog I walked for my friend Susan, has died, it's important to have some critters to care for. These ones are happy to let me. They're almost as comical as the cats, too, so that's a bonus.

(25 May 2020)

Thank you so much for sending me *SFCs 103* and *104*. I truly did not expect to see another *SFC* again, not in my hands anyway.

So I thought I would instantly write a letter to you and tell you how much I appreciated Nos. 98 and 99, but by the time I had the pillows organised and everything I was too pooped. I really regret having ongoing fatigue issues, and chronic pain that makes it challenging to type or sit or stand or even walk, these days, or lie down. It makes it very difficult to do the things I want to do, like working, going for walks, and locking your zines.

Nevertheless, hope springs eternal, and I have every intention still of locking them. One new tool in my tool kit is that I finally realised I have a microphone that works for dictation on the iPad. It makes a lot of weird decisions about what I said, but it still helps with the old arm pain, so I'm hoping that I can get some locking done RSN.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that life is terrible just because of pain and fatigue.

I have many happy moments every day and I am very grateful for all the wonderful things in my life, from faithful friends like you to a safe and comfortable home, to birds at my feeders.

(4 December 2020)

**ANDY ROBSON**  
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**Yorkshire LS12 4RR, England**

‘The absence of books in a life is a bad thing.’ ‘And still they come.’

Many thanks for *SFC 101*. The dollars enclosed in my envelope are retrospective for postage costs as always.

Good to see some slightly more substantial mentions of fanzines than usual. Anything from the other side of the equator is pretty much just a passing title on a list in this field, so it’s good to have a wider perspective on fanzine contents.

**John Litchen’s ‘retro-future’** sounds fun — a world where Jules Verne would have considered today’s ‘floating hotels’ to be a nonsense, whereas a similarly constructed cable car crossing the continent would have been thought to be a ‘work in progress’. When water-gas was superior to electricity, Zeppelins cheaper than aircraft. Ironically, planes succeeded because you were allowed to smoke on them. (Nay, ’twas compulsory in England, as the tobacco companies owned the air-lines!)

I would have written this letter sooner, but I wasn’t sure if overseas mail was still running. There’s about one plane per week leaving from my local airport, but I received something from the US a couple of days back, mailed this month, so there’s some sort of maybe-1920s service. I can cope without the bars and entertainment, but I’m missing my fish and chips — though not much else. I can cope with my own retro-world, and I don’t need TV. (Oh yes, a retro-future would have a stencil cutter app, I’m sure.)

I’ve never considered **Cy Chauvin’s** association with linking the **author’s voice** to the book. In fact, it would probably spoil my enjoyment. I was brought up on long-dead authors, anyhow. The thought of suffering an audio book version of *The War of the Worlds* in H. G. Wells’s pompous and plummy tones would be quite dreadful. Light and amusing works are often embellished by regional dialects and individual quirks, but for a serious narration a ponderous, flat-vowelled drone will not do, nor will theatrical whispers and dramatic pauses. The voice in my head may not be what the writer intended, but it keeps the pages turning. Some writers may have a character that is an alter

ego or not, but they all rather feel that the podium dialogue they present as ‘themselves’ is more of a cartoonish gabble than the guy on the page. Swing it all the other way when the characters are fixed, as in *Star Trek*, and the stories are written by many authors. In that case, it’s always a fake voice, so you have to pick the one in your own head in the end.

Despite all that, most writers can indulge their own personal tub-thumping through secondary characters, whereas musicians can’t. Yes, there have been a lot of **dreadful CDs** from longstanding performers in recent years. I’m not saying this because of my grumpy-old-man intolerance of popular trends (although I can gnash my teeth, the few that remain, over post-production overlays of drum machines) as the musicians having wild self-indulgences for 1950s throat singing and yodelling to bongos. Please stop it. Looking stupid is for your early twenties, not your early seventies. Abandon the histrionics and wild boogeying and 11–8 time signatures — just do it properly sitting down.

Enough of my whingeing pom stuff. Keep smiling.

(20 April 2020; received 10 June 2020)

You’re right. We’re not bored by the **never-ending-lockdown** — frustrated, yes, clinically depressed, yes, but not bored. 2019 as being a good year is debatable in my mind. I was contemplating finishing with quite a few interests at the start of the year. A decision was made for me. I didn’t attend quite a few events, as they either failed to appeal or I was refused entry by nonsensical online booking (seats reserved but neither used nor paid for) that deservedly left them with three-quarter-empty venues. Anyhow, no events this year (or next, until governments decide to eradicate the disease by piling up and burning all international aircraft).

Musically, the old guard proved that they were past it (then this year **Dion DeMucci** suddenly gets it together!). However, I am glad that you liked **Molly Tuttle** — some brilliant live stuff on YouTube if you can find it. **Ronnie Wood’s** bit of fun was enjoyable, and **Bonnie Tyler** maybe was let down by her co-conspirators.

I saw the **Chrissie Hynde** documentary on TV, expecting to switch off after about 10 minutes, but must admit it was really well made, and kept me interested to the end (even through those dreadful paintings).

**Books** have been a swings-and-roundabouts affair. Some long-elusive ones turned up and cheered me tremendously. Some didn’t live up to expectations. Many remained elusive for the future — though I’m not optimistic.

The **‘Young Adult’** category has been pretty much suspended here. It has reverted to its previous incarnation of ‘Teenage’, with such usual

suspects as Harry Potter, Discworld, and Adam Horowitz.

I did indulge in more **classical music** last year, finding a new light classical radio station and some cheap excellent-condition vinyl.

I think the first I heard of **'trick or treat'** was in Canadian comic strips — it was never mentioned in British or American ones at the time. I have no recollection of Charlie Brown trick-or-treating. Maybe it was a social thing to rival Thanksgiving in America, with the assumption that the north of Canada was always snowed in at Christmas regardless. In October you could still journey with the knowledge of being able to return home the same night. Over here Hallowe'en started in the 1970s. As things got wild in the 1980s it died out for about 10 years before returning as an early-evening thing.

**Earl Kemp**'s obit threw me totally. He'd been so snugly encased in a box as American pulp fiction for many years that the shocking revelation that he'd been churning out fanzines was like NASA turning round and saying 'Moon? What Moon?'

(20 August 2020)

**JOHN HERTZ**

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Re *SFC* 99: The appearance of **Ignatz Mouse** and **Offissa Pupp** on a 1970 **John Bangsund** invitation to attend Nova Mob meetings, and on p. 54 of *SF Commentary* 99, fills me with wonder and glee. You remind me to discuss the works of **Robert Heinlein** with **Mark Linneman**. You have probably realised the wonder and glee of your using just one hyphen in reporting your topic 'The Non-Science Fiction Novels of Philip K. Dick'. I am so delighted with **Yvonne Rousseau**'s saying 'attenders' in this lonely world (though I expect no less from her, as she well knows) that I can barely stop myself from asking what colour the cat Darko Suvin was. I manifested my esteem for **Ditmar**'s work more concretely a while ago, and now applaud the image and title **'Dancing Almond Bread'**; I hope its connection to 'My fate has been that what I undertook was fully understood only after the fact' is not too recondite. May **Randy Byers**, as my faith assures me beyond other knowledge, have found true morning glory.

Ditmar's dance, indeed, not only wraps around the Heroic Hundredth, but wraps, or warps, or sprawls (that's as close as I could get) issues.

I am certainly for things that come in the mail. Some go on the shelf. All is mystery and high anticipation.

There was here until recently a bookshop calling itself alternatively **'Bookfellows'** and **'Mystery and**

**Imagination'**. I urged the former over the latter. All books, I said, are mystery and imagination. This did not succeed. I was ready, had the two owners challenged me, to defend it for *Dinner at Omar Khayyam's* (G. Mardikian, 1944).

