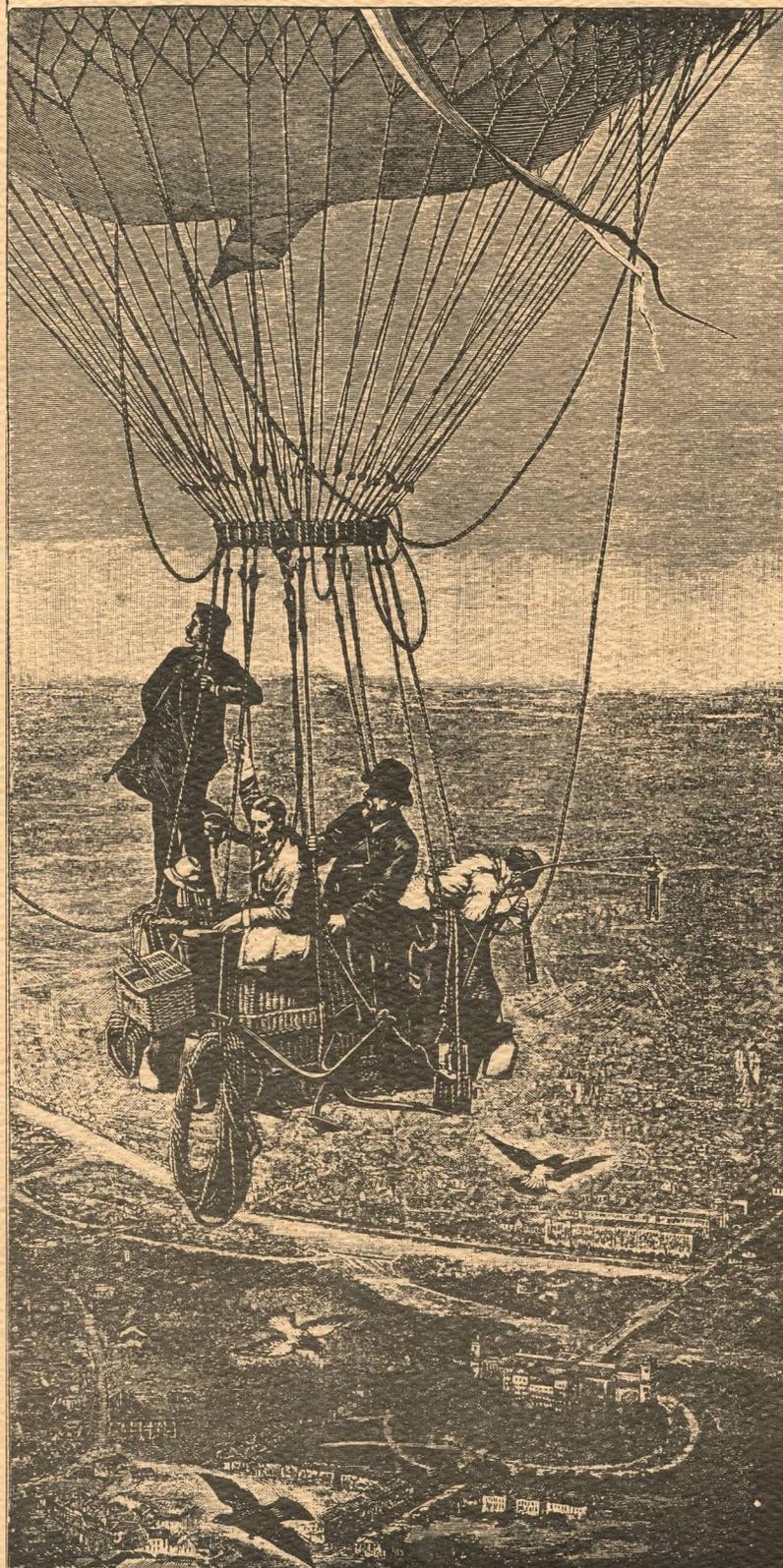


# SF COMMENTARY No. 73/74/75

October 1993

120 pages



**GEORGE TURNER**

special

**PAUL VOERMANS**

special

Three articles by

**DAMIEN**

**BRODERICK**

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# I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Talking to people at recent meetings of the Nova Mob (Melbourne's sf discussion group) I realised the publication of the new edition of the Clute/Nicholls *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* is the major sf event of 1993.

I've bought the encyclopedia (having failed to gain a review copy), but find that anything I would want to say about it has been best said in the following piece published in *The Age*, 24 July 1993:

## GUEST EDITORIAL:

### Signposts back to the future

by Damien Broderick

#### Reviewed:

*The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*

edited by John Clute and Peter Nicholls

(Orbit 1-85723-124-4; 1993; 1370 pp.; £45/A\$100)



'We are the smart alecks,' declared Australian science fiction scholar Peter Nicholls nearly two decades ago, in a feisty lecture at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. 'We take our metaphors from all over, from geology, design, traditional literature or relativity physics. We feel free to mix our fundamentally academic observations with an ironic raciness of manner.'

To the alert ear, cocked at an ICA do in 1975, that admission might not be alien or offensive. But to the haughty academic world of criticism and theory, science fiction smacked of acne cures and lonely Saturday nights. That estimate was not altogether wrong then, and has become more apt since the triumph of *Star Wars*, *Terminator* and groaning bookshelves of lucrative consumer fantasy fodder. 'Academic readers dislike us for our vulgarity, while ordinary readers dislike us for our constant display of our own cleverness.'

Wishing to advance the prospects of his genre, Nicholls sought ways to cut through prejudice and self-erected hazard alike. Everyone would benefit, he decided, if he and his smart-aleck mates made their judgments 'in a level, friendly tone, veering neither towards condescension on the one hand nor obscurantism on the other'.

He had in mind especially his terrifyingly dithyrambic Canadian colleague, John Clute, who had written previously, with resigned contempt, of genre science fiction's 'mild ignorant readership'. Weary of spilling their esoteric seed on barren ground, Nicholls and Clute joined forces at the end of the '70s (together with 31 others

of like mind, age and gender, plus one woman) to produce the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. This weighty, delightful volume ran to 672 close-packed pages and won general editor Nicholls a Hugo Award (science fiction's Oscar), which struck me as only fair: I had reviewed it in 1980 as 'the most spectacular, well-researched, balanced, amusing, compelling work of reference I've ever seen'. Since then, I've reviewed the *Britannica*, and it's still true.

A decade and a half on, its eagerly awaited revision is at hand. If the first edition contained some 730,000 words, mostly written by its principal editors, this hernia-inducing volume is more remarkable still: 1.3 million words, an extra 1500 entries, more than 200 theme entries comprising a quarter of the monstrous thing, 27 detailed entries on sf from individual countries as diverse and unlikely as Albania, Finland, Israel, Romania and Australia, 544 science fiction movies listed and discussed.

The writing is tighter, the critical poise of co-editors Clute and Nicholls accomplished and compelling. I hardly need revise a word of my previous encomium, except to note how impressively this edition meets the challenge of a mode of writing (and film and music-making) that has expanded so enormously.

I have two problems in conveying my pleasure in this book. The first is inherent in its title. We think of encyclopedias as tools for scholars: dry, concise, accurate but remote. Here, though, Clute and Nicholls (and their contributing editor Dr Brian Stableford) invite us into a conversation.

It's hard to stop reading because one entry draws you irresistibly to another half-dozen. Not just snacking. Major thematic discussions, such as the entries on 'Genre Sf', 'Definitions of Sf' and 'Sense of Wonder', twine in a polyphonic discussion between Clute, Nicholls and their contributors, inviting the reader into the discursive space. Indeed, the debates frequently reach back into echoes of the previous edition, so we get some sense of the ceaseless evolution of current thinking about this most protean of genres.

If the very word 'encyclopedia' does the book a disservice, masking its engaging delight, the topic itself remains a problem for many sophisticated adult readers. SF — not the vile 'sci fi', for reasons spelt out by Nicholls — continues to be ignored or disliked by readers trained to enjoy literary or 'canonical' texts while detesting anything else.

I'm inclined to view this disdain as a kind of learned incompetence, a bigotry that wounds its practitioners as much as its victims. More than one literary journalist has asked me, in genuine puzzlement, 'Why do you like science fiction when everyone else hates it?' This strange claim flies in the face of solid sales of sf and fantasy at a time when literary fiction struggles to survive. Worse, it ignores the striking realities of popular culture. Of the 11 top-earning movies of all time, nine are science fiction or fantasy. Of the top 33, 17 can be included under that heading. True, this is largely 'product' tailored for unreflecting and sentimental teen consumers. But it can hardly be said that everyone hates sf when there's scarcely anything that viewers love

more.

Sf's delight in sheer imagination blends magical escapism with an all-too-realistic awareness of the impact on our world of incessant technological upheaval. Mass-media versions of sf inevitably debase any subtle play with either component, so it is not surprising that huge success at the box office fails to translate into fame, fortune or even critical esteem for sf's best artists. After all, periods when the whole family routinely settled down to watch the latest western did not produce a surge of nuanced novels about existential cowboys.

With sf, it's more complicated. Despite spectacular epiphanies of shaped light, no Spielberg movie of UFOs or dinosaurs can approach the cognitive delights of print sf, from A. E. Van Vogt's baffling super-intelligent protagonists to William Gibson's cyberspace virtual realities.

As a result, Clute hardly needed to alter his melancholy entry on Thomas M. Disch: 'Because of his intellectual audacity, the chillingly distanced mannerism of his narrative art, the austerity of the pleasure he affords, and the fine cruelty of his wit, TMD has been perhaps the most respected, least trusted, most envied and least read of all modern first-rank sf writers.' Despite a single award, Disch has 'gone relatively unhonored by a field normally

over-generous with its kudos'.

Similarly, of the prodigious Gene Wolfe (whose four-volume 'Book of the New Sun' is a repeated exemplar in the encyclopedia), Clute notes: 'Though neither the most popular nor the most influential author in the sf field, GW is today quite possibly the most important.' In such clear signposts, Clute directs readers new to the genre toward texts that transform sf's comic-book tropes: 'A musical analogy might be the Baroque technique of the parody cantata, in which a secular composition is transformed by reverent parody into a sacred work (or vice versa).'

Naturally, some errors have slipped past a formidable sieve of editors, and I believe an errata list is available on request from the publisher. Mistakes I noted in my own entries are typical. The piece on me, by Russell Blackford, mysteriously notes that my 'first professionally published sf, "The Sea's Farthest End" . . . can be found in his early collection *A Man Returned* . . .' It can't, and the adjective is 'Furthest', despite its outrage against grammatical purity. The book of the same name, from Aphelion (1993), is not listed as a 'ghost' or projected title — as many others are — which is a minor irritation. Blackford was not responsible for the blooper, which

crept in further up the food chain. More annoying is the misspelling of film theorist Vivian Sobchack's name, in my entry on POSTMODERNISM. Oddly, she is also incorrectly listed as SOB-CHAK in her own bio/biblio entry. But such errors are trifling when we consider the magnitude of the whole effort.

The most conspicuous failing of the first edition was its exclusion of women scholars. It was utterly jarring to find that the thematic entry on 'Women' was by the ubiquitous Nicholls. In this edition, Lisa Tuttle writes not only on 'Women Sf Writers' from Mary Shelley to Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ and Connie Willis, but on 'Feminism' and 'Woman as Portrayed in Science Fiction'. 'The old stereotypes are still around', she notes, 'although women writers more often give them a subversive twist: the Good Wife is married to a lesbian star-pilot, the Spinster Scientist has a rich and satisfying sex life.'

In just such subversive twists, Clute and Nicholls have renovated their pioneering encyclopedia, fetched it into the 1990s, and gifted us with a map not just of futures past but of those many roads which the surprising artistry of the twenty-first century is bound to explore.

## Pinlighters

**Scott Campbell,  
11 Roma Avenue,  
Kensington NSW 2033**

Boy, am I pissed off. I'm appalled at the hatchet job of editing you did on my reviews. I realise that editors need to sometimes change things around a bit, and remove redundancies and tidy up the grammar and so on, but you've gone way too far. You've mangled a lot of what I said, completely rewriting sections in your own way, so that what remains does not even sound like me, and often says something very different to what I originally wrote. Sometimes your rewriting is, embarrassingly for me, more obscure and ungrammatical than what I had written. You've chopped out important chunks, including a lot of the humorous

lines (which you probably felt were not relevant; they were) and kept in parts that I had clearly crossed out. All of this was done without even informing me, and I regard this as way beyond the pale.

Now I know you are going to say that all the reviews you get need work, and you have the responsibility, as editor, of doing this, and I accept this to a degree. I did have some really crummy parts which I was glad to see you dropped or changed. I do have sympathies for editors, especially in Australia where the local writers do seem to be especially sensitive to editorial control. But I draw the line at complete rewrites of what I say by someone who's not very sympathetic to me. Imagine David Stratton trying to rewrite Robin Pen's *Eidolon* column in his own words. Or

Tipper Gore rewriting P. J. O'Rourke. That's what it felt like reading some of your changes.

In addition to the changes in meaning, you've often changed the way I said something, and part of what I say is the way I say it. When this is changed, often the whole point of my saying something is lost. As clumsy and as badly written as some of my paragraphs were, they were intended to be humorously put. When you change the words, the humour goes, and what I'm left with is often just a nasty, sometimes banal comment (which sometimes no longer makes much sense) with no humorous style to protect it. Sometimes the way of putting something, the attitude and humour revealed in the style, is more important than what is said.

Let me give some examples of where your unfortunate editing left me with dumb (or at least dumber) statements that I never wrote.

On page 64 (second column) of *SF Commentary* 71/72 I apparently wrote the bald and somewhat pompous paragraph 'Characters in novels should be interesting people, with plenty of faults, not role models' (which doesn't really square with the sarcastic comments of the previous paragraph). What I actually wrote was:

Being that sort of person may well be admirable (I must apologise for harping on about such characters), but when authors make so much of it, it becomes distracting (especially when the authors think they're presenting subtle character portraits). I don't want role models, I want characters who are interesting. And to achieve this, characters are allowed to have more than just the sort of minor flaws which only make them more lovable. (Nothing wrong with this sort of writing, but it has to be done well, and it's typically done better out of the sf field.)

No one can seriously maintain that Bruce's replacement sentence does justice to what I wrote. If Bruce thought my original paragraph was long-winded, he would have done better to have cut it out altogether. I can't believe such a highly competent and distinguished editor as Bruce (himself an award-winning critic) did this, and didn't even have the courtesy to inform me that he was making such changes. (No, I do not take it as read that editors have the right to distort copy to that degree without notice.)

Another example is on page 64 (first column) where I supposedly say: 'I don't want an essay.' This replaces the original:

I'd be very interested in reading an essay on the topic, but for a novel of this sort to be worth your while, the other elements have to be interesting in themselves.

The characters, the plot, the execution, or anything else that may maintain interest are what will make any such work a good novel, rather than just an essay.

'I don't want an essay' sounds a bit dumb, and is clearly not what I meant. And Bruce put in a paragraph where I do say that I am interested in reading essays of this sort, and this doesn't make sense.

I would also expect, after waiting over 18 months for publication, that the reviews wouldn't have dreadful typos in them that throw the reader.

For example, on pp. 60-1 there should have appeared 'Morrow's main characters seem to be the same as you'd find in any standard American Sterling-sucked cyberwimp book.' You replace 'Sterling-suckled' for 'Sterling-sucked', leaving the reader wondering what the hell is going on in my mind.

On page 63 I say that Sterling's prose has an 'impassive face'. You render this as 'impressive'.

On page 64, 'tat' becomes 'tatty', which means something completely different. I can send you a very long list of similar mistakes if you want.

You even leave off half a sentence. On page 63 I wrote: 'I expected something mind-blowing, something surreal and dangerous; that certain something that ticks off many an older reader.' You left off 'that ticks off many an older reader', leaving a fairly dumb sentence.

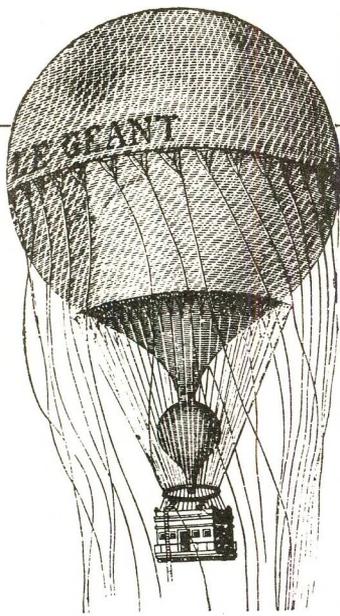
I had enough of this sort of thing as a student magazine writer, but at least the editor and typist often had an excuse; they had little time to proof stuff. When I was later editor, I was always conscious of making time to check stuff before putting it out. I know you're very busy, Bruce, and I've said many times to you what a great job you do putting out this excellent and necessary magazine, but you can't excuse mistakes like that. Send my copy to me, Bruce. I'll gladly proofread my own stuff.

I'm conscious about giving Damien Broderick a bit of an undeserved bagging. I should

qualify what I wrote here, because even though I don't like a lot of his fiction (though I still have much of his work to read; maybe I'll like the rest of his stuff), and I don't like some of his non-fiction, I think some of his other writing is superb, and I feel I like the guy. I think he's just about the most imaginative and intelligent sf writer in Australia, along with Egan and Dowling. He had an excellent review of Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* in *The Australian* recently, which revealed that he has a first-rate understanding of modern philosophy of mind and cognitive science.

I make no other apologies for my nasty comments, even though rereading them in September '92, two years after I wrote them, I see that I've sometimes been harsher than I needed to be. While I, and to a lesser extent other critics, do sometimes call a spade a fucking shovel, it's time Australian sf writers became less touchy about vigorous criticism. Whenever I read some writer or critic replying to criticism in the fan mags, it seems that what really motivates them is not the issues, but the fact that they've been personally hurt by criticism (and this is why most fan mags are not worthy of serious attention, or any attention at all really). This is understandable: no one, not even me, likes criticism, and we all take it personally. But we have to expect it, and take it in our stride. I would hope that any critics of my work doesn't hold back from saying what they think. This doesn't mean I will take any notice of what they say. A writer has no obligation to put store by what any critic says. But if you stick your bare ass out in public, you've got to expect people to mock and throw things at it.

Note to the readers: Even though I'm fucked off at Bruce, he still has my admiration for the job he does putting out *SFC* and *TMR*, and I hope we can continue to see them regularly, even if Bruce obviously doesn't want me to do any more reviews for him. (He keeps saying, 'I'm not sure which books to send you.') I'm



obviously not real keen on writing anything more for Bruce, but I do think he's a good guy. (I'm sure he doesn't treat his other nice reviews like he did nasty old mine.) I suppose I can't really believe that Bruce wasn't as sincere as ever in editing my stuff. We're probably just too different for Bruce to preserve the spirit of my writing when he edits it.

I was bemused about Bruce saying that I seem 'imbued with the spirit of the 1980s', when I've always been regarded as a seventies fan who despised the eighties. (The only good thing about the eighties was that they were more fun, a lot more, than the nineties are.) I hope Bruce isn't supposing that my ironic use of modern slang to mock trendy modern writers and modern fashions in general isn't the way I seriously speak. If I call something 'radical' (meaning 'great'), my tongue is firmly planted in my cheek, even if I say it with a poker face. Or is it my insensitive and disrespectful attitude to issues and beliefs the baby boomers hold dear that leads Bruce to his conclusion.

PS: My records show that I called James Morrow a 'hack' on the first sentence on page 59, not a 'wimp'. Did I change this at the last moment, or is this another of your changes? I don't remember making any such change. I suppose Morrow might be very offended by being called a hack, but a hack is what he is, in my opinion.

(15 September 1992)

This is the answer I wrote to Scott Campbell:

Dear Scott

You must have thought that I had received your letter and retired in high dudgeon. Not so! I simply haven't had time to answer any letters since last June.

Of course I meant to write as soon as I received your letter. My reaction remains the same: you found me out! After all these years of copy-editing/rewriting contributions without anybody objecting (or, as far as I can tell, noticing), suddenly somebody objects strongly. And if I publish your letter, which I will, suddenly my other contributors will begin to wonder: 'I wonder what he did to my stuff.' Pity help us if Colin Steele or Alan Stewart checks too closely my versions of their columns from the most recent issue of *SFC*!

Okay, I realise I did not follow Proper Procedure. But, as I say, I've never needed to for *SF Commentary* or *The Metaphysical Review*. There are some people whose work I do not alter because they write in complete sentences. George Turner is the obvious example. He even *speaks* in complete sentences. (I know this, because I've transcribed his impromptu statements from several convention panels.) Damien Broderick's sentences seemed undisciplined until I tried to improve them; only then did I realise that he writes his essays with considerable skill and forethought.

Proper Procedure would have been to mark all my intended changes on your manuscript, then send it straight back to you. That's standard editorial practice in publishing houses, and I did not follow it. (That's because I never follow it when working for Macmillan; since the books I work on are textbooks, I savage them just as much and as often as I like. Nobody's complained yet.) Sorry. If ever you choose to contribute to my magazines again, I will do this.

As to your letter, I don't agree with

much of it. I don't agree that I've mangled your meaning, because often you have given no idea of your meaning. Your sentences are all over the place. They don't say things clearly. If you were living in the same town, I would say the same thing that I used to say to one of my employers: 'What were you *trying* to say?' Decoding his impossibly prolix sentences, he would tell me what he intended to say. I would write this down as the correct version. Eventually this bloke took the hint and stopped writing gobbledegook.

If I cut out the 'humorous lines', it's probably because I didn't find them humorous. The essence of humour is simplicity and clarity.

I'll reprint your other points, and let readers decide whether or not my version is better than yours. However, I did have to change 'hack'. I once called a writer a 'hack'. In the very first issue of *SF Commentary*. Never again. That's as close as I've come to being sued. The meaning I used was non-pejorative: simply 'an author who writes a great deal for money'. But any *sf* writer takes this word as the worst kind of insult, and I simply won't use it again in my magazines.

Apologies, however, for any typos. In the case of the one you mention first, 'Sterling-sucked/suckled', I suspect that slipped through because I hadn't worked out exactly what you meant by the phrase in the first place.

The real problem with your reviews, apart from the impossibly overloaded sentences (and yes, I admit I commit the same crime from time to time), is that the reader gains no idea of where you are coming from. You use a wide range of emotionally loaded phrases and sentences. You seem to assume that the reader will react in a certain way to these phrases and sentences, but the reader gains little idea of your literary and philosophical stance. I suppose it would help if I had been able to send you any books you *liked*. If I knew what you liked, and why, I would gain some idea of why you don't like the books I've sent you. Until that happens, I see no point in sending any more.

A pity. I really need somebody who can read a lot of review copies and cover them in 1000-2000-word reviews.

We'll have to leave this as a truce. I'll publish your letter; but I can't see any point sending any more books for review until I have some faint idea of what you might find suitable. Meanwhile, I will send you the next issue of my magazine.

(17 February 1993)

**SYDNEY J. BOUNDS,**  
27 Borough Road,  
Kingston on Thames,  
Surrey KT2 6BD,  
England

I'm glad to learn you have some small press sf still going. After the boom of the past few years, sf magazines seem to be going to the wall here. I had assumed this to be the result of (a) the recession; (b) the high prices publishers stick on books; (c) the fact that most people find it easier to watch the small screen. (My library reports a falling off of fiction readers during the past year, and these are free books.)

However, *SFC* blows the gaff. Now I know the truth behind the slump. The University of Tasmania pays Scott Campbell to discourage reading, no doubt planning to take over a totally illiterate world. Tasmania rules, okay?

The interviews are mildly interesting; but your article on Carroll was the star item this issue. One of your best pieces of writing. But sell it? I have a feeling you've left it too late; reading, and books, are going down the drain.

What I find baffling is that with fewer readers, more people want to write. The school is finally going ahead with the crime course; I've just read the proof and now hope to get paid.

I've just read Pratchett's *Guards! Guards!* and he gets better. I see you like Martha Grimes too; I've read most of her books and am tickled that an American can beat most English whodunit writers at their own game.

No mention of the cats? I trust they're keeping you both in order.

(31 May 1992)

I've saved up cat news for the next *TMR* but some has slipped into this issue of *SFC* (p. 16). Neither you nor Sally Yeoland would forgive me if I left out the annual catalogue.

People in Australia seem to be still reading, although we can detect little evidence of this among our teenage friends. Lawrence Smith, remembered by some as a staff member many years ago at Space Age Books, has been having great success running Smith's Books, a secondhand book shop in Smith Street, Collingwood. Bookshops

of new and used books seem to be opening all the time, and few (that I know of) closing.

Scott Campbell, who moves often, and is no longer at the University of Tasmania (I presume), was the star reviewer of *SFC* 71/72. Damien Broderick liked his style, and others, while not liking what he said, thought him worth responding to:

**LUCY SUSSEX,**  
430 Dryburgh Street,  
North Melbourne Vic. 3051

I don't particularly wish to respond to Scott Campbell's 'No More Mr Nice Guy'. Reviewing is a thankless task, and one of the more unenviable aspects of it is sniping letters from parties who don't agree with the review. As a reviewer, I find this mildly irritating, and react by muttering the c-word (curmudgeon) a bit.

That said, the review of Rosaleen Love's *The Total Devotion Machine* did make me want to write a few words in the book's defence.

Firstly, perceiving Love's fiction as representative of the past decade, which is described as full of 'caring-sharing, concerned-about-everything types who made the 1980s so balls-achingly redundant' (gee, I must have been moving in the wrong circles for ten years, as I don't remember encountering anyone who fitted that description) is overly reductive. Love was born in 1940, but unlike many writers of that generation, she does not adhere tediously to the values of the 1960s. Instead I perceive her as articulating a range of social issues from the past thirty or so years but primarily the debate about feminism — to borrow a phrase from the 1880s, the 'new Woman' — which began in the early 1970s and continued to the present.

Other themes get a look in, namely ecology and science, which I don't see as presented overly in terms of its potential for harm, as is implied in 'No More Mr Nice Guy'. Is the Total Devotion machine, that cunning baby-minder, harmful? Not unless you believe in the divine right of paterfamilias to leave somebody else clutching the baby. However, I will admit that the (possibly) harmful

effects of male scientific vanity are satirised most wickedly in stories such as 'Tamani Drift', with its theme of male pregnancy. 'We did it because it was there!' cries Love's researcher, although to me the most delectably evil aspect of this story is what he has done with 'Mrs Schiller and the Balinese shrieking tree-frog'. We never know exactly — and therein lies the joy of it.

Incidentally, this particular tale was reprinted in Spinifex Press's *Angels of Power*, an anthology of responses to reproductive technology. When *Angels of Power* was reviewed both from a pro-and anti-IVF standpoint in *Australian Women's Book Review*, 'Tamani Drift' found favour in both camps — a tribute, perhaps, to the evenhandedness of the story.

Which leads me to another point, about Love as satirist, of the feminist ilk. Here is another thankless task, where the writer ends up in a no-win situation. If she goes for the bearded throat, the response is gruff cries of 'shrill' and 'strident' — two words which immediately identify the reviewer as a fuddy-daddy. But eschewing the bludgeon approach in favour of the claw in a furry mitt, as I think Love does exceedingly well, can lead to accusations of being 'lily-livered' and 'timid'. At least the buzz word 'delicate' doesn't recur.

Maybe it depends on your particular palate. If Love is being described as fare for 'caring-sharing etc.', say a bowl of brown rice and tofu, then I detect amongst that food hot peppers, onions, garlic, and plenty of spice. Others might not, and that is, I think, a pity. I rather enjoyed the stories, particularly 'The Total Devotion Machine'. And I adored 'Batmania'. Later stories, such as 'Evolution Annie', the title story from Love's forthcoming collection, her second from the Women's Press, are even better.

To another matter entirely. I don't intend to defend Van Ikin's anthology *Glass Reptile Breakout*, for the simple reason that I haven't got around to reading it. Most of the stories I know already, that's one

reason, and the other is that I have philosophical differences with arranging an anthology by alphabetical order of surname. Having sweated a good deal over pacing *My Lady Tongue* and the nineteenth-century crime collection (currently the subject of screaming arguments with a publisher who shall be nameless), I do think books of short fiction benefit from having the stories arranged in a fashion so that they complement each other, and the overall design. Anthology editing considered as a helix of semi-precious stones! Actually, it is rather like stringing a necklace.

The for-school aspect of the anthology was noticed early on by one contributor, who thus felt obliged to omit details of her political activism in the bios. Teenage fiction being the sort of minefield it is, with shock-horror reactions to a few bad words used by Gillian Rubinstein, I suppose the thought of parents' committees and teacher librarians influenced the selection somewhat, with nothing too dangerous/depressing included, like George Turner's 'The Fittest' or Pip Maddern's 'Inhabiting the Interspaces'. I didn't notice much feminism in the anthology, either. And while I haven't investigated the matter closely, I would bet there aren't many swear words.

Re the WA Ink, one-third written in WA aspect of *GRB*. I haven't checked, but this may have been a precondition of publishing with the UWA Centre for Studies in Australian Literature. I am informed, though, that the cover does relate to WA parochialism in a jokey fashion. For those who haven't seen the book, it shows a pair of bright red legs in a desert landscape, with atop the legs a slightly distorted silhouette of Australia. As the legs are facing west, this means that the figure appears to have an erection in the area of North West Cape, while its bum is the eastern states. Melbourne would be thus at anus position. Tasmania is invisible between the legs of the figure, which would make it a bollock. Does it ache, I wonder?

All that apart, it was this

anthology that was read by a WA radio producer, who thus encountered 'Lipton Village Society', in its third printing, almost ten years after I wrote the damn thing. As a result the story will be aired on ABC's 'Fictions' program late in 1992, for the which, many thanks to Van Ikin.

(9 June 1992)

**GEORGE TURNER,  
Flat 4, 296 Inkerman Street,  
East St Kilda Vic. 3183**

Re your comments on *Brain Child* in *SFC* 71/72: Let me set the record straight as to how much influence you exerted on the final text of the book, and also on its successor *The Destiny Makers* (then called *The Falling Axe*). Perhaps more than you imagine.

I recall that you complained of the first chapter of *Brain Child* that it left you a little uncertain of precisely what was going on, so I added 500-600 words of clarification to pin down the intention of Arthur Hazard towards his son David. Then, as you point out, I did a little cutting at the end to bring about the sharper conclusion you considered necessary — as I did also on thinking it over.

For the next book, *The Destiny Makers*, you had three criticisms, one of which concerned my original title (I forget now what it was) and I settled for a quote you had indicated somewhere in the text. Alas, the Avon editor didn't like that either. Hence *The Destiny Makers*.

More to the point, you objected to a chapter in the middle of the book, dealing with newscasts and trivid interviews, as breaking the tension of the rapid-action story. This bothered me because some essential information was buried there, but in the end I dropped the chapter altogether and found means of inserting the information painlessly in other places. Again you felt that the long post-climactic section at the end let down the tension too flabbily. As I recall, I dropped about 1000 words to bring up the conclusion more rapidly.

So you will see that I agreed

with your stricture on all occasions (after a certain amount of carpet-chewing). Both sets of advice dealt with technical aspects of presentation, the kind of information you do not get from reviewers or from the casual reader who knows something is wrong but can't quite put his finger on it, whereas you have had enough editorial experience to be conscious of what bothers you. Non-writers probably think that the publisher's editor will give this sort of critical helping hand, but it just ain't so in an industry where there are enough good mss to hand without wasting time on the imperfect ones, particularly where extensive rewrites are concerned.

This kind of disinterested assistance is invaluable to the writer who is prepared to take the advice he asks for rather than defend his precious prose to the death (and also prepared not to take it when he feels he shouldn't).

All sorts of people, notably John Foyster and Yvonne Rousseau, have picked up faults and weaknesses in earlier work and rescued it for me before it was submitted to the publisher. I try to acknowledge them as each book comes out, but the list grows and grows.

The writer, with his vision firmly fixed on his personal Grail, rarely observes all that he has done or failed to do (if he did, critics would starve), and is too often unable to see that in creating a particular effect he has unwittingly introduced, as well, some less desirable element, and one of his most valuable assets is the availability of someone with the perception and knowledge to give him or her the special technical criticism that can make or break the book. Every writer needs a rider in the chariot to whisper, 'Remember, thou too art mortal.'

(20 May 1992)

George's letter forms a kind of addendum to his article in this issue 'The Receiving End of Criticism', especially as here he covers much of the material that he talked about at the November 1992 Nova Mob but deleted in the published form.

I'm glad to be of help, George. Among other benefits to me, the best is always reading one novel ahead of the rest of the world. The next one (due in February 1994) is great, although I did tell George that it begins a bit too slowly. I'll be interested to see how much he has cut the first 100 manuscript pages.

**MICHAEL HAILSTONE,**  
14 Bolden Street,  
Heidelberg Vic. 3084

In *SFC* 71/72 you say: 'Until *Aurealis* . . . and *Eidolon* . . . made it, no Australian sf magazine had reached six issues since *Vision of Tomorrow* more than twenty years ago.' What are you talking about? My *Crux* ran for six issues (see article in a recent issue of *Aurealis*); and what about *Void* and *The Cygnus Chronicler*? Or don't they fit your definition of 'Australian sf magazine'? What about *Futuristic Tales*? Please get your facts straight.

(7 July 1992)

In reply to Michael, I threw up my hands in the air and claimed well-meant ignorance. Until we get *The Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction* there will be no way to look up such matters. My copies of these magazines are deeply buried in boxes or on shelves somewhere in the house. There is nowhere I could find out the circulations of the respective magazines. My hazy memory told me that all the magazines mentioned by Michael gave up at about the fifth or sixth issues. *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* are still romping on, although both are dropping an issue in 1993.

Since sending off my last curt note to you I have taken the trouble to check up on my own facts, and I see that both *Void* and *Futuristic Tales*, rather to my surprise, each ran for only five issues. But the fact remains that my own magazine *Crux* ran for six issues.

That aside, I was moved to write to you again on *SFC* 71/72 by your introductory comment to 'No More Mr Nice Guy': that Scott Campbell 'seems imbued with the spirit of the 1980s'. Feeling as I have done about that reactionary backsliding decade, I felt more than usually drawn to read on, to see what Campbell had to

say that would earn my anger or contempt or whatever.

Your passing comment was a good drawcard, but it brought about false expectations, for I found myself agreeing with most of his remarks on that decade. Indeed, it brings me to wonder just what the spirit of the eighties really was. Evidently my perception thereof is rather different from yours, and that surprises me, because I thought that you and I shared pretty common feelings here. I mean, we both mourn the passing of the sixties and rue the world's determination in the eighties to sink back into thorough boredom and dreariness, not to name the reassertion of naked unbridled capitalism. We agree about the despicable policies of Hawke and Keating, but it is clear that we are quite different in some other aspects. I'm not at all sure just where you and I part company, as I don't know enough about (though maybe I should from reading your autobiographical articles; let's just say that there is a side to you that's not very clear to me).

My only real disagreement with Campbell is on what he has not said rather than anything he actually said. Apart from a passing reference to 'the thoughtless yuppies' he sees nothing about what I feel the eighties were really about, the aforesaid reassertion of naked capitalist values. Yuppies were and are very much part of this, but I wouldn't call them thoughtless. I believe they knew damned well what they were doing, so this suggests that Campbell is indeed imbued with the spirit of the eighties, insofar as his silence on their values implies consent. But that's not much to go on, since he's writing book reviews, not a social commentary.

I'm wondering whether you object to his comments about 'caring-sharing concerned-about-everything types who made the 1980s so balls-achingly tedious'. Quite frankly, I can't help cheering him on about that in spite of my own concern about what's happening to life on Earth and social justice. I do disagree with his remark that it was

fashionable to be nonjudgmental in the eighties, but even there he probably has a point, insofar as it was in the spirit of the decade to be nonjudgmental about the wrong things. We'll come back to this.

Let's get back to Philip K. Dick and *Valis*. Indeed I feel that Dick was lucky to be spared having to live through the eighties and on into the nineties, into a world where social justice and decent values are vanishing as we watch, a world that is becoming so incredibly evil by the standards of the sixties and seventies. While it's all very well to bemoan this evil trend, it's also important to try to understand why this is happening.

You and I have exchanged thoughts on *Valis* before, and clearly you still don't understand it, and here we differ greatly, since the book made a longlasting impression on me. I guess it appeals to my mystical side; for the last decade of his life I see Dick as more than just a mere science fiction writer. I feel he was really onto something. No doubt the dreary linear leftbrained twits will sneer at what I'm about to say, refusing to allow any link between some sf books and films with the real (mundane) world, but bugger it, I will throw caution to the winds and say it anyway.

If you find *Valis* hard to understand, the same message is to be found in the more accessible *Radio Free Albemuth*. Both books are highly autobiographical, although the stories are different. Dick writes himself unashamedly into both without trying even thinly to disguise himself under another name. In *Valis* he's Horselover Fat, but this is later revealed as just a translation of Philip Dick, and the two are really the same person. At the back of the book is an exegesis written by Horselover, and the sixth paragraph says simply: 'The Empire never ended.' He's referring to the Roman Empire, which is still there behind the façade of our reality. And this Empire is evil.

We get the impression of the Roman civilisation as pretty barbaric and cruel, but a

couple of friends of mine (who've probably never heard of Philip Dick) have pointed out to me that this picture is false, and we can thank Hollywood largely for this portrayal. I won't go into Hollywood's motives for so doing, but just say that this caused me quite a bit of confusion. But then just last week I resolved this apparent contradiction. You see, for probably hundreds of years Rome was a republic (the world comes from the Latin *res publica*, the people's thing) and so was a fairly wholesome civilisation like ancient Greece. But then just before the birth of Christ, beginning with Julius Caesar, it became an empire: that is, it was taken over by evil forces that took the power away from the people. We are still oppressed by that same evil empire to this day.

When *Star Wars* came out, I was conceited enough to dismiss it as lowbrow space opera, believing that I was into higher things like True Science Fiction. It is easy to see it on that level, and I don't claim to know what was going on in George Lucas's mind when he wrote the saga, but I've come to see some pretty amazing allegories therein. Maybe Lucas meant it as a kind of allegory of ancient Rome. Last Saturday evening I watched *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* on television, and it's a funny thing that every time I see the first film the early part seems different. This time for the first time I heard a reference to 'the old republic'. Presumably this means that the galaxy was basically okay under the republic but became shithouse when the Empire took over.