More delight at your naming *The Berlin Project* (**G. Benford, 2017**) among 'Favourite Novels' and 'Books'. As I've reported elsewhere, I hear people say they can't tell where its actual history ends and its fiction begins; not out of such readers' ignorance, but out of the author's ability. I've never forgotten **Greg Benford**'s responding to the Aussiecon III committee's invitation: 'Thanks. Certainly. Are you asking me to be Pro Guest of Honour or Fan Guest of Honour?'

I so hate to disagree with **John-Henri Holmberg** that I'll be brief about *Frankenstein*. Indeed many readers miss its point. So, I cannot shirk saying, does he. As he glimpses, Frankenstein does not 'realise that this new ... being ... is capable of goodness, beauty, and insight'. But **Mary Shelley**'s epigraph is far more trenchant. 'Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/To mould me man, did I solicit thee/From darkness to promote me [Milton, *Paradise Lost* Bk. X, 11. 743-45 (1674); Holmberg doesn't cite, and instead of quoting, uses a re-translation [from Bengtsson's 1926 Swedish]?' The book is an irresponsibility contest between the man and the monster.

(31 March 2020; received 23 June 2020)

**MARK PLUMMER**

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When might you expect a new *Banana Wings*? That's a question with no easy answer. Our regular printers, the print shop at Sheffield Hallam University, have been closed for months and may well be closed for some months yet, perhaps until the new academic year and perhaps longer. We use them primarily because they're notably cheaper than other firms we've used, including delivering the finished copies to us. I can't see us resuming publication until they're back in business and even then we'll be mindful of the efficiency of (especially) international mail. Currently it seems erratic, although I can't really fault them for that. I was on a Zoom chat a few hours ago with **Spike**, among others, and she mentioned that her paper version of the April ANZAPA mailing has just arrived in Mountain View, California.

(4 July 2020)

You sent *The Metaphysical Review* 22/23 and 24/25 to everybody in Acnestis in early 1995. They were,

I think, the first fanzines I received from outside the UK.

I do also remember receiving *TMRs* 26/27 and 28/29 even more clearly. They arrived on the morning of 1 August 1998, the day before **Maureen and Paul** were heading off to the US on Maureen's TAFF trip.

They would be staying at Claire's house the night before flying — Croydon's a good deal closer to Heathrow than Folkestone is — and several of us were there waiting for them when it started to rain torrentially. This was more than a little concerning because a similar downpour a year previously had flooded the road where I lived and the waters had reached my doorstep. A few millimetres more and my house would have been flooded. I did write to you about this at the time, or at least I still have the computer file of the letter I hope I sent, although as a letter of comment on the last *TMRs* it says little about them.

But I do remember all four (eight) fanzines with great fondness, and indeed right now I've got a ton of things I should be doing but I feel like pulling them out of the collection to re-read them.

(28 November 2020)

I've been saving *SFC* 104 for the Christmas and New Year holiday under the impression that 'writing to Bruce about *SFC*' is a minor personal tradition of the season. I see on checking, though, that it's only a tradition to the extent that I did it once, six years ago.

Although it does remind me, and apologies as I'm crossing the streams here, that I wanted to say something about a comment you made in *\*brg\**No. 113 [for ANZAPA].

You expressed surprise that I was unfamiliar with **John Bangsund's** splendid 'Coming Up for Blair' before reading it in **Sally Yeoland's** ANZAPA contribution, given you'd also included it in *SFC* 103 and you'd emailed that around one month earlier.

Well, **the ghastly truth** is — and I realise that I'm risking having my fanzine fan credentials revoked, my ceremonial 'fwuk' epaulettes torn from my shoulders — I don't read every fanzine the moment it drops onto my doormat or into my email.

Sometimes, yes, especially if it's relatively short, or if the circumstances are conducive to retreating to the Reading Chair for a few hours to luxuriate in fannishness and (on my part) pretend intellectuality in company with a coffee or a glass of wine and a new issue of something substantial like *SFC* or *Portable Storage*. But not always. In the case of *SFC*, while I'm grateful to have the PDF versions and I do usually skim them on receipt, I know that you are still generous enough to send us print copies too and so I usually wait for that to read it properly. You emailed the PDF of *SFC* 103 to us and other



ANZAPA members on 18 September, yes, but the print copy didn't arrive here until 14 October and I don't think I read it until 31 October, whereas I read 'Blair' in Sally's ANZAPA contribution on 8 October. So I'm not ignoring you, Bruce, honest I'm not!

(We will set aside for the moment that when I was recently revisiting our cache of Bangsund fanzines I learned that I had read 'Blair' years ago in what I assume is its original appearance in *Philosophical Gas* 65, Spring 1984. I choose to believe here that I allowed myself to forget I'd read it so I could enjoy reading it 'for the first time' again.)

I enjoyed seeing you **enjoying life with Franz Kafka**. It seems a Very Bruce sort of thing. I just checked back on what I said in response to *SFC* 102 in which you'd asked 'Bored? Who's bored?' and I find that not much has changed with us. At that point, back at the beginning of August, I'd been **homeworking** for 140 days during which time I'd not visited my office at all, used no public transport, and not been more than two miles from the house. Now it's 293 days and I can only claim progress to the extent that I have expanded my roaming range to two-and-a-half miles as when we were still allowed to do such things we went to the games café in central Croydon one evening. I also see that back in August I was noting the erosion of the distinction between work and not-work when both take place in the same space, and again I'm writing this while a government-supplied computer sits next to me, generating some statistical reports that I hope somebody will at least look at if not for as long as it takes me to produce them (for some reason I am reminded of a colleague who was once charged with producing a graphic representation of our success at meeting a particular objective where the

target was that a particular thing should never happen and it never did).

You say you're **enjoying lockdown**, or at least you still were back in November, but I balk at going quite that far. Part of that is a sense of guilt about my privileged position here. I have a job which is even more amenable to homeworking than I thought, and an employer who seems to at least tolerate me working in that way. We got as far as talking about us maybe possibly thinking about starting a phased return to the workplace a few months ago, but the coronavirus seemingly decided it was having none of that and resurged. And there's also our domestic circumstances, where Claire's presence is currently only indicated by a distant gentle keyboard rattle. I was thinking about this the other night, re-watching the second season of *The Bridge* (the original Danish/Swedish version). **Saga Noren** is the Swedish detective and the series opens as she's trying to navigate the (for her) unusual position of cohabiting with her partner Jakob. She clearly lacks strong social skills, and in particular struggles with the way that Jakob is always there, in her space. Their apartment isn't large and at one point Saga has to go to stay in a hotel for a couple of days for the distance, and then concludes that the only way to make the situation tolerable is to wall off part of the living room to create a personal space for her, somewhere from which Jakob is forbidden. It doesn't end well for their relationship — sorry if that's a spoiler but it's a six-year-old show — although I'm now trying to imagine the lockdown edition with Saga and Jakob stuck in the flat for weeks on end leading to an altogether more predictable murder.

But that aside, I still won't go as far as saying I'm enjoying lockdown or whatever the term is for our current condition — today London is under Tier 4 conditions, the most restrictive tier in England, although who knows where we'll be by the time you read this — but I will concede, in a glass-half-full way, that there are some upsides.

I've been saying for a while now that, in common with the two friends you mention, the current restrictions don't make that much difference to our lives but I'm now wondering whether I'm already losing a sense of how we used to live in the before times. In the two-and-a-half months of relatively normal existence at the start of last year, I reckon that we did something sociable on average every other day, and that's discounting me merely going in to work. That really surprised me, as it's about double what I would have expected and rather gives the lie to what I've been saying, 'Oh, well, we never really went out much anyway.'

I had also been telling people that I don't get a, for want of a better term, covid dividend: I have been working throughout, just as much as I did

under normal circumstances and perhaps a bit more, and while it's true I don't commute now that was always reading time anyway, albeit rather fractured. I'm now having to rethink that because while we have to some extent virtualised our social life, and as a result have seen a lot more of some people than we ever would were we confined to in-person interactions, I can only conclude that it's not taking up as much time as it did before.