What has all this to do with our real mundane world? Well, in 1979 the second film of the saga, *The Empire Strikes Back*, was made, and in that same year the Empire struck back in our real world, and it has been striking back with a vengeance ever since. Who could have really believed in 1978 that we'd find ourselves in the nightmare we now suffer in 1992? The eighties began in 1979. (See my editorial in *Crux* 3, Autumn 1980, for my reaction at the time.)

Often I've wished that our

world had its equivalent of Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Han Solo and the rebel forces. Far from that, instead I find only betrayal by my own kind. How I'd love to be able to fight the Empire in some way. But our real world is not like Lucas's fantasy; it's just not that easy. Dick knew this. Paragraph No. 42 of Horseslover Fat's exegesis states:

To fight the Empire is to be infected by its derangement. This is a paradox; whoever defeats a segment of the Empire becomes the Empire; it proliferates like a virus, imposing its form on its enemies. Thereby it becomes its enemies.

This is not as startlingly new as most may think; Dick was merely saying what Herbert Marcuse had written back in the sixties, but who remembers Marcuse today?

History bears out the truth of Paragraph No. 42. The most blatant example thereof in all time must surely be the Christian Church, which was co-opted by the Empire to serve its own ends after 300 years of persecution. In our own time the same has happened with the Green movement, and I'm truly astounded that Campbell fails to see this. I refer to his statement that 'many people (except the greenies) are too scared to do or say anything these days for fear of being "ideologically unsound"'. As a former greenie myself, I can tell you that what largely drove me away from that milieu was that very fear. There one is not allowed to question such articles of faith as the Greenhouse Effect, or, worse, one is expected to believe a whole pile of pseudoscientific garbage about Australia being 'under the hole in the ozone layer', and maybe even worse than that, even without the dreaded ozone hole, that sunlight is harmful and Will Give You Skin Cancer. In other words, one is expected to believe all kinds of harmful negative bullshit. What better way to serve the Empire?

Like Campbell I too despise the wimpy little 'New Age liberals', especially Richard

Neville. Did you see that bastard talking to Clive Robertson on television a year or two ago? He damned the sixties, which made him, for godsake, with faint praise by saying that the present environmental movement probably owed something to the sixties movement. God help us! The Green movement, as it has become today, is a gross insult to those of who stood against the Empire back in the sixties. And what better example of No. 42 than the former campaigner against censorship becoming the new censor?

And all this caring-sharing garbage. What hypocrisy. What a lot of despicable wimps they are. Oh no, they're not judgmental about the real evildoers of the world, the international banks and financiers, the militant Moslems, Asian work practices ('You've got to understand them, you know'), but they're as judgmental as hell about their own comrades, their fellows. It seems that the future of the world hinges on the question of who cleans the bathroom or washes the dishes properly. With all their sugary guff about caring and sharing, they are quite lacking in true humanity.

Worse, the trendy left liberals refuse to believe that the Empire exists. They even expunge the word 'evil' from their vocabulary. They get utterly hysterical about anything faintly smacking of the right wing, so they stay hopelessly trapped in their ideological blinkers. Since the Empire discredits anybody aware of it with the label of 'rightwing extremist', the trendy left is very much part of the Empire and tamely doing its bidding. It's gotten so that the very term 'right wing' means nothing to me any more. One ABC journalist has woken up to this and has tried to resolve the confusion by dividing the 'right wing' up into three segments, all bitterly against each other, oddly enough.

And I'm afraid, Bruce, quite frankly, I suspect that you are trapped in this same ideological rut. I remember that article I sent you some years ago by Tom Stacey published in the

British *Daily Telegraph*, which I reprinted in *The Matalan Rave* No. 9. I sent it to you because I thought Stacey made some rarely insightful points about what was wrong with American (and western) society in the late sixties. I naïvely imagined that it would interest you, yet you just dismissed it as 'rightwing rubbish'. Either I'm politically very naïve, or you are truly blinkered and brainwashed. I wonder where the truth lies.

(27 July 1992)

Whew! Where do I start? With some definitions, surely, since I can't find any clear terms in any of the above.

Someone said that there is only one question worth asking about any politics or economics: 'Who benefits?' To me 'right wing' applies to those political or economic activities that tend to accumulate wealth in the hands of a small number of countries or small groups of people within particular countries. To me, such accumulation is illegitimate, although in fact the laws and economic systems of the grabbing countries or groups will institutionalise the results of that grabbing. Hence, 'Capitalism is theft', as somebody famous once said. It must be, since the wealth of any country or of the whole world is created by the workers of the world, not the grabbers. In fact, 'successful' is a term that seems to have always been applied to those people freed from the necessity of creating wealth, i.e. the leisured wealthy. The Empire, if you like.

The institutions set up, however, sometimes seem to work independently of the forces that set them up. Also, there are always individuals and groups within the ruling classes who have a wider view of society — who see, for instance, that if you impoverish the people who do the work and create the wealth, eventually there will be nobody to buy the goods that are created by the system. Which I take to be the lesson learned during the 1930s Depression and World War II. There was a tendency during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in Western countries back to some sort of equalisation of wealth. This culminated in Australia not in the 1960s but in the years 1972–1975, the 'Whitlam years' that are now denigrated by 'right' and 'left' alike. These years really threatened the Empire in Australia because the enormous wage rises and the government's attempt to redistribute real wealth posed an obvious threat to the 10 per cent of the population who are much wealthier than the other 90 per cent. Vengeful,

the right wing entered into a period of systematic depoliticisation and impoverishment of the middle classes that threatened them during that short period in the early 1970s. 'Level playing field' politics and the verging of both major parties towards the extreme right wing are merely the outward signs of forces that praise nearby Asian states and wish only to reduce most of Australia's people to the living standard of sweated coolies.

Worse, the ruling classes sold the country (about 90 per cent of Australian companies) to the ruling elites of other countries.

That's the political and economic background to the difference between the sixties and the nineties in Australia. But what deductions can one draw about 'sixties values' from those facts? Since you don't tell me what you mean by 'sixties values', Michael, I'll have a go.

For a start, the so-called 1960s did not happen in Australia until the early 1970s. For any equivalent of San Francisco 1968, move to Melbourne and Sydney in 1972, or possibly even as late as 1975.

'Sixties values' came out of the struggle to extricate Australia from its connection with the Vietnam War. The strategies used during that struggle were our political education. More importantly, those strategies were applied to a wide range of industrial, social and political causes. In my case, I learned much from the 1970 and 1971 teachers' industrial campaigns, campaigns that really paid off, in terms of improved salaries and conditions, during the months after I left the Education Department in 1973.

'Sixties values' then, come out of organised group activities that can force concessions from the ruling classes, concessions that would never be made in a stable conservative era.

Those values were those of the people who formed the groups: usually young people from the same middle to upper middle classes that had traditionally ruled the country. Daddy and Mummy still ruled the country; their children revolted.

Very little of this 'sixties activity' touched the lives of people struggling to survive. For a few years, working class wages and conditions improved, until the Fraser, Hawke and Keating Governments put the lower and lower middle classes right back at the bottom of the heap.

'Sixties values' are mainly remembered in terms of consumer items: popular music, drugs, clothes, books and movies. What is forgotten is a real, though transitory, feeling that people

might help each other in equality to attain desirable ends. This 'caring-sharing' feeling is the centre of everything that was good about the 1960s, which is why I find it puzzling that you, Michael, should denigrate it.

What remains of the sixties movement? Very little in the labour movement. When the Empire struck back, the workers' movements collapsed. Very little among upper middle class young people. Their mission is to hang on to what was grabbed by their parents, or try to be among the only people still employed.

The only place I can see any remnant of it is in the Green movement. There you still find organised activity on behalf of campaigns that affect us all equally. Since the early 1970s, when it became apparent that the planet itself is likely to go down the gurgler, the Green movement set out to try to stop the seemingly inevitable.

I'm a very inactive supporter of the Green movement, and still can't see what you, Michael, have against it. You seem to want to call 'pseudoscientific' facts that are in black and white in *New Scientist* every week. Industrial society has created waste products that now threaten the life systems of the whole planet. The hole in the ozone layer is there every summer. (Not that I need much persuading to stay out of the sun. Considering my attitudes and lifestyle, it would be very bad luck if I contracted skin cancer.) These industrial products were created equally by Western and Communist countries. Until recently, they were not created by countries that we regard as poverty-stricken. How exactly does one persuade whole nations to change their entire way of producing wealth? Greenpeace and many other organisations feel that they have a much better chance of succeeding by attacking issues one after the other. This gives the impression of piecemeal reform, but I take it that the strategy is sound: undermine the enemy without waking it too much.

As for 'caring-sharing' . . . well, we now have the examples of the Victorian and Tasmanian conservative governments showing us the meaning of the opposite values. The whole purpose of good government is, apart from equalising wealth, to provide an efficient, overall means of compensating for all those fixable weaknesses in society. Kennett has decreed that the rich will no longer help the weak and poor through the medium of government. Instead the 'private sector' (the rich) will be given the right to rip us all off. No more caring and sharing. Anybody who helps anybody else will get his or her hands cut off. That's the eighties

viewpoint, now translated into official action in the nineties. The Green movement is probably the only group of people sufficiently subversive to find a way to bring down these thrones. Or maybe not.

Sixties values in the nineties? Maybe I was never a sixties person. I rarely join groups. I want to be neither anyone's master or servant. I never smoked dope or took drugs. I never wore hippie gear. I'm not even much of a caring-sharing person, except in the vaguest way. To me, the 1960s were the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Procol Harum and the rest. I had my transistor radio at my ear while I studied for a safe career.

But when I see eighties and nineties values let loose in the endless rain of bullshit that pours down on us from Canberra and Spring Street, when I see what it is like to be ruled by drunken brain-dead sixteen-year-old-larrikins-going-on-forty-five from the leafy suburbs from Melbourne, I'd welcome back any manifestation of sixties values. Anybody's 'sixties values'. Although I still don't know what *you* mean by the term, Michael.

**DIRK STRASSER,**  
***Aurealis* magazine,**  
**PO Box 538,**  
**Mount Waverley Vic. 3149**

*Aurealis's* payment rate has always been \$20 per 1000 words. This is given on our copyright page and on our guidelines that we send to potential contributors.

We don't have any real backlog of stories, and we rarely take more than two months to respond to submissions, although we are averaging about 500 submissions a year.

Clearly I disagree with your statement about the quality of the *Aurealis* stories in the first five issues. Most of the stories accepted for *Aurealis* end up being read by four editors, and go through an exhaustive selection procedure. We don't always agree on everything, but Stephen and I stand by our final decisions.

We don't solicit stories; all manuscripts are treated exactly the same way. You obviously don't see this as a virtue; we do. Anyway, thanks for giving the magazine such prominence in your editorial.

(28 May 1992)

Apologies for not following up my remarks by reviewing now the most recent issues of *Aurealis* and *Eidolon*. Your tastes didn't seem to coincide with mine at all, but suddenly No. 6 seemed a great improvement. I'll catch up on my magazine reading Real Soon Now.

**PAUL VOERMANS,**  
**11 Leinster Grove,**  
**Brunswick East Vic. 3057**

It's wonderful to be back in Australia! I snaffled my first copy of *SFC* for five years and read about the changes in Australian sf with interest. Although I did have some contact with fandom in Old Blighty (the very charming Bristol sf group, for example), I never did find a decent channel for news from home. I suppose I ought to have written directly to you. The trouble is that my experience of reading *SFC* has been one of wanting to respond at length to, say, some review by George Turner, then getting embroiled in several thousand argumentative words, eventually sending it the way of all the prose I wrote in the early eighties, into the fat file marked 'Unfinished Stuff'. Now I've given up both the theatre and unnecessary trivialities like full-time employment I find myself able to give writing a proper perspective. Better to write a trivial, gossipy *something* to you than a profound not-at-all.

Perhaps it's just that I have begun to write again myself that gives me a sunny perspective on whatever writing I look at, but Australian sf writing seems to have made some collective decision on the profound not-at-all as well. It seemed we used to follow the Gore Vidal idea — someone was going around secretly handing out prizes for people *not* to take up writing on the principle that there were too many writers around already. In our case the prize was a satisfaction about not having succumbed to the temptation to write what might actually find publication. This, to an extent, I blame on sf writing workshops.

What I find upon my return after a fair old absence is a scene so healthy it takes me aback. And if what you said

about the two magazines is true, and the writers are improving, then it's because criticism of the quality of the short stories in *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* is not as important as the fact that the writers whose works appear in the two magazines have been encouraged to continue; it's because they are *not* a writing workshop. We need advice from one or two consistent sources rather than a welter of democratic comment from our helpful peers. Yay team! I shall contribute to both magazines if I can, and buy them as well.

This month [May 1992] my first novel comes out in Australia. What a frightening prospect. Yet already I find the reception here has been one of encouragement without concern as to the quality of the piece. Ah, what a friendly country. Of course the novel needs an honest response if I am to improve as a writer. This it will naturally get. What used to prevail here, though, was a scorn for anything not transcendent of careers; it was a perfect environment for noble dabblers. This is not to say that the writers emerging now are not serious about their craft. It's just that, removed from the seventies into a world where no world-shattering science fiction is being produced, we are able to floodle along making happy objects for fellow readers to enjoy. Paradoxically, this is the very way to produce world-shatterers. As sf readers, we like to second-guess the process. Where will the next Dick come from? It's hardly worth bothering about, and is actually detrimental to the next Dick, whoever she may be. Yahweh save us from heaped vituperation or praise! What we want is sales without all the tosh. One reason we have so many fat, foolish tomes called *Book XXII of the Shite Quest*, or whatever, is that some poor blighter will write some promising bit of fluff and will then be encouraged to wallow in the footsteps of the giants of the field. Not only have many of the giants vastly overestimated statures but when we look at the books that really are wonderful it can stunt us in a matter of seconds. The

backlash to this kind of stunting is an underestimation of your audience. Thus *Shite Quest*. It's that or silence.

Australia seems (at the moment) a place where there is room for several flooders. From what I've seen so far there's a nice line in criticism careful to avoid hyperbole. And there are writers — writing. How good it is to be home.

(27 May 1992)

Good to have you back, Paul. Before you left, we hardly saw you. Your whole life was devoted to the theatre, and you seemed to have forgotten writing altogether. You were too much trouble to get to know, and we didn't take the trouble. Come your return, and you are a writer, and suddenly very easy to get to know. And we got to meet Fiona as well. And enjoyed the (now) two novels.

Thanks for saying what I really was trying to say about *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* in the editorial for *SFC* 71/72. I really have no excuse for not saying it more clearly. The fact that the two magazines are there, and seem stable, and are actually reading stories and publishing them, changes the writing environment completely from the fond old days of the great writers' workshops. I just hope that plenty of the successful writers from the new Australian markets make the jump to the overseas sf markets.

**BUCK COULSON,  
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Hartford City IN 47348  
USA**

I'm surprised Arthur W. Upfield didn't spark a crime-writing industry in Australia. With 33 books published (34, now that four of his articles have been put into a small-press hardcover in this country) he was successful enough. I'd still like to get a copy of his biography, if any of your readers have access to cheap secondhand books.

Anyway, you can forget academics and literary persons as necessary to any fiction industry; either the general public buys the books or there is no industry. Academics are only necessary to academic book publishing; they're mostly parasites on the popular fields.

That ought to spark some dialogue in such an academic-conscious field as

Australian science fiction. Of course, in this era of high-priced books, Australia may not have enough population to support a popular book industry.

Your last sentence is correct. It is estimated that only about 10 Australian authors support themselves entirely from writing. The others, even quite successful authors, support themselves through running writing courses, stints as author-in-residence at universities or colleges, prizes, or (of course) by working nine-to-five jobs. Many of these extra forms of income depend on having a certain academic visibility. Science fiction is still on the nose, while crime writing has suddenly become academically respectable. Hence crime writers can be treated like 'real' writers and gain some of those extra benefits that enable them to survive.

A few writers do sell enough copies of their books within Australia to be considered successful. But even those authors depend very much on reviews and radio and television coverage to sell copies — in other words, they depend on being a 'name' — the sort of author one would like to have on one's shelf as well as by the bedside. Dreaded respectability again.

Speaking of outdated futures, as Walt Willis does in *SFC* 71/72, I was recently looking through some old *Planet Stories* from 1940 and ran across one set in the far-future world of 1963, which is a bit startling to read in 1992. (World War II was still going on and the Axis was winning.) That's one reason why science fiction stories no longer mention specific dates; it hampers reprints.

I'm not likely to ever write an autobiography, but if I did I wouldn't have to 'ignore the pain' of my life. Sure, I've got two diseases that might kill me off any day, separately or in combination — diabetes and a bad heart, or to be specific, two-thirds of a bad heart. And I haven't been a financial success in any field; I expect Juanita and I rate as 'poor' these days. But I've had a hell of a lot of fun out of life, and expect to continue having it, I have a fine wife and scores of fine friends and expect to continue having them and

continue to increase the number of the friends, and I've done more of what I wanted to do than the average person ever manages. So far the physical pain has been moderate and the mental pain almost non-existent. I'm sorry Aldiss has it, but I don't think he's typical of humanity. Possibly he's typical of successful writers, though; I wouldn't know. Or of the 'Type A' personality, if that classification is still popular.

(2 June 1992)

It all depends on whether you find that there are times in one's life that one cannot write about. I take it that that was Aldiss's point. There are bits of my childhood to which I could only do justice by writing a sort of Robert Cormier horror story, but above which I would probably glide if I tried an autobiography. And I've had a very sheltered life, as I find out when I hear other people's life stories. Things started to come good when I was teenager, and really began to move about the time when I began my continuous moving autobiography: 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' in *SF Commentary* and, later, *The Metaphysical Review*.

**PATRICK MCGUIRE,  
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I am still not entirely pleased with *SFC*'s emphasis on short reviews, but I gather that stems in part from the simple fact that nobody is writing you long articles, and anyhow, many of the reviews you are running do squeeze in some general considerations. For that matter, thanks to the small but readable type that the new technology provides they are longer than it first appears to one who spent early adulthood reading typewritten fanzines.

One suggestion: When you have several reviewers treating of the same book, or even different books by the same author, would it perhaps make sense to group such reviews together instead of splitting them up by reviewer? That or provide cross-references, or a lot more information on the table of contents than now appears there. When writing this, I can't even readily determine how many books

were in fact reviewed by more than one person.

You of all people, Patrick, should remember that during the great days of *SFC I* indexed every issue. Somehow a few years of intermittent professional indexing has taken the joy out of the exercise. But, if I feel energetic when I've typed this issue, 'The *SFC Index*' might yet return.

I do think that crime/mystery fiction is inherently a bigger market than sf, because it appeals to more frequently encountered personality types, so that it might not be safe to extrapolate from the recent Australian success of crime fiction to sf. Also, I am given to understand that crime fiction is now in a general boom period. Mystery writers are even using phrases like 'Second Golden Age'. A change in the Australian situation might have to do with this as well as with purely domestic events.

Damien Broderick seems to be misinterpreting, or maybe just imprecisely stating in his review, certain aspects of *A Canticle for Leibowitz* that are important to its understanding. There exists a hopelessly broad usage in which any non-Christian is a 'pagan', but since there are plenty of real pagans (polytheists/animists), such as Mad Bear, kicking around in *Canticle*, it would be more useful to recognise that the 'pagan' Texarkan scholar mentioned in the review (and who is named Than Thaddeo, if memory serves) is a secularist. The book's argument is that secular knowledge is not merely neutral but good, but that, like anything else in this world, it can be misused, and that for its safe use, growth in moral wisdom must parallel growth in knowledge. Than Thaddeo, in his desire to divorce secular learning from wisdom (as symbolised by his wish to transfer the monastery archives to a secular university) makes one of the first steps down the wrong path, in the novel's argument.

*Canticle* does suggest that the Catholic Church has a major role to play in promoting the growth of moral wisdom, but I think this can be interpreted symbolically

without a great loss of literary force — how else to explain the book's popularity among non-Catholics? It is irrelevant to this more generalised interpretation that someone is a 'disbeliever in Original Sin', provided that the disbeliever is willing to recognise — as who since the French Revolution is not? — that progress is not smoothly upward and that people often act in contradiction to their own ideals. In fact, there is a little speech near the end of good old secular-humanist Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* making almost exactly the same point as in a Miller passage Broderick cites: that, in the absence of a larger vision, a policy of minimising suffering and maximising security has brought society on Earth to disaster.

Miller, who had fought in World War II, also provides a bit of comfort that, whatever horrors eventuate, God ultimately will neither abandon individual human beings nor let humanity totally screw up *everything*. This aspect of the book can meaningfully be broadened quite a bit beyond a strictly Roman Catholic interpretation, but admittedly it probably would not make sense to a thoroughgoing secularist (not that a 'disbeliever in Original sin' is necessarily a secularist). *Eternity's* proposed larger goal is letting people do what they want, unmanipulated (which, we are told, will lead to the exploration of space and colonisation of other planets). *Canticle's* larger goal is harmony with God (which is possible only if people freely want it, unmanipulated, and which will, the novel maintains, lead to exploration and colonisation). *Canticle's* and *Eternity's* 'larger visions' are not entirely in contradiction, but to the extent that they do differ, I myself find that *Canticle's* is the more satisfying.

I greatly enjoyed Dave Langford's reviews. He mentions that somehow the 'myth' of Saberhagen's berserkers is better than any of the stories about them. This seems to be a more general phenomenon — somehow the

idea of Sherlock Holmes is better than all except two or three of the Holmes stories, for instance. H. G. Wells often packaged his science fiction as social fables — he probably sincerely wanted to provide such instruction, and in any case including a social moral helped market his works to a broad public with no special interest in sf. It is clear, however, that some proportion of his readers simply ignored the fable and grooved on the basic idea — time travel, invasion from another planet, or whatever. Orson Scott Card somewhere remarks that a story on paper is merely the medium by which a writer tries to get a reader to tell a story to himself, and the latter may not be all that close to the former.

Langford says that Card's 'The Originist' 'could well be the best Foundation/Empire story ever written' (page 48), although he thinks most of the stories in *Foundation's Friends* are merely routine. Myself, I thought almost all the stories were far above average for a shared-universe book, and I even have a theory to explain this. Most of the authors had grown up reading Asimov; they had assimilated the Golden Age Asimov stories at an impressionable age, and much more thoroughly than people commonly do those stories that they encounter only as adults. They can therefore work with such material as their own, in a way that is very difficult to parallel when people first encounter the to-be-shared universe well into adulthood.

Dave also mentions Jack Vance's whimsical names for characters. I here introduce my own candidate for a name for a Vance character: Mittelscharfer Senf. It's simply German for 'medium-spicy mustard', but from the first time I saw that on a label, I realised its potential.

On another linguistic question, it's interesting (a) that the Spanish edition of *Dragonhiker's Guide* (page 44) adds a couple of words to make the title sound more science-fictional (*estelar*, *galáctico*), and (b) that the title leaves key words in English, impairing the puns — presumably because they were

so left when the translations of the relevant books were done. Since Covenant is a person's name, not much could be done about that, but 'Dune' is presumably the translation into English of whatever the name of the planet in Frank Herbert's far-future language is, so there was no logical reason not to use the Spanish word (*duna*) when the Spanish-language edition came out.

If Scott Campbell is a teacher or student in a philosophy department (page 59), one might have hoped he would have had some instruction in precision of expression. If he is going to raise the red flag against the opiate of the masses (page 61), the least he could do would be to define his target with some minimal clarity. It is certainly news to me that 'the Church' has consistent views on 'moral issues such as abortion' unless 'the Church' is taken to mean neither the body of Christians in general (the most common Protestant usage), nor the Anglican Church, but the Roman Catholic Church. But that doesn't seem to work either: an argument could be made that Catholicism is a 'dangerous . . . religious force', but it scarcely can be deemed a 'lowbrow' one (page 61). This is so generally recognised that even its enemies see the Catholic Church as a malign corporate intellect, spinning fiendishly clever webs, on the order of Professor Moriarty's gang. So just whom is Campbell attacking? Or is he merely off ranting in all directions at once?

(2 June 1992)

Or have I massacred this bit of Scott Campbell's prose as well? (See the first letter in this column.)

Australia must be one of the few countries in which detractors of the Roman Catholic Church would add 'lowbrow' to their list of insults. Until after World War II the Church mainly represented Australians descended from Irish forebears, people who formed most of our working class. Although the Church itself showed plenty of signs of wealth, it saw itself as representing people without wealth, and had very strong connections with the Australian Labor Party. All these connections have become detached or

rewired during the last forty years, especially as Australia's 'working class' became made up of European and Asian migrants, many of whom had no religious allegiances, and the ALP became a middle-middle-class party during the 1960s.

**ANDREW WEINER,**  
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Canada

Thanks for SFC 71/72, which reminded me that I never got around to complimenting you on your piece on Dick's mainstream novels in the previous issue. Since I haven't read any of these novels other than *Confessions of a Crap Artist* (which didn't exactly leave me hungry for more) I was relieved to have you confirm that I don't need to read them. Like you, I found Dick most interesting when he was obsessively exploring the nature of 'reality', and only 'science fiction' (or a reasonable simulation) allowed him to do that.

I hope I didn't give the impression that the true-blue Phil Dick fan could avoid his mainstream novels. However, I think they would be more interesting to a student of the 1950s American novel than they are to sf people. It's only when I read Hazel Rowley's biography of Christina Stead (an Australian writer of Communist sympathies who had to go into exile from New York to Europe in 1951) that I realised how absolutely McCarthyism attacked every aspect of American life. Of course Dick couldn't get those novels published in the fifties! Today we can appreciate them as a unique record of what was happening at the time. We can also see why some sharp intellects, such as Dick, Sheckley, Knight and Bester, could only have published in the sf field at the time — sf was so unrespectable that somehow the FBI thought police missed it altogether.

I wonder what Dick would have made of what 'reality' has become. After Reagan, the Gulf War, the ozone hole, and the LA riots, it becomes clearer than ever that we're living in a Dick novel (*The Penultimate Truth*, say, or maybe just *The Zap Gun*), in which nothing is what it seems, and media and

governments conspire to keep us in ignorance. You could draw the same conclusion by reading Noam Chomsky, but Dick was more fun, in a black-comic way. Movies like *JFK*, however crudely, reflect a growing sense that They're Lying To Us. But who are They? Personally I don't care to think about it too hard.

Did you ever see *They Live*, by the way? It's a silly horror thriller about concealed alien invaders, but with about two minutes of pure Dick at the front end. (When you wear these magic sunglasses, you look up and all the advertising signs say 'Buy'.) More Dickian than *Total Recall*, although I was thrilled to see an actual wallscreen in the latter.

I empathised with your discussion (In No. 71/72) of Australian sf. Home-grown Canadian sf publishing is in an even more pathetic state. As in Australia, there has been an upsurge in local crime publishing in recent years, but I don't think it portends anything useful for sf. Local crime writing is just that — local. Readers can relate to familiar settings. Sf is for the most part non-local — it could be set anywhere. Also, there's a big difference in readership. Adults read (and publish) crime fiction. Most adults are not interested in sf, except as product for adolescents. The market for adult (that is, non-sci-fi) sf in the USA is vanishingly small, and in places like Canada or Australia it's virtually non-existent.

I thought your review of *Station Gehenna* was fair enough, by the way. Although in a sense the book isn't Malzbergian enough — it makes too many (clearly reluctant) concessions to sci-fi action-adventure.

(6 June 1992)

Amazing — a writer with a clear-eyed view of his own fiction! Even the most ordinary writers I meet get grumpy if I say anything disinterested (or even mildly flippant) about their work. You'd think they would all be trying to improve their work instead of defending every line and comma of their current work.

Local publishers can sometimes sell small quantities of Australian sf books,

as long as nobody mentions anywhere on the cover or in the publicity sheets that it might be considered 'science fiction'. It's that fundamental barrier that hasn't fallen here yet.

**DIANE FOX,  
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Thank you for *SF Commentary* 71/72. I haven't written letters of comment for ages. At first this seemed to be caused by burnout, followed by sheer lack of energy. A couple of months ago I found out the cause of this. Probably in early 1991, I came down with an apparently flu-like virus that wrecked my thyroid. I have been running on a quarter of my normal energy. It is rather surprising that I have managed to keep up with my job, which involves long-distance commuting. I had no ability to keep up with my other interests. The damage to my thyroid is permanent, so I'm on tablets. At least I feel up to coping again, but I'll be in trouble if civilisation collapses.

I've gaffiated to a degree, but am again reading sf in large quantities, and looking out for Australian sf and fantasy.

You wrote a fascinating article on Jonathan Carroll. You're right about the magic turning dark. This is most obvious in *Voice of Our Shadow*, which is out-and-out horror, and thus more 'ordinary' than anything else I've read so far by Carroll. The end of *Sleeping in Flame* is disconcerting and blackly funny rather than actually horrifying or hopeless. *The Land of Laughs* was disturbing because it showed the usually positive and life-affirming power of creativity being used for creating a petty dictatorship. Is Carroll saying that creative people can be evil corrupt bastards like everyone else, or something even darker — that creativity is a form of power, and all power is suspect?  
(8 June 1992)

That's one of the inferences that you or I might reasonably make, but I doubt if Carroll is the sort of writer who ever 'says' any particular thing. A slippery customer. In the end we always feel that Carroll's viewpoint in any of his novels is pitched a long

distance from that of any character in that novel, especially the main character.

I trust you can find some more permanent help for your thyroid problem. Our cat TC, who has had almost every other uncommon complaint, had a malfunctioning thyroid gland. He was very thin and very stropy, and seemed likely to die at any moment. We took him down to the Veterinary Hospital at Werribee, where they dosed him with radioactive iodine and kept him in solitary confinement for a week while the radiation destroyed part of his overactive thyroid gland. The treatment must have worked; TC immediately put on weight and returned to his former energy level.

**SIMON BROWN,  
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I was flattered by your kind words for 'All the Fires of Lebanon'. However, I find myself in the peculiar position of disagreeing with you, at least on one point. You say the story had an impact 'that could not be found in a mere journalistic report of Lebanese events'. In fact, Robert Fisk's *Pity the Nation*, a journalist's first-hand account of Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the consequences of that invasion, is such a powerful account that in several parts it literally had me in tears — an effect no other book has ever had on me.

I wrote 'All the Fires of Lebanon' after reading Fisk's work partly to rid myself of the anger and sorrow I felt — writing as catharsis, if you want, something I rarely indulge in. Though pleased with my efforts, I now realise the story only hints at the real tragedy, the real horror, of Lebanon's long war, something Fisk imparts with a skill and tenacity that leaves me numb with jealousy.

Since hearing Fisk's regular broadcasts on Philip Adams's *Late Night Live* during the Gulf War, I'm prepared to believe you about his journalistic skills. I buy so many books I never get around to reading, but now I'm kicking myself for not buying *Pity the Nation* on the one occasion when I saw it in a book shop.

As usual, the books I've enjoyed the most over the last

couple of years have been non-fiction, with one exception (more on that later). These include Robin Lane Fox's *The Unauthorized Version*, about truth and the Bible, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, about the Afro-Asiatic roots of Classical civilisation, James M. McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, the Civil War volume of the Oxford History of the United States, and Nancy Phelan's *A Kingdom by the Sea*, a warm and frequently very funny account of growing up in post-World War I Sydney.

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, a novel first published around 1985, was the first long piece of fiction I can honestly say I enjoyed more than any non-fiction work in nearly five years (with the possible exception of *Pity the Nation* — a reading experience I'm not sure you could classify as 'enjoyable'). It's immensely witty without being the least pretentious, strangely scholarly, and a book I've gone back to several times to re-read my favourite sections, of which there are several. Recently I've also read Barnes's *Before She Met Me* and *A History of the World in 10 (and a half) Chapters*, both well written, but neither as successful or accomplished as *Flaubert's Parrot*.

Moving house has meant dredging up old copies of magazines and anthologies for packing, unpacking and repacking. I took the opportunity to go over a few of them, and found myself falling in love all over again with the science fiction short story, even ones from as far back as the 1930s. To some extent this surprised me, but I have to admit that an original idea told competently has it all over a trite idea told well — the problem with a lot of modern short stories (and not just in science fiction).

(23 September 1992)

**DAVE PIPER,  
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*Make me redundant, please!* I could draw me pension, and spend all day, every day,

reading and re-reading The Publications of Gillespie. Which, given the increasing size/length of such publications, is just about the only way I'd be able to do 'em justice.

Me? I appear to be reading even less of this year than I did last. Seems to be a continuing process, I fear. I read the magazines 'cause I'm a magazine junky. Doubt if I'll ever pack up reading them, but very few novels. I've got Connie Willis's new novel awaiting a rainy day, and I just finished Powers' *Last Call*, which I enjoyed very much, but then, I enjoy all his stuff. Apart from anything else, the price of paperbacks makes a decision as to whether to buy or not really 'Is this by one of my favourite authors?', in which case I'll probably buy. Anyone else's magnum opus has to compete with mundane stuff like booze, and Camel, and tapes, and all stuff like that.

I go through periods of dissatisfaction with the magazines but I invariably buy them, and periodically, really look forward to an issue almost to the extent that I did nearly 40 years ago!!!! Gawd!!!! I think it's a case of getting bitten by the bug at an early age, and you just never lose it. I meet fans up at Fantasy Centre who are rock-solid sf fans but never read the magazines and wouldn't have one as a gift. I guess, to be honest, I just love 'em. Colour me a dinosaur!

(20 July 1992)

Me, too, but I've never got back to reading the magazines since I stopped in the mid-1970s. Once I decided not to keep up with all the magazines, I felt quite a relief. I did, however, keep up buying the original fiction anthologies, and now I have hundreds of the things, most of them unread since the early 1980s.

When the genie offers me three wishes, my first will be: 'Make me a rapid reader.' I am a man of many hidden handicaps, but the inability to read fast is the most crippling of all. (My other two wishes? I have hundreds of candidates, but the two that seem most pressing are: 'Give me eidetic memory', since I am perpetually depressed by my complete inability to learn lines of verse or prose; and 'Give me vast musical abilities, or at least the ability

to play some of my favourite music on the piano.' I know I should include in my three wishes 'Save the ecosphere', 'Equalise wealth among all the world's people' and 'Reduce the world's population to safe levels', but perhaps my special genie will give me six wishes.)

**ANDREW WHITMORE,  
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I must apologise for not having written to you sooner. The main problem is that I wanted to try and comment sensibly, and at some length, on *SF Commentary* 71/72, but, whenever I sat down to write anything, I found myself deciding that I needed to do a little more background reading first. Thus, as a result of the various essays and articles in the issue, I've been reading Philip Dick, Jonathan Carroll, and various other authors, in an attempt to order my thoughts and comment sensibly on what you and others have had to say.

Thank you very much for your review of *Fortress of Eternity*, which was entirely unexpected and most flattering indeed. My own opinion of the book remains somewhat ambivalent, although its flaws seem to be becoming increasingly glaring as time goes by. I certainly tried to subvert as many heroic fantasy conventions as I could, although the fact that it is one of the very few novels in the genre to feature an unashamedly Marxist hero and proto-feminist heroine appears to have escaped most readers. (If, indeed, there were any readers at all to speak of: my royalty statements suggest them to be exceedingly thin on the ground.)

That must have had much to do with the ghastly cover that Avon gave the book, Andrew. Not many books have been as successfully undersold as *Fortress of Eternity*.

I haven't read a great many of Dick's non-sf novels, but I did find Sutin's biography fascinating. The best thing about it, of course, is that it inevitably leads one back to Dick's books themselves. Whether simply through the

passage of time, or by virtue of the insights into Dick's personal life afforded by Sutin's biography, these novels now seem quite different to when I first read them. Originally, what appealed to me in Dick's works were the quirky backgrounds, bizarre incidental inventions and 'reality-shifting' plots — in other words, all those things we traditionally regard as 'phildickian'. Now, however, I am struck by the extent to which his books are character-driven, especially in something like *Now Wait for Last Year*, in which the sf aspects of the plot (time-travel theme, alien invasion, etc.) are entirely subordinate to the relationship between Eric and Katherine Sweetscent, whose mutually destructive relationship is very much the heart of the story. This is ultimately resolved in a marvellous scene featuring Eric and a robot taxi, where Eric says:

'If you were me, and your wife were sick, desperately so, with no hope of recovery, would you leave her? Or would you stay with her, even if you had traveled ten years into the future and knew for an absolute certainty that the damage to her brain could never be reversed? And staying with her would mean —'

'I can see what you mean, sir,' the cab broke in. 'It would mean no other life for you beyond caring for her.'

'That's right,' Eric said.

'I'd stay with her,' the cab decided.

'Why?'

'Because,' the cab said, 'life is composed of reality configurations so constituted. To abandon her would be to say, I can't endure reality as such, I have to have uniquely special easier conditions.'

'I think I agree,' Eric said after a time. 'I think I will stay with her.'

'God bless you, sir,' the cab said. 'I can see that you're a good man.'

If we are to believe Sutin's portrait of Dick, this just goes to show how much more

compassion Dick demonstrated as a writer than in his own personal relationships.

It is interesting to note that the characters in Dick's sf novels would appear to be portrayed rather more sympathetically than those in his non-sf works. At least, that is the impression I get from your article. Could it be, perhaps, that by setting his stories in various fantastic alternative realities, he was able to distance himself more from his material than was possible with his other, more overtly autobiographical works?

If the main characters in all the novels, sf and non-sf, are based on Dick's view of himself, he is certainly much more severe on himself in the non-sf novels than he is in the sf novels. This must have something to do with the fictional models he took. Sutin shows how much Dick wanted to be the new Great American Writer. His models for the non-sf novels were the great ironists. I see a lot of Flaubert and the other nineteenth-century realists reflected in his devices. With the sf? Van Vogt, early Heinlein, all the writers of the Golden Age. Hardly great ironists, but models of brilliant looniness. Only Dick could have put together the two influences, as he did in his best books.