I was reading an essay by **Zadie Smith** the other day, from her collection *Intimations: Six Essays*, an attempt to 'organize some of the feelings and thoughts that events, so far, have provoked in me, in those scraps of time the year itself has allowed'. One of the pieces is called 'Something to Do', and suggests that for many people it's the truthful and surest answer to '**Why I Write**', and now 'this most honest of phrases [is] in everybody's mouths all of a sudden, and in answer to almost question. Why did you bake the banana bread? It was something to do. Why did you make a fort in the living room? Well, it's something to do. Why did you dress the dog as a cat? It's something to do, isn't it? Fills the time.'

I don't have the sense of **having time on my hands**, time that needs filling. Clearly I do have that time through not going out but I seem to simply fill it organically, without needing to find or manufacture something to do. I'm thinking back to when Claire took an exit package from her job a few years ago and reactions were split between those who saw the opportunities it presented and those who were genuinely baffled because, well, what are you going to do all day? I felt at the time that you could tell a lot about somebody from which line they took.

I am reading a lot more, as I mentioned back in August, about 50 per cent more **books** than in even the best of recent years and more than at any point since the early 1990s when I had no home computer and indeed no television. For much of the last nine-and-a-half months there has been no opportunity for in-person book shopping, and when the opportunity did exist, when we were allowed out during the summer, it didn't feel like an opportunity worth taking. Not that we can't buy new books, obviously, what with this being the twenty-first century, but I see that of the 50 print books I've read since the beginning of August, 40 of them were already in the house.

Perhaps it's that rarely leaving the house causes me to be more aware of what's in it. I still don't know when or why I acquired a vertical-grid Penguin of **John Braine's** 1957 novel *Room at the Top* but now I've read it. We've had a copy of *An Infinite Summer* by **Christopher Priest** for years, bought I think at Rog Peyton's old **Andromeda bookshop** in Birmingham, which has been closed for getting on for twenty years now. For some reason I'd never got

to it before, but now I have. I will resist the temptation to smugly claim that the acquisition of a backlog was a long-range plan in case of pandemic-induced isolation.

Looking through the pages of **SFC 104** I've been thinking about **commonality**. You and your contributors discuss 54 books or thereabouts (caution as I may have miscounted). There are a few from 2020 or 2019, but most are older, in some cases much older, books that were published decades ago and have been sitting on your shelves for years. I think I've read four-and-a-half of the 54, the half being the **Budrys collection**, which I'm working my way through slowly. I'm crossing the streams again here, I know, but I've seen your 'best books of 2020' list posted to the Trufen elist and here I've read four of your top 22, and two of the other four-star books. In simple numeric terms we have relatively little reading common ground and yet I do get a not entirely explicable sense of commonality from reading **SFC**, that we're coming from the same place. That's fandom, I guess.

And I particularly like what seems to me to be the more varied content this time around such that No. 104 comes across as a fusion of **SFC** and **TMR**, mixing traditional fanzine staples such as book reviews and convention reports with more personal journalism from **William Breiding** and others, and even poetry. Reading William's piece in particular I thought fairly quickly that it felt like a **TMR kind of article** and so was smugly pleased to learn that was where it was originally pitched.

I liked **Guy Salvidge's 'Supernova Memories'** — because I like bookshop and bookselling stories generally but also because of its unglamorous view, which I'm sure better reflects the reality of what on the surface, and as it at first appeared to Guy, would be for many of us a dream job. I've never worked in a bookshop and while I've sold books at conventions that's a very different thing, even more so when you're not relying on the income to pay the gas bill or to buy potatoes. A few years ago we found ourselves briefly in possession of the entire for-sale print run of a brand new **Stephen Baxter** novella and I recall painstakingly negotiating a sale with **Niall Harrison**, packaging up a copy and sending it to him and collecting a payment on behalf of the book's owner, and then thinking, hmm, this book-selling lark isn't so bad, I could make a living at this so long as I can persuade my friends to keep buying books a few hundred times every month. No, wait.

The **Dublin Worldcon** now seems an event from the deep past, so long ago that it only exists embedded in amber. I suppose it's in the nature of contemporary Worldcons that we have few intersecting experiences, and while I think I did see **Edwina Harvey** (not sure about **Robert Day**) the two reports here have few points of contact with my own

trip beyond generalities. We'd not stayed in Dublin before and I liked the city: compact, friendly, and easily navigable. As for the Worldcon itself, as Edwina says, the queuing did become rather a theme, although I wonder to what extent it's now the norm, at least with European Worldcons. There was a lot of **queuing** in **London in 2014** and again in **Helsinki in 2017** and so it may be that for many younger European fans it is now an expectation. Helsinki had the money and space to expand into other halls within their conference centre, and so the queuing problem was reduced as the weekend went on, but Dublin had already booked every inch of their venue and there was nowhere into which they could expand. If it is to be a feature, though, the question is, what can organisers do about it? The only solution seems to be closing memberships, but that effectively cuts out the local first-timers who may not join until the last minute or on the day. I think we were able to get into the items we wanted to see but they were mostly old-school fannish items and so not exactly high demand.

I share some of Edwina's feelings about **the dealers' room**, and only didn't find it underwhelming because it was largely as I expected. I realise that the feature has evolved but for me it's still, conceptually at least, **The Book Room**, and in that respect conventions are not what they once were, and again I don't really know what we can do about that. It's particularly evident at smaller British conventions, so I didn't really expect anything else from the Worldcon. I don't think I bought a single book, something that would have been unthinkable ten years ago. I also wonder about those copies of **Warhoon 28** as mentioned by Robert. I saw a box of them — being used as a door-stop.

All of which seems to be a rather gloomy note on which to finish, so I'll add that I don't think I've come across **Denny Marshall** before. I'm not that struck on the front cover image, but 'Recharge' on the back is rather good. Let's hope we've all been able to recharge over the last few months. Onwards into 2021!

(4 January 2021)

**JOE SICLARI**  
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**NY 10598-5901, USA**

Edie and I have been pretty much staying housebound even though our area is getting fewer cases of the virus. Since my heart surgery and other conditions put me on the 'endangered' list, Edie has been a tyrant about me staying away from the public.

We have put up on Fanac.org **Edmonds and**

Huett's *Australian Fanzine Bibliography* and we have been adding more Australian zines to our site. However, the *Bibliography* only goes to 1975, so it doesn't answer some questions I had about your fanzines.

First, we have scanned and put all the issues I have found of *SF Commentary*. I am missing two issues, Nos. 27 and 73–75 of the printed issues that I have up to No. 76. You had indicated that there were primarily electronic versions of later issues. Could you send me those so we can put them online? Edie can provide a DropBox link to make it easier. That would allow us to have the complete run for the archive. *SF Commentary* is on our Core List of zines we would like to provide to fans and researchers. I'm looking forward to completing the run.

Second, can you give me publishing data on the following titles, at least the number of issues, with dates would be better. I have some issues but not all.

- *American Kindness*
- *BRG*
- *Invisible Whistling Bunyips*
- *Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology*
- *Metaphysical Review* (1st and 2nd Series)
- *Steam Engine Time* (with Kincaid & Speller, & Stinson)
- *Supersonic Snail*
- *Sweetness and Light*.

Are there any other major titles that you have done? Can I scan and put these online as I find them? If you agree, I do try to get permission from all editors for the zines we put online. So could you give me the contact information for Paul, Maureen, and Jan?

Lastly, can we put *The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie* online? We have a special section for Collections of major fanwriters and Fanthologies.

I know I'm asking a lot of questions, but I would really like to add a lot more of your material to **The Fan History Project**. I hope that is agreeable to you.  
(14 July 2020)

[\*brg\* I was very glad that Mark Olson scanned nearly all the duplicated issues of *SF Commentary*. He didn't tell me the source of his stash. Since I received this letter, all duplicated issues of *SFC* have been located and scanned in Fanac.org.