The question of biographies in general is also an intriguing one. For example, do interesting subjects make for a good biography, or do good biographies make their subjects interesting? I know, for example, that you've read Douglas Day's biography of Malcolm Lowry. I read this many years ago, and found it quite fascinating, and certainly far better reading than any of Lowry's own works (with the exception, perhaps, of *Under the Volcano*). Now, is there something intrinsically interesting about Lowry himself, or is it Day's portrayal of the man that catches our attention?

On the other hand, Joseph Blotner's massive two-volume biography of William Faulkner is excruciatingly dull. To read it, one would scarcely think that Faulkner would have been able to review his past for more than a few minutes without being bored to death, let alone distil from it a series of the

most remarkable novels in the language. Does this make Blotner a bad biographer, or does the fault rest with Faulkner himself, a notoriously private and retiring person? Perhaps a little of both.

Your enthusiastic advocacy led me to read Carroll's *The Land of Laughs*, which Mary had already recommended to me in the most glowing terms. Previously, I had read three-quarters of *Bones of the Moon*, which I found interesting, but happened to put aside one day and never bothered to pick up again. While having no such problem with *The Land of Laughs* (which is indeed 'unputdownable' in the strictest meaning of the word), it didn't really possess the qualities that might warrant me elevating Carroll to the rarefied heights of my own personal literary pantheon. What so appeals to you — the sheer verve of the narrative and a style limited to 'the places, events, sights, sounds and rather hectic observations of the narrator' — are the very things that prompt me to damn the book with such faint praise as 'a good read'. To me, the book bears *too* much resemblance to a screenplay. There's action aplenty, but little opportunity for reflection, and at the end one is left more with the impression of an express train rushing past than a piece of art that may be studied and admired at leisure.

Well, I got a lot more out of it from a second, detailed reading than I did from the first reading. The strength of *The Land of Laughs*, compared with Carroll's other novels, is the strength of its fable. It is as delicious, as inviting to infinite contemplation, as any of the great world fables. 'What if everything you wrote down as fiction came true?' Give this to a hundred of your favourite authors and you would have a hundred interesting answers. But I doubt if you would have any that would take the fable so far, that could make it so completely ironic and cruel in every aspect, as Carroll does.

Not that I was trying to elevate Carroll to any literary pantheon. As I tried to imply in the introduction to the essay, when I struck Carroll I was struggling to find *any* sf or fantasy author I could read with consistent enjoyment. Carroll gave me what I used to find in

Bester, Knight, Sheckley and Dick. A few other new writers, especially Connie Willis, are interesting, and a few old favourites, such as Aldiss and Le Guin, have published deeply enjoyable books during the last two or three years.

I have a somewhat idiosyncratic method of rating my favourite authors, which owes more to Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' than any established literary theory. There are, for example, two authors whose books I will automatically purchase as soon as they become available, regardless of price: M. John Harrison and Iain Banks. The fact that I will cough up somewhere in the vicinity of 40 dollars for a hardcover edition of their works demonstrated my unstinted admiration far more eloquently than any amount of impassioned prose. Of the two, I rate Harrison slightly higher, for, in the not entirely hypothetical case of me being down to my last few dollars, I would choose a new Harrison novel over Banks's latest offering (albeit reluctantly).

There are two other authors whose works I will also diligently and enthusiastically pursue, sight unseen: David Foster and Barrington Bayley. However, as neither of them tends to be published in hardcover (or, indeed, at all, in Bayley's case), my admiration has never been put to the acid test of being forced to expend exorbitant amounts of money to read them. My affection for Foster's work probably owes more to loyalty than good sense, as everything he's written since *Moonlite* has been something of a disappointment. By now, he ought to be producing out-and-out masterpieces rather than inconsistent and self-indulgent works like *Testostero* and *Mates of Mars*, no matter how intermittently brilliant these novels may be.

When it comes to other authors, I am slightly more discerning. I will buy books by Ballard, Amis, Angela Carter and the like in hardcover, but only if the reviews sound promising enough. Thus, I bought Ballard's *The Kindness of Women* as soon as it became

available, but have yet to purchase even the paperback edition of *Day of Creation*.

Angela Carter's death, of course, has made the appearance of any further works by her hand highly problematic, but before her untimely demise, she was on the verge of joining Messrs Harrison and Banks at the top of my 'Must Read' list. I enjoyed her last novel, *Wise Children*, very much, and *Nights at the Circus* must rate a close second behind *Empire of the Sun* as the most outstanding English novel of the past decade.

What I value most highly about the above writers is that their work displays a rare blending of style and substance — in other words, they write exceptionally well about exceptionally interesting things. They are also the authors I envy most in the world because they write, not only far better than me, but far better than I could ever dream of writing.

(21 October 1992)

That goes for all my favourite writers, as well as all the second-raters. I look at my own fiction, go 'blaaah!', and wonder how anybody could write worse than that. Most of the authors whose books I buy automatically have tended to be those offering slightly illicit pleasures: my favourite writers of mysteries, including Elizabeth George, Sara Paretsky, Martha Grimes and Patricia Cornwell. Not great stuff, but I just gotta have my next fix. I always buy Aldiss, Le Guin, Disch, and other favourites in the sf field, including some of the newer people, such as Connie Willis. The trouble is that the house is now full of books — no wall or floor untouched — and the review copies pour in, so I have no justification for buying new books at all. Which is probably why I buy far too many CDs.

**WILLIAM M. DANNER,  
RD1, Kennerdell PA 16374,  
USA**

Your new equipment does very presentable work, as modern printing goes. I am glad, indeed, that you do not feel as some youngsters do today: that ragged margins look better and are easier to read than justified ones. Apparently the editors of all-too-many magazines

nowadays have that mistaken idea. I am keeping my fingers crossed against the appearance of a magazine with both left and right margins ragged, with some cock-eyed explanation that it looks better and is easier to read. I would prefer to see even the letters justified, for they do not resemble typed or written letters in any way. However, this is a better way to distinguish them from other matter than using a different type face, as some do. And I must say I don't like the tendency to put a half-point rule around each page; I suspect it is done simply because, with all these modern marvels, it is so easy to do. And the three-column pages would look better without the column rule, since the columns are so widely separated. But what the hell? I had what little formal training in printing I received almost 70 years ago, so no doubt my way of thinking is hopelessly out of date. . . .

I just recalled that a couple of years ago I did get several copies of a semi-catalogue from some telescope company that did have both left and right margins ragged, and some of the pages were done in Old English! The whole thing was an absolute fright, and hard to read. I took time to tell them so in a letter, and a subsequent issue was a little improved. It shows the trouble with 'desktop' publishing: too many people are tackling it without the vaguest ideas of good composition or good taste. This certainly does not include you, and I'm sure that future issues of *SFC* will be even more attractive than this one.

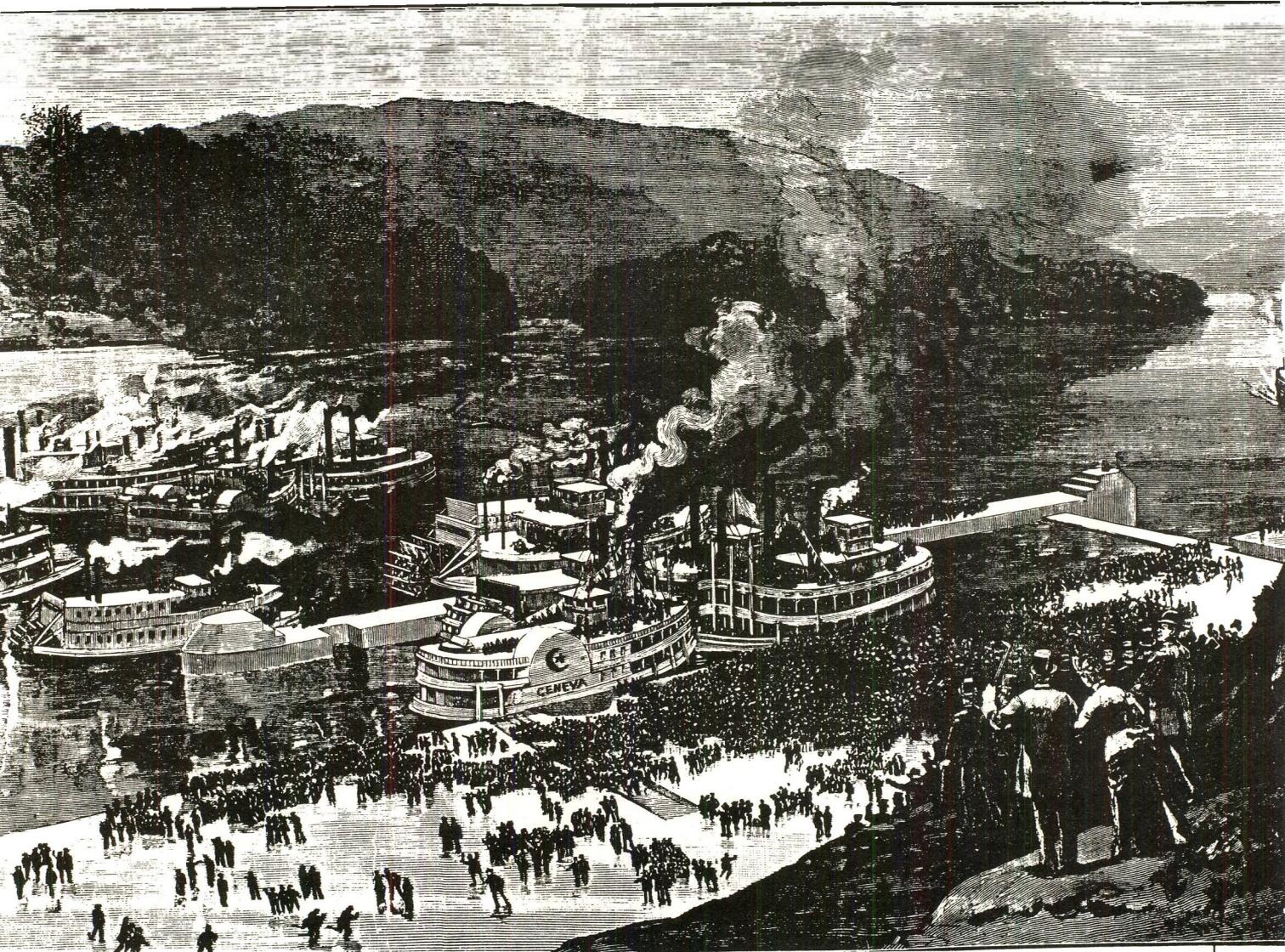
As you can see, Bill, you could easily include me. Most of the layout decisions I've made this issue have been made with your imagined voice groaning somewhere in the background. I'm the first to admit that I'm trying to crowd too much text into too few pages, but the economics of publishing the issue make this the main consideration. The use of quarter-point rules on both the outer margin and between columns helps (to my eye) to bind together pages that would otherwise be too daunting for most readers. I just hope that I can combine the upright rules with heading rules to make pages that still

look satisfactory.

And, of course, I will just have to be content to annoy you by running the letters not only in a different type face but also ragged right. Even so, some people will still write letters showing that they think I was talking when you were, and vice versa. (There are worse solutions. It's easy, for instance, in Ventura to put a grey screen over the letters to separate them from my comments, or something equally repellent.)

Try to find a copy of the 1923 catalogue of American Type Founders. A big public library *might* have a copy, even down under, I suppose. It's a fantastic hardbound volume of about 1200 pages, mostly heavy coated paper, but with many pages and folded inserts of fine book and cover papers. It was printed entirely from handset types (for that is what ATF made) and I'm sure the old comps who did the work had a wonderful time doing it. (There is an ad, for instance, for a bookstore on Merkin St. Have you ever looked up 'merkin'?) All of the many ads included are phony ones, save for a few for ATF itself. Hundreds of type faces are shown, many in sizes from 6 pt. to 120 pt. Both composition and presswork are flawless, and there is a note that states that a requirement was that the last copy should be identical with the first one of the 60,000 that were printed from the type directly, rather than from electros of the pages. Many of the pages are in two colours, and register is in every case perfect. There are many examples of brass-rule work, and corner joints are in every case perfect. No price is given in the book, and I believe it was given free to large users of type. Certainly nothing like it can ever be produced again.

The whole volume is a beautiful example of printing at its finest in the heyday of letterpress. Modern methods of printing are faster, but if you can find a copy of that fabulous book you'll agree that the result is, at this stage of the game, not better. What it may be in the future is anyone's guess and, if the 'ragged-right-looks better' brigade have their way, I'm glad I won't be around to see what will have become of what was once a fine art. (1 June 1992)



I agree — but I'm one of many millions of small publishers who have, for the first time in history, access to a wide range of font families. Not that I've solved all the problems of the new technology. Nobody can tell me how to run, on Ventura through an HP Laserjet IIP, Postscript fonts alongside downloadable Adobe fonts. Hence the restricted range of fonts that I actually use in my magazines.

**We Also Heard From:**

a few people not already mentioned in the TMR letter column (conspicuously not yet published):

**ARTHUR B. EVANS** wrote to tell me that my free ride was over. After McGill University in Montreal had sent me *Science-Fiction Studies* in exchange for my magazines for nearly 20 years, DePauw University, Greencastle Indiana, the new home of *SFS*, has decided not to extend the arrangement. It's not that *SFS* is expensive (still only US\$24.50 per year), it's just that so

many remarkable, and remarkably unwieldy articles in those beautiful volumes remain unread. By comparison, I still find *Foundation* interesting, and occasionally brilliant, but *SFS* goes out of its way to stop its authors showing either of these qualities.

**STEVE PAULSEN** (like Dirk Strasser) is one of those pestilential persons who won't trade with magazines of equal worth (ahem) or financial status (vast loss). Why should I have to subscribe to *Australian SF Writers' News* just to see a magazine that should automatically be sent to *SF Commentary*? Does Steve offer to subscribe to my magazine? Not recently.

**TERRY GREEN** sent me lots of information about what he has been doing, plus two of his recent books (reviewed in my column in this issue).

**DAVID RUSSELL** got his name on the cover of the last *SFC*, and is feeling egoboosted. I can't find any excuse for doing the same this issue, David. However, in February you sent

me a copy of *Beyond the Enchanted Duplicator* [To the Enchanted Convention. This is the sort of present that makes me feel warm and runny inside. Thank you very much.

Several letters from **GREG EGAN**, ace West Australian—international success (two stories in the Top Ten Novelette list in the latest *Locus* Poll) explaining that he has followed his editor, Deborah Beale, from Headline Books to Millennium Books in Britain. Millennium will do the paperback of *Quarantine*, plus the other books that Headline was going to do, plus (I hope) new Egan books ever onward into the twenty-first century.

**TERRY JEEVES**, taking up the inference that *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* have an 'Aussie-origin material only' policy (not quite correct, since *Eidolon* has published at least one Harlan Ellison story), says: 'one fanzine openly says so [that it accepts only Australian content] and one or two others only comment on home-grown books and

fanzines.' All very puzzling. I don't know of any Australian fanzines that refuse material from overseas contributors; and we feel some need to feature reviews of Australian sf books, on the principle of 'If we don't, which overseas fanzines will?' The Australian reality is that 95 per cent of the books on the sf shelves are the product of non-Australian writers and publishers. I will continue to try changing this situation, although I haven't yet had the courage to read a Martin Middleton fantasy.

**IRWIN HIRSH** writes: 'I'm not sure where you got the idea that I've disappeared from fnz fandom. I haven't published a fnz for some years but I've been writing a fair number of locs. . . . Since June 1990 (when I finished my degree) I reckon I've averaged a loc a month.' In this letter (June 1992) Irwin hopes to restart *Sikander*, but it hasn't happened yet, for reasons that seem perfectly sensible to me each time I make an attempt to publish the next *SFC* or *TMR*.

**FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER** has had a look at some recent Australian sf, but can't quite see his German publisher leaping with glee on (say) books of Australian short stories. Germans and Austrians, it seems, want translations of American sf books. However, Franz did take the trouble to read what he was sent, and he doesn't seem to have given up entirely on his original proposal to look at Oz sf.

**HAL HALL** (3608 Meadow Oaks Lane, Bryan, Texas 77802, USA) shows me up as a weak-kneed lily-livered sloth: '*Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Index* continues to appear, but is still slowed by other projects. I have yet to recover from the time loss in doing the 1400-page "Reference Index" for Gale Research, but one *SFBR I* is still coming out each year now. Currently, I am completing the cumulation of a Supplement to the 'Reference Index'. *Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index 1878-1985* indexed something over 19,000 individual books, articles

and news reports. *Science Fiction and Fantasy Reference Index 1985-1991* indexes an additional 16,272 individual books, articles and news reports.' And I'll bet all *that* happened in the time I was deciding whether or not to publish the next *SFC*.

**LYN McCONCHIE** is another correspondent who makes me realise how unprofitable my whole life has been. Admitting in a recent mailing of ANZAPA that out of every ten pieces of fiction submitted, selling one of them is a nice average, she still seems selling stories or poems every other day and on four continents. Her new New Zealand book *Farming Daze* has just appeared. I'll give more details in the next *TMR*.

**DOUG BARBOUR** hasn't yet caught up with Jonathan Carroll's work, but was 'pleased to see another intelligent review of Guy Gavriel Kay'. (I think that's an unsolicited compliment to Ros Gross). Ever busy in Edmonton, Alberta, Doug has 'just spent the past few days writing the first draft of a review of Tranter and Mead's *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry* and Lehmann and Gray's *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century*. Aside from the fact that it's half the price and despite all its flaws the *Penguin Book* is much the better anthology.'

'QUANTUM TO MERGE WITH SCIENCE FICTION EYE!' is the headline from **DOUG FRATZ**, editor of the recently deceased *Quantum*, formerly *Thrust*. I enjoyed *Quantum* a lot, but I was its worst correspondent. Sounds as if Doug burned out. I've never received a trade copy of *Science Fiction Eye* from Steve Brown; instead, it seems safer to buy it from Slowglass Books. *SF Eye* has many features I'd like to copy in *SFC*, but I don't have the needed graphic skills.

**CYRIL SIMSA**, who first started writing to me from London, has returned to the Czech Republic, where he can be reached c/o Adamovicová

Ksidlisti 13, 14000 Praha 4. I'm still hoping that he might send me another article. The last one he sent me mouldered so long on my shelf between issues that eventually (justifiably) he published it elsewhere.

**PAUL COLLINS**, formerly of Cory and Collins, Publishers, and City Limits and Zephyrs bookstores, is back in Melbourne after a few years in Brisbane. Mass Alternative is the name of his new book store: Shop G34, Fran Central, 325 Chapel Street, Prahran 3181; phone (03) 521-1345.

**BRIAN ALDISS**, just returned from a trip to Greece, sent a nice postcard and his two most recent books, *Remembrance Day*, a non-sf novel, and *A Tupolev Too Far*, his latest book of short stories. Rather impressed, I read the former and sent a mini-review to Brian, accompanied by personal news. To which Brian replied (in part): 'I've been abroad six times in the seven months of this year. Now I'm well into writing the screenplay for Phil Dick's *Martian Time-Slip*. It's commissioned by BBC-TV for a five-part 55-min. miniseries. . . . I'm also working with the BBC lot on a project for a long-run sf serial. . . . Although I've now to some extent come down to Earth from the galaxies, I would be ashamed in this day to write a novel that was wholly set on this little island; hence the attempt to embrace a wider canvas — Russia, Czechoslovakia, and so on. The next novel, *Burnell's Travels*, goes further afield, to Georgia (USSR) and Central Asia. That volume marks the conclusion of a quartet which began with *Life in the West*, continuing with *Forgotten Life* and *Remembrance Day*.' Much to look forward to here: a serial based on one of the greatest Phil Dick novels, a new serial, and a new novel. Makes me almost ashamed to be just a reader and watcher waiting for the next Aldiss delectable.

— Bruce Gillespie, 23 August 1993

This article began as a talk given at the Nova Mob (Melbourne's sf discussion group), on 7 October 1992. I printed it in *\*brg\** No. 6 for ANZAPA, October 1992. Although I printed only 40 copies, the article, under its original title 'James Morrow and the ERNI', was nominated for a William Atheling Award for SF Criticism. An edited version of the article appeared in *Tirra Lirra*, Vol. 3, Nos. 3/4, Autumn/Winter 1993, under the present title. I liked Eva Windisch's editing so much that I've based the version below on the *Tirra Lirra* version.

## 'Earth is as good as it gets': James Morrow and the ERNI

by Bruce Gillespie

When in doubt, get annoyed. Or rather, when something annoying tugs on the fishing line of thought, reel it in. Also, when in doubt, quote yourself.

For this talk I've combined these deep insights. What emerged is what follows.

First, the annoyance. What rankled in my mind was the discrepancy between several different reviews I ran of the same book in the most recent issue of *SF Commentary*. The book is *Only Begotten Daughter*, by James Morrow.

Morrow is the most interesting writer in the field today, apart from Jonathan Carroll and George Turner. His earlier novels are *The Wine of Violence*, *The Continent of Lies* and *This Is the Way the World Ends*. I thought I was on pretty safe ground when I sent *Only Begotten Daughter* to Scott Campbell to review. I've never met him, but he writes quite lively reviews that get up people's spouts.

The other, much shorter review was mine, but in it I quoted John Clute's review in *Interzone*, in which Clute dismissed the book. Campbell's review might be excusable, I thought, but how could a critic so usually acute as Clute have misread a book so badly?

First, to Scott Campbell, who really gets steamed up about James Morrow. 'Biggest wimp in contemporary sf.' That's in his first paragraph. 'Morrow's cheerful mediocrity.' Etcetera.

Campbell begins his article (*SFC* 71/72, pages 59-61) with a putdown of *The Continent of Lies*. Later he discusses *Only Begotten Daughter*: 'Morrow's tale of the Second Coming of Christ, who is of course female (though not black), as is God Herself . . . It's simply inept and unimaginative . . . I can only compare it to the film *Jesus of Montreal*. If you liked such an obvious and hamfisted work, then you'll probably like *Only Begotten Daughter*.'

Campbell gives us no examples from the novel of what he considers inept or unimaginative, or indeed of what in general he considers ept or imaginative. I get the idea that he doesn't approve of allegories in general, or perhaps only allegories based on the life of Christ. Which is more or less what he admits in his next paragraph: 'There is just so much scope for retelling the life of Jesus. I think the whole idea of the retelling is an unoriginal waste of time unless you are going to do something with it, such as Ballard's inspired work in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, "Zodiac 2000", *The Unlimited Dream Company* and "The Object of the Attack".' Since I haven't read those pieces, I can't argue with Campbell about his comparison. Needless to say, I think Morrow does a great deal more with the Christ allegory than anybody I've read.

I can't argue with Campbell line by line, because I don't know what his assumptions are. But for some reason I got particularly annoyed with this element in his review:

'Morrow's main characters seem to be the same as you'd find in any standard American Sterling-suckled cyber-wimp book, except that Morrow draws his characters in a more light-hearted way. They're basically ideologically sound, but a bit rough around the edges, with a few idiosyncrasies and character failings that just make them all the more human and lovable. If you actually met anybody like this you'd want to strangle them.'

Well, I do from time to time — meet people like those in *Only Begotten Daughter* — and I quite enjoy their company. Who are these people? The main characters are Murray Katz, who is a dropout who lives in a lighthouse, his ex vitro daughter Julie, whose other parent is God Herself, Murray's lesbian friend Georgina Sparks, and her in

vitro daughter Phoebe. As one of them says: 'The All-American family. Who'd ever know it's a hermit, a bastard, a dyke, and a deity?'

I suspect that it is this line in particular that annoyed Scott Campbell. He suggests that Morrow has somehow had to manufacture these characters to meet the expectations of a particular audience. Which implies that Scott Campbell doesn't meet people like these. Which tells me a lot about what it must be like to live in Hobart. Obviously it doesn't have the equivalent of Friday night at K&M's. It's equally clear that Scott Campbell never gets to science fiction conventions. I guess that Morrow based all the main characters on people he knows.

Here's Campbell's final shot:

'Morrow ends the book with the daring and provocative suggestion that the character of Amanda the Sea Sponge is really God. This is because sponges are "faceless, shapeless, holey, undifferentiated, . . . inscrutable . . . and a hermaphrodite to boot . . . cannot be fatally dismembered, for each part quickly becomes the whole . . . both immortal and infinite". Get it? Saying that God is a sponge is saying that our concept of God can "soak up" whatever we want God to be. What an original idea!'

If that was what Morrow was saying, Campbell would be right. But how could one reviewer so completely fail to read a novel? I tried a feeble preliminary answer in my own short review (*SFC*, 71/72, p. 86). As I said earlier: when in doubt, quote yourself:

'I can't describe this book, so I'm grateful for the following written by John Clute in *Interzone* 55, January 1992, which arrived this morning: "*Only Begotten Daughter* is a fable about the life of the sister of Jesus, whose name is Julie Katz; who was born in an ectogenesis machine in New



**James Morrow.** (Photo courtesy *Locus*.)

Jersey in 1974 to a Jewish sperm-donor, a desperately nice fellow who dies of heart failure later on; who grows up capable of performing miracles, though her father persuades her not to; who is forced into action by fundamentalist Reverend Milk's assault on Atlantic City, which seems likely to burn the place to the ground . . . It is funny, impassioned, decent, concerned and rakish. That is good.' Clute has doubts about the book, because the characters seem too nice. I suppose so; but no more nice than other people I know who find the world hard going. Would Julie Katz have stayed nice if her earthly father had not persuaded her to hold the tidal waves each time she got annoyed? What is not nice is the world Julie Katz lives in — a world designed to crush people of goodwill, and most of the others as well. It's our world, a few years hence. Clute says that *Only Begotten Daughter* fails 'to bite into the great rotten apple of the world'. I say that Morrow's frenetic rhetoric, dancing speech rhythms and daring command of fantastic and religious metaphors enables him to skewer the world, material and otherworldly, to its core. Julie has a look at the afterlife. There is no comfort there; only two people have ever been judged worthy of heaven, so everybody else, including Julie's 2000-year-old brother Jesus Christ, burns forever in hell. This terrestrial life is as good as it gets! Clute finds this nice and comforting?

I keep hoping someone will write me a long essay that will explore this book's intricacies, games and dilemmas. *Only Begotten Daughter* is a funny, ferocious torrent of words that leaves the reader exhausted and ex-

hilarated, certain only of one truth: that only great fantasy can tell great truths about our lives.'

Since nobody has taken my hint and written me the long essay about *Only Begotten Daughter* that I asked for, I've just had to do it myself. But I could not work out what to say about the book until I found myself writing this down while preparing my most recent ANZAPA contribution (\*brg\* No. 5, August 1992, p. 6):

'*Only Begotten Daughter* didn't offer any "solutions" at all. It was essentially a fairy tale. The point about a fairy tale is that the "happy ending" is always the reverse of the ending you would expect from the events that are in the tale. Morrow ends the book quite neatly, but in the process he has brilliantly dissected the real situation of good people in an evil world, and hence undercut any reassuring sounds that he seems to be making. Is there a technical name for this sort of writing? I'd call it an ERNI: an "extensively re-complicated nasty irony".'

After I had done a bit of research and reading, I decided that the term is probably unnecessary. All you need is the basic term 'irony', which can be used in many ways, including extensively re-complicated nasty ways.

The word 'irony' has so many overlapping meanings that it really means 'extensively re-complicated' and 'nasty' all along, especially when applied to a book like *Only Begotten Daughter*. This book moves continually between the whole range of ironies, often within the same sentence. The meaning that best applies to this book and science fiction in general would be dramatic irony: 'the quality or effect, or implication of a speech or situation in a play or the like understood by the audience but not grasped by the characters of the piece' (*Macquarie Dictionary*).

After looking through my critical books, I can find only one extended discussion of irony. That's in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, a book I've so far avoided reading because it's been used by bad writers of fantasy and science fiction to justify writing equally bad stories about superheroes and gods. Frye is actually a pretty sharp writer, although he bases his classification of narratives on the scheme offered by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago.

Frye gives a specific meaning to the 'ironic mode' in narrative:

'If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scheme of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic mode*. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or

might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom.'

Since Frye is not using the usual meaning of 'inferior' here, he sharpens his point by contrasting tragedy with irony. In a tragedy, the hero is an *alazon*, someone who 'pretends or tries to be something more than he is'. In irony, however, the hero is the *ieron*, the man who deprecates himself, and irony is 'technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning'. Here, to me, is the essence of irony.

James Morrow is very much an ironic writer, although he manages his effects not by saying too little, but by seeming to say so much that the statements cancel out each other and lead away from any direct statement.

Frye continues: 'The ironic fiction-writer, then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. Complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements is essential to this method.' One result is that often there is no particular reason why the hero should deserve the fate that falls on him or her. This is often the everyday use of irony.

How does all this relate to science fiction? This, I note, is not a question that Frye asks. He assumes that all fictions are interesting and valid, although they are telling us things we know not to be true. In this sense, all fiction is ironic.

It seems to me that science fiction is a particularly ironic form, although often it is also melodramatic or romantic. How often have I been asked by people who know nothing about science fiction: 'Do you *believe* in science fiction?' My jaw drops, and I say in disbelief: 'Of course not. Science fiction isn't the sort of thing you *believe* in.' The essence of science fiction stories is to throw up a series of possibilities. These possibilities could be extrapolated in some way from today's world, but they don't really have to be. The important thing is that they have some internal coherence and, like science experiments, are both explicable and disprovable. In other words, put a science fiction idea up in the air, then fire at it to test it to destruction. The whole process depends on contrasting possibilities. If you really think that any one of these possibilities is the *actual* way the world will go, this sours the experiment and produces nothing more than propaganda.

In *Only Begotten Daughter*, James Morrow goes one further. He bases his whole present and future world on an assumption that, even within the terms of the novel, is either a lie or as good as one. Scott Campbell has taken this as anti-propaganda, I suspect, and that's reasonable until you start to look at the complications of the book.

In Morrow's book, there is the solid world of the eastern seaboard of the United States. The New Jersey shore area he refers to is, as I found when I travelled through it by rail, one of the most desolate landscapes in the world, with its endless miles of marshes, rubbish dumps, and abandoned factories and other buildings. Atlantic City itself has fallen on hard times as an entertainment centre. It's a pretty good setting for an apocalypse novel, which is the basic category into which *Only Begotten Daughter* fits.

In Morrow's book, there is also a world that most of us, including the author himself, would regard as wholly fanciful. This is the religious superstructure, including heaven and hell, the Holy Trinity, the Messiah and the Second Coming that has come down to us from our traditional reading of the New Testament of the Bible. In the solid world, a baby named Julie Katz is conceived from the donated sperm of Murray Katz and no traceable donated egg, is raised to full term in an ectogenesis machine, and after birth is found to have supernatural powers similar to those ascribed to Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Because of the whole weight of religious belief that is shared by the characters, they come to believe that Julie Katz must be the daughter of God. Taking a lesson from the Gospels, her father Murray persuades her not to use her powers, since only crucifixion could await her.

Sure enough, there are forces enough who would kill her if they knew who she was. In Atlantic City, there are the forces of Reverend Billy Milk and the Revelationists. They expect the Second Coming of Christ any minute, and aim to put into practice the various horrors described in the Book of Revelation in order to hurry things up a bit. In other words, they are looking for the Anti-Christ. When they get wind of the existence of Julie, she fits the bill.

If that were all there were to the novel, it would be ironic, but basically just a realist novel set in the future. Morrow makes it into an ERNI by adding to his cast of characters the Devil himself. Disguised as a handsome fellow named Andrew Wyvern who keeps appearing when least expected, he aims to keep up the level of evil in

the world by persuading Julie Katz to begin a new Church that will replace the rather moribund Christian Church. To do this, he must persuade her to use her powers.

It's one of Northrop Frye's better points that the main character of an ironic text is a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat. What better scapegoat to use as a model than Christ, the kingpin scapegoat figure of western religion? Yet for this reason, the ironic character always comes full circle. Rather than being merely a character in a comic realistic irony like the characters in Zola's novels or those of Gogol, the ironic character in the twentieth century has often been turned into a legendary figure. For instance, there are Estragon and Vladimir, the two characters forever *Waiting for Godot* in Beckett's play, or Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*. The character who seems most distant from us, least like us, becomes the character who best represents the reader by becoming a mythic figure who represents all humanity.

In Western literature during the twentieth century, this has happened because of the nature of events during this period. It is the age of the innocent victim, where civilians are bombed instead of soldiers, and where millions of people can be hauled away by secret police for no clear reason.

James Morrow aims to write a comedy that will leave the reader weeping 'for every person who'd ever died for what someone else believed in'. He wants to skewer True Belief in all its forms, yet knows that it is not enough to write the same kind of book that every other twentieth-century writer has been trying for. Instead, he aims for a comedy that is so outrageous and entertaining that it turns itself inside out, and therefore can easily be interpreted as the opposite of what it is.

It's hardly surprising that even a critic as astute as John Clute might not have caught the full impact of *Only Begotten Daughter*. The book risks everything. Not only is Julie Katz presented as actually a rather ordinary but very resilient person who happens to be the daughter of God, but he puts the Devil on stage, then allows the Devil to take Julie off for a tourist's guide to hell. I'll leave this amazing middle section of the book for you to figure out. Morrow's joke is that he takes all the traditional literal ideas about hell and makes them into a highly entertaining fantasy world — a theme park of the infernal. He lists great catalogues of the horrors piled on people in Hell, then has the Devil tell us that everyone ends up there after death — even Murray Katz, even Christ himself. As Julie Katz

says when she returns to New Jersey: 'Everybody's damned. Earth is as good as it gets.'

Which lands the meaning of the book right back in the reader's lap. Most of us don't believe in a literal hell, or even in any life after death, but rarely do we allow ourselves to think through the implications of this disbelief. The implication stays the same: 'Everybody's damned. Earth is as good as it gets.' For people in Australia who have lived long lives that, until recent years, have been pretty prosperous and fulfilling, this message might not hit too hard. But in the 1980s Morrow has seen urban life in America deteriorate alarmingly, and no doubt has also seen real possibilities of the emergence of the fascist America that greets Julie when she returns from fifteen years in Hell.

For when Julie returns from Hell, she enters hell. The Devil only allows her to return if she will give up her divinity, which she does. The New Jersey she returns to has become an independent Revelationist state, ruled by Reverend Billy Milk and a group of fanatics who are trying to bring about the Second Coming by killing as many heretics as possible. There are daily public mass executions presented as entertainment. The gambling casinos of Atlantic City have been turned into religious shrines. The heretics are mainly the disciples of Julie Katz herself, having founded a church during her absence, just as the Devil intended. She finds her former boyfriend, and tries to persuade her followers to disband her Church. I'll leave the rest of the story to you.

Irony moves throughout every part of this book, especially its language. Every sentence is barbed with wonderful contradictory implications. Many of them revolve around the contradictions of being Julie. 'What good is it having God for a mother,' she says to herself, 'if she never sends you a birthday card? Why has God stuck you in this place, this filthy old Atlantic City . . . It isn't fair. Phoebe has a mother. Everybody does.'

In the first section of the novel she has powers, yet no power. She cannot fix the world. 'Like Jesus before you, you know you're not God. A deity, yes, but hardly cocreator of the universe . . . Jesus cured lepers, you often note, Jesus did not cure leprosy. Your powers have bounds; your obligations limits.'

In this novel, you see the Devil in all his splendour, but never set eyes on God. The Devil is a liar, anyway; 'not always, but most of the time'. We never find out if there is a heaven. Perhaps engendering the occasional human

child is the only way God make an impact on our world. Or perhaps it's all a gigantic lie, from beginning to end.

The net result is that, no matter what she does, Julie is powerless to help people, or even to give them any happiness. Evil is all-pervading and arbitrary. As the events of the twentieth century seem to prove, even the best intentions of the best people seem powerless against floods of evil.

Why does *Only Begotten Daughter* not leave the reader with a feeling of despair? At the basic level, it's a vast comedy. If it is a cruel world, it's also endlessly contradictory and amusing. There is a fairy-tale ending, which offends both Scott Campbell and John Clute, who fail to see that this is the final irony of the book. Of course in the

solid world shown in the novel the Julie Katzes of the world would not survive the depredations of Billy Milk's State of New Jersey. Of course God will never speak, or perhaps She's only a sponge after all. But the unlikelihood of the ending merely points up the bitter meaning of the rest of the book.

As Northrop Frye says, 'Irony never says exactly what it means.' No wonder many readers, even the best, don't get the meaning of ironic works. Readers less acute than Scott Campbell or John Clute often do not see where irony is intended, and are often offended by statements in fiction that seem to be the actual opinions of the authors. The great strength of *Only Begotten Daughter* is that it is a true ERNI:

an extensively recomplicated nasty irony. Morrow has found a way to present the whole range of human evil or good without wagging the finger at us to tell us what we should consider good or evil, or how we should live our lives. What might have been a sanctimonious allegory (which seems to be how Scott Campbell has taken it) becomes a vast, and vastly funny, tapestry, a combination of humour, realism, Biblical fantasy and political science fiction. *Only Begotten Daughter* is the best sf/fantasy novel for quite some years.

— Bruce Gillespie,  
19 September 1992

## Introducing . . .

# The George Turner Issue The Paul Voermans Issue

It's traditional to introduce a special section on a particular author by showing you a photo of him or her. I have lots of flattering photos taken of George Turner during the last 25 years, but not a single usable photo of Paul Voermans. You'll just have to attend the Nova Mob, first Wednesday of every month, to meet them for yourself.

**PAUL VOERMANS** is not yet well known outside Australia, although his first two novels have already made him lots of friends. He met some fans and writers while he lived in Britain for eight years, but is probably best remembered in Australia for his theatrical work during the late 1970s and 1980s. Having sold his novels to Gollancz in Britain, Paul now seems to have decided to be a Writer instead of an Actor.

**GEORGE TURNER** has been a contributor to my magazines since 1969. He is well known for his non-sf novels (including *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*, which won a Miles Franklin Award), his science fiction novels and short stories (*The Sea and Summer/Drowning Towers* won awards all over the place), and his reviews and criticism (see the Bibliography in this issue for a listing of a small percentage of his work). Recently George suffered a stroke, but made a remarkable recovery before I could send out this 'Get Well' issue of SFC.

Editions referred to in the following pages:

### PAUL VOERMANS:

*And Disregards the Rest*: London: Gollancz 0-575-05143-4; 1992; 256 pp.; hb £14.99 / A\$32.95.