I've never posted *American Kindness*, the report on my 2005 trip to America, because it was meant to be sent to all the people who donated to the Bring Bruce Bayside Fund that took me to San Francisco. Also, there is a technical problem that stopped me substituting colour photos in the PDF version for the

black-and-white shots in the print version. But of course it should be posted, 15 years after the trip.

Ditto *The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie*, a slim volume edited by Irwin Hirsh to highlight a few of my best pieces. This was published as a money-raiser for the fund, but nobody's ever asked about spare copies.

\*brg\* has been my ANZAPA fanzine since 1991. Some issues I would have to scan; others are in electric format, but not all are in PDFs. I don't even have a complete set of the print copies, especially as many are nothing but mailing comments.

*The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* was my fanzine for the Acnestis apa (British) from 1995 to 2005. It includes a lot of the same material as \*brg\*. As a result, all the non-mailing comments stuff from both magazines appears in efanzines.com as issues of *Scratch Pad*. *Scratch Pad* never existed as a print fanzine, but is on efanzines.com as a convenience to PDF downloaders.

Before I adopted \*brg\* as my ANZAPAZine title, I used a wide variety of titles from 1969 to 1990. *Invisible Whistling Bunyips* is an early title; as is the original incarnation of *The Metaphysical Review* in the early 1970s.

*Sweetness and Light* was an apazine for FAPA (1985–1995). I'm not sure how many print copies I still have.

My APA-45 fanzine (1972 to 1974) was *Notes of a Naïf Son*.

*The Metaphysical Review* ran from 1984 to 1998 as my main fanzine, although I did revive *SFC* in 1989, after eight years in limbo, as the *Twentieth Anniversary Issue*. *TMR* features all the other things I am interested in, as well as a fair amount about SF and fantasy. I think the best fanzines I ever published were the last few *TMRs* (26/27 and 28/29). I was able to generate PDFs of them for efanzines.com, but not earlier editions. Early ones were still duplicated, because I was able to keep duplicating until 1990, when it became more and more difficult to find a source for stencils, ink, and duplicating paper (esp. the latter). But duplicating cost a quarter a cent a side, whereas offset printing has remained about 11 cents a side for most of the time I've changed to offset. Early offset issues were typeset using Ventura for the text, with pics scanned separately and pasted into slots on layout pages. They would have to be re-scanned.

And every issue of *Steam Engine Time* (2000–2013) can be found as PDFs on efanzines.com.

Please take a look at the complete catalogue of PDF editions of my fanzines on efanzines.com.\*]

I have found multiple issues of both the *The Meta-physical Review* and *Steam Engine Time* that I can scan relatively quickly.

We are trying to add as many of **John Bangsund's** fanzines as possible. Sally endorsed the idea of getting his fanzines on fanac.org. We have completed the *Australian Science Fiction Review* set and have added issues of *Scythrop*, *Philosophical Gas*, and other titles. We also put up the 1974 *John W. Campbell: An Australian Tribute*. We are hoping to do a feature page on John in the near future. It would be nice to have as complete an inventory of his publications online as possible. Who might have them and be willing to scan them?

You can see the list of **Australian fanzines we have online** at [https://fanac.org/fanzines/country\\_listing\\_of\\_fanzines.html](https://fanac.org/fanzines/country_listing_of_fanzines.html)

(4 January 2021)

**[\*brg\* I've answered most of these questions in personal correspondence. As far as I know, the two most complete collections of John Bangsund's fanzines are owned by Irwin Hirsh and Sally Yeoland. As Mark Plummer writes earlier in this issue, he has probably the most complete checklist of John's fanzines, but not a lot of the magazines themselves.**

**My fanzines can easily be downloaded as PDFs from efanazines.com. I'm not sure if Joe has come to an agreement with Bill Burns about sharing items. I cannot see any reason why that shouldn't happen.\*]**

**CHRIS NELSON**  
**25 Fuhrman St, Evatt ACT 2617**

Are you a member of **CoNZealand**? I've been contacted by Spike, the Exhibitions Organiser for the con, who is keen to have a display on the six ANZ winners of the **Big Heart Award** over the years (one Kiwi and five Aussies).

**Merv Binns** is one of those, of course — and *SFC* 102 even has a photo of him with Helena on the day he collected this award — but with no photo credit. Do you know who the photographer was? It would be a great shot to use for the exhibit if permission can be acquired.

Would you also know of anyone who might have a photo of **Ron Graham**? Yes, he's another Big Heart Awardee.

(19 July 2020)

**[\*brg\* Extracted from a conversation between PERRY MIDDLEMISS and CHRIS NELSON in which I became involved:\***

**Fisher Library** in Sydney should hold *Locus* issues,

courtesy of Colin Steele.

You ask about **Chris Collier**, the mysterious winner of the Big Heart Award in 1999. I may have a contender.

Information from **John Ryan's Panel to Panel** (1979), page 213. The first Australian 'comicszine', *Down Under*, was published in Sydney by **John Ryan** in December 1964. In the 40-page, spirit-duplicated publication, Ryan was assisted by **John Brosnan** of Perth and **Chris Collier** of Brisbane.

*Cinema Papers* in the 1970s also had occasional letters from a **Chris Collier** in Paddington, Brisbane. And I suspect the same chap used to send newspaper clippings of new words to the Australian National Dictionary Centre at ANU.

He certainly sounds obsessive enough to be an sf fan and correspondent of **Forry Ackerman**, and hence a candidate for the **Big Heart Award!**

(19 July 2020)

**ALEX SKOVRON**  
**172 Hawthorn Rd,**  
**Caulfield North VIC 3161**

How interesting to read (amid so much else in **Colin Steele's** column) of the contents of **David Bowie's** travelling library, and of the 'secret life' of **John Wyndham**, whose books I haven't returned to since the early 1970s.

Most recently, my only close encounters with the genre(s) have been **Stanislaw Lem's Solaris** and (in the broadest sense) **Philip Roth's** timely and uncannily topical alternative history, *The Plot against America* (2004) — at once reminiscent, of course, of that other Philip's 1962 classic.

(29 July 2020)

**JULIAN D'AUBBONNETT**  
**julian.daubbonnett@gmail.com**

My name is Julian D'Aubbonnett, and I am in search of my grandmother **Margot D'Aubbonnett**.

My story is very simple; I have never had any contact with Margot, and my father never spoke of her.

I understand, Mr. Gillespie, that you met her at Syncon '75. Also, that she was a regular contributor to your fanzine, *SF Commentary*.

Thanks to the wonders of data storage and the internet, today, for the first time, I have found evidence of her existence. Moreover, I have discovered that she lived in at least two locations that are now no more than a 45-minute drive from where my family and I now live.

I am keen to try to piece together some of her past, find out if/where and when she passed away — as she would be 100 this year — and to build something of a history of her life. From her letter, published in *SFC* 33, I have discovered that she was in the Army in World War II. As I am currently an officer of the RAAF, I am very keen to discover some more detail, if possible, about this part of her life, with the hope that it will give me enough detail to search for her records with the National Archives of Australia or the Australian War Memorial. If there is anything that you might be able to do to assist me in this endeavour, please let me know.

I am amazed that she was such an SF fan. Also, given that she was, I can see that my own childhood of being brought up with the *Star Trek* movies and series was a direct result of her influence on my own father.

(15 August 2020)

**[\*brg\* I have a very vague memory of meeting Margot at Syncon '75. She had letters of comment in only one or two issues of *SF Commentary*. I cannot remember how she made contact; probably through the Australian Society of Authors, of which I was a member at the time. Perhaps somebody in Sydney can help Julian with his quest.\*]**

**RICK KENNETT  
PO Box 118,  
Pascoe Vale South VIC 3094**

**[\*brg\* The last time I tried to send an email alert that the new issue was available, I received a bounce from Rick's email address. There's a good reason for that — I had one letter incorrect in the address.\*]**

Snap! I tried to send my email to you a couple of days ago but it bounced. An out-of-date address, it seems. Got your new address when I downloaded *SFC* 102 earlier this evening. Immediately I read the pieces on **Merv Binns's** passing by **Leigh Edmonds** and yourself.

Well I remember my discovery of **Space Age Books**. It was 1973 and I was working at Carlton Brewery at the top of Swanston Street. One lunch time I took a walk into town, little suspecting what I was about to find — an overwhelmingly 'Gosh! Wow!' moment. I religiously bought every copy of *Australian SF News* as soon as it appeared on the front counter, and found early copies of *SFC* on the back shelves.

Now I have all the electronic copies of *SFC*, *Steam Engine Time*, and *The Metaphysical Review* filed on the

computer.

Right now my **courier job** is a dream. Empty roads, no traffic snarls. I flit here, I flit there, I flit merrily everywhere. This is offset somewhat by the fact there's a lot of down time in which we stand idle in city streets, staring at walls and scratching ourselves indelicately. I'm being paid the dole as a sort of de facto JobKeeper payment. Late last April I lost my licence for three months — racked up too many points — and submitted myself to the tender mercies of CentreLink, who have continued to pay a percentage of benefits even through they know I'm now back at work. It helps, what with the above-mentioned down time, wall staring, and indelicate scratching.

My last blog post was about 18 months ago when I mentioned the serialisation of my novel *Presumed Dead* on the YA podcast *Cast of Wonders*.

I published that story in *War of the Worlds: Battleground Australia*: 'The Enemy of the Enemy' was a finalist for the Australian Shadows Award. The webzine *Bewildering Stories* published 'The Gods in their Galleries' a couple of months back, and in a couple of months' time they'll be republishing my non-fiction piece 'Piloting into the Unknown', which is about my time at 3PBS in St Kilda in the late eighties and early nineties doing a radio SF show improbably titled *Pilots into the Unknown*. The fellow with whom I was doing the show wanted to call it *Pilots into the Purple Twilight*, while I wanted to call it *Unknown*, in honour of John Campbell's short-lived fantasy zine of the early 1940s. We compromised.

*Tall Tale TV*, a podcast and a YouTube channel, has accepted everything I've sent. I swear that editor **Chris Herron** doesn't know what a rejection slip looks like. In early October he'll be podcasting an excerpt from my novel *The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, in which our heroes are attacked by hammerhead sharks in a suburban lounge room. I'm a little ashamed of myself for making the hammerhead the villain of the piece, as they're up the Cute-and-Cuddly end of shark species rather than the Vicious Man-Eater end. Even the Great White — so maligned in *Jaws* — isn't such a bad fellow once you get to know him. And if he does take your leg off it'll be completely by accident, having mistaken you for a seal. It can happen to anyone.

(28 August 2020)

**DENNIS CALLEGARI  
159 Kilby Road, Kew East, VIC 3102**

I've mentioned already, I think, that while I enjoy reading **Peter Beagle's** books, none of them sticks

in my mind. In that way, they're like complicated mathematics: I can enjoy following the derivation, but the moment I stop doing so, the whole process magically disappears from my mind.

I finally got round to reading *Chances Are* by **Richard Russo**. Very enjoyable, but not to the extent that you found. I really like Russo's style and the mystery theme, but there is something about stories in which people look back to their youth that just doesn't grab me that much. I also picked up that most of the book is told from only two viewpoints (Lincoln and Teddy), and it kept nagging at me that the author was keeping Mickey 'off-stage' for a specific reason. (Ultimately I found out why.) And after finishing the book, I wondered if an editor had made Russo cut a couple of chapters — did you find that the character Delia appeared to jump too abruptly into the book?

**Thomas Pynchon**: The only book of his that I've been able to get into was *Inherent Vice*. Two reasons: I know what the term means, and at one time considered writing a story with that title myself. Also, it's a mystery of sorts. I also liked the movie they made of the book.

Finally, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: one of my all-time favourite books, which I probably never would have read if it hadn't been a prescribed book at secondary school. The literary equivalent of a 'road movie' that also works as a satirical look at American life — and as a kind of morality tale, where Huck knows that he is committing a crime and a sin in helping Jim escape but feels driven to do it anyway because it's *right*.

The only thing I disliked about *Huckleberry Finn* was that fucking Tom Sawyer at the end with his elaborate schemes, tall tales, and constant lying. A complete waste of a way to end the story.

(23 October 2020)

**CAREY HANDFIELD**  
**4 Meliodora Place,**  
**Yallambie VIC 3085**

Thank you for your comments on books you've been reading.

I enjoyed reading this issue, although I was very surprised when you said that you find **Charles Dickens** unreadable. Surely this was a typo? Dickens is one of Britain's greatest novelists.

(28 October 2020)

**[\*brg\* Dickens ricochets around the critical pantheon. All his novels were on the nose for the English Department at Melbourne University when I started my degree in 1965. Harold Bloom**

likes some of the novels — he's certainly much more enthusiastic than many other critics. I found some of the novels I read in the sixties indigestible — great lumps of prose that went nowhere, as in *Dombey and Son* and *Our Mutual Friend*. Bloom likes *Bleak House*, but I found that particularly sterile when I read it in 1965 or 1966.

*Hard Times* was the only Dickens novel approved of by the Leavisites — because it's short and terse.

But I do have my favourites, such as *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby*. Who could deny that *Great Expectations* has one of the most brilliant plots in all literature? And *Oliver Twist* is a great melodrama.

But while Dickens was building his own world, the great French novelists were mounting an armed attack on the real world, creating the modern prose style. It was wonderful to discover Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola in the mid 1960s. It's a pity I can't read them in French, as Elaine can.

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is one of my very favourite novels, along with two Australian novels (*The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* and *The Tree of Man*) and, of course, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland/Through the Looking Glass*.\*

I know **Perry Middlemiss** and **David Grigg** are busy reviewing their reading lists for their *Two Chairs Talking* podcast about their **Best Of** lists for 2020.

For me it has been a strange year. I have only read 20 books (I may add one more this week). Usually I read 50-plus in a year. This year I found it hard to get motivated. I would read two or three books in a rush then nothing for months.

My Favourites of the Year:

- ***A Brightness Long Ago*: Guy Gavriel Kay**  
This is one of my favourite authors. He writes what I call historical/fantasy. In a number of his books he chooses a time in history and creates a fantasy work where real cities have their names changed. This book is set in a world based upon fifteenth-century Italy. It has a complicated plot and great characters.
- ***A Memory Called Empire*: Arkday Martine**  
I loved the way she describes the court at the centre of the empire. It reminded me of a Byzantium court.

(27 December 2020)

I have just finished reading my best book for 2021: *Piranesi* by **Susanna Clarke**. I agree with the comments made by David, and others. I know it is only 1 January, but it will be a challenge to read a better book this year.

(1 January 2021)

**HENRY GASKO**  
**36 Hadley Drive, Wallan VIC 3756**

You might remember my story called ‘**The Flight of the Brolga**’ that I showed you some time ago. Everyone liked it but I could not get it published — too long they say. So eventually I sent it to *Dreamforge* (the new SF magazine for which I am a slush pile reader) and after a lot of toing and froing, they are going to publish a much-reduced version of it — see the attached PDF complete with illustrations. They are also going to nominate it for a Pushcart Award — not sure what that is but it sounds good. I am going to nominate it for an Aurealis Award as soon as it is published, hopefully this calendar year.

Hope you and Elaine are both surviving. Things should be just about back to normal now. Judy and I are still in Paynesville helping with our grandson while Emily and Ollie are both working full time.

(26 November 2020)

**BILL WRIGHT**  
**Unit 4, 1 Park St, St Kilda VIC 3182**

I, too, had to submit to a **Covid-19 test** during Melbourne (Australia) ’s months of lockdown (with restrictions now being lifted gradually now, as the period with no new infections, no deaths, and no infected persons in care lengthens). I took my four-wheeled walker to the streets, hailed a taxi to go to hospital, only to be told that the testing facility was 300 metres down the road. By that time I was a bit frazzled, having become noticeably frailer since last year’s series of horrific accidents. A couple on the street walking their dog took one look at my condition and hurried down to the facility (where there was a line of 25 patients who had waited up to two hours for their test) to alert nurses who were monitoring the queue.