*And Disregards the Rest*: London: Gollancz 0-575-05282-1; 1993; 256 pp.; pb £4.95 / A\$11.95.

*The Weird Colonial Boy*: London: Gollancz 0-575-05325-9; 1993; 302 pp.; hb £15.99 / A\$32.95.

### GEORGE TURNER:

*Brain Child*: New York: William Morrow 0-688-10595-5; 1991; 407 pp.; hb US\$20 / A\$28.50.

*The Destiny Makers*: Morrow Avonova 0-688-12187-X; 1993; 321 pp.; hb US\$20 / A\$28.50.

## Paul Voermans' first novel and the debatable craft of reviewing

by George Turner

Australian sf seems, after a number of doubtful starts, to have at last got its foot in the overseas door; it is being published in both England and America, not just occasionally but continuously. Damien Broderick may have been quiet of late (while assaulting the critical Groves of Academe at Deakin Uni) but the great world out there is becoming conscious of Terry Dowling, Leanne Frahm, Greg Egan, Sean McMullen and a few others, and soon should extend its awareness to Lucy Sussex and Rosaleen Love.

Having waved the flag for fourteen years or so in workshops, magazines and publishing houses, insisting always on an 'Australianness' in our native sf, I feel in my ageing bones an urge to dance when a new local writer makes the grade in world publication. That's what Paul Voermans has done, starting at the top with a first novel published by Gollancz, the main fount of British sf. They have also accepted his second. He is definitely *in*.

Paul Voermans' first novel is called *And Disregards the Rest*. (That title won't last long if an American house picks it up.) It is a good first novel, not without its problems, longueurs and imbalances, but still a 'good read' with all sorts of unexpected ingredients; its weaknesses are countered by very solid strengths. Above all, it is as Australian in its viewpoint and attitudes as anything could be, short of featuring an Aboriginal standing on Uluru to sing 'Waltzing Matilda', so much so as to make the Gollancz acceptance a mite surprising; the Brits don't usually go for anything quite so uncompromisingly determined to stand on its two Australian feet.

Perhaps the descriptions of bush and outback seduced them, for most seductive these passages are; they form one of the strengths referred to above.

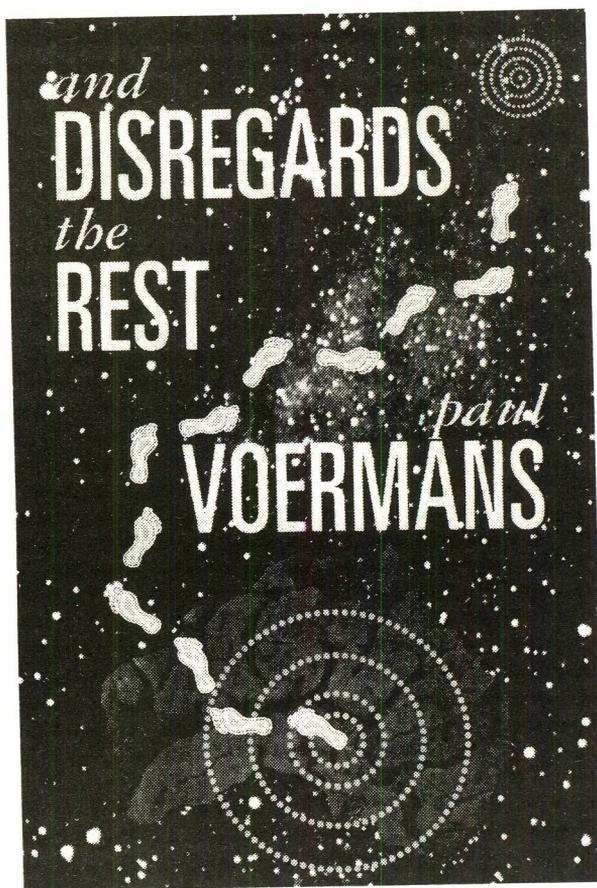
I don't propose to review this novel in a formal sense (let someone else stick his or her neck out) but to discuss certain aspects of the craft of the

novel in general, together with some of the less-publicised problems of the reviewer. *And Disregards the Rest* is not one of the great works of sf, but it is sufficiently fresh and individual to deserve the closest attention, not because of what Voermans has achieved but because of what he may achieve in later books.

Discussion of the plot would require a full page of itemising and cross-referencing, but the set-up, briefly, is this: A theatrical troupe is formed to produce Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in outback South Australia at the prompting of mysterious 'voices' in the head of Martin Leywood. The 'voices' are in fact a telepathic communication, and the play is concerned

with the visit of aliens to Earth. America's CIA is also aware and hostile, and destroys the production in a flash flood, killing all concerned but Leywood and actor Kevin Gore. Ten years later, Gore is tormented by the 'voices' and tries to set up another 'message play'; this time, against odds, he succeeds. The point is that the aliens are on their way and have to be warned off though they are friendly. (Why? Well, think of what our superior white culture has with the best of intentions done to Aborigines, Inuit, Amerindians, Zulus, Aztecs, Incas. . . . Only the Japanese have shown the intestinal fortitude to play back to the West its own unpleasant weapons of peace.)

The story is told in alternating



chapters, past and present, and requires some attention to make sure you have your cross-references right. A mistake? Probably not. It helps with the preservation of suspense and allows some nice observation of character forming and changing over time, and this is a novel in which such observations matter acutely.

My temptation, given such a plot, would have been to tell it straightforwardly, Part 1 in the past, Part 2 in the present. But I am not Paul Voermans, seeing the thing through his eyes, and I can't honestly say my plan would be a better one; it is just that I remember my own early work back in the sixties (mainstream stuff) and the temptation to use all sorts of unnecessary flourishes, inversions, curlicues and subtle references to let the reader know that he or she was dealing with a really smart literary intellect. Faced these days with the need to express complicated ideas as clearly as possible, I tend to discard the frills and buckle down to the business of being easily and immediately understood.

Now that I am up against the necessity of justifying my objection to Voermans' complication, I see that it probably stems from my lifelong association with theatre and theatre folk. The production of *The Tempest* is for me much more interesting than any number of orbiting aliens; having the play chapters cut off every ten pages or so for the next instalment of Gore's voices and love life irritates the hell out of me because Voermans is himself a theatre man who creates the theatre atmosphere extremely well.

You see now what can happen when two different reviewers are let loose on the same book! One will want *The Tempest*, the other will object that his avid pursuit of the aliens is constantly punctured by ten-year-old theatricals. They will give two utterly different accounts of the work — and in the middle will sit the author, cursing the guts of both. Beware of reviewers! After 25 years of it I know only too well what damage our private predictions can do to supposedly 'balanced' assessments.

Long, long ago (1977 actually) the young Paul Voermans attended the McIntyre-Priest-Turner workshop at Monash University and one of his stories written there, 'The Broken Butterfly', appeared in the memorial volume of workshop stories, *The View from the Edge*, which I edited and Northstralia Press printed. In my 'Editor's Note' to that story appears the following:

I suggested to Paul . . . that part of

his trouble was incomplete visualisation — that he saw in his mind only . . . the immediate object in the focus of his vision, whereas the writer must 'see' the total ambience of his characters, even though his final description uses only a few significant details. . . . Paul replied that no one had said this to him before, and that it provided a new outlook on his writing.

I don't remember saying this, but I'm glad I did, because the secret of impact on the reader is to know more than you reveal; in this way you are able to write with the conviction of knowing the scene intimately, and it is your conviction that carries the reader along with you. It should be said to every beginning writer. In Paul Voermans' *And Disregards the Rest* it comes home to roost.

He knows all about his characters, how they look, move and speak, and all about their surroundings of house, street or countryside. And his scenic descriptions are first class. But there is a problem: he becomes so bound up in his vision that he is unable to hold anything back. I felt sometimes that every bird, bush and insect had been pinned down with admirable precision and nary a one had been left out.

My reaction to this was threefold: (a) The eternal schoolmaster in me awarded full marks for observation transmuted into cherishable prose. (b) The novelist-technician in me noted a lack of balance between description and narrative, producing a stop-go effect that could be erased with judicious pruning. (c) The eager reader in me occasionally rose to cry out, 'For God's sake, get on with it, man, and stop dithering over the bloody magpies!'

If I were to write a review, which 'me' would surface? The appreciative or the chiding? I don't know. To add a complication, I discussed the book with Bruce Gillespie and found him almost lyrical in his appreciation of the countryside passages. So, there are four reactions to one topic — and a good case can be made for each of them. Not only but also — all four reactions can be held simultaneously by the same reader. There is nothing simple about a competent novel and nothing simple about an informed reaction to it. And how do you balance these personal conflicts in a review trying to give a coherent account of the book?

I also became impatient with the Gore character's snailspace approach to his love affair with Gemma; I could

have dispensed with a couple of those scenes altogether. But — and this 'but' is important because it tells much about the intangible qualities that are hard to grasp but make the difference between a successful novel and a failure — I never at any time became sufficiently irritable to lay the book aside. Voermans' prose has the unpindownable gift of compulsion, and compulsively I read on, noting objections but never deterred by them.

Then there is this matter of 'Australianness'. It is a quality that needs no stressing in the honest writer who is not tailoring his work to the requirements of American or English readers, who is writing what is in him to write rather than what he feels will be acceptable to Stanley Schmidt or David Pringle (both of whom are less insular than you may think). 'Australianness' is an attitude of mind. You can't fake it with a spattering of boomerangs, Koories, koalas and the Sydney Harbour Bridge; it lies inside you as a way of thinking, a mode of expressing yourself formed by the surroundings you grew up in. You may not be able to detect it in your own work, but the American or English reader will react to it at once.

Voermans has 'Australianness' in high degree, so high that I wonder the Gollancz editor did not try to tone it down. Sometimes it grated a little on me, too, particularly when he tried to present the sound of Australian speech.

Here is a one-line sample from Page 66, last line. (Kevin is speaking.)

'I've gotta see some people. Thanks for lunch; it was great. See ya.'

Correct? Of course it is. You'll hear it every day — if you are Australian. You know exactly how it sounds in real life. But do you know how it sounds to an English, Scottish or American reader? The Australian 'gotta' and 'ya' have entirely different uses and stresses from their American counterparts. The casual recognition of a lunch is close to rude by any overseas standard and difficult for strangers to interpret correctly. Also, our speech rhythms and stresses are different from theirs and they are unable to capture the sound of the speech from the printed page.

What the overseas reader receives is not recognisable Australianese but a foreign and offputting social attitude as well as a sentence construction slightly at odds with his own colloquial

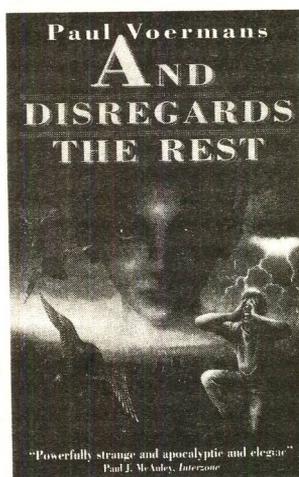
speech. The writer's transcription tells nothing about Australians because the sound and accent cannot be represented in print. The overseas reader will take unfamiliar words in his stride as long as the context makes their meaning plain (I had a minor battle over 'cooe' with the William Morrow editor of *Brain Child* — I lost) but his attention will jerk to a stop when he comes on something grammatically or rhythmically at odds with his own usage, because he doesn't know how it should be vocalised, or perhaps what its emotional connotations are, and it will raise doubts when he applies his own accent and pronunciation.

Here is an illustrative cautionary tale:

Years ago I wrote *Vaneglorry*, about half of which had a Glasgow setting. Having visited Glasgow and listened hard and having noted at least three separate Glaswegian dialects, I laboured hard to provide my Scottish characters with dialogue representative of the way their counterparts actually speak. Since I have a whole Glasgow family of friends here in Australia to check my dialogue, I called them in and they passed the work with a few minor emendations. But, remember, they read it with Glasgow accents.

When the book was published, the critical reaction was a blow to the author. Scottish reviewers for the most part found the dialogue unexceptionable or did not mention it at all, but the English reviewers, accustomed to having Scottish speech represented by the occasional 'hame' (home) or 'hoots, mon' (which I have never heard said) found my phonetic reproduction incomprehensible and hilarious and roasted me over a critical slow fire. It was a lesson worth learning — that a foreign speech cannot be represented phonetically because the reader reproduces it in his own accent and all your careful imitation goes for nothing.

A rule of thumb might be: let your characters speak a reasonably standard English — unless you are trying to show that one of them is poorly educated or has a specific speech idiosyncrasy, or you need a term like 'cooe' or 'yabbie' with no international equivalent. Even then, don't lay it on too heavily; the odd word here and there is enough to alert the reader to a strange culture. He will render the



speech in his own fashion so long as you don't continually hit him over the head with it. Try to recite 'Waltzing Matilda' with a Scottish accent and you will gain some idea of the problems involved.

My own reaction to much of Voermans' Oz dialogue was complicated by a lifelong familiarity with theatre folk telling me that most of them speak with some care (they are, after all, *taught* to speak) and are rarely bluntly ocker. (Or am I lost in the past? Has the situation changed? I must ask Voermans about it; his experience may be quite otherwise. That's another trap for the omniscient reviewer.)

Let's not reopen the hopeless argument re the difference between sf and fantasy. Suffice it that Voermans makes a few gestures towards the commonplaces of sf and avoids embroiling himself in devious semi-scientific explanations. He throws in aliens from the stars, communication across time and a few odds and ends of reference that commit him to nothing too adventurous. In effect, he says to the reader: 'You know all this stuff; I don't have to explain it to you', and gets on with his main business of character handling, which is excellent.

This leaves a curious fictional structure wherein the sf background is only an excuse for telling a tale about people under stress. This is a reversal of the usual procedure and makes an exhilarating change of focus, even if Kevin's love affair does take precedence over the fate of the Earth and the travails of

a theatrical company are accorded more loving detail than can be spared for a few interstellar visitors. In fact, after 90,000 or so words of wholly engaging narrative we know exactly nothing at all about the aliens. What they look like, where they come from, and the nature of their technology and culture remain hidden to the end. They are mere props in Voermans' theatre of the mind, crowd support for the struggles and self-questionings of a group of rather everyday terrestrial characters.

The extraordinary thing is that, for me at any rate, this cavalier reversal of sf values works like a charm. I accepted quite happily the brushing aside, in authorial terms, of the most momentous visitation in the history of the planet. Voermans has the true writer's gift of making you accept him on his own terms — and to hell with your traditional expectations.

Only once did I surface in questioning unbelief. There is a passage wherein Kevin holds up an Armaguard truck to bankroll his new theatre production. He does it precisely as instructed by his alien 'voices'. They tell him to do it that way because from a viewpoint in the future they have already seen him do it — and so can give spot-on directions. This confusion of cause and effect should traditionally cause a time loop (the sf writer's way of getting out of trouble) but apparently does not, and I defy even Stephen Hawking to tie that one in with his latest Theory of Everything.

And there you have it. There are enough things wrong with his novel to sink the collected writings of Tolstoy and Dickens.

And yet it works.

Isn't the greatest thing since sliced bread or even since John Carter travelled to Mars by simply wishing hard, but it is much more enjoyable, more likable than any random handful of Hugo and Nebula winners.

I suspect that *likable* is the operative word.

If a writer has charm, he needs little else. Criticism gives up in despair, its complaints unheard.

Writer Voermans has charm.

You will hear more of him. Much more.

— George Turner

# A man does what he has to do

by Don Ashby

Right here and now I have to state that I am a close friend of Paul Voermans, the author of *And Disregards the Rest*, the book under review. We have known each other longer than either of us care to contemplate in daylight. Objectivity is difficult.

With that disclaimer out of the way I will proceed with what cannot really be a review. I was probably the first person in Australia (outside the book trade) to read this novel. My impressions were unclouded by review or debate. That is not to say that I read it with equanimity. The reading of a close friend's first novel is to be approached with extreme caution, if not dread. Suppose I hadn't liked it?

Fortunately the book engaged me from almost the first page, and I read it with pleasure. As the weeks went by, local and overseas reviews appeared. Fan reviewers have always been eccentric and very varied in ability. The missives usually appear to the deafening screech of axes being ground. In this case, reviews from fans or the trade, either favourable or unfavourable, were mostly of indifferent quality. They seemed to lack any real attempt at a close reading of the text. How many good books have mouldered on remainder tables because of the casual attitudes of reviewers?

The book's narrative is divided chapter by chapter between the book's present and a period some twenty years in the past. The chapters dealing with the past are in the form of a manuscript written by Martin Leywood, one of the two protagonists. The contemporary account is an omni-narrative following the fortunes of Kevin Gore.

Both characters are survivors of a disastrous flash flood that destroyed an avant garde production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, killing most of the cast and crew. Was it an accident or was it murder?

Martin's account is of the events that lead up to this disaster and of the disaster itself, written just after the events it relates.

Twenty years later we find Kevin still emotionally paralysed by loss and beginning to doubt his own sanity.

First he hears voices speaking

poetry in his head; then he discovers his blood has gone blue and gelid. Wounds heal almost immediately.

While all this is going on, the long-suffering inhabitants of Earth are being subjected to increasingly frequent manifestations of personal and mass hallucinations. After much 'Who is Hecuba to whom' Kevin finally realises that these messages in his head are instructions, which he follows. The story, after many alarms, excursions and voices off, is resolved, by a series of eye-crossing temporal paradoxes.

The human condition of the characters and the unfolding of the plot are so much of a piece that it would be almost necessary to paraphrase the entire novel to describe them.

Both main characters have been deeply damaged psychologically by the *Tempest* disaster. Both lose lovers and friends in a shockingly sudden and brutal fashion; they both retreat into themselves. One has 'retired' to a lunatic asylum, and the other to a remote duck farm. Kevin's voices precipitate both of them back into contact with humanity. They each, pell mell and rather messily, acquire lovers. It is the development of these growing relationships as much as the attempt to save the world that provide the substance of the book.

Unlike most sf narratives, in which character and motivation depend mainly only the plot, in *And Disregards the Rest* the action of the story is imposed on the main characters, who are driven to save the world as much by their own problems and memories as by any of the altruistic or mercenary motives common in generic fiction. This may explain some of the *sotto voce* head-scratching evident in some reviews.

There are many delights in *Disregards*, not the least of them the ordinariness of the characters. Apart from the CIA agent, who is the least interesting character, the people you find within the covers are no more exceptional than you would find at the local. There are no supermen and superwomen here. The arrested adolescent has little opportunity to live out his

wish-fulfilment fantasies. Bandy-legged and blowsy, the men and women are memorably average. Even sex is problematic and fraught with failure and embarrassment. Transfiguration occurs only through the soggy hormonal persistence of developing love and affection and the exasperation of desires thwarted by circumstance and bloodmindedness. The women are neither hags nor Fay Ray. They move through the narrative shedding hairpins and dandruff, palpable and powerful in their sweaty roundness.

The landscape of Australia — wild, rural and urban — is not the *Mad Max* gritty wasteland of the conventional Australian sf novel. Here we have careful writing. Voermans describes with perceptive affection, once or twice just avoiding mawkishness, many snapshots of Australia that shine like pieces of well-lit scenery framing the action. In his 'Mythago' series, Robert Holdstock captures the essential mouldering deciduousness of the northern forest. In *Disregards* we find the antithesis — brittle aridness, surprised by water; the angularity of foliage growing from the wornout bones of our southern continent. The descriptions are realised with economy and a satisfying absence of adjectival clutter.

Paul Voermans' writing career was interrupted by a protracted foray into the theatre. He became an accomplished mime, puppeteer and mask-maker. (One of his busking turns was *All the Decorator Gator* written by none other than Terry Dowling in his foray into show biz.) It is not surprising that his first novel should revolve around a theatrical event. The writing also reveals the sort of obsessional concentration necessary to and developed by such demanding craft forms.

A close reading of the climactic chapter, describing the assault on the theatre company in the desert, reveals a tight pacing and rhythmic power. The snapshot description of the deaths of the cast and crew employs a style more usual in a film treatment, giving the writing a pace that sets the adrenalin going, revealing individual horror in the way seen in video grabs of a news broadcast.

The novel is innocent of the 1960s. Nowhere do you find that sense of cheated altruism symptomatic of the generation of greying hippies. The disillusionment and grief are personal and angry. *Disregards* also avoids the cluttered bric a brac of the postmodern preoccupation with the ephemeral. Paul Voermans is literate in and aware of the artificial stylism of novelists like Martin Amis, but it is all grist to be ground. This novel calls to mind the paintings of Dali and Magritte. It is not surreal in the accepted sense, but it does deal with time, the persistence of

remembered images, and the way our nerves are shredded and our backs are bowed.

At the end of the book I was left with a curious nostalgia. Notwithstanding that the end is weaker than the rest, I felt that I was looking back on something that had happened to me. I felt that the pages of fractious banter, fumbled affection and general getting on with it had included me in a piece of life that I wouldn't have missed for all the tea in China and half the rice.

This is not the Great Australian Novel, nor even the Great Australian

SF Novel. The book has flaws. The paradoxes could have been more clearly confusing. Some scenes, especially the love scenes, tended to become sentimental and naïve. The pace, so well controlled up to the apocalyptic disaster, falters at the end. Despite these difficulties, *And Disregards the Rest* is a damn good read, and a second reading is rewarding. If you can't afford the hardback, it is now out in paperback.

— Don Ashby

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### PAUL VOERMANS ISSUE, PART 3

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## Write your bloody heart out: Re-regarding *Disregards*

### Paul Voermans in reply

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Chris Priest once told me not to expect anybody to say anything useful or even perceptive about my writing for a good long time. Or something to that effect. Then perhaps Damien Broderick would write a solidly academic article for some low-circulation publication examining some story or other and picking up all those little things over which you laboured so hard.

Labour is right.

There is for me an element of escapism in *Disregards* that manifests itself not in aliens or in suspense or even in homesick raves about bandicoots. My escapism exists in a cherished layering of possible readings aimed at someone almost as diligent as the writer. An improbable guest in your internal theatre. It exists because writing is jolly good to do when you have to work at three jobs at once just to pay an exorbitant English rent with no possibility of a Job Search Allowance or any other comfortable post-industrial euphemism for not knowing what you want to do. Thus no matter how difficult you make your fictional problems, there is always talk talk talk in your ears as you pack frozen faggots on dark winter days or scour toilets. There is the joy of music ineffable. Some people have Walkpersons. I can't abide the tangly

earplugs and couldn't afford the batteries anyhow.

Many journalists see writing and reading as a job. In this unfortunate life-problem lies the imagined dichotomy between escapist entertainment and quality. What about being entertained by quality itself? Why not fun in meaning? Many sf readers have a perception of writing as a sport and of 'their' writers as happy practitioners of tall stories backed up by reasonably convincing bull-dust. Of course we are professional. Naturally. We would not be blessed with the likes of *Chung Kuo* otherwise. But as has been pointed out interminably, a great number of us could be making oodles from all kinds of other pursuits. Some of us should. Perhaps the best and wisest of us do and drop out of the field for years on end. I was incompetent enough to put myself in the position of having to write to remain sane.

Never mind the critics. Never mind selling it. Write your bloody heart out. All the more joy can be scooped by learning a thing or two about your craft. And this is how I sold my first novel. Wouldn't it be nice to be published by the mob that gave me Ballard and Shaw and Le Guin? The idea was admittedly in the back of my mind as I

sent it off to Gollancz for some feedback. But it was feedback I was after. It took me a dozen years to convert the fear of criticism I first met at the '77 SF Writers' Workshop into a hunger for it. There are worse things than a roomful of writers' egos and the misfortune of early praise.

Not receiving any criticism is such a thing.

One of the several rawhides of criticism at which I gnawed during my time of wanting-to-write-but-never-getting-around-to-it was George Turner's editorial comment on my story in *The View from the Edge*. If you can't always write about what you know intimately, then lie outrageously and you will surprise yourself with what you *do* know. Even if you don't lie, surprises will come out of subordination to your characters. This is a gross misinterpretation of what each of the three professionals told us at one time or another. It comes out of gnawing at comments until they transmute. My first attempt at a longer piece of fiction constantly surprised me with its forms. Later I tried to undo some of the unnecessarily complicated plotting, but I was dissuaded from producing an entirely squeaky-clean unfolding by my editor. The novel was planned and



did not 'write itself' in the sense that God picked me as His Mozart of sf. It grew till it reached the maximum length my abilities could then nurture.

First it was a novella. Quite a different form of the first-person Martin Leywood chapters in the finished piece. It ended with an image so mysterious it kept me awake pondering. (Which was later diced.) As usual, I had included so much subtext that the story was incomprehensible. You wouldn't think this was a habit of mine from a reading of my rather slight effort in the workshop collection. I did want to be deep. A mixture of youth and workshopitis was responsible. Now I want simply to engage. To engage simply.

However, the habit of being deep meant a story in which single words had to bear whole realms of meaning, and if you missed those signals you missed the entire point of the story. What? You didn't catch the significance of the three-toed sloth on the refrigerator in the scene where she finally gets up and leaves the kitchen table? How could you. The sense that a

young writer must finish work for criticism gives an impatience that in my case prevented stories reaching their appropriate lengths. And naturally passing stories around for comment is the writer's primary purpose. I was free from that sense Massah Bob. I knew nobody in England except for my fiancé. My escapist tactic made deepness a game. At last here was the compressed story and the angle at which to stuff around with it. And the motivation.

The improbable guest for whom I plotted *Disregards* in order to get sleep to get to work to prevent deportation will one day notice the fact that the science-fictional elements in my first novel are not the multiplicity of sf devices in it. They are my concerns with a definition of 'progress' and with landscape as a matter of cultural perception (it is as relative as a culture's religious imagery) and with aliens as a notion rather than as a manifestation of a universe that is stranger than we can imagine. None of these three ideas occurred to me *consciously* before the

first draft was written. Nor do they matter much. Just yet.

I am learning to be philosophical about the activities of critics in relation to these issues. Who cares if they are not discussed? After all, I did have enough fun discovering them and playing with them in the first place. No need to be greedy.

As the quite kind and often generous responses to *Disregards* continue, I've begun to reassess what Chris Priest said. There are so many comments that come in at angles I never expected and illuminate many areas that will give me more enjoyment in my escapism. More rawhides. Chris Priest has over twenty years' experience at his craft. I have less than four. Perhaps one day I shall feel the same. It is after all taken for granted that a writer's craft has been mastered after the first half dozen odd novels. Until then I shall take the rawhides and gnaw. Yum yum.

— Paul Voermans

## Two views of *The Weird Colonial Boy*

by Judith Raphael Buckrich and Bruce Gillespie

### Give us less to give us more

by Judith Raphael Buckrich

*The Weird Colonial Boy*, Paul Voermans' second novel, is, whatever else, an interesting read. I experienced quite violent and contrasting emotions about and because of it. At times I really didn't feel as though I could finish the novel, and then I couldn't put it down.

For those who have not read Voermans' first book *And Disregards the Rest*, the prose style itself will provide a new and challenging experience. It is very florid and dense.

The story itself is not complicated. Nigel, an awkward, pimply boy in his late teens, living a frustrated life in what is supposed to be an ordinary Melbourne in 1978, is mad about exotic fish, which he purchases from an ex-Nazi chicken sexer-fish importer. As we enter Nigel's world he is about to purchase a few specimens of the almost extinct Fool's Gold swordtail. Since he bikes from one side of Melbourne to the other to make the purchase, Voermans takes the opportunity to introduce us not just to Nigel but to the Melbourne he lives in. This is fairly important in the light of things to come: Nigel will soon experience a very different Melbourne.

Nigel himself is dopy and endearing and not without hints of the hidden talents he will soon use to survive. The swordtails in themselves are no more mysterious or thrilling than any rarity is to any enthusiast. But one of them keeps disappearing. Nigel realises that

something extraordinary is going on, and without further ado (his life is not such a big thrill that he can't afford to take a few risks and perhaps change it), he sets up an elaborate contraption to follow the fish into 'nowhere'.

His attempt is successful, and he finds himself in what turns out to be an alternate Australia in another 1978: an Australia of convicts, inquisitorial laws and a terribly cruel morality. He introduces this other Australia quickly by describing the landscape and some of the people living there.

In this other world we find all kinds of strange parallels with the 'real' Australia, and even more often, familiar people who have nothing in common with their counterparts of the same name in Nigel's 'real' world. Voermans, having done quite a bit of research into the politics and history of our world, humorously alters it to suit his very strange sense of reality (realities?).

All this is fine. The shadow of one world behind the other works well, as do the characters and landscape. Yet despite all its charms, the book can be exasperating. I found the description of Nigel's contraption for escaping our world almost incomprehensible, and still annoying once I'd understood it. But it seems that in Voermans' world everything is always complicated.

There is a kind of rule in the theatre that if you're playing the part of a

drunk you must reel around the stage for only a short while. Having established the fact, you need remind the audience of it only now and again. You must not 'act' drunk all the way through the play because that gets very tiring, and takes away all credibility from the character.

It is this consideration that Voermans should apply to his writing, which is altogether too full of description and cleverness. He does not give us a chance to get into the story before rolling us into yet another distraction that is certainly imaginative but sometimes altogether off the point.

On the other hand, this detail is the precisely what is so endearing in Voermans' work. How he would refine it without losing it is not clear, but he should attempt it.

The last part of the book, in which Nigel and his New World friends form a 'revolutionary' theatre company, is full of wild images and concepts, yet we never quite believe that the bushranging theatre would actually cause its audiences to change and become more enlightened in the way intended.

Voermans is obviously a gifted writer, and worth reading. I just wish he would give us less and thus perhaps give us more: less colour and more form. I can recommend *The Weird Colonial Boy*, and have no doubts that you will enjoy most of it.

### The other Australia

by Bruce Gillespie

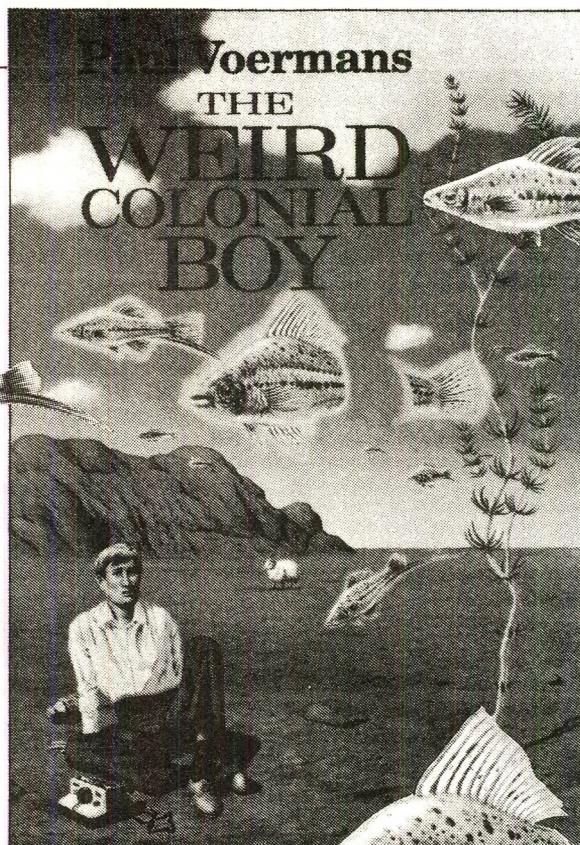
With his second novel, *The Weird Colonial Boy*, Paul Voermans continues to show that he is one of Australia's most able new writers. Like his first novel, *And Disregards the Rest*, the new book is thought-provoking and

merry, dense and entertaining.

There is only one hiccup to Voermans' otherwise brilliant career: his novels are hard to find in Australia. Voermans has been afflicted by the same problem that faces any Aus-

tralian author whose books are published first overseas: almost complete neglect by local reviewers and prize-givers.

The irony is that *The Weird Colonial Boy* is richly Australian in a way that is missing from much locally published



fiction. Voermans asks the question: what the hell are we doing frittering away our time on this rich continent at this end of the twentieth century? Are we asleep? How should we be awoken?

Nigel Donohoe, the book's main character, is a sublimely naïve teenager floating along in the directionless world of Australia 1978. He's nuts about punk rock and tropical fish. When he buys a tank full of very rare fish, he finds that one of them keeps disappearing. Convinced that the fish is disappearing through a 'gate' into outer space or some other time-space dimension, Nigel devises a way to travel through the gate. He is shocked at what he finds.

At first it seems that Nigel has been the victim of a fairly standard science fiction ploy: the trip into an alternate time stream. He finds himself in Australia 1978, but a painfully different country from the one he has just left. Its British masters, steeped in a Catholic-Mahommedan worldview that took over Europe in the sixteenth century, have never allowed the continent to become much more than a convict settlement. Most Australians are convicts or guards, each group dominated by the lore of the prison. There are some

rich landowners and, of course, some people who huddle in rather ramshackle 'cities'. Much of the country is still unexplored.

Quickly Nigel discovers that he looks just like a famous bushranger of the district. Clapped into irons, he suffers every pain and indignity that might afflict any convict without actually killing him. Once his back begins to heal after suffering 100 lashes, he learns how to survive in this cruel yet vivid society.

Voermans tells his grim story with much humour as well as pathos. Nigel can't help taking the mickey out of the people he meets, which is why he's always in trouble. At the same time, he learns to love life itself in a way that escaped him when he was a gormless drongo in our suburban Melbourne 1978. He discovers how these rough characters preserve their humanity despite every temptation to lose it. He discovers two purposes in life: to return to Catherine Samuelson, the girl he meets at the beginning of his pilgrimage; and to find a way to subvert the rusty conservative viewpoint of this world.

Not that Voermans is saying that our world is the 'right' one while the alternative Australia is a disaster. In the

alternative Australia Nigel discovers that every breath of life is precious, that every day promises excitement and humour as well as possible disaster. In 'our' Australia, Nigel's life had seemed pointless. In the 'other' Australia, everything has meaning, but anybody might die pointlessly at any time.

Voermans preserves the conventions of the alternative-world story while subverting its assumptions. As you might expect, eventually he returns Nigel to our world, where he finds he can use the knowledge he gained from his rite of passage. But so successfully has Voermans rendered the other Australia that he makes the reader reluctant to leave it.

As he did in *And Disregards the Rest*, Paul Voermans writes with a Shakespearean delight in the multiple possibilities of language. Humour and disaster, adventure and epithets tumble over each other. The Australian countryside and people burst out of the pages, yet we are always reminded that this is an alien Australia, one that destroys any complacency we might have about our current assumptions. You will have difficulty finding this book, but find it.

- Bruce Gillespie, June 1993

## Author with open eyes

by Paul Voermans

**Reviewed:**

**CALL TO THE EDGE**

by Sean McMullen

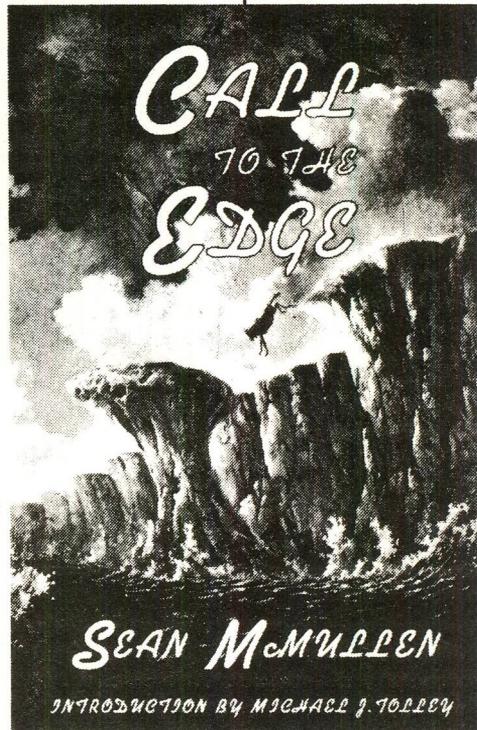
(Aphelion 1-875346-06-6;

1992; 245 pp.; A\$12.95)

Boy, is it ever good to be back in Australia! Why can't you get Aphelion titles in them dratted English bookshops? Perhaps it's just another case of lack of horse sense in the book trade and they'll catch up eventually when they realise there's money to be made from these books. Such a happy event for Aphelion would, however, deprive talented new authors like Sean McMullen of the opportunity of selling great stuff like this short-story collection again, separately, to a bigger market, which would be preferable since it's difficult to handle distribution efficiently at such a distance. And given the success the obvious intelligence and care invested in these nine pieces ought to find him, it won't be long before overseas editors are asking for a Sean McMullen collection (if they haven't already done so).

The cover of *Call to the Edge* has a jaunty and at the same time disturbing quality, which I think well reflects Sean McMullen's stories. As to its worth as a book cover — ah, I have heard that Nick Stathopoulos is gaining a good reputation here, but judgment of this sort of business definitely lies outside the bounds of my competence. Budapest the cat, though, leapt onto my lap and bit into one corner. Normally she only bites toes and handbags — what this means readers will have to decide for themselves. I did not like the footnotes, which is merely taste, I suppose, and it did not stop me reading them with interest. Otherwise, hail Aphelion!

Mr McMullen is a computer systems analyst, and he must be a good one if he goes about it with the same assiduity he brings to writing. His exposition of scientific ideas is methodical and clear, he does his homework, and although once or twice he errs on the side of assuming his audience's intelligence is a little too

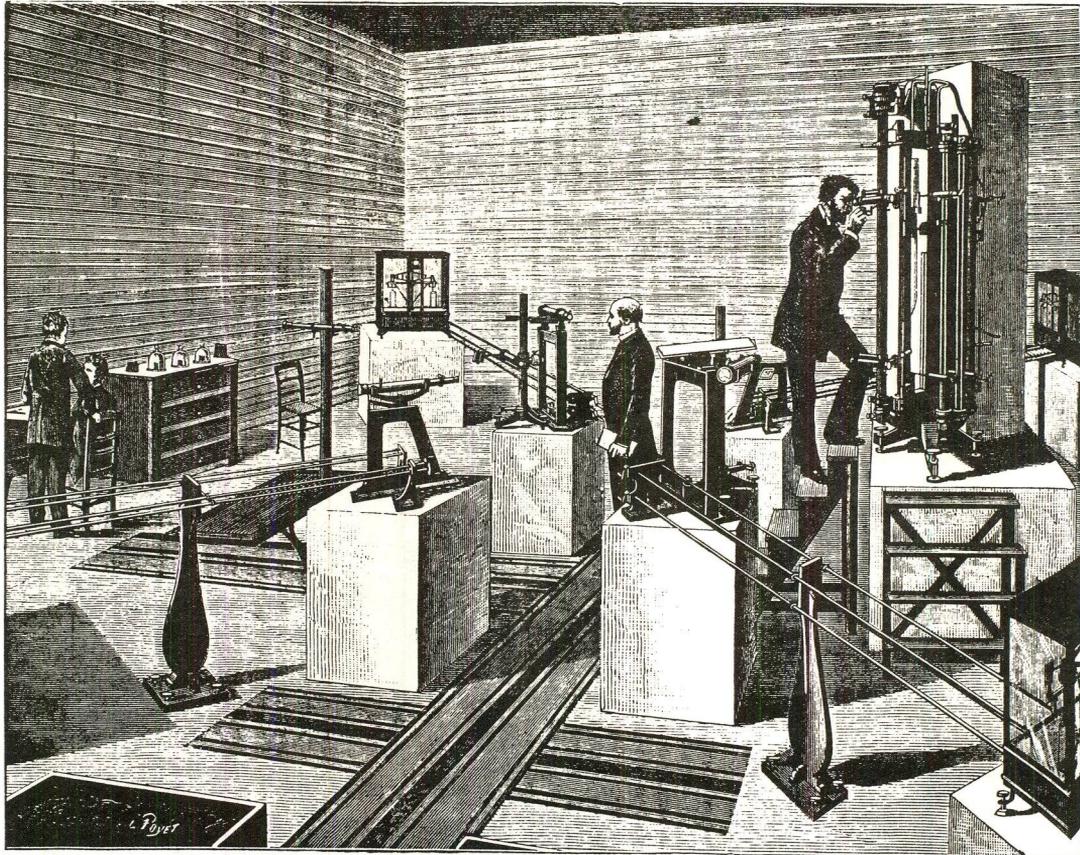


high (at least, higher than mine), I would rather he did things this way around than the other. He doesn't go in for notions he can't explain except when absolutely necessary, nor does he contradict what is known to be known. Future science will be inexplicable and unbelievable almost by definition, as far as I can tell, but then Sean McMullen's not exactly obsessed with future science: past science and future science retarded crop up in 'The Eyes of the Green Lancer', 'Destroyer of Illusions', 'The Deciad', 'Pax Romana' and in his nicely judged one about bringing back Chopin for a few more gigs, 'The Colours of the Masters'. An interest in history figures blatantly in six of the nine pieces of this collection, and it informs nearly every word in the book. Here is a man concerned about the nature of science and our attitude to progress, as well as about the future of Truth and Beauty.

I like a certain nasty quality in some of his ideas, as in the two stories set in a greenhouse-affected future, where

the 'Call' drives people south, no matter who they are. The (partial) explanation of how and why the impulse is generated made me smile at its toothy horror. 'The Eyes of the Green Lancer' and 'Destroyer of Illusions' are part of a planned longer work — or one growing piecemeal, I'm not sure — and I look forward to reading the whole caboodle, even to the extent of waiting until they're all out before reading them all at once so as to increase the pleasure of immersion in it. So don't let them grow into an interminable series, Mr McMullen, because I want to read them *sometime*.

And speaking of nasty, his willingness to confront with open eyes the ugly decisions that we might have to or want to make is refreshing, possibly because he asks himself questions like, 'How would most people I know react to this?' rather than basing his work on any Grand Theories of 'human nature'. This is especially evident in my favourite story, 'The Dominant Style', in which hard decisions have been made



concerning our destructive and unplanned use of the world in a tale bringing together genetic engineering and the relativistic effects of space travel as well as an enthusiasm for the neat objects of art deco and a use of its complacency I have never seen before. Ballard seems to be an influence here, from the beautiful people living pointless lives right down to the scarred aviator, although I could detect no conscious dipping of the lid to the great man. Perhaps McMullen has read the theorists, because he certainly does not have the clichéd scientist's naivety about the moral outcomes of scientific work, but if so his head is screwed on too tightly for him to deviate from sense.

Not that he has no humour. It's evident in a few places here, mostly in the form of little chortles and in the delight he takes in some of his inventions, a few of which have to be read to be believed.

A few quibbles: while his ear for

dialogue and his own voice are mostly on target, McMullen sometimes descends to stilted translatores or received romance, which does intrude when his usual prose shows a no-frills, if formal, ease. This is most evident in the historical numbers. He does have the excuse of using a translator as a character in 'The Deciad'. This could rather be seen as supporting an argument for the best qualities of translations instead of the use of archaic English.

And most of this work is plot-driven. I confess it's something I wish I were better at myself and I admire it in McMullen's work, but the subordination of character to events lends a fatalistic grey to his stories at times; if his people seemed more unpredictable it would distract me from trying to second-guess the plot, I reckon. Too often in science fiction writers treat their characters the way they do their ideas. In trying for 'originality' rather than examining the people around

them with as much as they can muster, they come up with cartoons, which is okay if you know you're doing it and why, but unfortunately this is not usually the case. The twins in 'The Colours of the Masters' come to mind.

However, these elements will no doubt improve under a hand as thoughtful as Sean McMullen's. I found myself making excuses for remaining with the book after I should have risen to do other things: a good sign. This man patently enjoys what he's doing and that's well communicated to the reader along with the fascination he has for subjects as diverse as classical music, computer science, war, and European history. What will he delve into next? I rub my little mitts together when I think of the prospect, and it ain't just because of the nippy Melbourne winter, believe me. Hello Aphelion. Hello Mr McMullen.

— Paul Voermans, 1992

## Turner's compelling vision

by Wynne Whiteford

Following the success of *Brain Child*, which received the *New York Times*' 'Notable Book of the Year' award, George Turner's *The Destiny Makers* is arguably the most effective novel yet by an Australian author in any category. Its power stems from the fact that the writer has no inhibitions about looking hard and long at unpopular subjects that most people pretend do not offer any serious threat to our way of life. In this case, the conflict arises from the impact of the remorseless growth of human population on the steadily shrinking fund of irreplaceable resources.

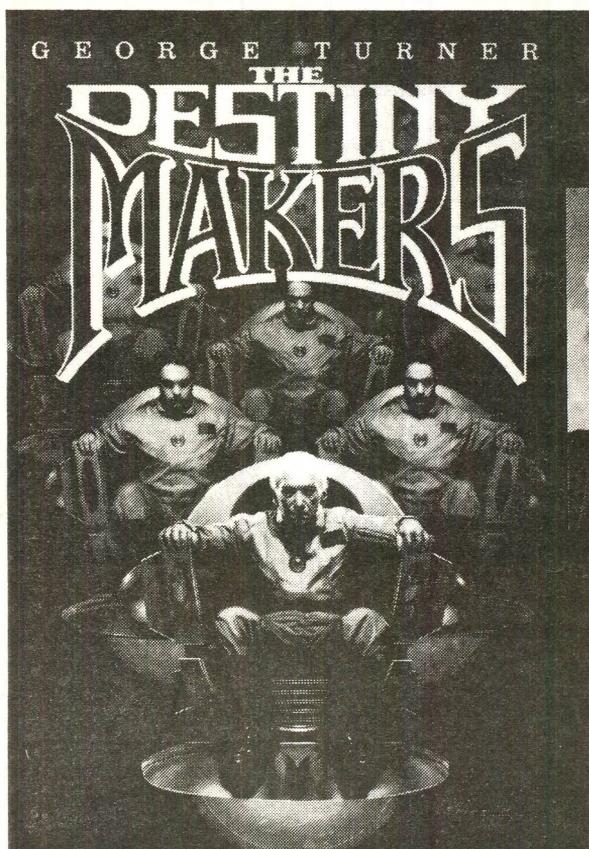
*The Destiny Makers* introduces us to a world of the year 2069, where the population of the Earth has reached twelve billions, and where 'every home has its vegetable patch as a matter of necessity'.

The first and main viewpoint character is a policeman called Harry Ostrov — a name first used by his Ukrainian great-great-grandfather, who derived it from an anagram of his home town, Rostov. Isolated chapters switch to the viewpoints of three other people, but the story always returns to the eyes of Ostrov.

At the beginning of the book, Harry Ostrov is thirty years of age. His parents had married in the decade that has been dubbed the Dancing Thirties, 'that last decade of nonsense and thin-ice gaiety before history tightened its grip around the human race'.

With too many people in the world, there lurks at the back of everyone's mind the unmentioned concept of the 'cull' of surplus population that must come at some unspecified future date. The two most outrageous crimes against society are the unlicensed birth of children and the medical treatment of terminal disease, both of which would add to the crushing population pressure.

Ironically, medical science has developed techniques for defeating the effects of ageing and the extension of human life. I know only one book that has as its theme the conflict between potential immortality and the pressure of world population — Jack Vance's *To*



*Live Forever*, set in a future in which certain privileged individuals could attain immortality; there, when one person was granted unlimited extension of his lifetime, a team of Assassins went out that night and eliminated 2000 expendable 'no-hopers' to maintain the balance.

Turner's world does not deal with the problem by that solution, but simply by making the extension of life illegal. Here is the source of the novel's central situation. Jeremy Beltane, Premier of Victoria, has been trained as a politician by his father, who had had a 'long and influential parliamentary career ... a "numbers man", a valuable henchman to four State premiers in different administrations'.

When Alzheimer's disease removes the father from the political scene, Beltane uses his influence as premier to keep the older man secretly alive until, thirty years later, science

has reached a point where he can be brought back to active life as a hidden adviser to his son, who has lacked his political shrewdness and allowed the mounting complexity of problems of government to overwhelm him.

Turner's vision of Melbourne two-thirds of the way through the next century is compelling. He excavates his scenario layer by layer as it is seen through the eyes of different characters, all of them believable and drawn in unexpected detail.

At one level, the novel is a story of political intrigue. At another, it explores intricate personal relationships. And outside and beyond these fields, it takes in a wide sweep of future history — pessimistic, maybe, but inescapably credible.

— Wynne Whiteford,  
September 1993

This article began as George Turner's talk to the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group) in November 1992. Unfortunately, nobody taped that talk. George agreed to reconstruct it from his outline. This note accompanied this reconstructed version: 'I know this is not the speech I made. It is the speech I should have made.' The speech that George made was pretty good as well.

## The receiving end of criticism

by George Turner

We write our reviews, scatter praise and blame, and exercise our deadly wit; we demonstrate in piercing commentary that we are not deceived by the novelist's camouflaging tricks of the trade, that we know his or her work is mere pandering to a tasteless semi-literate fandom.

The reviewer's estimate may be right. Again, since he or she is a human being and therefore fallible, it may be wrong, mistaken, even prejudiced and, in its assumption of authority, cruel and unjust.

Yet how often does the reviewer pause to consider the effect on the feelings of the writer (as often as not a forty-hour wage slave, writing with love in spare time) who has spent a precious year producing the vilified book, been rewarded with rather less than an apprentice's wage for an equal number of hours, and seen it dismissed with disdain by some columnist who has, as likely as not, read it in a hurry to meet a deadline?

An adverse review can hurt; any writer will tell you so, if he is honest about it. There are many, in and out of science fiction, who claim never to read reviews. They are, in greater part, fiddling with the truth; they always seem to know just what So-and-so said about their last novel and, through rigid lips, are not prepared to discuss it. Most suffer in silence and hope for a better reception for their next book. Occasionally a misguided writer will defend his or her book publicly against a particularly offensive attack — and will immediately be suspected and accused of being a conceited twit who can't take criticism.

Nevertheless we live in a placid world by comparison with the previous century, when critics would and did ruin writers with vicious attacks that no editor would print today, and were sometimes incited to do so by unscrupulous rival publishers. (There is a remarkable passage in Balzac's

novel *A Harlot High and Low* in which a venal journalist shows a new employee how to write two reviews of the same novel, one praising and one damning, using precisely the same references and quotations in each.) The reviewing game is less savage today, but every now and then the bile surfaces and personal animus takes precedence over literary fair play. You have to read many reviews and do much cross-checking to uncover who has it in for whom, but the evidence will emerge. Among fan reviewers this hardly matters, but among the literati there is more bloodletting than is generally realised.

Even in the middle ground of magazine and newspaper contributors the odd axe may be wielded with intent to split the skull, while fanzine reviewers tend only to worship their favourites of the moment and tersely dismiss the competition. I doubt that these fan notices have any effect on sales beyond spreading knowledge of a book's existence (the publishing trade commonly acknowledges word of mouth as the most effective sales promotion) but they are often a necessary item because — as in the case of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club and no doubt others — books are given them for review, and simply ignoring them might cause the source that helps fill their club library shelves to dry up.

Even *Locus* reviews must be suspect. Its stable of columnists reviews dozens of sf books every month and gives the unwary reader the impression that the market is flooded with first-class sf and fantasy, rarely coming down hard on even a demonstrably substandard work. But — the suppliers of these volumes for review are also the publishers whose advertisements provide a considerable part of the *Locus* income. The reviewers have to tread a fine line. The reader must be wide awake at times to spot the covert information that *Vampires from the Hell*

*Planet* (or some equally awful title) is a real clunker.

Excessive caution, unbridled mayhem and wide-eyed adoration tend to undermine the credibility of all other reviewers.

My professional reviewing career began in the *Melbourne Age*, and continued for about fifteen years of fairly regular columns covering both sf and mainstream works. Having read sf since 1927, by the sixties I knew just how unsatisfactory the general run of the genre was, and often had trouble finding worthwhile books to fill a column. I quickly gained a reputation for savaging helpless authors and their product, not because I lashed out at all and sundry (an actual count shows that I commended three out of every four books reviewed) so much as because I occasionally took the mickey out of popular blockbusters like *Bug Jack Barron* and *Starship Troopers*, which seemed to me unreasonably praised for minuscule virtues. Readers took my disagreement as slurs on their taste and intelligence.

And so it may have been, because I realise now that I had a bad case of schoolmasteritis, which is a sense of magisterial freedom to lay down the law. It tends to be endemic among freshman reviewers who wish to impress their editors with their breadth of vision, depth of understanding and subtle intelligence. Usually it doesn't last long — but long enough to attract narrow-eyed attention from the criticised. I had several letters from outraged Australian mainstream authors pointing out my sins of omission and commission and demanding grovelling apology. My editor left me to deal with them, and there was only one occasion on which I had to admit myself in error, defenceless and wrong, but there were several narrow squeaks.

I learned caution, a good lesson for any reviewer, who should observe from the outset (a) that statements must be factually incontrovertible and (b) that the more abstract summations are the opinions of one person and other evaluations are possible. It pays to be aware at all times that several publishers' readers and probably two house editors recommended the book for publication (which meant spending a few thousand dollars on it) and therefore to look for the plus values that made them think it a worthwhile investment.

This means more than simply questioning the authority of your own statements; it means asking what another reader, with a different caste of mind, might make of the book. In other words, is your criticism too much guided by your personal tastes and prejudices? This is difficult and can be chastening, but will pay off.

One should also consider what sector of the reading public is aimed at and whether or not it satisfies that sector's standards and requirements. Is it good of its kind or merely production-like non-literature for the tasteless? If the former, modify your strictures accordingly; if the latter, why review it at all?

These rules appear simple, but are not easily followed. The reviewer's vanity is at least as great as that of the author, and the sense of power occludes his or her vision. It may take years to unlearn these things. Some never achieve the balance. I can confess now, with a quarter-century of reviewing behind me, that I unlearned too slowly.

My own career as a novelist was singularly free from adverse reviewing — at first. With a Miles Franklin Award (for *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*) filling my head with dreams of glory and gaining me more respect in the profession than I deserved, I went on to my first custard-pie-in-the-face.

Capitalising on my experience with Alcoholics Anonymous, I wrote *A Waste of Shame* and discovered, the hard way, that I was not destined for literary glory. First, my publisher disliked it and agreed to handle it only under protest. Then the local critics disliked it and treated me to a few doses of head-shrinking medicine; one headed his review 'A Resounding Plonkle' (I can laugh now), which nearly brought on manic depression. I knew that feeling, familiar to the writer, of having been crucified, naked, in public, exposed to the ridicule of guffawing millions.

In fact, nobody noticed; the novel

died the death in the bookshops; only the libraries bought it on the strength of my Miles Franklin. It received only one wholly favourable review — in the AA 'house' magazine. I wrote it off to experience until, many years later, Public Lending Right became law — and I discovered that *A Waste of Shame* had possibly the largest readership of any of my mainstream novels. Thirty years later it is still paying me a few hundred dollars every year.

So much for the power of the critics! There is no need to end it all by flinging yourself from the top of a pile of unpublished manuscripts.

Rereading, I see that it wasn't so bad a book, and in any case the next one retrieved the lost critical ground. (Only Tom Keneally panned *The Lame Dog Man* — then wrote to apologise!) After that I published no fiction for ten years, during which time I became the reviewer known to science fiction as 'acerbic', 'fierce', 'destructive' and a blaster of reputations. Looking back, I think the reason for so much laying about me with scourges was that after forty years of reading sf I was fed to the teeth with its juvenile pretensions. I realise now that I was floundering in the beginnings of a more adult sf and failing to observe it. (Am I alone in perceiving that the present semi-artistic postmodern pretensions of the sf scene represent another rite of passage through another phase of juvenility? The number of novels praised each month as being equal in literary skills to the work of the best mainstream writers is laughable. Sf will grow out of it as it did before.)

There were occasions when I published remarks I later regretted, but not many. One that I would erase, if it could be done now, concerned Robert Silverberg, who had published a novel whose name I no longer remember, recalling only that one of the leading characters was a Hebrew who he portrayed with the bold strokes and 'ethnic' vocabulary used by bad actors. I wrote that: 'In spite of his name, you might think Silverberg had never met a Jew.' That was unforgivable in a responsible reviewer, a sting in the tail too many. It is one of the rare lapses I have remembered — for twenty years. However, when we met at Aussiecon in 1975 there were no hostilities, though I know he resented it.

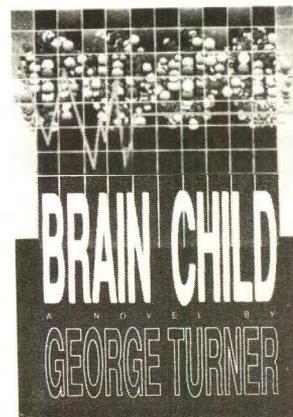
It turned out otherwise with another writer of whom I printed a testy and demeaning statement which I afterwards regretted — but in this case no longer do. Here is a tale of how deeply a careless barb can enter and spawn a litter of razor edges down the years.

In the dear old days of Space Age Books I wrote a review for Merv Binns' *Newsletter* of a novel by an author described in the jacket blurb as 'perhaps our best writer of space opera'. I found the book uninspiring, reviewed it accordingly, and included a doubt that being 'our best writer of space opera' was really a commendation to be envied. It was an unnecessary and heartless remark. In the following year, in London, I discovered how deep such a wound can go. Peter Nicholls, all unknowing, introduced me to the author who, as soon as he heard my name, walked away and ignored me thereafter. I dismissed the matter as just one of those things and forgot about it. That was only the beginning.

Since that meeting I have published five sf novels and seen his snarling reviews of three of them. Since other reviewers thought rather better of the books, I was not concerned; I had developed a tough skin by then and, in any case, he might genuinely have thought them as inept and contemptible as he wrote.

Then early in 1992 he reviewed *Brain Child* at length for *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Now, the NYRSF rarely prints a wholly unfavourable review (their pieces tend to work hard at being 'balanced', 'literary', perceptive of subtext, and ultimately bland) but this was the stinker of a lifetime. It opened by accusing me of being 75 years old (apparently a crime against literature), ran quickly over my sf career in dismissive terms, described *Brain Child* as nonsense padded beyond its proper length, flatly contradicted my use of biological theory (without offering a 'correct' version, though he has a degree in biology) and wound up with a comment on my career as a purveyor of 'snide criticism'.

I'm thinking of having it framed; it would be a work of art if it were not so patently typed with a poisoned ribbon. And the offence that caused it is about sixteen years old! Which, I suppose,



only goes to show that moderation is a virtue and a careless phrase can hound you down the years.

Ah, well, *mea culpa* and all that.

There are varieties of criticism that we tend to forget about because they are not written on paper. There is, for instance, the workshop experience.

I had always been a defender of the workshop system until this year (1992) I came up against a situation in which the weaknesses of workshoping had to be recognised and circumvented. More of that later, but first the workshop method.

The staple device of the workshop is the criticising of each student's work by all the others in a classroom situation, with a professional writer monitoring and commenting. It has produced some useful results in Australia without uncovering any major talents, but an incident at one such gathering shook my confidence in the *modus operandi*. I had always been aware of the tendency of the round robin commentary to concentrate on the correction of faults rather than on the encouragement of perceived virtues, and a single case at a Sydney workshop rattled me badly.

I was the professional monitor for the first week and very dispirited by the quantity of really shoddy fiction submitted by the workshopers. One in particular submitted a piece of wildly sentimental, crassly written nonsense that would have barred her from attendance if the choice had been mine. When the story was discussed in forum, the unfortunate writer heard her work cold-bloodedly shredded, with nobody saying an encouraging word. As monitor, I had to sum up, and could, in honesty, only agree generally with what had been said and make a few half-hearted suggestions as to how the story might be improved. Privately, I thought her totally untalented. However, she rewrote the story several times in the following days and showed considerable improvement on the original disaster but still no real aptitude.

The late, much-regretted Terry Carr took over from me for the second week and I met him later, in Melbourne. When I asked about this particularly awful story he said that it had continued to improve but was still hopeless. I recall saying, 'You should have seen the original version!', to which he replied, 'By God, I should not!'

And yet, in a year or two this hopeless workshoper was one of the few from that course to sell professionally, both in Australia and in America.

Not until I met her husband a few years later did I discover the nature of the miracle. He told me that on the first night, after her terrible introductory session, she had rung her Queensland home, in tears, saying she would return the next morning. He told me, and I quote: 'I said to her that if she did she was never to say anything again about wanting to be a writer.' So she had stayed on.

Considering the shellacking her pride and her hopes had received, this was a courageous decision. It paid off. She must have absorbed advice and technique like a sponge until the spark of talent, which had been concealed by her simple misunderstanding of the requirements of fiction, came to light and flourished. I still can't see her as a great sf writer, but she has sold a fair quantity of work of consistent quality, and has certainly outstripped many others among the circle of rising Australian writers in the genre. Yet that workshop nearly stopped her for good. Only determination, and a husband who knew how to rouse it, saved the writer in her from extinction.

I have looked back at that workshop and thought that while I know I have done a little good now and then, there may have been other cases where lack of insight had doused a flame. If human insight had for a while edged out the critic struggling with technique and editorial requirements...

But early in 1992 the South Australian Writers' Centre, an organisation of professional writers, asked me to conduct a Master Class for a week. This is a very different thing from a workshop. It is my belief that there is no such animal as a Master Class for writers; the conception of a 'class', where a subject is 'taught' by someone who presumably knows all the answers, does not hold for writing, which is the most deeply personal of all arts — save, perhaps, music. Nonetheless I accepted the job and received the specimen manuscripts from the would-be students. I saw very quickly that all preconceived ideas of monitoring, advising and tutoring had to be dropped. Some of the attendees were professional journalists, several others had had a few stories and essays accepted by local minor publications, while three were aspiring sf writers. The idea of a single class spanning such a range was ludicrous; I had to find another method.

Fortunately the SAWC had booked us into a small-town seaside hotel in the off season, so that we had the place to ourselves. I gathered the 'class' in the dining room on the first night, told them I wanted them to read each

others' work and discuss it among themselves, with particular attention to the writers' strong points that could be fostered and developed. (That, I hoped, would save the three beginners from absolute despair. Apparently it did.) Then I arranged to take each one for a personal session each day, because only individual attention could produce results in such a disparate group. There would be one class meeting only, to deal with the correct presentation of manuscripts.

Whatever they had expected (and I carefully didn't ask), it was not what they got. It meant for me a steady grind from 8 a.m. to midnight, with each day's fresh manuscripts being read, usually while eating, but the response was worth every minute of it.

I have never in my life felt so handsomely repaid as by the almost magical improvements in style and understanding of what they were about. (I had expected the journalists to be a problem, but in fact the sf writers gave me real trouble. They could not cotton on to the bedrock fact that a story is based on characters, not on neo-pseudo-semi-scientific ideas.)

I spent the first day's interviews seeking a key to each individual personality and literary ambition and mapping out an approach to each; then, when each of us had sized the other up, and all of them were getting feedback from the others, we were ready to begin. I never once asked what other group members had said of their work (though usually they told me); that was the basic stuff I didn't want to have to worry over. At each day's interview we discussed the scripts as if operating in a collaboration, so that the exchange was always about how the work could be improved from each point of view, leaving the final decision to the writer. It is the writer's work, his or her personal expression, and should remain so. In this way we kept the discussion upbeat and favourable. The actual removing of warts and excrescences was my part of the exchange — and the part where I really earned my pay — a matter of presenting the kinds of alternative approach that would appeal to the writer, so that he or she would see not so much an adverse criticism as a redevelopment of his or her ideas in a fresh direction. The end of it was not only a week of steadily improving work from every attendee, but a plumbing on my part of depths of understanding and critical method that could never have been attained in reading and writing, solitary, at home.

I wish I had had the experience twenty-five years earlier; it would have saved me many a critical gaffe, many a

trampling display of egotism and many a careless cruelty. It made a profound difference to my approach to critical writing. (Bruce Gillespie says a change began when I published my first sf novel in 1978. If so, I don't know what caused it then.) I no longer have much interest in standard-method reviewing and prefer to do it only when asked to handle a particular book by some such editor as Bruce or Van Ikin.

My preference, now, is to discuss a book, to try to look at it from different points of view, to see what different kinds of readers might see in it, and to write at length about the aspects that seem worth extended attention, not so much in terms of 'good' and 'bad' (words too imprecise to have meaning in criticism) but in terms of their revelation of the writer as well as their communication with the reader.

In the long run I think that reviews,

except those by the revered — and feared — public panjandrums of the craft, make little difference to sales or reader preference, whereas a gentle discussion, with no axe to grind, may open the occasional reader's mind to values he or she had passed over and aspects he or she had misunderstood.

Perhaps I am getting old and soft — or merely tired of infighting — but I offer a small plea to all reviewers:

Be just but gentle with the volume you are about to shred; you are tearing at the dreams of some writer who can't hit back and who, if he or she tries, will only be subjected to further humiliation from the critic who won't permit any damned scribbler to query his or her expert strictures.

I know that it is only the writer's vanity that is hurt — but that same vanity is the spur that impels the world's novelists to offer us countless

hours of pleasure and, once in a while, wisdom.

Now, a last word to writers shuddering under the lash of critical blood-letting:

Always read and preserve the adverse reviews. Praise only reinforces your already puffed opinion of your genius; from the occasional damnation you may learn something, because the critics are not always wrong, as you will admit when you have finished your fit of outraged carpet-biting. Most of what they write will be unsupported opinion, and disposable, but when two or three say the same thing it is time to sit down, swallow your pride, and think the situation over. Even Shakespeare and Tolstoy were far from perfect.

— George Turner, November 1992

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#### GEORGE TURNER ISSUE, PART 4

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## It's an Arthur Clarke world

by George Turner

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#### Discussed in this article:

##### ASTOUNDING DAYS: A SCIENCE FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by Arthur C. Clarke

(Gollancz hb 0-575-04446-2; 1989; 224 pp.; £12.95/A\$24.95)

(Gollancz pb 575-04774-7; April 1990; 224 pp.; £4.99/\$11.95)

##### ODYSSEY: THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR C. CLARKE

by Neil McAleer, Foreword by Patrick Moore

(Gollancz 0-575-05448-4; 430 pp.; £16.99/A\$39.95)

##### HOW THE WORLD WAS ONE: BEYOND THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

by Arthur C. Clarke

(Gollancz 0-575-05226-0; 1992; 289 pp.; £15.99/A\$39.95)

Of these three books one is a disappointment, one less successful than it should have been, given the subject matter, and the third an absolute delight.

Being not quite one year older than Arthur C. Clarke (and not within touching distance of him in any other respect) and having also published a memoir of my bored/loving/exasper-

ated relationship with science fiction (*In the Heart or in the Head*, 1984), and having been, like him, in at the birth of sf-as-we-know-it (*Amazing Stories*, No. 1; 1926), I looked forward to a feast of shared reminiscence and lush nostalgia.

What I got was a dull disappointment in Clarke at his plodding worst. (I know that Mike Tolley reviewed this

book in *SFC* 71/72 and enjoyed it greatly, so don't accept my dissatisfaction as the last word. For a number of reasons our outlooks are very different.) For me there has always been a problem with reading Clarke: his extraordinary ability to be breathtakingly fascinating in one work and almost unreadably prosaic in another. I recall reading *Prelude to Space*, *A Fall of Moondust*, *Rendezvous with Rama* and many of the short stories in a sort of ecstasy, a temporary slippage from this world into the one he created. I recall, also, reading *The Fountains of Paradise* with interludes of irritation and finding *Imperial Earth* a chore I was glad to finish and put aside.

As a critic (well, a reviewer) I found it necessary to puzzle over this; I concluded that the problem lay in characterisation. Clarke's fictional people vanish with the last words of the book. His glowing visions of worlds and inventions — 'creations' might be a better word — refuse to fade with the years; it is as though the visionary consumes the man, and the characters become puppets employed only to

move the story from marvel to dreaming marvel, having no reality of their own. That this is not always true will appear later in the essay; yet it is 2001's dying computer, Hal, who registers as more 'human' than astronaut Bowman.

But, to *Astounding Days*— basically it is a rumination on the three periods of *Astounding* history as represented by editors Harry Bates, Orlin Tremaine and John W. Campbell. Elements of sf history do emerge from time to time, but for the most part the book is a reverie on the stories that stuck in Clarke's mind. He discusses them as if he had read them only yesterday, with the impression clear and joyful in memory — and this leads to painful moments. For instance, he refers to Frank R. Paul as 'that most famous of all sf artists', and cites the wonderment of the first sight of the first issue of *Amazing Stories*. One recalls the work of Paul with a shudder. He was 'the most famous' simply because he was almost the only artist in those early years. Even at age 10 I saw that he was a hopeless draftsman who could not manage the human figure, whose imagination was limited to a few styles of building and machinery that appeared month after month in stultifying repetition, and whose colour sense seemed bounded by violent primary contrasts. (*Astounding* produced Harry Wessolowski — Wesso — whose male figures all tottered on pipistem legs but whose machinery was more convincing.) I wondered if Clarke ever dug out some of those old Paul covers for a second look at what had fascinated the 1926 schoolboy. . . .

A similar question occurred to me throughout the reading: had he re-read some of those tales that thrilled the youngster? As an adult I made the mistake of returning to some of my best-loved stories, only to realise how second-rate they were, how poorly written and how deficient in even the basics of everyday science. Isaac Asimov's selection in *Before the Golden Age* scraped the barrel of what was worth preserving as well as much that was not; most (not all) sf before Campbell is forgettable. We had to be young to love it. We were and we did. It has honourable burial; we recall the love, not the creaking creations that inspired it.

I find it hard to believe that anyone familiar with all this 1926–40 material will find interest in it, save perhaps where Clarke laughs over the mistakes

and misunderstood 'science' — and where, occasionally, he points to some forgotten insight that returned as fact, decades later.

A few meetings with real scientists, such as Willy Ley, Wernher von Braun and 'J. J. Coupling' (Dr J. Pierce), are interestingly handled, but for most of the time this is an 'old boy' playing 'Do you remember?' at the school reunion.

I opened *Odyssey: The Authorised Biography* with great expectations, and indeed found a deal of most interesting information in its 430 pages, but the fact remains that Neil McAleer, however close to Clarke and well informed, is not the man for such a book. It takes a writer and investigator of special attainments to produce an 'authorised' biography. Readers tend to think that 'authorised' guarantees the truth of the contents as against the beat-ups and opinions of the unauthorised kind. To a degree this is true, but the real implication of 'authorised' is that nothing is published save what the subject approves — and who in the name of sanity is going to approve a warts-and-all portrait of his weaknesses, backslidings, prevarications (or outright lies), failures, double dealings and moments of physical or mental cowardice?

Yet without these the portrait of the subject remains a snapshot, bland and depthless; the reader has to be wide awake to catch the occasional unwary reference, the blurred account, the fuzzy explanation showing where a door into deeper understanding could open. At the same time, one should not too readily accuse author or subject of unwarranted concealment. Aside from personal reticence on uneasily private matters there are the feelings of involved others to be considered, to say nothing of the law of libel waiting on a careless expression of opinion or a poorly substantiated account. The fact is that a definitive biography cannot be written of a living person; only for the dead is truth a safe mantle — and not always then.

So, this account of Clarke's life is choked with almost worshipful detail but never for a moment scratches below the surface of the man. Thus:

We learn that quite early in his life Clarke was awarded the nickname that follows him still: 'Ego'. McAleer makes a hasty disclaimer that this is nothing more than an affectionate joke, but the tale of relentless success, with mind fixed on intellectual gratification, suggests the existence of a more spikey Clarke than ever appears in this chronicle of unflinching goodwill. (One hopes

so. Who wants perfection, even in a friend? We carry crosses enough without that.)

We learn of a marriage, early in life and plainly ill-considered, to a divorcee with a child, which seems to have lasted about eighteen months. Obvious incompatibility, we are told; a mistake on both sides. But the reader who considers Clarke's workaholicism (ten hours a day on the world processor) will need no telling who went single-mindedly on with his life and who was left solitary and lamenting.

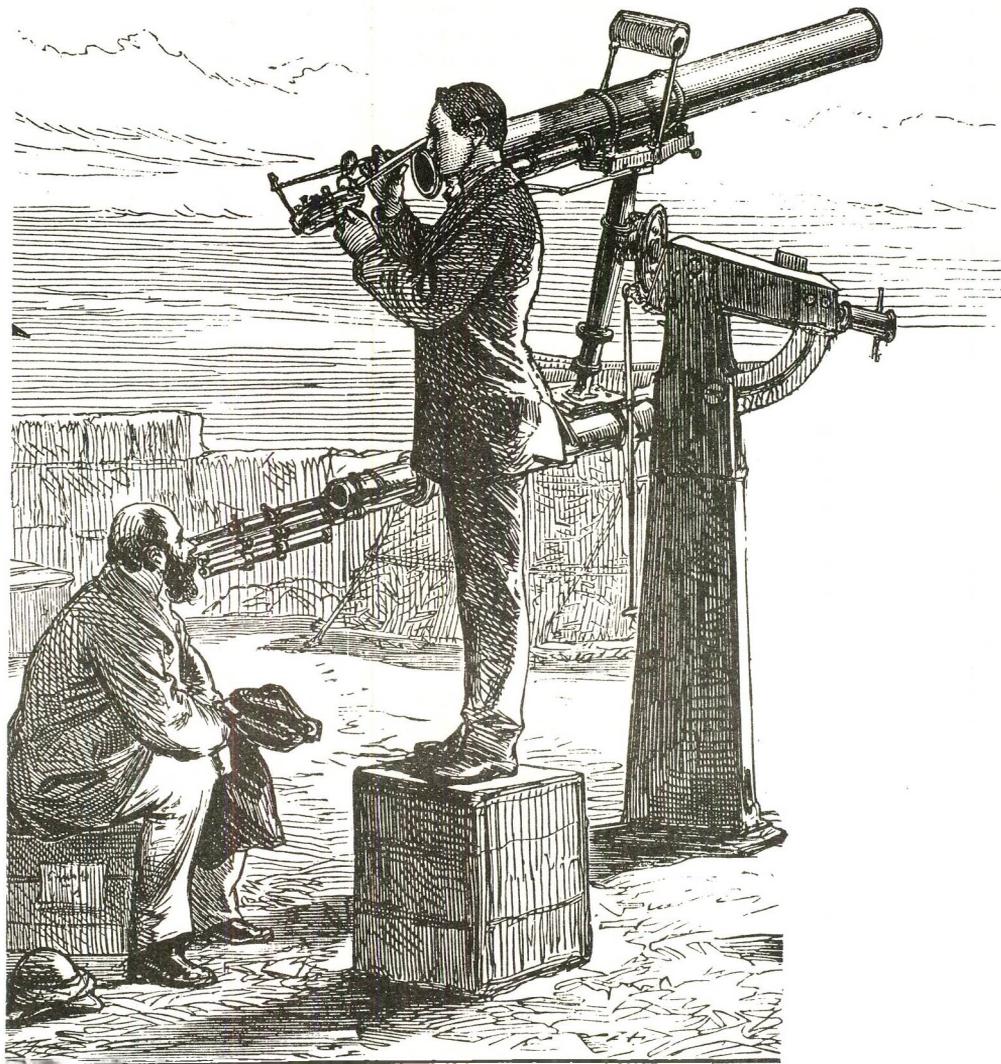
Late in the book there is an account of a verbal set-to with Robert Heinlein, which I suspect might have been omitted had it not gained gossip currency through being carried out between two well-known people and very much in public. It reflects rather worse on Heinlein than on Clarke. Heinlein was egomaniacal in his not always sensible beliefs, whereas on this occasion Clarke was merely careless, so we are given a picture of Clarke dumb and helpless before the tirade of a small, closed mind (remember his credo that only blooded soldiers should have the vote?) whose sub-teenage logic he should have destroyed in a single sentence.

Always, always, there are glimpses of a fallible human being other than the placidly successful futurologist, but only glimpses.

The monumental encounters with Kubrick over the making of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where Clarke met an ego impervious to his own, should have produced fireworks and revelation. Instead, we get a fascinating tale of origins, production problems and ultimate success — and little more than a vague impression of the differences of opinion that existed. Seeking to dive beneath the words, one is left with an uneasy impression that Kubrick told Clarke what book to write, and that that was the book he wrote, with a single act of rebellion over the closing chapter.

So we have, in the long run, a plodding curriculum vitae in which detail sometimes mounts heights of boredom (for instance, the American speaking tours, where never a whistle stop or a handshake is left out), but which also contains blocks of solid and significant fact that the Clarke aficionado cannot do without.