(Like Canada’s, the Australian health care system is free, but the trade off is rationing of services.)

When I arrived, I was taken in charge and escorted directly to the test caravan, bypassing the queue. My test was invasive. They made me do it myself under supervision. First I had to shove the stick as far down the throat as I could, rotate it so as to collect a sample, then shove the same stick up each nostril, rotating it again each time. Not pleasant. The paperwork before and after took 15 times as long as the actual test.

The paperwork contained strict instructions to stay locked down at home — not even going out for a walk on deserted streets was allowed — until the test results came in. I would be texted if the result

was negative. A positive result would have landed me in hospital in an isolation ward.

The negative test result came two days later.

**My medical adventures** continue. I had what I think is the last of my scheduled surgeries yesterday evening, when the intended operation failed and the surgeon had to segue quickly to an alternative procedure without anaesthetic. I was conscious throughout. It was very painful. I clung to the nurse whose sole job it was to hold both hands and give me support and comfort during the ordeal. Gratitude doesn’t even begin to describe my emotions at the time. As the last patient for the day I was discharged immediately after the operation, allowing everyone concerned to go home.

It is now the middle of the night at home and my catheter connections have come apart in bed. Which is why — after changing pee-soaked bed clothes and restored catheter connections, I have chosen to write to you rather than tell God all about it at screaming pitch.

I will make myself a cup of tea, then go back to bed. Good night.

(28 November 2020)

**DAVE LANGFORD**  
**94 London Road, Reading,**  
**Berks RG1 5AU, UK**

Excellent news that *Beachcombing* has reached you already! This is not really a well-organised project from any commercial point of view. I wanted to create a treat for various friends and fans who like yourself have sent me wonderful things over the years without much response besides skimpy issues of *Ansible*. Belatedly I realised that I’d also have to make it available for mere money, because I can’t afford to print copies for everyone likely to be interested.

**Chris Priest**, who had an early preview, sort of forced my hand by demanding to know how he could buy copies for his children, who are fans of *Silence* and other Langfordiana. I’ve set up a sales page at Lulu.com — linked from <https://ae.ansible.uk/?t=beach> — but don’t want to go public with this until all the UK copies due to go out with *Ansible* and/or Christmas cards on 1 December have arrived.

Hence an entirely arbitrary official release date of 21 December. I may yet tinker with the Lulu paperback pricing, since it’s based on Ansible Editions costings, which allow for royalties to Aldiss and Budrys, Sladek et al, and so could be reduced a bit if the Christmas spirit should suffuse me. Ebooks to be available from 21 December at £5.

(29 November 2020)

I too am very fond of **Josephine Tey's** novels, and return to them every few years.

Special thanks for giving **Paul Di Filippo's** kind review of the **Budrys collection** its first print incarnation; as far as I know it had appeared only on the **Locus Online** website. The accompanying cover image looks to have been a relatively low-resolution one posted online and not really suited to a print zine: I would have provided a better one if I'd known. Do tell me if the issue ever arises again.

It would have been fun to reprint the whole of **SF Horizons**, but the thought of dealing with all those expensive literary estates — Kingsley Amis' and C. S. Lewis' as well as William Burroughs' — was just too demoralising. I had a bad enough time with just the Aldiss estate, or rather its literary agents: Wendy Aldiss was entirely cooperative, but the agency managed to drag things out for most of a year, insisting on using its own contract rather than the perfectly good one drawn up for Ansible Editions by Chris Priest, and making unusual demands, such as 20 complimentary copies of **Jonbar Point**. I got them down to 10, assuming the agents would keep one and send nine to Wendy. Later I heard that she got two, and was so embarrassed that I sent her a couple more as part of today's mass mailing.

The **Arno Press** facsimile reprint of **SF Horizons** mentioned in the following blog post may perhaps still be available from second-hand dealers: <https://socialistjazz.blogspot.com/2015/04/ffb-sf-horizons-edited-by-brian-aldiss.html>

( 2 December 2020)

**SIMON BROWN**  
**Somewhere in South Africa**

Sorry I've been so desperately poor at keeping in touch since our move to South Africa.

As many of you will already have seen on Alison's Facebook page, she has resigned from the American International School of Johannesburg, effective at the finish of the current school year (end of May 2021). In August 2021, she will take up her new position of teaching the IB Diploma and Middle Years Program to students at the International School of Vientiane in Laos; the job in Laos will be for at least for three years, and possibly five. We're really looking forward to being back in SE Asia and the tropics.

We hope to be able to come home to Australia in June (COVID restrictions, flight costs, quarantine rules, and vaccinations taken into consideration) for a few weeks to catch up with everyone.

**South Africa** has been great, but the pandemic put a real dampener on our ability to see the

continent. We have been able to travel around the country itself, however, and enjoyed it immensely. Unfortunately, Johannesburg has been rough on my health, especially my asthma and allergies, and we just couldn't stay for a fourth or fifth year, which was our original thinking.

This is an amazing country with enormous potential, and we encourage those of you who haven't yet seen it to get across when you can.

(25 December 2020)

**ADRIENNE RALPH**  
**Northcote VIC 3070**

In **SFC 104**, I was particularly interested in the article about **Harold Bloom**. This year I have watched a number of his interviews and read his book **How to Read Poetry**. This was prompted by some of the many EdX short courses I have completed during the pandemic. Are you familiar with EdX? This organisation offers ivy league and other university undergraduate courses in a wide range of topics. I have audited these courses for free, although it is possible to complete these courses for assessment and credit — for a fee.

Two of the Harvard courses that I audited are on **American poetry**, and Bloom came up as I was doing background research. He is an interesting speaker and highly opinionated, as he is in his books. Americans often describe him as a 'colossus' of a critic. Bloom himself describes Shakespeare as God. I balked at both descriptions; I think I am constitutionally allergic to hyperbole.

Nonetheless, he is interesting and provocative. You might also enjoy some of his interviews (available on YouTube).

(4 December 2020)

**JOY WINDOW**  
**PO Box 1377, Lismore NSW 2480**

I noticed that in **SFC 104** you mentioned once owning a **Hornby toy railway set**. By coincidence, my photography group's theme this month is 'railway cars', and I asked at the Lismore Historical Museum, where I volunteer two days a week, if they had anything rail-car related. The trains to Lismore have stopped so I was looking for other options. I'm not allowed to use any of the many photos they have of old trains — I have to use my own photos — but the day manager did get out for me — from the basement, so not on display — a (can you believe it?) **Hornby toy railway set!**

There's a set of tracks, too, and the key works to



set the engine going. It zooms along quite fast. A photo is attached. I also took close-ups of each car if you're interested.

(4 December 2020)

**MURRAY MOORE**  
**1065 Henley Rd. Mississauga,**  
**Ontario L4Y 1C8, Canada**

Today's mail included my copy of the November–December issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. I re-subscribed earlier this year. The newsstand in Toronto where I had been buying it seemed not to be carrying it anymore.

Resubscribed, that is, after a decades-long lapse: my previous subscription period was the late 1960s.

I just finished the September–October issue. It includes two outstanding stories, 'The Fairy Egg' by **R. S. Benedict** and 'Little and Less' by **Ashley Bloom**.

*Asimov's* I continue to be able to buy, in Indigo's biggest store, in Sherway Gardens in Etobicoke. I can walk there in 30 minutes. I also was buying my *Asimov's* copies at the same newsstand as I was obtaining *F&SF*, in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood. I have been there twice since the pandemic started. Nowhere to go currently: we are in early days of a 28-day lockdown, essential services only.

Because of the pandemic I lack a copy of the May–June *Asimov's*.

Because of pandemic disruption I have re-subscribed to *Toronto Life*. I had dropped my subscription and instead was borrowing copies from our public library ... until I couldn't.

I am a *New Yorker* subscriber, beginning my patronage late in the 1990s.