I found it a book that interested me in fits and starts, as much by its quite overt glossing of deeper penetration as by its occasional fascinating episodes. All in all, McAleer seems most successful in his account of the Sri Lanka years, of the diving, the relations with natives and co-workers and the sheer joy of



living. There Clarke seems to have found his real niche, the happy retreat to which he returns to relax and recover after coarse forays into the world of argument and publicity.

On the scientific and futurological side, from the famous 'three satellites' suggestion (which, despite regrets, probably could not have been patented) to the confabulations with governments and big business, there is little that is not already familiar.

The third book more than makes up for the other two. *How the World Was One: Beyond the Global Village* is vintage Clarke, Clarke at his galloping best, Clarke with enthusiasm running hot and spilling over the page. If only his novels communicated the sheer exhilaration of this account of the growth of global communications from the first telegraph (1793, believe it or not) to the near edge of tomorrow!

The first one-third of the book, subtitled 'Wiring the Abyss' and telling the story of the laying of the world's

undersea cables, is sheer delight. If the subject sounds unpromising, be undecieved; under Clarke's treatment it becomes a miracle of intertwined anecdote and exposition, almost a novel in its drive from the earliest idea to the latest technology. It is a tale of dedicated dreamers and hardnosed engineers, high finance and low failure, governmental ditherings and the desperate courage of men who risked their entire substance for a vision. The laying of the first Atlantic cable makes a tale of sufficient heartbreak, determination and resurgence to justify a filmed adventure epic — and that is only the beginning.

Clarke's writing in this book betrays absolute immersion in a subject close to his heart. Even the characters stand up and breathe with a realism rare in his fiction; the story races along with never a let-up; the technical expositions share in the onward rush by their simple clarity, no words wasted. If the book had ended at page 108, I would still have recommended it as worth the price.

Part Two, 'Voice Across the Sea', brings in the story of the telephone and the rise of radio, ending with the first vision of communication satellites. The Comsats themselves are the subject of Part Three, and if the wonder and compulsion are less pressing here, it is probably because the story has moved into areas of contemporary knowledge. The surprises are fewer, but surprises there still are in the numerous anecdotes of what happened and when, though you hadn't heard of it, and in the odd details, dropped in like raisins in the bun, bringing you up short in surprise.

It is in this section than an occasional detail demonstrates the completeness of Clarke's removal from the quotidian world to his private universe of state-of-the-art gadgetry. On page 165 he asks, as if our whole history had vanished before the technology of the computer age: 'Does anybody remember carbon paper — or want to?' Does he really not know that we remember it well, and use it if only in campaign against the paper-wasting printout

that tempts us to produce ten copies where two will do? (I am sure you know that the computer is the greatest provider of unnecessarily printed paper in our era. Its excesses can be counted in ravaged forests.)

Many such references make it plain that Clarke, in his Sri Lanka hideaway, lives in a cyberpunk dream country wherein the real world is brought to him as a selected shadow at the touch of a key; he enters it physically only to move from one techno-crowded base to another. As a consequence, his literary output is enormous. He works, once a book has been conceived, up to ten hours a day at the world processor; the list at the front of *How the World Was One* shows only 22 volumes of fiction, but his actual output in technical articles and highly specialised books that you are I are unlikely to have heard of (as well as constant updating of his old books) defies easy counting.

Strangely, the unguarded joints in his literary armour are exposed here and there, as when, on page 168, he repeats Sam Goldwyn's supposed dictum for script writers: 'If you gotta message, use Western Union'. Clarke carries on with: 'I have always regarded this as excellent advice. The prime duty of fiction is to entertain, not to instruct — still less to propagandise.' If he had written 'not to instruct or propagandise overtly' one might go along with him, but how can he fail to see that his own fiction, especially the novels, is propaganda for the dreams he wants to share and bring to reality? Only the dullest and most paltry fiction has in it nothing at all of the author's quiet whispering in the reader's ear that there is something to be learned here if you read correctly. The story with nothing to say beyond hero-punches-villain or boy-kisses-girl is dead with its final word. It is the fiction with something to say, however subliminally, that stays in the mind. What saves Clarke's own fiction, irrespective

of his literary creed, is that he has always a great deal to say and a powerful desire that the reader should heed and accept.

You don't like a story with a message? Don't fool yourself; every worthwhile story has a message and it is merely auctorial tact that fails to advertise it.

Part Four, 'Starry Messengers', is Clarke's paean to modern communications, with every now and then the emergence of his misty-eyed vision of the United States of Earth. There is a touch here, also, of a background paean to Clarke the visionary, prophet, singer of tomorrow, in his plain delight in detailing the Clarke awards (both in sf and real science), of his audience with the Pope and his various meetings with VIPs. Only a man whose nickname is Ego could insert this vignette of himself:

I couldn't resist telling him: 'You know, when I was invited to speak in the Vatican, my first choice of subject was "After Giordano Bruno — who?" There was about a millisecond's delay before George (Dr George Coyne) answered, "If you had used that title, the answer would have been — you."'

Yet it doesn't come across as an eruption of vanity; it reads, in context, as the joy of a small boy revelling in the wonderful things that happen to him. Ego, yes, but with a saving touch of innocence.

This section is full of little predictions, of which only those concerning the future of technology to bring eventual universal peace get thoroughly up my nose. It is technology in its most extreme forms that has given nations the ability to interfere in each other's affairs at the touch of a button and deploy weapons as quickly, just as it is mankind's true knowledge of itself that makes such interference an ongo-

ing concern. Somebody should tell Clarke that 'the proper study of Mankind is Man', and that there will be neither peace nor safety until we take that to heart. It is fine for him to be a grown man with a boy's exuberant heart, at play with marvellous toys, but one sometimes wishes that his pronouncements on religion, philosophy, literature and the destiny of Man packed more knowledgeable observation and less emotional fluff.

The final section, 'Let There Be Light', brings some interesting updates on communications and the exciting possibilities of leading-edge technology, but the closing chapter, 'As Far As Eye Can See', is disappointing. He discusses FTL travel, the influence-at-a-distance paradox (I feel he distrusts quantum theory), teleportation and telepathy (to whose possibility I, like Clarke, give little credence). He offers little hope for any of them unless some totally unexpected and so far unimagined properties of spacetime come to light.

He closes with a quotation from that book whose teaching he rejects! 'Behold they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do, and nothing that they propose to do now will be impossible to them.'

Yes, he knows that God (whom he rejects as limiting the universe too stringently) put an end to the Babel Project, but he sees the words, today, as a message of hope. And why not? This Earth should be habitable for some millions of years; to make the most of a fabulous future we must learn more of that 'proper study of Mankind', but time is on our side, short of cosmic catastrophe.

*How the Earth Was One* is the most entrancing non-fiction book I have read since Stephen Hawking's *A Short History of Time* — and much easier on the straining intellect.

— George Turner, November 1992

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## GEORGE TURNER EDITION, PART 5

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# Genuine Wolfes and doodlings

by George Turner

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Don't ponder the punning title (Sto-  
reys from the Old Hotel) of this col-

lection. It is meaningless; perhaps the  
publisher chose it. Neither title or

jacket refer even peripherally to any-  
thing in the book, so move at once to

Discussed:

**STOREYS FROM THE OLD HOTEL**  
by Gene Wolfe  
(Tor 0-312-85208-8;  
1992;  
431 pp.;  
US\$21.95/A\$32)

the text and get on with it.

The volume opens with an 'Introduction' in which Wolfe tells something of the origins of the stories, indicates here and there that he has a special liking for one or another, but altogether does little more than confirm one's suspicion that this is a ragbag gathering of previously uncollected works. In the manner of ragbag volumes, the quality is violently uneven, swaying from trivial to hugely entertaining, and my feeling is that this one does less than justice to its author, being put together to turn an honest penny while the Wolfe name is, as the Tor Marketing Section would phrase it, 'in selling mode'.

This is not to say that the standard of workmanship is not high; with Wolfe it always is. His ear for prose has not faltered with the years; he remains one of the most mellifluous writers in the fiction business and one of the most fertile ingenious propagators of striking ideas. It is what he does or fails to do with the ideas that troubles the rapture with which I greeted *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* all those years ago.

There are 34 stories here, mostly very short, but varied with longer and on the whole more rewarding tales. I will not attempt to cover them all individually.

The book begins and ends with related fantasy adventures written more or less to order for a shared-world anthology, with other writers presenting other tales. They are good enough of their kind, distinguished from the hero-epic norm by the precision of Wolfe's language and some arresting imagery.

The second story is 'Beech Hill' which, despite Wolfe's rather deconstructionist explanation, is an ingenuity about role-playing and quite enjoyable as such.

Skipping a few, we come to 'Slaves

of Silver' and 'The Rubber Bend', a pastiche pair making gentle mock of Sherlock Holmes and Watson, Nero Wolfe and Archy and the conventions of the 'classic' detective story. I found both highly enjoyable, 'The Rubber Bend' more so because its solution depends on a geometrical fourth dimension of the kind Miles J. Breuer manipulated so ingeniously back in the thirties when sf was a box of wonders and we kids were goggle-eyed at it. (Who, besides myself, remembers 'The Captured Cross-section'?)

The above two, with 'Westwind', are my favourites of the book. 'Westwind' is pretty well indescribable in a few words. It tells with great brevity of an intumed society that gave me the feeling of sitting in a psychological Klein bottle, where you are outside looking in and inside looking out — from the same position. You must read it to sort that out for yourself.

A group of three follows, all nicely coldblooded but fragmentary, as if the ideas had refused to lead anywhere. 'Straw' is the most effective of them.

'The Marvellous Chessplaying Automaton' fills in the story that Poe failed to write round 'Maelzel's Chessplayer'. It promises more than in the end it delivers, except some routine sadism, but is told with verve and the customary Wolfe finesse.

Wolfe's 'Introduction' claims that 'To the Dark Tower Came' is the record of a dream, and it reads like one. It arises full blown out of a provenance that seems to be King Lear and ends, as dreams do, with nothing determined or lucidly foreshadowed. It holds the interest — and then it simply stops. Wolfe suggests it as a psychological jumping-off point — but from what and to where?

'In Looking Glass Castle' brings us a woman-dominated world with a fugitive man in hiding. Little really happens, though possibilities abound. I had the uneasy feeling of reading an idea that its propagator didn't know what to do with, so that at a convenient point he cut it short and sent it off. There must be a limit to how far a writer can stretch 'dramatic significance' in a denouement that leaves the reader to make what he can of it.

'Cherry Jubilee' is an sf murder mystery aboard a spaceship. It has other resonances and mixes them well in a neatly thought-out plot.

Then there is the very fine 'Red-

beard', a brief horror story that works its genuine magic in seven pages. Full marks for this one.

Let me skip some doubtfully rewarding fillers to 'Trap Trap', which, writes Wolfe, marks the real beginning of his writing career (*Orbit 2*, edited by Damon Knight; 1967), and an excellent beginning it made. It is a parallel worlds tale with the customary Wolfe abundance of ideas in a fairly small wordspace and also the double-dealing ironies of the talesmith at his most inventive.

'Civis Laputus Sum' is, in Wolfe's account, a mocking of academics. If you know the inside of his head this would no doubt be plain; to the outsider, however, it is imaginative game-playing with Dean Swift's aerial island of Laputa, and perfectly enjoyable as such.

'Death of the Island Doctor' may represent a gentler coda to the hard-edged 'Doctor Death' clutch of tales, but shows itself, when the beguiling language is pierced, a real *Women's Weekly* story of the benign old gent and the two young lovers who didn't know what they wanted. It is entrancing until you put it down and notice the taste of cold porridge.

I have mentioned just half of the content of titles. The remainder are for the most part short — some very short indeed — and often no more than idiosyncratically Wolfian ideas that he has not bothered to develop. They entertain until you realise they are going nowhere; at their ends they hang in midair waiting for something more definite to be done with them.

Every writer has his file of the still-born and even the regrettable, stories that paid the rent one bygone week or another and were laid to rest. Then, one day, he or she becomes 'bankable' and editors wheedle for the suppressed material that will make a book while the magic persists in a hungry public.

A certain amount of every writer's lesser work should be forgotten. About half of *Storeys* is genuine Wolfe, the other half is Wolfe doodling; read it for the fabulous genuine Wolfe and ignore the sound of the bottom of a barrel being scraped.

— George Turner, August 1992

# George Turner: SF Commentary/Metaphysical Review Bibliography

by Bruce Gillespie

This Bibliography was prepared for my own amusement, but prompted by the researches of Judy Buckrich, who is George Turner's biographer. George, Judy and I would welcome any help from anyone who might like to extend this list into a complete Bibliography of George Turner's non-fiction publications.

*SF Commentary* began with the January 1969 issue. The first issue of *The Metaphysical Review* appeared in August 1984. Since George's first science fiction novel *Beloved Son* did not appear until 1978, I do not list 'Reviews of George Turner's books' until this item is needed.

— Bruce Gillespie, July 1993

Articles or reviews by George Turner	Letters by George Turner	Letters in reply to George Turner
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 1, January 1969</b>		
Review of <i>Picnic on Paradise</i> (Joanna Russ) (pp. 10-11) Review of <i>The Ring</i> (Piers Anthony and Robert E. Margroff) (p. 11) Review of <i>The Masks of Time</i> (Robert Silverberg) (pp. 11-12) Review of <i>The Pacific Book of Australian SF</i> (ed. John Baxter) (pp. 12-16) Article: 'TQ in Science Fiction — and Elsewhere: Notes More or Less at Random for an Unwritten Article' (pp. 24-6)		
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 2, March 1969</b>		
	pp. 7-10	
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 3, April 1969</b>		
The Discussion Panel: Melbourne Conference 1969: George as a panellist, as well as Damien Broderick, Lee Harding, Wynne Whiteford and Jack Wodhams. John Foyster presiding (pp. 11-43)		

Articles or reviews by George Turner	Letters by George Turner	Letters in reply to George Turner
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 4, July 1969</b>		
Review of <i>The Two-Timers</i> (Bob Shaw) (pp. 39-40) Review of <i>Star Well</i> (Alexei Panshin) (pp. 40-1) Article: 'Smith's Underpeople: Symbols or Slaves?' (Long review of <i>The Underpeople</i> by Cordwainer Smith) (pp. 50-4)	pp. 9-13	A. Bertram Chandler (p. 17); John Foyster (p. 37)
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 5, August 1969</b>		
	pp. 25-7	Robert Silverberg (p. 6); John Foyster (pp. 8-10); Franz Rottensteiner (pp. 16-17)
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 7, November 1969</b>		
	pp. 14-15	Harry Warner Jr. (p. 11)
<b>SF COMMENTARY No. 8, December 1969</b>		
Photo of G. Turner (taken Easter 1969 by Lee Harding) (insert facing p. 18) 'Author Panel Discussion: Melbourne, Easter 1969' (with Lee Harding, Phil Collas, David Boutland and Wynne Whiteford; John Bangsund presiding) (pp. 19-37)		
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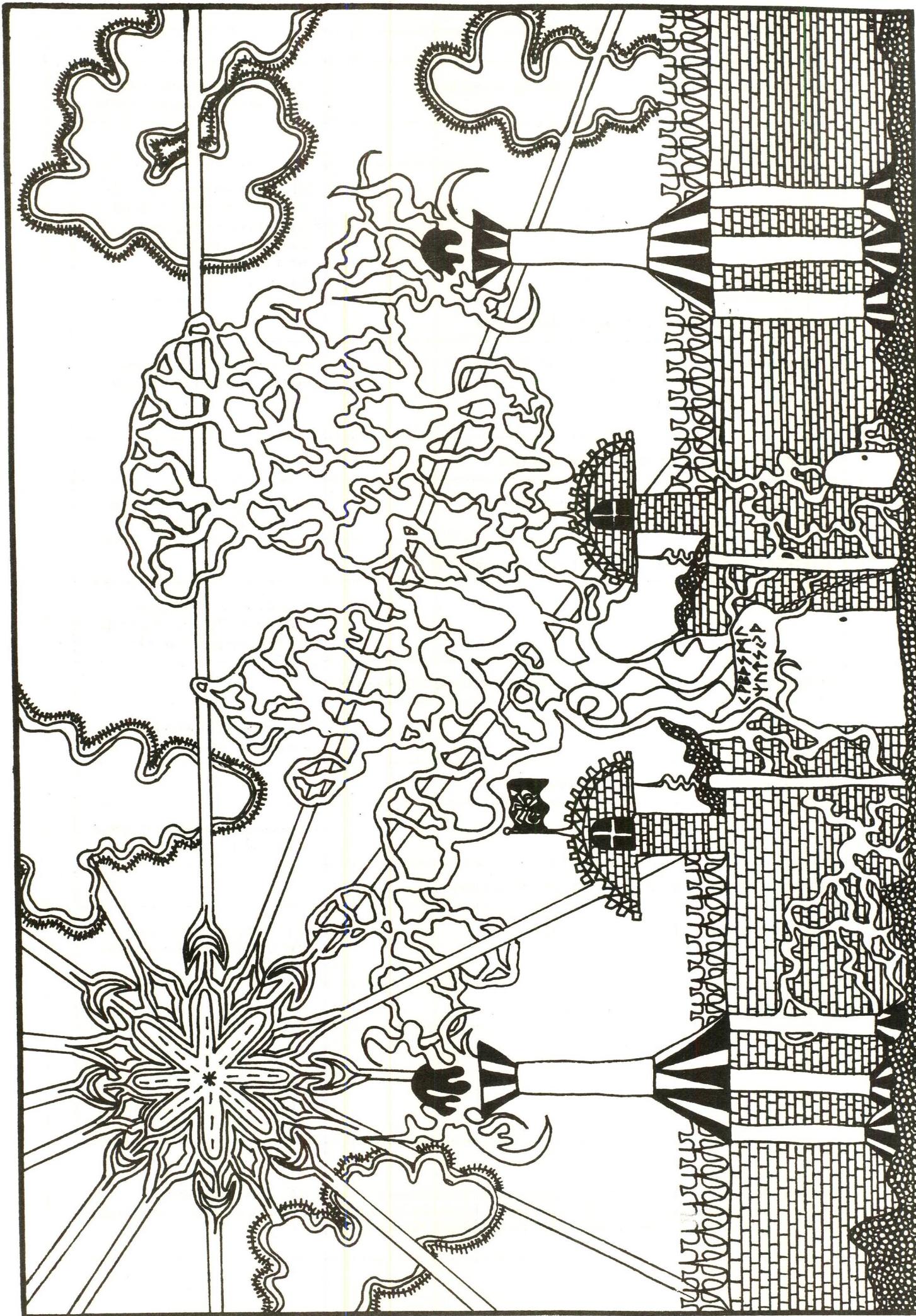
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**Add to the above list:**

The various items by and about George Turner that appear in this issue of *SF Commentary*; plus an odd item: 'Philip K. Dick by 1975: *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said*'. Written for *SF Commentary*, but never published here, this article appeared only *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd* (ed. Bruce Gillespie, Norstrilia Press, 1975, pp. 94-100).



DAMIEN BRODERICK's most recent books include *The Sea's Furthest End* (Aphelion Books) and *The Lotto Effect* (Hudson). Forthcoming are *Reading by Starlight: The Semiotics of Modern and Postmodern Science Fiction* (Routledge) and *The Architecture of Babel* (Melbourne University Press). He reviews science books for *The Australian*.

## Silverberg not moving

by Damien Broderick

### Reviewed:

#### Robert Silverberg's WORLDS OF WONDER (Gollancz, 1988)

I wish I'd had this book to read when I was 15, 17, 20. In a way I *did* have it, and read it closely, at exactly those ages, because its bulk is a gathering of 13 stories from the true Golden Age of sf, the early and mid-1950s, and eight or nine those stories were near the heart of the municipal library sf anthologies I devoured as a kid. What makes *Worlds of Wonder* entirely special is Silverberg's candid autobiographical opening, 'The Making of a Science-Fiction Writer', his careful, detailed commentaries on the craft of each story, and the poignant intertwining between the two projects. Read it, certainly, for the intelligence, humour and honesty of his analysis. But read it, above all, for the agony and irony of the self-deception between the lines.

The intellectually gifted Robert Silverberg discovered sf pulp magazines at 11 or 12, in the late 1940s, and his account of the result is typical, even in its overwrought character:

Their impact on me was overwhelming. I can still taste and feel the extraordinary sensations they awakened in me: it was a physiological thing, a distinct excitement, a certain metabolic quickening at the mere thought of handling them, let alone reading them. It must be like that for every new reader — apocalyptic thunderbolts and eerie unfamiliar music accompanying you as you lurch and stagger, awed and shaken, into a bewildering new world of images and ideas, which is exactly the place you've been hoping to find all your life. (p. 3)

Not all victims of this exotic virus

are so pleased to recall the fever of their infection. But for most fans, such as the notable New York sf editor David Hartwell, besotted wonderment and a subsequent nostalgia for its impossible re-evocation are at the heart of science fiction, a heart that starts beating in early adolescence. 'The Golden Age of Science Fiction Is Twelve', candidly declares the first chapter heading of Hartwell's wryly titled *Age of Wonders. Exploring the World of Science Fiction*, McGraw-Hill, 1985 (a title echoed in Silverberg's own):

Immersed in science fiction. Bathing in it, drowning in it; for the adolescent who leans this way it can be better than sex. (p. 3)

It's interesting, by the way, that Silverberg chooses twelve as the peak danger point for sf infection. This collection, he remarks, is 'an affectionate gift to that 12-year-old kid with my name who set out, in Brooklyn long ago, to be a science-fiction writer. Look, kid, I'm trying to say: here are all those stories you loved so much, the ones you wished you could have written.' As it chances, Bob Silverberg was twelve in 1947; while the earliest story in the book is from three years earlier than that, the next is from 1950, and the modal date is 1953. He was a smart kid, no doubt about it (so were we all), but it's actually a stroke of luck for the reputation of the field that the stories that so powerfully burned into his soul found him not at twelve but at fifteen or eighteen, perhaps the earliest time when wonder passes into something closer to understanding.

Perhaps the most romantic and besotted history of the genre (and one altogether convincing to an inducted sf reader of a certain age) is Alexei and Cory Panshin's *The World Beyond the Hill*, a richly detailed if rather gushily New Age volume with the revealing subtitle *Science Fiction and the Quest for Transcendence* (Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc., 1989). Nor is this rush of delight in

cosmic spectacle, and the sense of transcendent significance evoked by it, indicative only during initiation; Hartwell argues that out of it comes everything central to the genre. Fandom — the company of other initiates — is its social embodiment. I believe Hartwell is correct in finding here a key to sf's singularity among genres:

The fans and professionals eat together, drink together, play together (sleep together, exclude one another, criticize one another), act in some ways as an enormous extended family[. . .].

What fandom has done on a social and cultural level for or to the writers in the SF field is to provide them with a paradigm of the life of the writer quite different from the two major paradigms available to all other writers outside SF: the life of the artist (working in isolation from the marketplace to achieve art; supported by the academy, by grants, by awards, perhaps by the admiration of peers) and the life of the commercial writer (after an apprenticeship, writing books and stories or articles primarily for money by big publishers according to the dictates of the marketplace [ . . .]).

The life of the SF writer is a life of continual socializing and communication with a rather large audience of loyal and vocal readers together with the majority of other writers working in the field. The response of these people to a writer's work is always in the forefront of his consciousness and may even be the controlling factor in his writing[. . .].

Fandom, then, is at the center of a discussion of SF, without which all else falls apart. (pp. 174-5)

All this is true, and quite beyond the intuition of even trained critical readers familiar only with other modes of writing. Still, there are limits to its

generality and salience. Hartwell writes as an American, where fandom is strongest and major conventions occur every weekend. A more sardonic and less engulfed reaction is typical of writers in the UK (exemplified in Aldiss's amused disgust — or at any rate that of his narrator in *Forgotten Life* — for the swarming fans 'protuberant of buttock and breast').

In geographically or culturally isolated markets like Australia, local fandom has a considerably more restricted capacity to conscript and shape the consciousness of the few writers able to compete on the world stage. No doubt this accounts in part for the maverick character of non-American sf, and for its general failure to achieve the large success which brought the US-fan-endorsed writers fame, wealth and devoted readership during the last decade or so.

The corollary of this fannish rapture and the sub-culture built upon its memory is a fear of any paradigm challenge to its canonical form. On the one hand, new readers are drawn increasingly to sf's imagery through 'dumbed-down' mass media varieties. Of late, Hartwell notes with dismay, 'the younger writers and the younger fans got their initial imprint of SF from sci-fi, from media.' On the other hand, ambitious young writers well-schooled in literary devices and standards are turning to sf simply because it is the best available fiction market. Hartwell's anxiety is revealing:

And while they may produce works of some merit to people of taste, they are becoming dangerous to the SF field just because there are so many of them, and they write so well, and they get published and praised by peers — but they aren't really contributing to the SF field. Rather, they are often taking something from it by creating a major distraction, a confusion of goals. (p. 188)

It is possible to have some sympathy with Hartwell's qualms, while concluding that if sf is to retain any claim to the lofty status sometimes sought for it — a bridge between the two cultures — it must do so largely on credit extended to the as-yet-unwritten. Perhaps science fiction's best hopes are discernible as the virtual shadow of an absent bridge: formal schemata tentatively to be glimpsed through the inartistic and immature trappings of a genre funded by bored or harried readers in search of opiates or displaced unconscious wish-satisfactions, dreams of some ultimate 'scientific'

quick fix for a reality irredeemably disappointing.

H. L. Gold, fabled editor of *Galaxy* magazine, offered advice in 1956 that stung Silverberg then and should crucify him now (though he cites it with some complacency):

Project your career 20 years into the future and see where you'll stand if you don't sweat over improving your style, handling of character and conflict, resourcefulness in story development. You'll simply be more facile at what you're doing right now, more glib, more skilled at invariably taking the easiest way out.

A year later, Gold tightened the screw:

I'm appalled and outraged that a talent should be *encouraged* to stay small, so that the least effort and maximum glibness will sell the most literary yard goods . . . and the hell with whether you grow as a writer. . . I've seen too many aged hacks, Bob, and damned if I want to help even one person join that pathetic ragged crowd.

Chastened finally, Silverberg tells us that he pulled up his socks and knuckled down, becoming in the process the great talent he is today. For a different opinion, we might look at a recent heart-on-sleeve review of Silverberg's 1991 *The Face of the Waters* by John Brunner, another high-production sf machine who never managed to become Gene Wolfe or Brian Aldiss or John Crowley or Geoff Ryman:

I can't keep my mind on it. Every few pages I start reminiscing to myself about when and where I first ran across this, that or the other element of the plot. . . . To my dismay, it turned out to be effectively interchangeable with the sort of thing I used to write myself about a quarter of a century past.

What's happened? Here's Brunner's explanation, drawn upon his own soul-destroying experience in sf publishing:

. . . even though I have in mind stories that, I'm sure, would prove as notable as the Big Books I wrote in the '60s and '70s, in a different way . . . I simply cannot persuade an editor — any editor

— to pay me an economic advance for what I think of as my *modern* stuff . . . or less than shopworn, at any rate.

On the strength of this book, I conclude Silverbob must be a victim of the same phenomenon.

An assessment from the academy, I'm bound to say, would reach an even harsher conclusion on the basis of *all* Silverberg's novels, even the interesting failure *Dying Inside*. (And it's worth noting, in passing, what a devastating admission it is that one will not write one's best because there's not enough money in it. As George Turner tells us, you can always get a job cleaning the streets. What's at stake is how much you value your art over your comforts, so stop fucking whining. A more persuasive complaint might be that, once written, challenging sf simply cannot gain publication or meaningful distribution, given the realities of today's mass market, which is not at all the same thing and perhaps not true, though Terry Dowling — despite rave reviews in *Locus* — evidently can't get into print in the USA, and I — despite the odd prize — seem to have lost what small charm I held for readers outside this country.)

It is not just that Silverberg, like Brunner and many other professionals, has learned well the lesson of how to turn out those 'literary yard goods' with smooth and consistent polish, but that he shows no evidence in his work of knowing what makes fiction deeply moving, memorable, powerful, subtle, adult. He's learned how to punch the tale along, how to churn out the expectedly unexpected variations on alien life forms and cultures, how to daub in the 'surprising' colours and moods, how to echo with a certain English III know-iness the tropes of canonical art (an urbane thematic reference to Conrad here, a citation from Kafka there) which is embodied, horrifyingly, in the degenerating parasitical life of his protagonist in *Dying Inside*, who writes and hawks university essays for illiterate jocks. But, alas, some sensitive inner portion of Silverberg's brain (or heart) has gone dead, it seems — or, more charitably, has been blocked off from the slick left-brain segment dedicated to his word processor.

In his extremely interesting analysis of James Blish's 'Common Time' (1953), he tells us that Kenneth Burke's notion of 'the tragic rhythm' gave him an early clue to structures of art. In essence, the formula is *Purpose, Passion, Perception*. 'Of all the formulas for constructing fiction that I have heard, this seems the most useful.' Curiously,

in this sinuous and insightful unraveling of Blish's 'marvelous story' (as Silverberg justly dubs it), he closes with what I think is a perverse misreading of its end.

You'll have to follow the logic by re-reading story and critique for yourselves, but Silverberg insists that Garrard the star pilot 'realizes, once he is safely back on Earth, that he will not go' back to the Centaurian climesterton beadmung 'with all of love'. Blish's single technical failure, Silverberg tells us, was to skimp the motivational contrast which might have intensified the 'renunciation of star travel' by formerly space-mad Garrard.

Yet the story plainly shows that Garrard decides to return, a decision thwarted and betrayed by his mission controllers. 'Don't move' is the haunting reprise in this story, the dictum which saves Garrard when subjective time plays dangerous tricks on him. Its utterance at the finale is not Garrard's secret self speaking a loss of resolve or drive; it is *society* speaking on its own behalf, for the time being, a (much slower) time-scale drastically out of synch with an individual's.

And so yes, one must ask if this interpretative error reveals something bitterly sad in Silverberg's own spirit: that in embracing the common time of his commercial readership, in accepting 'don't move' as the principle of his evolution, he blunted his perception, squandered his passion, and lost his deepest artistic purpose.

Most of the stories in the collection are exemplary, even if they creak a little after all this time (which tells us, happily, that the genre has lifted its narrative game in the meantime). They are not necessarily the stories I'd have chosen, but for obvious reasons everyone has his or her own 'age of wonder' favourites — and, of course, any Golden Age gleaning undertaken in the '80s or '90s follows upon a multitude of predecessors, some by Silverberg himself, which have already collected the period's very best sf.

Here we have C. L. Moore's 'No Woman Born' (1944), Cordwainer Smith's 'Scanners Live In Vain' (1950), Cyril Kornbluth's 'The Little Black Bag' (1950), Jack Vance's 'The New Prime' (1951), Damon Knight's 'Four in One' (1953), Henry Kuttner's 'Home is the

Hunter' (1953), Robert Sheckley's 'The Monsters' (1953), James Blish's 'Common Time' (1953), Phil Dick's 'Colony' (1953) — my God, what a fabulous year! — Alfred Bester's 'Fondly Fahr- enheit' (1954), Brian Aldiss's 'Hothouse' (1960), Bob Shaw's 'Light of Other Days' (1966) and Fred Pohl's 'Day Million' (1966).

The clunkers, for me, are 'The New Prime', 'Home is the Hunter' and 'Colony'. 'Scanners' is the Smith piece everyone of a certain age falls about over, but for me it lacks the dreamy, idiosyncratic mythos of the core Instrumentality tales: I'd prefer 'The Ballad of Lost C'Mell' or 'The Game of Rat and Dragon' (a bit primitive these days, granted) or 'Alpha Alpha Boulevard' or 'The Burning of the Brain' (which I recall is John Foyster's choice for just such a book). Bruce Gillespie can provide the perfect Dick piece, and I'd leave Kuttner out, turning instead to Theodore Sturgeon: 'The Touch of Your Hand', say, or 'The Skills of Xanadu' (seen in every other anthology, admittedly), or 'The Other Man', with their charming if reductionist cognitive psychology. The Aldiss selection is a bit too winsome, but so are my own early choices: 'Old Hundredth' and 'A Kind of Artistry'. On the whole, though, these are outstanding choices, and the editor's part-analytic, part-nostalgic readings are entralling in their own right. And yet what comes through, again and again, is a heart-breaking blend of envy and admiration, wistfulness and slightly unconvinced boastfulness.

A lengthy study of these pieces, and others of their calibre, could perhaps tell us what went wrong with sf, as well as what went right with it. Silverberg's own summary is this: 'To think well, and to write well: those are the minimum requirements for writing great science fiction. High demands; but those who choose science fiction as the centre of their writing lives accept those requirements unresentfully.' Well, but they don't, not often. (And note the absence of 'to feel well', although we're told, hard though it is to believe in Silverberg's case, that 'technique is merely a means to an end, and in this case the end is to convey understanding in the guise of entertainment'.) George Turner is not alone in berating most sf writers for avoiding hard thought, for playing children's

games with adult perceptions and passions and purposes. If the best commercial sf writing today generally has a finer finish than we find in these stories of 30 and 40 years past, I'm not at all sure that it could be described as 'written well'.

And yet — It's not simple greed or laziness that holds sf back (if you can see why I think it is being held back, rather than standing proudly where many fans still place it, at the steely pinnacle of world art to date). 'By a rough calculation,' Silverberg remarks, 'I find that the writing careers of everyone in this book aggregate a total of nearly five hundred years. That's a long time for fourteen people to spend wrestling with the phantoms of the far reaches of time and space.'

I guess this can be taken at face value. These stylistic pioneers, these children of primitive sf, these parents of today's speculative writing, they were undoubtedly driven by a kind of artistry, a search for the skills of Xanadu. They could have made more money, back in the 1950s and 1960s, writing ad copy (as some of them did, to keep steak on the table). It was the comradeship of fandom, I expect (except for Dr Linebarger — 'Cordwainer Smith' — gargling his hydrochloric acid and dreaming the psychological conquest of more worlds than one), the fever of that shared, funny, nerdish, clever, knowledgeable, profoundly genre-shaped (*mutually-shaped*) company.

We have never truly known it in Australia, in the place where the 1985 World SF Convention could gather together barely enough writers of international standing that, when I whinged and complained of the absence of an SFWA suite, Bob Silverberg could twist his lips and suggest, in the driest possible voice, 'An SFWA booth, perhaps?' *Worlds of Wonder* takes us into a booth of sf writers from another time and space, and it's well worth the visit, but at the end of the day I'm left wondering if we're not just the victims of a plague, as our irritated mothers warned us so long ago, confiscating the gaudy magazines, but not before infection had worked its way deep into the heart and head, where fancy, after all, is bred.

— Damien Broderick,  
October 1992

# Futurist Dreamtime

by Damien Broderick

## Reviewed:

### BLUE TYSON

by Terry Dowling  
(Aphelion 1-875346-05-8;  
1992; 238 pp., \$A12.95)

(This review appeared first in *The Weekend Australian*, 20–21 June 1992)

To read fiction of any kind is to help create a world, built out of words, memories and the fruitfulness of imagination. Usually we miss the complexity of this process. Postmodern fiction tests the textual transparency we take for granted, contorting habits of grammar and lexicon with unexpected words strung together in strange ways.

Decent plain folks and Philistines alike detest such assaults on their comfort. Happily for both, these difficulties are generally isolated in thin upmarket paperbacks with austere covers. By a reverse snobbishness, devotees of rich fictions spurn anything that smacks of formulaic indulgence. This denies them the odd pleasures of (in this case) Terry Dowling's intriguing futurist tales.

Dowling is a Sydney writer who has been awarded three or four hundred prizes (or so it sometimes seems) by Australian science fiction fans gathered together, some dressed in *Star Trek* uniforms and adorned with pointy ears, in their curious annual conventions. Despite this dire constituency — I confess to owning several of these awards myself — Dowling's growing body of work deserves the attention of the larger world.

Words, memories and imagination might be the common bricks and blueprint of all fiction, but how can they construct the future? By offering us new words to name objects and practices that don't yet exist. Dystopias of the near future — the closest most well-behaved readers get to sf — rein in their lexical inventiveness sharply, reflecting the impoverished worlds they guardedly deploy. More buoyant futures put out luxuriantly flowered tendrils, and so frighten the horses.

Beyond the odd vocabulary, alto-

gether necessary as well as extremely pleasurable once a taste is developed (akin to the delight an art connoisseur finds in Francis Bacon's 'Screaming Popes'), these images unfold according to the syntax of a nonexistent culture.

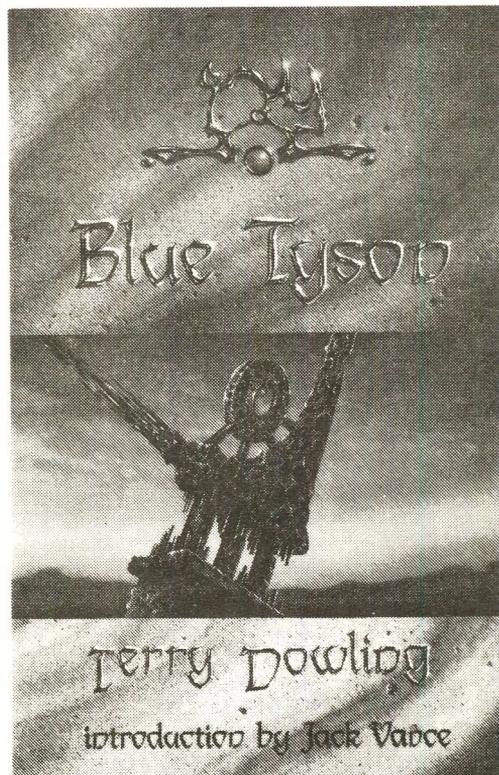
We ordinarily approach such perplexing density only in, for example, a baffling pastiche like Jean-Luc Godard's 1982 film *Passion*. And, as Fredric Jameson notes, it's by no means certain that 'the heavily charged and monitory juxtapositions in a Godard film — an advertising image, a printed slogan, newreels, an interview with a philosopher, and the *gestus* of this or that fictive character — will be put back together in the form of a message, let alone the right message.'

In Dowling's future Australia, a metaphysical transformation is underway, finding its parallels in the very shape of the landscape and the cultures that have evolved to its new form. There's an artificial inland sea, now thousands of years old (an adjacent university town is called Inlansay, a lexical hint of the elapsed time involved).

As now, a blend of European and

Pacific Rim peoples, the Nationals, live in many cities and towns along the periphery of the country. In its mysterious interior, a wholly new culture has emerged, blending genetic engineering, artificial intelligence and space technologies (nuclear energy and powered aircraft seem forgotten), and ancient tribal Dreaming mythologies — indeed, the accumulated myths of all humankind. Across these bleak, ancient deserts move the few permitted dirigibles and wind- and solar-powered charvolants, or sandships. Captain of one such, the *Rynosseros*, is Blue Tom Tyson — a sort of incarnation of Tom O'Bedlam, the visionary, pathetic Shakespearean madman.

Capturing these imagined landscapes and populations calls for a richly inventive tongue. Dowling has it (though it falters painfully in several crucial places). By these strange namings, he builds up with cumulative intensity an *Australis Incognita*. Ideally, readers of *Blue Tyson* should start with the first volume of these tales, *Rynosseros*, but it isn't entirely necessary. Despite a sense of brooding



development, these pieces resemble a Thousand and One Nights of the future, a medieval display of epiphanies locked into a certain timelessness.

Dowling's words and images are lavish: belltrees (thousands of ancient carved roadposts whose artificial minds are slowly dying as this enigmatic culture changes), biotects, the brinraga wind, totemic artifacts half-way between machine and plant:

The cauchemars sweated resin, the orrerries clicked and shifted like bone carousels . . . the sand-wives, xoanons and coralline dexters, even the spinnerets . . . turned imperceptively like the hour-hands of antique clocks, angling slowly to follow the course of the sun.

When he clunks, though, it's teeth-grating. The rulers of this future Australia, with their Clever Men and Princes, their patriarchal defloration rituals and incessant intertribal wars, prove to be DNA-altered descendants of today's dispossessed Kooris. Dowl-

ing calls them, alas, Ab'Os. Perhaps the coinage has its own curious logic; many African-Americans derisively call each other 'nigger', Italian or Greek kids have adopted 'wog' . . . and Tyson's world is millennia in the future. Still, we're reading about it *now*. At least he didn't call them Bo'Ongs.

There'd be no point in trying to summarise Captain Tyson's emblematic adventures, though it is clear that he's a mediator and bearer of transcendental insight to this stressed society with its own authenticated 'haldane Dreamtime', a collective unconscious stocked with the mythic detritus of human prehistory — dinosaur dragons, trance-induced identification with powerful Heroes, effective death songs.

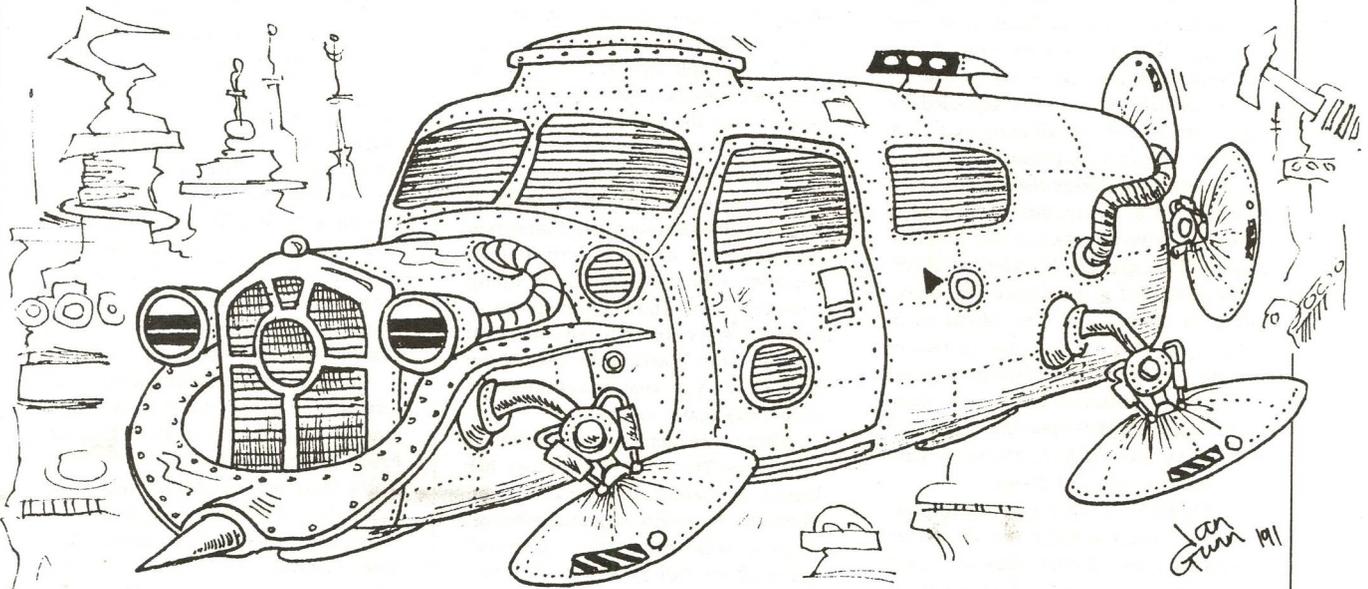
Do such fancies have any salience to our own time? No less, perhaps, than those resonant icons art reprieves from expired faiths. In one tale, the plot is less important than Dowling's images: a ziggurat in the secret places of the desert watched from space by a lethal satellite. Surely this is the truncated

pyramid (familiar from US dollar bills) with its hermetic Eye gazing in judgment and power. Dowling's borrowing is hardly without art:

Usually the house sang. It was built to make music out of the seven winds that found it on its desert rise. Vents in the walls, cunning terraces, cleverly angled embrasures in the canted terrazzo facings drew them in; three spiral core-shafts tuned them into vortices and descants, threw them across galleries, flung them around precise cornices and carefully filigreed escarpments so that more than anything the house resembled the ancient breathing caves of the Nullarbor.

Seek the book out. Australian speculative fiction is rewriting the map of our continent, and Dowling is one of its most accomplished cartographers.

— Damien Broderick, June 1992



ROS GROSS is a Melbourne freelance writer who is particularly interested in fantasy.

# The two Freda Warringtons

by Roslyn K. Gross

## Reviewed:

*The Rainbow Gate*  
by Freda Warrington  
(New English Library pb,  
1990, 381 pp.)  
(First published NEL hb, 1989)

*Darker than the Storm*  
by Freda Warrington  
(New English Library,  
1992, 304 pp.)

Is it possible for one writer to produce two books of such astonishing contrast that one is highly readable and original, while the other is dismal, woeful in style and almost unreadable? Anyone who doubts this possibility should read *The Rainbow Gate* and *Darker than the Storm*, both by an English writer, Freda Warrington.

It is usual to find variations in quality among books by the same author, but the difference here is very striking and quite bewildering. I enjoyed *The Rainbow Gate* so much that I eagerly looked for another book by the author; something about the book made me assume that it was a first novel. My disappointment on reading *Darker than the Storm* was only equalled by my surprise at discovering not only that it was published after *The Rainbow Gate* but that *Darker than the Storm* is connected to a sequence of four other novels, all written before *The Rainbow Gate*. (They are: *The Blackbird in Silver*, *The Blackbird in Darkness*, *The Blackbird in Amber* and *The Blackbird in Twilight*.) A scan over one or two of these novels in a bookshop revealed that they contained two of the main characters of *Darker than the Storm* and that they seemed to be the same kind of novel in style and theme.

*The Rainbow Gate* gives the impression of being the first novel of a writer with promise; *Darker than the Storm* has an amateurish feel about it, as though it were a very good effort by an aspiring high school student. The 'Blackbird' books I saw in the bookshop seemed to have the same feel, though it is certainly unfair to judge

Warrington's other books in such a hasty way. But it does seem to deepen the mystery. Why has a writer who so far seems very mediocre suddenly produced a novel that, despite its flaws, really lives? That this superior novel should be also followed by a book of much inferior quality is a real mystery. It is possible, of course, that *The Rainbow Gate* was actually written after *Darker than the Storm*, though published before it, but that still leaves us with the question of why *The Rainbow Gate* is so different in quality from all that precedes it.

*The Rainbow Gate* begins in our familiar world with two young women, Helen and Rianna. They had been childhood friends; Rianna had been very special to Helen because they had shared a secret world that became real only when they were together.

The novel begins with their reunion after fifteen years, and soon we are enveloped in a mystery that makes use of some familiar yet originally presented motifs. There are the exquisite dolls that Rianna makes — dolls that seem to watch with their pale faces — and soon people who have bought the dolls begin to die mysteriously. Helen notices that the gentle and innocent-seeming Rianna is hardly affected by these uncanny deaths, and even seems pleased in some way about them. It soon becomes evident, too, that someone sinister is trying to find Rianna, someone who believes she is doing something evil. These are the props of a horror story, or of a psychological thriller, and Warrington uses them quite skilfully to weave an atmosphere of mystery and excitement.

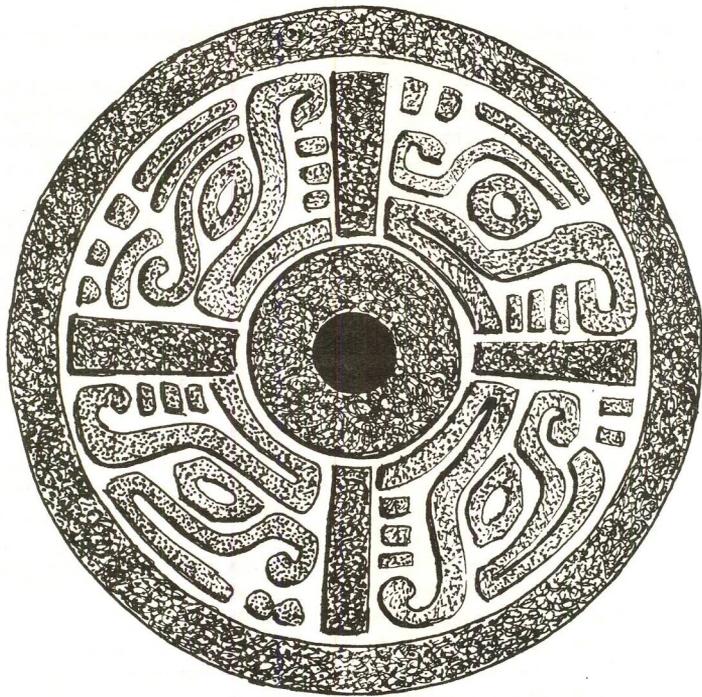
There is real emotion and involvement here. We share Helen's fear, her loyalty to Rianna, and her confusion. There are moments of genuine terror: Helen's ex-husband Nick's terrified, dying phone call to her, for instance, and the climactic scene where one of the dolls comes to life and attacks her, sending her to another world. Warrington uses these techniques deliberately to put us on the wrong track, building up excitement at the same

time. The reader is busy trying to decide whether Rianna is really some kind of psychopathic killer or if Helen's instinctive loyalty towards her is justified. That the real secret of the dolls — and of Rianna — turns out to be something completely different from what we expect is one of the great strengths of the novel.

The novel turns out to be full of fascinating and original ideas. The characters find themselves in the world of Tevera, which seems to be divided into two very different peoples, the Chalcenians and the Domendrans. The Chalcenians are pleasure-seekers, totally uninhibited, full of the passionate joy of living but seemingly indifferent and even cruel to the Domendrans. They live in a virtual paradise of joy and harmony. On the other hand, the Domendrans are life-denying, their only emotions misery and deep depression, their whole aim in life being to end suffering and the cycle of life.

It turns out that these are not different races or cultures but conflicting and contrasting ways of being in the world. In fact, they are different — indeed, exactly polarised — states of mind. Their respective states of elation and deep depression are reminiscent of the two poles of manic depression. Through the plot the author argues that life is not whole unless both truths are recognised, that life at the same time evokes both despair and joy. Even in a paradise like Tevera, the shadow side of life exists and makes itself felt. In fact, inhabitants of Tevera may swing from one polarity to another, becoming Chalcenian instead of Domendran, and vice versa.

But some of the Domendrans have turned their side of the polarity into a kind of religion, and it is in their attempt to stop Rianna from making the dolls that we begin to see what Rianna's role in all this might be. The reader will probably have guessed that Rianna comes from Tevera, but it is her role in the cosmic scheme of things that enmeshes the reader in a plot that involves mythology, life after death, sexual energy and love relationships, woven together in a fascinating and original way.



The reader becomes involved in the world of the novel through another great strength, the characterisation. From the first page, the characters *live*. There are awkwardnesses in the writing at times — as I said, it has the feel of a mainly successful but occasionally clumsy first novel — but the characters feel vital and alive, bursting with feelings and struggling to come to terms with events and their lives. Even where the dialogue sounds a little stilted or awkward, it never loses the quality of aliveness.

Helen, especially, feels alive in her struggle to comprehend what is happening, her fierce loyalty to the people she loves, in all her emotions, as the plot unfolds. We are given no idea of what Helen looks like, and yet she feels specific in quite a striking way, more, perhaps, than any other character in the book. Her interactions with the other main characters help to give the book its sense of reality, because the various relationships are tied up very closely with the plot and the unusual ideas it explores.

It is in the characters we meet in Tevera itself that we encounter the weakest point in the novel. Although by their descriptions they are supposed to be colourful characters, the various Chalcenians and Domendrans never come as alive as do Helen, Martin and Rianna. There is a stilted quality about them; they feel more like ideas or descriptions than real people, and the dialogue among characters in Tevera is more stilted than anywhere else in the novel. Yet these characters are not quite dead; even at its weakest point

the novel never quite loses that pulse of vitality and aliveness.

So *The Rainbow Gate* is hardly a flawless novel. It fails on many occasions, for example, to give the reader that sense of detailed physical reality that is often so potent in bringing novels to life. Yet it never fails to *engage* the reader; it has that indefinable quality of readability, the gift of story telling that compels the reader to keep reading and feel part of the novel's life. It is this quality that *Darker than the Storm* lacks.

There is little point in describing the characters or plot of *Darker than the Storm* in any but the sketchiest way since neither comes alive at all. The book is set entirely in two imaginary worlds. In Ikonos the High Master of its School of Sorcery, Gregardreos, loves the beautiful Silvren, hates Silvren's lover Ashurek, and manages to send Ashurek off to another world, Jhensit, to find out what is going wrong there.

It turns out that Gregardreos has been secretly linked all along with what is going on in Jhensit, and his secret sense of guilt is supposed to explain many of his actions. He is supposed to be a tragic figure, destroyed by his ambition and his secret resentment and jealousy and guilt. We are supposed to feel compassion as well as disgust for him in the end. I use the word 'supposed' because Warrington never manages to pull it off. She never manages to engage the reader in what is supposed to be happening, or in the characters' supposed emotions.

The characters are shown thinking, doing and feeling things, but Warrington never makes us feel anything about any of it, or care two jots about the characters, who never become more than abstract names on the page, attached to supposed characteristics. On the second page of the novel we hear Gregardreos musing:

'Oh, Silvren, it's not my fault I love you. I've tried so hard to be a perfect High Master but I'm not made of stone. . . . I know, after all this time I should have risen above these feelings, but they only seem to grow worse, not better.' . . . He pressed his knuckles to his forehead, trying to calm himself. 'No, no. I must be detached about this. I have overcome obstacles far greater than this.'

(*Darker than the Storm*, p. 8)

Such melodramatic gnashings of teeth (or knuckles!) and ravings do not bring characters or feelings alive; nor does one character calling another 'beloved' — as Ashurek and Silvren do throughout — make the reader believe they love each other. The amateurish feel I noted before is felt most clearly in passages like the above, where the author has tried to invent a character quickly and clumsily in the first few pages of the book.

It is the same all the way through and with all the characters. At one point in the plot, Ashurek is supposed to make a supreme act of sacrifice for Shai Fea, a princess in Jhensit. I was two pages past this event when I realised what had happened; it had totally failed to engage me.

Some of the ideas in *Darker than the Storm* are potentially interesting. There are two totally separate societies in Jhensit. Niankan-Sol consists of airy, beautiful towers high above the earth, while way below life is miserable and people are enslaved. The people above feel that everything connected to earth and nature is disgusting. Outside both cities the world is being destroyed by the Maelstrom, which of course is connected to the secret activities of Gregardreos. There is potential here for all sorts of interesting concepts and symbols as well as an interesting story, but the culture and problems of Jhensit remain as wooden and unengaging as the characters.

What is interesting about the treatment of the two contrasting societies in Jhensit is that it shows Warrington's attempt to deal with preoccupations similar to those in *The Rainbow Gate*. Warrington seems to be fascinated

with psychic opposites, with psychological extremes. But whereas in *The Rainbow Gate* the conflict between the Chalcenians and the Domendrans becomes part of the fabric of the story and of the novel's vision, in *Darker than the Storm* the conflict, like everything else in the novel, never feels real, and has little emotional impact. The seeds of potential are there; one can see Warrington's novelistic preoccupations, but they never quite take root properly. This is another reason why *Darker than the Storm* feels like an early, clumsy attempt at writing, and why it is hard to believe that it was actually published after *The Rainbow Gate*.

From time to time it is possible to see that the author is capable of writing well. There are glimpses here and there of vivid imagery. (Of a monster that attacks Ashurek: 'There was a soft noise like a pod bursting, and the carapace split open to reveal something undulating inside, glistening pink and raw.' — *Darker than the Storm*, p. 57). But these are hardly enough to redeem a novel that simply fails to seduce readers into its own world.

Looking at the two novels side by side (and even more so if the 'Blackbird' novels are indeed similar to *Darker than the Storm*), the question I asked at the beginning blares out at the reader. What is happening here? It is possible, of course, that the 'Blackbird' books became popular among a certain readership, so Warrington simply continued to write those kinds of books, including *Darker than the Storm*, which, despite being published after *The Rainbow Gate*, does seem to belong to the 'Blackbird' series and that whole trend in Warrington's writing.

But that still does not explain how *The Rainbow Gate* comes to be of such infinitely better quality. Is it to be believed that she *deliberately* wrote the other novels in that style, knowing she was capable of better? Even if one were to be cynical about this, this is not the feeling one gets from *Darker than the Storm*; Warrington really does seem to be *trying* to write interestingly there. It seems clear that in *The Rainbow Gate* Warrington has suddenly and genuinely begun to find her novelistic voice; and the leap of quality between the two is so marked that it does seem to require more than mere cynicism.

There is, I believe, a clue to the mystery in the biographical notes that appear in both books. Freda Warrington, we are told, was born in Leicester and grew up in Charnwood Forest, which is precisely the setting for *The Rainbow Gate*. Its main character, Helen, deeply loves this part of Leicester. The part of Tevera Helen visits overlaps with this area, too, so that in effect all of the action takes part there. Moreover, the notes inform us, she is also a designer and illustrator. *The Rainbow Gate* is full of observations of colour and beauty; the descriptions of Rianna's dolls are a good example. It is possible that Warrington is one of those writers who only writes well when she is writing about what she knows and loves best. Of course, all writers will bring their experience to bear on what they write, but some are more able than others to bring to life convincingly the imaginary worlds and characters of fantasy. Perhaps some writers, Warrington included, ought not attempt 'pure' fantasy at all; perhaps she is much more successful when there is a this-worldly background, as in *The Rainbow Gate*. It certainly seems that it is only in this context that she is able to properly embody her ideas and themes, such as the resolution of opposites. And it is certainly borne out by the fact that the weakest part of *The Rainbow Gate* is that concerned with the Teveran characters, and that its main focus and biggest strength is the character Helen, who very possibly is partly based on the real Freda Warrington.

One of the most vital characters in *The Rainbow Gate* is a mythological one, a supernatural being called Black Annis who guards the boundaries of Tevera and Earth, and of life and death. One of the forms she takes is that of a vulgar, bleach-haired woman with nicotine breath and a strong Leicester accent. This character comes alive with a vivid physical presence, and her strong emotions are an intrinsic part of the plot. She is at once a local mythological figure — an element of Leicester legend — and a being of cosmic importance. The sense of gritty realness she invokes contrasts with the stilted quality of some of the Teveran characters. This even more clearly shows that Warrington is best able to imbue fantasy elements with genuine life when there is a connection to what War-

ington knows best and cares about.

Such a long discussion of just two books might seem to be much ado about nothing, were it not that some very interesting implications come out of it.

Beginning writers are often told: show, don't tell. Don't *tell* readers what characters are doing and feeling; *show* them. Another piece of advice often given is not to stray too far from that which you really know and are familiar with. Both these rules would certainly seem to be borne out when one compares these two books.

But an even more interesting observation emerges from this mystery of the two novels. Critics of sf and fantasy often claim that writing about that which is imaginary is a soft option and is not about what is 'real'. But it could be argued that the writing of really good sf or fantasy requires a skill additional to that found in other types of writing: an ability to make what is imaginary and seemingly unconnected with our familiar world feel convincingly real and alive. Where the writer must create a wholly imagined world — rather than play out fantasy elements in a this-worldly setting — the task of creating a convincing vision becomes particularly complex and exacting. This is actually a very special and rare gift. (This is *why* writers are so often advised only to write about what they know. Of course, even writers of 'pure' fantasy are on a deeper level tapping that which they know, on a more inner level perhaps.) In other words, it may actually be harder to write really effective fantasy than any other kind of writing. And this, too, would seem to be very well borne out in these two very different novels.

Postscript: Apparently another book has since been published by Freda Warrington, a novel about a vampire, set in our own world. It will be very interesting to see whether, being set in our world, this new work confirms the thesis of this review and proves itself, like *The Rainbow Gate*, of a different calibre than *Darker than the Storm*. Perhaps, if Warrington is continuing to hone her voice, it will prove even better.

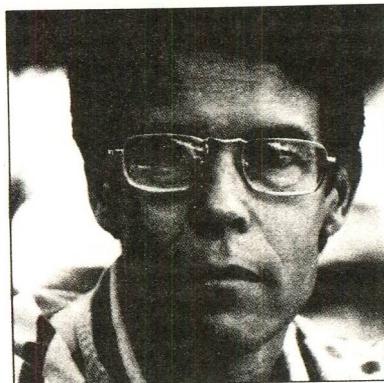
— Roslyn K. Gross, May 1993

**ANDY SAWYER**, long-time *SFC* contributor and recent editor of the BSFA's *Paperback Parlour*, has just been appointed the Librarian/Administrator of the Science Fiction Foundation Collection at the University of Liverpool. This is the first time that Britain's SF Foundation has had a fulltime Administrator since 1980.

**KIM STANLEY ROBINSON** is one of the most prolific and successful science fiction writers of the 1980s and 1990s. (Reviews of his books are scattered throughout the pages of this issue of *SFC*.) Currently resident in California, unless he's moved again without telling me, he is at work on a mighty trilogy of novels, of which *Red Mars* is the first.

## Mr Robinson: explorer

### Kim Stanley Robinson interviewed by Andy Sawyer



Andy Sawyer interviewed Kim Stanley Robinson on 23 September 1992. Part of this interview appeared in *Dreamberry Wine*, November 1992.

#### Discussed:

*Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson (HarperCollins 0-24-613881-5; 501 pp.; £14.99/A\$35)  
*Escape from Kathmandu* by Kim Stanley Robinson (Tor 0-312-93196-4; Nov. 1989; 314 pp.; US\$17.95/A\$25.50)

#### Andy Sawyer

In a couple of days there will be another unmanned Mars probe launched. Mars is back on the agenda in both fiction and non-fiction. *Red Mars* assumes that Mars is going to be visited in the near future and there is going to be a colony on it soon. Why do you think so?

#### Kim Stanley Robinson

For the sake of the novel I wanted to postulate this happening in the near future so that we feel a connection with it. Obviously it's a best-case scenario, that it would happen that fast. In the world we inhabit, I think it's going to be a lucky thing if it could happen that quickly, simply because of the financial investment involved.

In the book I tried to make the point that it might be possible that America and Russia might come to see this as a financial opportunity rather than a burden, and I think this is indeed possible. Both countries have enormous aerospace industries that were built for the Cold War. Now, with that over, they have an expertise and these big infrastructures and industries that in some sense can't really be allowed to collapse without causing worldwide depression in the economy, so for the most part they ought to be put to work doing useful things such as rapid transit systems and other things that aerospace might be tooled over to with a minimum of conversion. It seems to me that as a sort of a plum for the best

performances of these aerospace companies they might be awarded this project and that it could be seen as a payoff. By very long-distance concerns in mining and transport of materials and also by the creation of the travelling infrastructure of going through space and coming back, it might mean that they would be the carriers if other nations decided to go. This is a bit farfetched, I think, in financial terms, but for the sake of being able to write the book I thought it was enough to go on.

#### Sawyer

The terraforming of Mars takes place over a short period of time. Is that a scenario that could actually happen?

#### Robinson

I pushed everything to the fastest timetable imaginable in that regard, but it's not as if it happens like at the end of that movie with Schwarzenegger, in thirty seconds! I conceive of it as happening over a matter of hundreds of years, so I don't think it's grossly unlikely that advances in technology might make it possible, especially biotechnology and the use of microorganisms to help in the transformation of the soil and release gases and melt some of the permafrost. I've tried to introduce every single method that's ever been proposed and a few new ones of my own and put them all together, and thought of the synergistic effects, along with the advances in technology that one presumes will

happen, that make this plausible.

#### Sawyer

The physical side of the planet is very much the hero of the book. The reader gets this strong realistic sense of being there.

#### Robinson

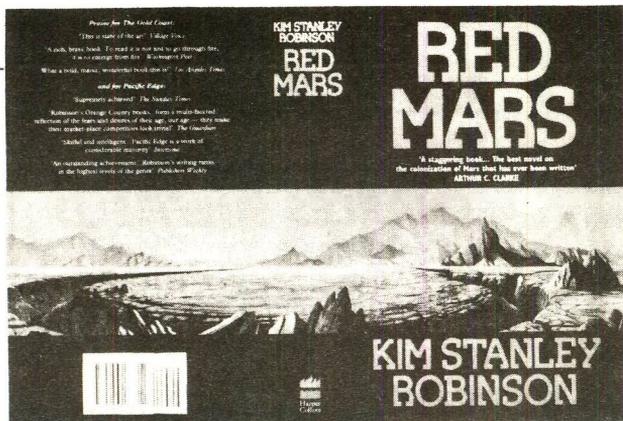
I really didn't want to do what has been done so many times before, which was to make up an imaginary Mars and impose on it a story that didn't really have to take place there anyway. I wanted the story to be about Mars. I wanted it to be, as you say, the 'hero' of the book in a sense. We have all this new and wonderful information about Mars that we didn't have before 1976. There it sits, so far not really used very fully by science fiction, and it's a magnificent place. I wanted to take advantage of this situation, which seemed to me to be just an unbelievably fine situation for a science fiction writer.

#### Sawyer

You've not bothered to go into the old question of whether there's life on Mars. You've more or less assumed that there isn't, and allowed the story to go on from there.

#### Robinson

I made the working assumption right from the start that I wanted to assume that there isn't life there, since it seems like a fairly good assumption at this point, and then play with it as it is. That



reduces the intrusion of all those elements in the storyline that are more or less implausible at this point and I find irritating — you know, the unknown virus, the living clays, this and that. Every time I run across that now in Mars stories I just groan and think 'Oh God, here it is again.' I wanted to go with the dead planet.

Besides, that gives you so many more interesting problems. I should add, however, that if we go there and assume it's dead we're going to have a heck of a time proving that for sure, because it's very likely that life, if it did exist, would start more or less like it did here, which is down in the subterranean sulphur-filled volcanic vents, and by the very nature of the location, it would be very hard to check.

#### Sawyer

How long have you been working on the book? There are scenes in *The Memory of Whiteness* (published 1985) that remind me of the society that seems to be developing in *Red Mars*, with its multiplicity of viewpoints concerning the hows and whys of changing the shape of the Martian landscape.

#### Robinson

I started writing it during the middle of 1989 and I started the research for it about 1980. By the time I wrote *Memory* there was a notion in my mind that I would come back to Mars — which is in fact the last line of *Memory* — and really dig in and do the Mars story, but at that time I knew very little about the planet itself, so it was just a notion.

#### Sawyer

And your short story 'Green Mars' — is that connected also?

#### Robinson

It's associated. I won't include it in the text of the trilogy because it just doesn't fit. It doesn't have its place. It's a sort of a side-bar story, and I'm thinking I might in fact write one more side-bar story about Roger and Eileen, the characters who are the protagonists of the novella 'Green Mars'. I might have a short book of side-bar stories that I'm interested in simply because I want to

know what happens to Roger and Eileen when they get really really old.

But basically it was an exercise in figuring out some means of playing with the new knowledge I was getting about Mars and claiming that title. With 500 active science fiction writers in the world, and I was several years away from working on this project (and at that time I thought it would be a simple novel to be called *Green Mars*), I didn't want someone else to come up with something using that title in the meantime. I know there's no legal problem but just an aesthetic or moral problem; I wanted to be there first! I recently got a letter from Arthur C. Clarke saying that the current book that he's working on would have been called *Green Mars* if it wasn't for the existence of my story, so it wasn't just pure paranoia.

#### Sawyer

How's the timescale of the trilogy going to play out?

#### Robinson

I can't absolutely say for sure, but approximately two to three hundred years for the whole thing.

#### Sawyer

And *Green Mars* will be the terraformed Mars?

#### Robinson

No, in *Green Mars* they'll still be working on it, but it will be much easier to get the Martian atmosphere to the point where some plants might survive, especially genetically engineered plants that are really good with cold and low pressure. It will be much easier to do that than to make a breathable human-viable surface, and so I'm thinking that in *Green Mars* we will have plants on the surface that will justify that title, but it won't be very vast; more like Arctic tundra, or even less lively than that. But then in *Blue Mars* by the time we really get out there to the farthest extent of the story I hope to have a good start on terraforming.

#### Sawyer

*Red Mars* is very 'hard science', for

want of a better term, but in other stories you bring a range of other influences and interests to bear. *The Memory of Whiteness* is very much about music, as is that lovely jazz story 'Coming Back to Dixieland', and then there's the Jacobean drama in 'The Disguise'. What spurs you to write?

#### Robinson

From these examples you can see that if I have an interest it seems to me a good plan to figure out a story that will enable me to write about that interest and use whatever I've learned about that topic. There's some information content to the stories, in that they don't just rely on their plotlines, which after all can only be so original. I like trying to get a kind of density of information into the stories, and I think that's one of the reasons I got into science fiction. It allows you to give, and the readers are happy to get, a certain amount of information. It's a working method.

As to what spurs me to write — it's just a compulsion. It just seems to me to be basic to my nature. It's just what I do.

#### Sawyer

Your names — Kim, Stanley, Robinson. They all seem to me to be resonant with the idea of exploration, travel. And from what I've seen of your biography, it's something that you've done a lot of.

#### Robinson

Not enough!

#### Sawyer

Kathmandu and places?

#### Robinson

I really love to travel. I really like getting up into the mountains and backpacking and mountaineering, and this is one of my favourite things to do in life. I've tried to see some other mountain ranges. I've wanted to go to the Himalayas just because of the attraction of the world's biggest mountain range, and I'm really glad I did that. It's inspired me to want to do more. Currently I don't have the opportunity like I used to, being married with a young child, but we'll do some more and do it again.

In general, I like to travel where I can get on to new wildernesses and new mountain ranges, but I'm not restricted to that area. I wouldn't want to restrict myself to that. I suppose the two urges are somewhat intertwined, this travel urge and writing science fiction, because they have to do with other cultures and other landscapes.

Often my phrase to describe the oddity of some place comes from the

title of the book published in the United States as *Easy Travel to Other Planets*. I go down into Karlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, for instance, those truly enormous and spectacular caverns, and just 'travel to other planets', and the same is true of many other different places.

It also turns out to be time travel in a way. If you get off the electric net in Asia and many other parts of the world you could easily imagine yourself in the year 1500 and so — in a certain sense that isn't exactly true but at least it's suggestive — it's like time travel. I like to do it because it informs my writing, but also I think I like to write because I enjoy the experience. The two are intertwined. They're experiences of the same pleasure.

#### **Sawyer**

Going back to *Escape from Kathmandu* — how did that come about? It seems so different from the rest of your work.

#### **Robinson**

Oh yeah, it is. I never would have written that book if I hadn't gone there, because it never would have occurred to me. It was a direct response to our experience there. We had a tremendous time there. It was hilarious. Day after day my wife and I would laugh in horror at various aspects of our experience, not so much at the people there but at the discrepancies between their culture and ours. And you know, we did in fact run into Jimmy Carter under completely bizarre circumstances. These kinds of things happen there, so I wanted to get them down somehow.

After a while I wrote one story that just an expression almost of joy at the experience, but after that I wanted to understand it; I mean *why* is it so corrupt in the government and the bureaucracy? How did that come about? What's going on there? And I wanted also to make it clear that I did not consider it to be only a playground, that it has its own integrity, its own people who have their own integrity, so it was really necessary to write the rest of the stories to try to give a full picture of the place.

I had to do a lot of research in the Library of Congress to try to understand Nepal's history. And so people have remarked that the second two stories, the last half of the book, are much darker than the first two, and this is fine, but I wanted to do it as a kind of deepening to get a better perspective on the country and understand it better. I wanted to keep it funny, but black comedy is some of the funniest comedy

that we have. I think it was appropriate to the country.

#### **Sawyer**

When I was reading *Escape from Kathmandu*, it was an incredible experience because there was at the time a lot of news coverage of the unrest and attempted coups in Nepal, and so there was this country to which I wouldn't have paid close attention, but I was in fact reading a novel about it, and the novel appeared to be happening. Which was commenting on which?

#### **Robinson**

This was my greatest act of prediction as a science fiction writer! I really did, before the Nepal unrest, which I guess would be about late 1990 — I wrote all those stories '86, '87, '88, and I really picked it in terms of the resistance. I guess in a way it was easy to pick, but that doesn't mean that we always do it. The Rana family that runs Nepal was a kind of a giant Mafia operation. It's just gone too far, and the people of the country are really hurt, and it just seemed to be a ripe situation. I wrote my story as a kind of wish-fulfilment thinking I *wish* they would overthrow these guys (and the King himself is more or less their hostage), and certainly the Nepalese people wished for it more than I did. So when it happened, it shouldn't have been that big a surprise.

To tell the truth, it hasn't completely solved the problem, but it shows the level of outrage there, and things might eventually change.

#### **Sawyer**

What after *Mars*?

#### **Robinson**

I have ideas that I don't really want to talk about, but I feel that these Mars books are central to my career. By that I mean that there's going to be a 'before' and there's going to be an 'after'. I have a lot of ideas for really big projects to come after, but I'm not really worrying about doing much advance planning. I feel that I have, at least, maybe three more years to go on this Mars project and I'm not in any rush, I'm enjoying it so much. In a way, I don't really want it to come to an end.

#### **Sawyer**

It can be a satisfying thing to build on as well because, as you said earlier, so many Mars stories are just excuses for romances. Not many of them are actual explorations or future histories of a conceivably real place.

#### **Robinson**

I've no plans, though, for sequels to the 'Mars' trilogy when I'm done with it, except for this one side-bar volume with Roger and Eileen, which is basically wrapping up something I started beforehand. I want it to be a discrete and individual work because I think that it's really dangerous to do sequels to individual works. Not only are they weak in themselves but they tend to weaken the integrity of the original work and make it seem less. Which is something I would never want to do to this book. It's just that I'm having a really good time with it and, you know, I don't want it to end.

#### **Sawyer**

Do you think that the exploration of Mars is as fundamental to the future of humanity as it comes over in the book?

#### **Robinson**

It is an expression of health in a civilisation. If a civilisation can do that, it implies that that civilisation itself is healthy, or at least striving to be healthy. The colonisation and terraforming of Mars is — the best image that I've ever come across to describe it is that of the poet Frederick Turner, who said that it's like the cathedrals of medieval Europe, and essentially it's a kind of religious and spiritual act that we can all band together as a society and do something beautiful *for itself* where the economic return is either incidental or maybe even non-existent. Maybe it's an economic stretch for us, but what we're saying is that we want to do this simply because it's beautiful, and that it immediately raises the *esprit de corps*.

#### **Sawyer**

Though lots of people would say: what about solving our own problems here?

#### **Robinson**

I have a lot of sympathy with the notion that we ought to solve the problems here first. Actually I don't think Mars can be terraformed without the health of the Earth. In my book, what I think might happen is — this goes too far into the plot of the second two books, but let me put it this way — I don't think we *do* Mars without getting our house in order as well.

#### **Sawyer**

Kim Stanley Robinson, thank you very much.

#### **Robinson**

My pleasure.

During 1993 DOUG BARBOUR has been travelling around Europe reading his own poetry, teaching (University of Alberta at Edmonton), reading and writing.

## Some Canadian science fiction

by Doug Barbour

### Reviewed:

*Children of the Rainbow*  
by Terence M. Green  
(Toronto: McClelland & Stewart;  
224 pp.; Can\$16.95)

*Strange Attractors*  
by Tom Henighan  
(Victoria: Beach Holme Publishers;  
221 pp.; Can\$6.95)

*Moonfall*  
by Heather Spears  
(Victoria: Beach Holme Publishers;  
240 pp.; Can\$6.95)

A question that is continually asked is: What makes Canadian speculative fiction Canadian? It is a question, I find, that gets more and more difficult to answer. All three of these books are by Canadians (though one is by a poet who has spent most of the past thirty years in Denmark), but I'm not too sure about any specific Canadian content.

The whole point of sf is to invent new and other places and times, so aside from the occasional side glances at Canada, the writers simply go about their business of inventing with considerable élan, and I for one am glad they do. I only wish the publishers would go about their business as carefully and well, but the number of typos in all three books tell a different, negative story, an ironically Luddite one, for computer spellcheck programs will not catch the right words in the wrong places.

One of the protagonists of Terence M. Green's *Children of the Rainbow* teaches physics at the University of Toronto, but aside from the considerable and interesting use of the story of David McTaggart and *Greenpeace III's* attempt to prevent the French explosion of an atomic bomb in the South Pacific in 1972, there are few other Canadian allusions in the novel. Green writes a fast-paced and intriguing time-travel story that

moves through alternating chapters from South America in the twenty-first century to Pitcairn Island in the twentieth to Norfolk Island in the nineteenth.