A year or so ago I subscribed to *The Gardener* (office in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan) when an Ontario-based gardening magazine stopped publishing.

Wait, there's more. I have first-time subscriptions to *Canadian History* (formerly *The Beaver*) and to *Canadian Notes & Queries*. I await my first subscription copy of each title.

Yesterday my copy of *Outworlds 71* was delivered. I was not expecting it until 10 December. *Outworlds 71* has dashed the hope of any other 2020 fanzine editor thinking of winning the 2020 FAAN Award

for Best Special Publication/Single Issue.

(1 December 2020)

It turns out I possess a cornucopia of extra issues of *SF Commentary*, accumulated through decades of acquiring fanzines in large and small batches, for example, buying a backpack to bring home some of the hundreds of fanzines on tables donated by **Greg Pickersgill**, free, donation encouraged, during the most recent Glasgow Worldcon; our car filled with boxes filled with fanzines, given me by **Alan Rosenthal**, shipped by him to Buffalo and collected there by myself; a car-and-one-half load of fanzines sold to me by **Taral**; etc.

I have extra issues of *SF Commentary* 12; 14(2)–15(2)–16; 18–25; 29; 31–34; 39(2)–42; 44–47(2)–50(2)–51(2)–52(3!)–54–55–58; 60–66.

Also *Invisible Whistling Bunyips* 1; *Great Cosmic Donut of Life* 3; *Steam Engine Time* 1.

I have duplicates of *SFC* issues 39 and 41–42 and 44–45.

#### Recent Murray & Mary Ellen news:

On 14 September Mary Ellen's right hip was replaced. All good except now she squeaks when she walks. Her hip has not been oiled. To exercise it she rides a stationary bike she bought for that purpose, set up in our family room.

Mary Ellen's surgeon told her that her left hip is good for another two to five years. When she is ready, she need only call his office, saving months of waiting. To get to surgery for her right hip, her doctor referred her; she was inspected by a physiotherapist; she met with the surgeon; surgeon's assistant said, surgery would be 12–16 months wait; then, COVID.

As a Canadian, Mary Ellen's costs of surgery were only indirect: car parking while I waited plus rental of a recommended machine to massage post-surgery with ice-cold water her traumatised thigh.

Her surgeon replaces hips through the front, not the rear. Through-the-front of the thigh surgery is day surgery. Through-the-back surgery, still more popular with surgeons, means the patient stays one night in hospital.

Unlike for too many people, for us COVID only has been inconvenient. Actually, our disposable income is higher than pre-COVID, because we are not able to spend our disposable income as we normally do.

So we have gotten serious about **transforming our back yard**. Elaine should approve. We hired a landscape architect who specialises in native plants. We had to wait longer for a plan because the plans she usually makes for clients are for spaces one-quarter the size of our space, she told us. The plan she has made for us includes space for a pond. She works for you if minimum 60 per cent of the plants/shrubs/trees to be planted are native plants/shrubs/trees. Our plan is complicated: she spent three-plus hours with us, going through it, talking about each item. She divided our back yard into four gardens.

Mary Ellen and I have been, and are, well. However in October and last month, a nephew and Mary Ellen's mother, died, the cause in neither case COVID.

Last Friday of October my sister's middle child, **Brian**, died, of cancer. Brian was 60, so, untimely. Perhaps he was lucky to reach 60 years. Of my sister's three children, all boys, Brian was the athlete. Because of skill, and drive, and a bit of luck, too, he made it in hockey as far as the Triple A team of the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Post hockey he became an institutional manager. One day at work, walking along a corridor, he died. His heart stopped. Luckily Brian was a manager in a hospital in Hamilton, Ontario. A heart surgeon was nearby.

His heart was never right afterwards. He had a device implanted (not a pacemaker). Then his kidneys stopped working. Finally, cancer: he had finished radiation and was about to start chemo.

**My mother-in-law's death** also was not a surprise, because she was in her 100th year. Physically she was still ambulatory, walking with a walker. Her sole mental deficiency was having lost her short-term memory. Seven years ago her family thought she was dying (opinion of two daughters-in-law who were retired nurses). The family took care of her, around the clock, in her home, for two months. A palliative care doctor visited, prescribed a different Ensure-like drink, and her appetite returned.

She moved to an apartment in Evergreen Retirement Community building, then to the second floor, Assisted Living. In October she was not eating or taking her meds. The day my nephew died, she refused to see the visiting doctor on the first floor. The doctor said, take her to hospital for assessment.

She would not go with the paramedics. What happens then? Call the police. So paramedics and at least one police officer were needed to take my 99-year-old mother-in-law to hospital. By the time she arrived, or soon after, she would have forgotten she did not want to go.

She improved, was being treated as a Rehab patient. Then she began to decline. She was declared palliative on 21 November, a Monday, her

last Monday. The previous day her oldest son saw her. Monday, Mary Ellen saw her. Tuesday, Mary Ellen's other older brother saw her. Wednesday, Mary Ellen's younger brother saw his mother, before she died, shortly before midnight.

Me? I plan to emulate my parents. My father, in his early 90s: getting up from bed in the morning, his heart stopped. My mother, late 90s, getting into my sister's car to go to a doctor's appointment: her heart stopped.

Mary Ellen's funeral and my funeral (separate events, hopefully) is arranged, cremation, etc. Years ago when the province announced that sales tax would begin to be added to the cost of a funeral, we made and paid for our arrangements. We even paid for shipping home our bodies if we happened to be elsewhere, albeit the likelihood is that when each of us dies we will be home or in hospital. But we each have a card to carry with us, with information to be used in the event one of us dies far from home.

We moved into this house in the fall of 1999. A few days ago, Mary Ellen urged me to come to the family room. 'Come! Quick! It's a bat!' This at 4 p.m. on a cold day. I misheard. The bat was a rat. It was eating black sunflower seeds below our bird feeder. **Our first rat.**

(29 December 2020)

**DAVID FOSKEY**  
[djfoskey@ozemail.com.au](mailto:djfoskey@ozemail.com.au)

I happened upon your paragraphs on **T. S. Eliot** and his poem '**The Hollow Men**'. Unlike you, I don't remember **Ken Ellis** reading it at Bacchus Marsh High School in 1964, but it must have had an effect, because I remember the poem. Also unlike you, I have never been able to read poetry, but among the very few lines in my memory are the final lines — something I share with many others.

My library doesn't extend to poetry volumes but Google came to my rescue. There are also a few spoken versions of the poem available, and the links to the two I played are:

T S Eliot <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WAWaZqDf-VE>

Jeremy Irons (piano background) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZgsnoxF-7c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZgsnoxF-7c)

I do remember Ken Ellis as one of our good teachers.

(8 December 2020)

**PATRICK McGUIRE**  
**7541-D Weather Worn Way,**  
**Columbia MD 21046, USA**

Covid numbers even in Maryland are up a bit, but since March we've been pretty good about masks and social distancing, unlike the idiots in Trump country, and we're in relatively good shape. Inability to meet in person is what is beginning to wear on me, but I'll survive, especially now that I have internet access again.

I'm surprised that **John Hertz** has no email, since he contributes to the *File 770* site, but he and Mike Glycer are both in LASFS and may have worked out some sort of physical transfer.

I've been following the ups and downs of the Melbourne area regarding both Covid and wild-fires. Southern hemisphere summer should help with Covid (less gathering indoors), although I'm unsure about the fires. Meanwhile we're heading into winter, meaning outdoor restaurant tables are less feasible as are outdoor meetings of all sorts. (At my age I wasn't ready to try even an outdoor table, but they helped restaurants a bit.) My sf book club managed one meeting on a member's screened porch with masks, but the next month the hosts decided at the last minute that the forecasted temperature was too low and we went back to Zoom.

(19 December 2020)

**MALCOLM McHARG**  
**30 Kotara Place, Kotara, NSW 2289**

**[\*brg\* So you thought you had troubles during 2019 and 2020. Read this amazing account from my old friend Malcolm, who moved to New South Wales over 30 years ago:\***

**Many things have happened in my life since I last communicated.**

Lake Macquarie is picturesque coastland country, about 1 hour north of Sydney, eastern coast of Australia. The shores of Australia's largest saltwater lake encompass a cluster of village-type settlements free from the disenchanting stridency of the Sydney metropolis. Helen and I, for over 20 years, have enjoyed Lake Macquarie's friendly way of life.

The date: 3 December 2019. A glorious summer's day. Nothing out of the usual. No signs of anything forbidding. The time: around 4.30 p.m. Then an unexpected constellation of vicissitudes.

Our neighbour's two-storey timber dwelling at 83 Ridge Road, Kilaben Bay, bursts into flame, masking the shape of the building. Once sighted, I

dial 000; the person taking the call informs me that the local fire brigade has already been dispatched. I alert my wife Helen, in bed but awake.

Potentially fatal threats to our friendly neighbours Marcus and Mary-Anne, Helen, our dog Layla, and to me are high. A menacing wall of brutal, orange-yellow flame engulfs the 83 residence. The flame swirls into the shape of a witch's-hat cone above roof height, creating its own micro-climate. A strong prevailing wind bends the apex of the flame to focus directly on a window of the 85 Ridge Road residence, our house. The window implodes. Furious flame directly enters a room accommodating my computer system, ancillary materials, research resources, records, and office supplies as well as many personal possessions — library, paintings, portraits, drawings, clothes, and footwear.

A well-organised firefighting team with five engines initially focuses on containing the primary fire at 83. During this phase it is unable to suppress the secondary fire at 85, now burning from within. The cacophony from the 83 and 85 dual fires masks most sounds other than that from firefighters spraying carefully targeted fire-suppression water. Thick black smoke, seen several kilometers distant, pinpoints the location of this catastrophe.

The fire brigade has backup resources by way of two police cars — the Police wearing body cams video the incident — and an ambulance. A flash mob of Kilaben Bay residents rapidly accrues to watch and offer help.

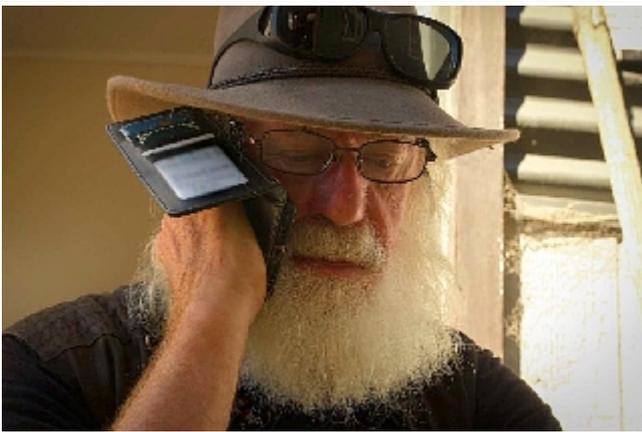
Some elements of good luck work in our favour. Mary-Anne is not at home. Helen, the person most at risk, has sufficient time to dress, find Layla, put her on a lead, and then evacuate. Our car is parked on the street not, as is usually the case, in the car port.

The elapsed time between dialing 000 and the firefighting team prohibiting entry to 85 is between 4 to 5 minutes. Watching this spectacle unfold from across the road is a surreal experience.

The evolving reality: My personal possessions will be limited to the clothes I'm wearing, iPhone and iPad, PC tower, and importantly, my '90-second pack' — a file box of necessary papers such as birth and naturalisation certificates, passport. The '90-second pack' is what goes with you when you must evacuate a building within 90 seconds; my pack includes iPhone, iPad, and PC tower (without attachments). A neighbour takes control, first of my 90-second pack, and then Helen's pack.

Both residences are destroyed but no person, or dog, is physically harmed. 83 burns to the ground. 85 is still standing, but inside there is extensive fire and water damage.

I feel calm, but emotionally exposed. Very thankful for a quick escape from harm.



**Don Ashby, January 2021, in Mallacoota: 'There wasn't much I could do about my place. I knew if a fire came it would burn — and the fire came, and it burned. At the time it was okay, It's just stuff, move on, because I was busy.'**  
 (ABC News: Daniel Fermer, 3 January 2021.)

But I am already beginning to sense the scope of disconnect from 'life-to-date' to 'where do we go from here'.

The intense sorrow of loss — emotional attachments to library, paintings, music, movies, clothes, items of furniture, and other objects of family or personal significance — is akin to bereavement.

I've experienced the bereavement of a spouse, Julie.

Emotionally, I know that much of what is being destroyed cannot be restored or re-established.

When you get to our age, there are downsizing decisions to be made. The fire described in the attachment made several of these challenging decisions for us. We now have a replacement home; in terms of size, location, amenity, and location it is excellent. It's much better than I would have anticipated. Our new address is listed above. I look forward to the future with confidence.

I'm forever indebted to you for your mentoring on writing. I hope it shows.

(16 December 2020)

**[\*brg\* My other correspondent whose house burnt down during the last year or so is our old friend Don Ashby, who has been living in Mallacoota for quite a few years. As everybody who follows Australian news knows, Mallacoota, on the extreme south-eastern coast of Victoria, was very badly hit during the vast bushfires at the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. Not only were many houses and businesses destroyed, but the Covid plague that happened two months after prevented tourists from visiting the town and helping people who had suddenly lost their livelihoods. Don's efforts during the bushfire period and the rebuilding of the town were recorded in both newspaper and TV stories.\*]**

**DON ASHBY**  
**Mallacoota VIC 3892**

Yes the tourists are back, teeming like rats. It was very pleasant during lockdown having our town to ourselves. Having to endure lollygagging, insensitive conversation and looting is not pleasant. However if one lives in a glass house, complaining about the rocks is probably foolish.

I reckon I will have somewhere to live within the month, which will be a relief both for me and the dogs. It will be very affirming to have bookshelves, cupboards, and a place to eat inside again.

Twelve months ago, to the day, I was looking at the smoking ruins of my house and planning the organisation of the relief centre. I certainly never considered entering my seventh decade being presented with a total house-build. That starts in about six months I hope.

In the mea ntime finishing my shed/tiny-house/foodforest and building fences is all the go. Happy gnu ear

Onwards and Upwards

Love and Rage

Don

(2 January 2021)

## We also heard from ...

**Thanks to the many people who responded to all issues up to and including SFC 104:**

**Jennifer Bryce** (Elwood, Victoria, 11 Nov. 2020): 'My last treatment of chemo today — and what should be in the mail? *SF Commentary* 104. Perfect!';

**Nic Farey** (Las Vegas, Nevada); **Werner Koopmann** (Buchholz, Germany), who sends lots of wonderful photos: 'On TV we saw *Outback Truckers*, an Australia-

lian film series we like very much reminding us of our much too short trip to Australia'; **Carol Kewley** (Glasgow, Scotland; until 2020, Albion, Victoria): 'I've had one winter here already, so things should be fine. Xmas is going to be awkward with the lockdown'; **Malcolm Gordon** (Whealers Hill, Victoria): 'Re the recent MSFC talk [May 2020] by Chris Flynn, author of *Mammoth*. So far (about 10 pages in) the book is great fun'; **Ion Newcombe** (Macksville, NSW).

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 14 April 2021

# SF Commentary 106

May 2021

80 pages

## *A Tribute to Yvonne Rousseau (1945–2021)*

**Bruce Gillespie**

with help from **Vida Weiss**, **Elaine Cochrane**, and **Dave Langford**  
plus **Yvonne's** own bibliography and the story of how she met everybody

*Perry Middlemiss*

The Hugo Awards of 1961

*Andrew Darlington*

Early John Brunner

*Jennifer Bryce's*

Ten best novels of 2020

*Tony Thomas and Jennifer Bryce*

The Booker Awards of 2020

*Plus letters and comments from 40 friends*