Green's premise is intriguing. A leader of the New Inca Church has discovered how to send people back through time up to 100 years. Fletcher Christian IV, a direct descendant of the *Bounty* mutineers, asks to be sent back to Pitcairn Island in 1972 in order to investigate both the phenomenon and his own inheritance. This seems simple enough, but the date chosen turns out to be exactly 100 years after a French nuclear explosion in the same area of the South Pacific, and that explosion not only erupts into the psychokinetic time trip but disrupts it, flinging Christian back to the appalling penal colony on Norfolk Island some 140 years earlier, and a heroic young Irish prisoner forward in time to 1972.

Green's narrative skilfully weaves the lives of his different characters together across time, but his characterisations don't always live up to their implied complexity. The closer he tries to get to their emotional hearts, the more he seems to slip toward cliché. This is perfectly acceptable for genre fiction, but I get the impression he is trying very hard to transcend mere genre categorisation, and on this level he doesn't quite succeed. In showing the psychological disruption that the time shifts create in his two central characters he is very good, bringing out the comic possibilities of a nineteenth-century convict suddenly being asked to listen not only to a radio but also to the Rolling Stones, and demonstrating convincingly how difficult it would be for a twenty-first-century man to get nineteenth-century people even to see him, let alone listen to his story. Indeed, the best chapters in the book are the long conversations between Fletcher Christian IV and Major Joseph Anderson, the commandant of Norfolk Island (which Green presents as an appalling place of punishment without coming near the horror of the

first-person accounts that Robert Hughes included in *The Fatal Shore*). The narrative perfectly captures the intelligent incomprehension of the latter, an extremely well-read and thoughtful man of his time.

Green's multiplicit ending, in which some people are granted joy, others a proper end, and Christian the by-now-mandatory scientifically transcendent conclusion that so much sf strives for, owes an awful lot to another Canadian, A. E. Van Vogt, but it at least suggests just how little we really know about the origins of life or the potential powers of the mind, and that makes it speculative in the best sense. *Children of the Rainbow* is an intriguing blend of history and prophecy, always an engaging read.

Tom Henighan has published a previous collection of short stories, *Tourists from Algol*, and a historical fantasy, *The Well of Time*. His new collection, *Strange Attractors*, demonstrates continuing growth in his craft and a deepening of its emotional grip on the reader.

These stories range from fabulous allegories through dark fantasies to inventive speculative fictions. Most of these fictions are dark in that they take their beginnings in a future predicated on human failure to solve the ecological and political problems that now face us all. The stories themselves tend to celebrate individuals' abilities to survive in a hostile environment, and even to find a kind of happiness and love despite all. Of course there are ironies, especially in the black comedy of 'Dark Christmas', in which a child gets his wish — perhaps; in 'Tourists from Algol', in which an Ontario town is just as morally ruined by an alien tourist promotion as it would be by a human one; and in 'Perfect Place', which can be read as either a feminist warning or as a satire of same. There are a couple of harsh tales of corruption and human failure, and one grand exercise in compassion, love and heroism. This story, 'The Book of Tobit', in which the Bibli-



cal story is rendered in post-holocaust terms, is both the longest and the best story in the book, and by itself worth the price of admission.

All the stories in *Strange Attractors* will hold your attention, and leave you just a bit more aware of the strange attraction of all other people in this strangely attractive world we share.

If the previous two writers have followed time-honoured conventions of sf in placing human beings in new and changed environments, Governor-General's Award-winning poet Heather Spears has attempted something much more difficult: to create a new humanity in an utterly changed world. *Moonfall* is a poet's novel in the best sense of the term: its style is allusive, metaphoric, and full of deliberate gaps brought about by the loss of knowledge in a culture forced back to primitive living near the poles by the collapse of the ozone layer (a 'fact' never stated, but revealed only the various imagistic descriptions of the two-headed 'twins' who are our inheritors).

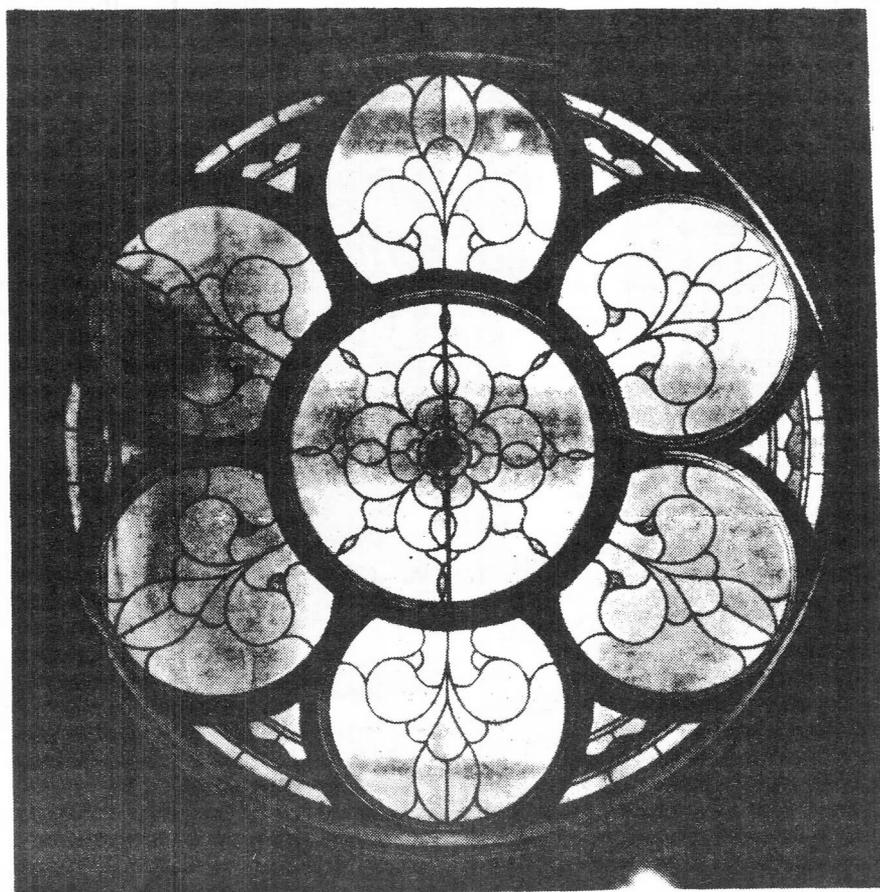
Into the world of 'second humans', the bicephalic people who have supplanted us, Tasman, a monocephalic, is born. Although her early life is hard, for she is an almost complete outsider in her culture, eventually she becomes the key to regaining ancient technology and preventing 'Moonfall', the destruction of the earth by the moon's collision with it. How she grows up, is educated in a far 'city' by a 'twin' who eventually becomes her lover, and how whole 'cities' of people eventually make a trek across the empty deserts to find the ancient technology that might save their world, is the mythic but carefully anti-epic tale of *Moonfall*.

What Spears has accomplished here is very special, for she manages both to capture the tone of oral tale-telling and to provide a profoundly moving psychological portrait of her protagonists, and all the while by implying without explaining in detail the complexities of having two minds in one body. There is a long scene of her teacher(s) initiating Tasman into sexual love that is extraordinary both for its erotic intensity and its subtle under-

standing of the varieties of feeling and concern that must play across such a strange event for all three (both) participants. As you can see, she has done her job so well that I have difficulty writing about her success without lapsing into her language; indeed, her subtle use of contemporary words as 'translations' of a conceptual language based on bicephalic living is one of the great accomplishments of her novel.

*Moonfall* is a special sf novel, achieving something new and different. It is perhaps not surprising that it is a poet who has not apprenticed herself within the genre who has accomplished this, for she is able to sidestep many of the givens of genre sf while never losing sight of its prime directive: to create a sense of wonder. *Moonfall* is a book that will excite both sf aficionados and all readers interested in mythic imaginings. A truly fabulous novel, it is also a beautifully subtle study of alternate psychology and a wondrously effective construction of a new myth.

— Douglas Barbour, July 1992



# Criticanto

Roslyn K. Gross ❖ Greg Hills ❖ Elaine Cochrane ❖ LynC

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## SOMEWHERE FAMILIAR IN A NEW WAY

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Roslyn K. Gross reviews:

**TAM LIN**  
by Pamela Dean  
(Tor; 1991; 468 pp.)

*Tam Lin* is one of a series called *The Fairy Tale Series* put together and introduced by Terri Windling, in which authors are asked to re-tell and bring to life various fairy tales. This one, based on the old ballads 'Thomas the Rhymer' and 'Tam Lin' (both part of the same myth, with variations), is delightful, evocative and, as Terri Windling claims, 'both modern and timeless'.

Dean has chosen to set the story in a small Wisconsin college in the early 1970s. It sounds like the most unlikely

setting for a re-telling of 'Tam Lin', but Dean really does manage to write an engrossing story set among modern young people, a story that at the same time evokes the sense of dark supernatural forces found in the original tale.

The residential American college pictured in the novel is, of course, somewhat different in ambience and educational system from an Australian university, but readers who experienced university life in the seventies will feel nostalgic reading all the lovingly recounted details of adolescent relationships, the earlier version of the Pill and its symptoms, idiosyncratic lecturers, choosing subjects, and so on.

Most of the book, in fact, involves the richly detailed doings of everyday college life of Janet, the protagonist, and her roommates, following both their changing intellectual inclinations and their romantic entanglements. Lovers of literature will be fascinated by the frequent references and discussions on Shakespeare, Keats, Latin

grammar, the theatre, and far too many other literary subjects to mention; all but the most fanatical may find some of the references a bit unclear or a little confusing in places.

But it all adds up to a passionate appeal for the importance and the delights of learning, which, in fact, is part and parcel of the novel's plot. In the afterword, the author writes: 'I would say that this book is about keeping the heart of flesh in a world that wants to put in a heart of stone; and about how . . . learning and literature can help their adherents accomplish that' (p. 461). Janet's literary education is as important as her romantic relationships in helping her to be the sort of person who is willing to try to save Thomas from his fate.

The reader who is familiar with the old tale will already know that a character called Janet saves a character called Thomas from the Queen of Faery, but this in no way interferes with the unfolding of a very engrossing

and readable story. In fact, it reads so much like a delightful story of adolescence and college at times that the reader may wonder how the author is going to reach that conclusion. But the strange, supernatural elements are there underneath, in hints at first, then becoming more menacing as Janet realises what is going on, and culminating in the saving of Thomas. This climax does seem to come a little suddenly, however; there is not quite enough emphasis on Janet's feelings and her decision to try to save Thomas.

Another reason why knowing the outcome of the old tale does not spoil the novel is because Dean has included in the plot other elements not in the original story. The idea that actors who actually acted in Shakespeare's plays in his lifetime have been in Elfland and are now actually living in a small mid-American college may sound totally unbelievable, but Dean carries it off surprisingly well, and it fits intriguingly into the plot, adding interest and depth, throwing into relief both Thomas's plight and Janet's character. There are other intriguing mysteries, such as the ghost who throws certain books out of a particular window every year on a particular date, and the strange behaviour of students majoring in Classics, both of which are themes running throughout the novel and important clues to what is really going on. All these additional plot elements, seemingly nothing to do with the original tale, somehow fit into the plot well and add interest to it.

All the characters, even those who appear briefly, jump off the page vividly and feel individual and interesting. Janet is especially appealing, with her sharp straightforwardness and strength of character. She manages to get through the traumas of adolescence — including having her father as one of her lecturers, a failed romance, and falling pregnant — with grace and humour. The Faery Queen (who happens to be a head of department at the college) and her consorts are depicted with clarity but enough mystery and ambiguity to be convincing.

The wonderful thing about this novel is the way the everyday doings of Janet's educational and romantic life and the currents of her thoughts and friendships manage to sustain our interest throughout, even without the supernatural elements. This kind of fantasy, in which supernatural forces are juxtaposed against a wholly mundane and understandable world, or where there are intrusions into the mundane world by the strange and unworldly, can be very satisfying. The reader has the satisfying and stimulat-

ing sense in this novel of being somewhere familiar in a new way: both the old Tam Lin story, and our familiar everyday world, are seen through fresh and interesting eyes.

## WORTHY TESTIMONY

Greg Hills reviews:

### REQUIEM

by Robert A. Heinlein  
edited by Yoji Kondo  
(Tor 0-312-85168-5; 1992;  
352 pp.; US\$21.95/A\$32)

The habit of continuing to publish new posthumous books of well-known sf writers has produced some awful clunkers, but every so often something good does come out. *Requiem* is one example.

Rather than a novel that was unpublishable while the author was alive, or an unfinished work, or a selection of mostly mundane correspondence leavened only by occasional gems, *Requiem* is a collection of pieces that deserve publication. The book contains, among other things, the text of Heinlein's Worldcon Guest of Honour speeches, the novelette 'Destination Moon' along with the article 'Shooting *Destination Moon*', which gives us a Heinlein's-eye view of the making of the film, two of the 'Puddin' (non-sf) tales, and a grab-bag of tributes to the Master. Only this last selection lets the book down, since few (but by no means none) of the tributes rise above maudlin sighs of admiration and regret.

In this last section may be found Larry Niven's 'The Return of William Proxmire' — a time travel tale that is as entertaining as it is minor — and Spider Robinson's passionate defence 'Rah Rah RAH!'. One point I've always objected to in the latter is the line 'Do not good people, responsible people, enlightened citizens, want to be lec-

tured to by someone who knows more than they do?' My answer is that I prefer my lectures straight — not dominating the 'fiction' I've just paid good beer money for. I greatly enjoyed parts of *Expanded Universe* where Heinlein chose to lecture in clearly labelled non-fiction articles, but I have always found the injection of the same lectures into his stories irritating. The only book in which I feel it actually worked to the benefit of the novel was *Time Enough for Love* — and this is a less-than-universal opinion among the book's readers.

We find, surprise surprise, that the book *Requiem* kicks off with the short story 'Requiem'. Without 'The Man Who Sold the Moon', the story is a little flat, but it does still reflect the dreams and hopes of a generation.

'Requiem' is followed by 'Tenderfoots in Space', which has not been previously reprinted since its initial appearance in *Boys' Life*. This is the tale of a family that moves to Venus, taking with it a Boy Scout son and his mongrel dog. It's not one of Heinlein's better stories, but is well suited to its original audience — I would have wolfed it down in my own Scouting days.

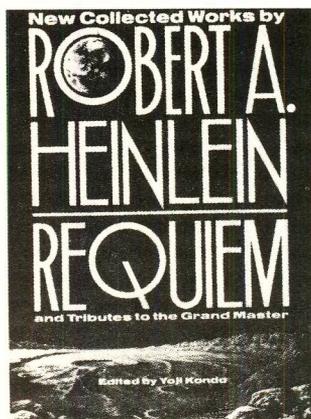
Following 'Tenderfoots' is the *Destination Moon* pair, a fascinating exploration of an intelligent layman's observation of the shooting of an early sf film. Notable is the brief mention of the fight against Hollywood's foibles:

At one point it seemed that all this planning and effort would come to nothing; the powers that be decided that the story was too cold and called in a musical comedy writer to liven it up with — *sssh!* — sex. For a time we had a version of the script which included dude ranches, cowboys, guitars and hillbilly songs on the Moon, a trio of female hipsters singing into a mike, interiors of cocktail lounges, and more of the like, combined with pseudo-scientific gimmicks which would have puzzled even Flash Gordon.

It is a shame that later sf movie makers lacked the gumption to face down such interventions, though I must admit to a tickling curiosity about some of the suggestions listed above.

The two 'Puddin' stories are 'The Bulletin Board', which gives a wonderful surprise to the campus crowd, and 'Poor Daddy', which explains how an intelligent man can surprise his friends by doing something new — without risk of looking foolish by falling on his prat.

The real meat of the book is the next



four items: Heinlein's Guest of Honour speeches to Worldcons for 1941, 1961 and 1976, and to the Rio de Janeiro Movie Festival in 1969. These are treasure enough to justify the book, though many of the ideas used in them have also been published in *Expanded Universe*. Of these the most interesting (and the one I would have liked to hear) is the 1976 speech, for which Virginia Heinlein practically apologises in her introduction as being 'rather more informal than he would have wished'. Maybe so, but it provides us with a glimpse of the man that a prepared speech never could.

The rest of the book, as mentioned, is mainly filled with tributes to the man, not really worth the paper they dirty. I don't mean to be offensive; it's simply that I think there are better ways to fill out a book such as this. Many of the passages grind personal axes; few possess intrinsic interest; few even represent good samples of the writer's art. They would pass in 1988 when the subject was fresh; in 1992 they pall rapidly. The testifiers (in order of appearance) are: Tom Clancy, L. Sprague de Camp, Jerry Pournelle, Charles Sheffield, Jon McBride, Catherine Crook de Camp, Tetsu Yano, Poul Anderson, Jim Baen, Greg Bear, J. Hartley Bowen Jr, Arthur C. Clarke, Gordon R. Dickson, Joe Haldeman, Larry Niven, Spider Robinson (twice), Robert Silverberg, Harry Turtledove, Jack Williamson, Yoji Kondo and Charles Sheffield.

One final note: the dustjacket features a moonscape by Pat Morrissey. Personally I would preferred the Bonestell moonscape mentioned in 'Shooting *Destination Moon*'. While I am not qualified to be dogmatic about this, I think that Heinlein might have felt the same way.

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## NO SIGN OF ENERGY OR GOOD HUMOUR

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Elaine Cochrane reviews:

**BLOOD AND HONOUR**  
by Simon Green  
(Gollancz hb  
0-575-05240-6; 1992;  
316 pp.; \$14.99 hb, \$7.99  
pb (C format))

Despite its obvious faults, I enjoyed Simon Green's first novel, *Blue Moon Rising*, and was looking forward to reading his next offering.

*Blood and Honour* purports to take place in the same world as *Blue Moon Rising*, but some years later in another country. However, the two books have almost nothing in common. It appears Green assumes that all readers of this book will have read and memorised the other, so obviating the need for creating background. I suppose it's one way of avoiding expository lumps.

The great Jordan, a hungry but once-successful actor, is employed to act as the double for a prince. When he is embroiled in very nasty castle politics he is surprised. I don't know why. If you are down on your luck and someone offers you ten thousand ducats, wouldn't you suspect a catch? And if the money is increased fivefold at the first sign of trouble, wouldn't you suspect that maybe you weren't expected to collect it? The quick-witted hero, who sees his way through every trap only ten pages after the reader, does not.

*Blue Moon Rising* had problems, but it also had verve and good humour. Although the action scenes in *Blood and Honour* are better handled, the energy and good humour are gone. The book drags. I'll have a look at the next Green novel in the hope that the sparkle has returned, but, if it has not, I

won't be plodding through another 316 pages.

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## WONDERFULLY FUNNY, OF COURSE

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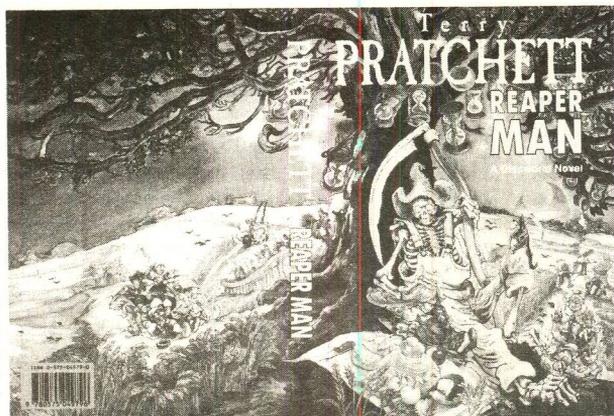
Elaine Cochrane reviews:

**WITCHES ABROAD**  
by Terry Pratchett  
(Gollancz hb  
0-575-04980-4; 1991; 252  
pp.; \$13.99 hb/A\$24.95)  
**REAPER MAN**  
by Terry Pratchett  
(Gollancz 0-575-04979-0;  
1991; 253 pp.;  
\$13.99/A\$26.95)

When review copies of Terry Pratchett's books arrive, which they do with astounding regularity, I tend not to review them for a very simple reason. We *know* they'll be wonderfully funny — and a quick skim through a few pages confirms this — and everyone else knows they'll be wonderfully funny, and if they don't, we have Dave Langford saying so far more wittily than I could possibly manage. So I end up reading something else much less enjoyable.

*Witches Abroad* is wonderfully funny. Pratchett starts with the idea that stories have a life of their own: once begun, they keep going to their happy ending, regardless of the wishes and feelings of the characters caught up in them. Against the power of one particular story are pitted Magrat, Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg. The witches' battle takes them far from the Ramtops to Genua on the other side of Discworld, and on the way Pratchett has fun fracturing more fairy tales than I would have thought possible in 250 pages.

*Reaperman* could be described as Pratchett's version of 'Death takes a holiday', though Pratchett, of course, does not write anything so crudely obvious. It has much of the expected Pratchett humour, but, unlike any others of his books I have read, it also has a serious theme. Death is granted mortality and rides off to experience what life he has left. Pratchett has great fun with the implications of this for the Discworld city of Ankh-Morpork. He also explores, tentatively, some ideas about life and death. The blend is uneasy, and I kept wishing that Pratchett would stick to either the humour or the adventures of Death instead of trying to do both.



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## NORTON BACK IN FORM

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LynC reviews:

### THE MARK OF THE CAT

by Andre Norton

(Ace 0-441-52020-0; 1992;  
248 pages)

Take one gentle outcast, an exotic landscape and culture, some big cats, and a re-inspired master, and the magic of Andre Norton lives again.

*The Mark of the Cat* could almost be classified as a shared world book. The land and its inhabitants were actually created by Karen Kuykendall, whose familiar painting of cats floating in the air surrounding a human tumbler is used as the frontispiece. Her world, the outer lands, consists of five queendoms, governed overall by an emperor chosen by ordeal rather than inheritance. It is a harsh land, consisting mainly of sand dunes, volcanoes and salt pans. Only one queendom has enough greenery to support plant life. It is sparsely populated by humans, their tame beasts, three species of cat, and huge marauding rats.

Klaverel-va-Hynkkel is the elder son of a retired commander. Instead of following on his forefathers' footsteps and becoming a soldier, Hynkkel develops an affinity for the animals around him, even being befriended by a 'Kotti', an independent, sacred, semi-domesticated species of cat. This engenders the contempt of both his father and younger brother, and leads to his virtual ostracism from his father's house. He is permitted to be the beast-master for the household.

In the queendom of Hynkkel's birth, Kahulawe, male children from the age of fifteen are dumped in the desert alone to prove their manhood. Not all return. Hynkkel's father, fearing that Hynkkel won't return, has for years not allowed him to 'solo'. Hynk-



kel's younger brother, wishing to be rid of the threat posed by Hynkkel's existence, persuades their father that he is doing Hynkkel a disservice in not letting him chance it — and so his father sends him out.

While soloing, Hynkkel rescues a wounded sandcat from the ravages of the rats that are mutating into a race capable of extensive organisation as well as vicious malicious damage. While sandcats and humans are sworn enemies, the rats, a common problem to both, are mutating so fast that it is not possible for either group to keep them in control any longer. The sandcats teach Hynkkel their language and send one of their own to accompany him.

Knowing there will never be a welcome for him back home, Hynkkel travels on to the capital. This is at the time of the death of the last emperor, when the big blue leopards choose from each queendom one person to be a candidate for the emperorship. Hynkkel reasons that at such a time of social upheaval it should be possible for a clanless and guildless man such as himself to find work.

This is not a long novel (only 248 pages), but Andre Norton manages to include a fully detailed picture of many of the groups of people scratching a living and a visit to each of the five queendoms as part of this rite-of-passage story. These descriptions are handled so well that they become more than a travelogue, despite their brevity, and are an integral part of the story.

A master of storytelling is back in form again, as she has not been for some years. Welcome back, Andre. A good easy read — for adolescents upwards.

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## CYBERPUNK — PLUS LIVING CHARACTERS

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Elaine Cochrane reviews:

### CHINA MOUNTAIN ZHANG

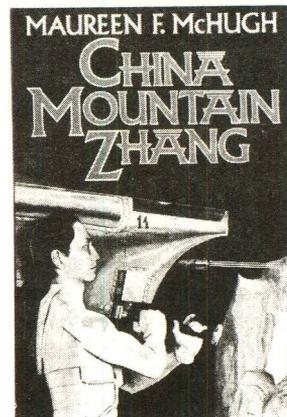
by Maureen F. McHugh

(Tor Books; 1992; 313 pp.;

\$US19.95/A\$29)

*China Mountain Zhang* is McHugh's first published novel; I hope she goes on to write (and have published) many more. Perhaps future novels will have all the strengths of this, and fewer of the weaknesses.

At some time in the past America has had its Great Socialist Revolution.



More recently, it has had the Great Cleansing Winds campaign, its own version of the Cultural Revolution. Advisers from the prosperous, affluent, Chinese People's Republic give technical assistance for their own ends, but the reconstruction of America is slow and painful.

With this setting, McHugh has attempted a cyberpunk novel. She has the typical implausible computer technology, but unlike any other cyberpunk novelist I have endured, she has living characters as well. It is the depiction of these characters, particularly that of Zhang, American-born and an outsider in many ways, that kept me reading.

McHugh's settings also differ from the typical cyberpunk. Certainly there is a background of urban decay, but McHugh's decayed New York still manages to have clean, safe trains that run on time. We are told that there are housing shortages, but we are shown people sharing houses in conditions familiar to many uni students. The 'real' poverty and disease is offstage, neither seen nor felt. Optimism keeps breaking through. (Not that I object to optimism, but, given her setting, McHugh seems more to suffer from wilful blindness, to have avoided thinking her society through.)

The pastiche seems to be a structural requirement of cyberpunk. McHugh also has her first-person narratives from multiple viewpoints; unlike many less skilled writers, she even manages to give each character an individual voice. Thus Angel the kite flier, San-xiang the boss's daughter, and Martine the Martian colonist (Patriotic Volunteers Turn Red Desert Into Productive Land) also have their stories. If only McHugh had managed to make these stories connect, to weave the strands together before parting them again in the cyberpunk tradition, this could have been a very fine novel indeed.

**DAVE LANGFORD SAYS:** I must say Bruce is a glutton for punishment. This second batch of 'Critical Mass' review columns from *GMI* takes us to the end of that magazine's life and beyond: it folded late in 1991 thanks to the collapse of the parent company, leaving one final piece unpublished. Since then I've been having a bit of a rest from this sequence of 101 columns in three successive fantasy games magazines. . . . Token references to games may be ascribed as usual to nervousness about what on earth the editors thought I was doing in their mag. (May 1992.)

### Critical Mass 10

As I write, Sir Kingsley Amis's *Memoirs* (Hutchinson, hardback, 346pp, £16.99) are causing a stir for their relentless curmudgeonliness and scabrous anecdotes. I myself had hoped for a few appalling stories about the author's pal Brian Aldiss, but perhaps owing to some lingering fondness the SF world gets off lightly. It's thirty years since Amis's *New Maps of Hell* appeared as the first 'respectable' — i.e. non-cult, non-small-press — survey of sf. This remains witty and readable, however outdated . . . but the *Memoirs* imply that the SF overdose left Sir K. unable to absorb any more, just as he could no longer enjoy the James Bond books after writing his enthusiastic book on them. When you can't even face the fearful task of looking for any-

thing good in a genre, it's perhaps time to shut up about it.

Unlike Sir K., I'm not shutting up yet: worthy stuff still appears. Here for example is John Kessel's *Good News from Outer Space* (Grafton, paperback, 403 pp., £5.99), a wonderful example of 'comic inferno' SF (another Amis phrase). It's 1999, with Apocalypse expected at the dawn of the year 2000. North America is falling apart as in a John Sladek novel but with even blacker, even more deadpan humour, and more sympathetic people.

'Trashnews' datanets, electronic Sunday Sports, dominate the information services. Fundamentalists plan for the Second Coming's televisual problems such as 'high intensity lumination from the Holy City's descent'. Thanks to modern medicine, the dead rise but have a bad time socially. Backstreet

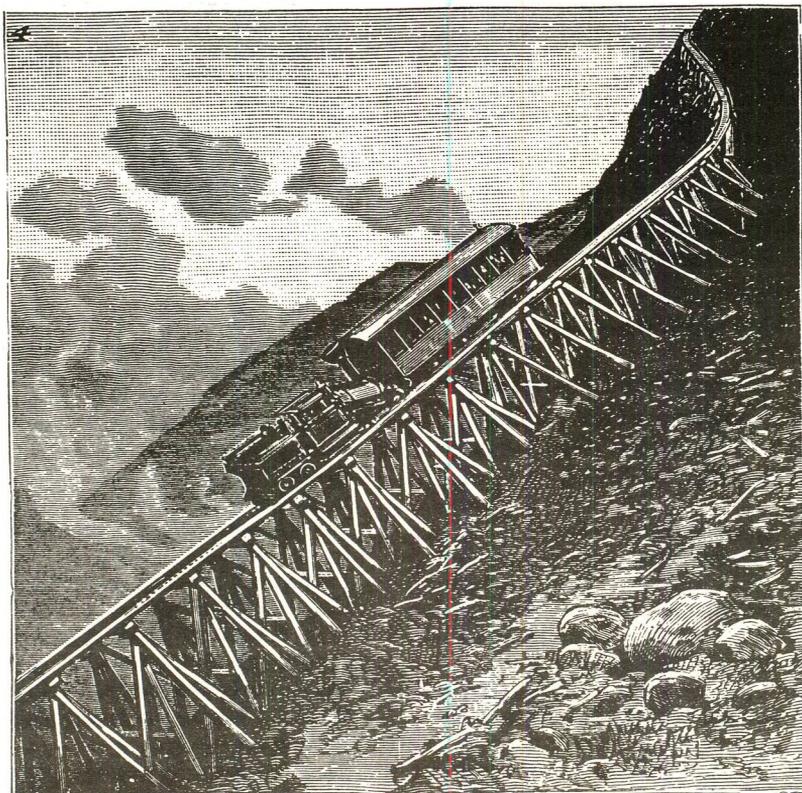
biochemists are fostering new retrovirus plagues like AMPS, Acquired Melanin Production Syndrome, whereby white chauvinists who don't take proper precautions in bed turn black. 'Dadaist punks' might break at any moment into your car and instal an expensive stereo system. UFOs abound. Aliens are seemingly amongst us.

What the 'aliens' are doing (perhaps there's just one, and perhaps this is the Second Coming) is messing around with people's heads, playing out personal psychodramas. One example: the ghastly TV preacher is confronted with a horrible though illusory choice between privy amputation and, in his terms, damnation. This is darkly funny, but Kessel doesn't take cheap shots as most writers might: the Reverend actually keeps his integrity (again, in his terms).

*Good News* is full of goodies, spinoff ideas like on-line politicians programmed to vote unthinkingly as their constituents would wish ('Thought is just resistance in the circuit'), the doctrine of Spiritual Economics, and a quantum theory of morality. And at midnight on 31 December, 1999 . . . but that would be telling. Read it yourself.

I haven't seen the Roger Corman film based on Brian Aldiss's 1973 *Frankenstein Unbound*, and find it hard to imagine. That novel is very literary, full of debate, pastiche and cross-references, like the science-fictional 'time shifts' which are also the easy time-transitions of novels themselves: 'Eighteen years later . . .' Now comes *Dracula Unbound* (Grafton, hardback, 199 pp., £13.99), which despite the smooth Aldiss touch does seem a more clunky and filmic tale, as though the storyline were influenced or even dictated by Corman — who according to the grapevine will indeed be filming this.

So instead of allusive time shifts we get a solid, physical time machine — a time railway, in fact — and a sprinkling



of familiar paradoxes. The visionary city at the close of the first book gives way, in the sequel, to an all too unambiguous stronghold of vampires dominating a far-future Earth. One major plot device is a continent-busting superbomb which if detonated in the far, far past could erase the vampires and guess what else?

(Worst line: a young American most implausibly yelling 'I'll save Daddy from that fate!' Please let this be Corman, not Aldiss.)

Aldiss does much better with the real-life Bram Stoker who in 1896 displaces van Helsing as vampire-hunter... and also with the vampire metaphor itself. Stoker's *Dracula* carries a terrific sexual charge, the bits you couldn't describe in a Victorian novel being transferred to those glamorous night visitors. Unbound expands on the ugly side of the glamour: Stoker died of syphilis, and here his vampires become a filthy, self-propagating disease of evolution with similar long-term effects. The new angle gives a new, authentic shudder.

But look. *Frankenstein Unbound* had much to say about science, Shelley's *Prometheus*, and things you can't put back in the bottle once they're released. In *Dracula Unbound*, despite one routine 'is-this-really-the-end?' hint, evils are magically undone and the metaphorical horror is rebottled. Yes, and AIDS will go away if we all clap our hands.

It's a good read... but rather minor Aldiss.

Would you like to learn *How to Write Tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction* (Robinson, paperback, 242 pp., £4.99)? The book is edited by J. N. Williamson; the subject order in the title suggests correctly that horror gets top billing. It contains nearly 30 brief essays, about eight of them worthwhile, and a 60-page wodge of favourite titles in 'Book of Lists' style.

Some of the professional contributors apparently have no idea of how to construct an essay: they open with wincingly formulaic 'narrative hooks' and continue with zappy writing which fatally distracts from what they're trying to teach. Others, desperate for material, pad out one tiny observation to several pages. Some are too brief or too general (couldn't be bothered to provide illustrations), some too personal: Colin Wilson has only to rinse out his mind with Faculty X, while Ray Bradbury says he just jots down a word and it grows into a story... fine, fine, but what happens in between?

The book dates from 1987 America and, as is traditional in these days of disk storage and instant electronic publishing, has not been updated. Defunct magazines are cited as markets, the small press listing is a farce, and no British publication (such as *Interzone*, a paying market then and now) appears at all.

Generally, this kind of how-to book is best written by a single author. Try *The Art of Fiction: Notes of Craft for Young Writers* by John Gardner, whose precepts translate into any genre. Brian Stableford's and Chris Evans's how-to books on sf are also well worth a look.

In brief...

Series continue. Brian Craig (Stableford) still turns out the smoothest and best constructed fantasies in the dread world of the Warhammer game, and in a way I rather liked *Storm Warriors* (GW, paperback, 271 pp., £4.99), third book of the storyteller Orfeo. Warhammer novels generally get better as they shake loose from the Warhammer gamebook, whose creators had no originality and no feel for language: consider Nergal, the Babylonian (I think) demon of pestilence and devastation who has featured quite effectively in the *Hellblazer* comic, but who in Warhammer becomes 'Nurgle'. That one inept change of spelling transposes the whole thing into the *Goon Show*.

In *Taliesin's Telling* (Headline, paperback, 277 pp., £3.99), Fay Sampson continues her painful reorganisation of the Arthurian myths around the dark centre of Morgan, alias Morgan le Fay. Very personal, very bloody, not at all Christianised, and recommended as ever. This is book four.

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## Critical Mass 11

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How many games fans know any game theory or probability maths, I wonder? Of course the mathematics doesn't apply to role-playing, whose essentials are naked imagination and ingenuity plus (sometimes) encyclopaedic knowledge of the rulebook. In card games like poker, though, it's vital to know the odds. Lotteries, football pools and fruit machines are easily analysed as sucker games: the prominence of a very few big winners obscures the need for that immense horde of losers who finance the whole

operation.

Can a prize be so huge that it makes the gamble mathematically worthwhile for every player? The great Blaise Pascal, of Pascal's Triangle fame, suggested in the seventeenth century that Christianity was a good bet — since a trifling investment of belief could lead to the colossal pay-off of eternal life. (There might be a fallacy there.) The twentieth century has its own equivalent of Pascal's wager, with rewards so potentially mindboggling as to make large stakes seem worthwhile... if you believe the theory. This game is called SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence.

*First Contact*, edited by Ben Bova and Byron Preiss (Headline, paperback, 438 pp., £5.99) records the state of the art and is a welcome change from the UFO rubbish which pollutes our bookshops. SETI comes in three parts: informed speculation, hopeful listening, and politics. This collection covers all three, with sf writers strongly represented.

Isaac Asimov contributes a worthy but unexciting look at what we mean by intelligence; Hal Clement probes the basics of what chemical environments might support life, and I wish his piece were longer; David Brin offers a 'where are they?' meditation which is a nonfiction complement to his thoughtful story 'Lungfish'; Greg Benford is sensible about possible alien technology and Arthur C. Clarke visionary as ever.

Meanwhile the SETI scientists report on projects, political sufferings and lack of funds. The field remains wide open. Even amateurs have a chance, as often before in astronomy: there are so many possible directions and frequencies for Their hypothetical message that a home outfit (satellite dish, gigahertz-range scanner and off-the-shelf computer) could scoop the billion-to-one jackpot before the major projects. If so, this book also prints the international guidelines for what to do when you pick up that interstellar message. Be prepared.

Are the aliens broadcasting out there somewhere, spilling technological secrets? I don't know. These authors don't either, but their hopes and fears and arguments are worth reading.

Here's Asimov again, in *Frontiers* (Mandarin, paperback, 390 pp., £4.99). His science essays are normally reliable if not always frightfully exciting, but this book is definitely substandard. It contains over 120 very short pieces, written as newspaper columns. At this length

everything is over-compressed, there's no time to reflect on side issues or develop an analogy or let the Asimov ego bulge entertainingly, and all too often the piece stops abruptly in mid-air because there was no room to engineer a climax.

Coverage? Everything: prehistory, scientists, Earth, the universe. Revelations? Only about a dozen facts or insights new to me, but then I read *New Scientist* every week.

Judging by his long-running column in *The Magazine of Fantasy and SF*, Asimov is more comfortable at several thousand words' length (when the *F&SF* pieces are collected, there are usually 17 essays to a volume). Since he likes to recycle material, the book or books in which he expands on the topics of *Frontiers* should be worth a look. Even for those who like the stuff, this one is far too breathless.

More names from First Contact reappear in the joint package of Arthur C. Clarke's *Against the Fall of Night*, from 1948, with Greg Benford's new sequel *Beyond the Fall of Night* (Gollancz, hardback, 239 pp., £13.99). The Clarke is better known in its expanded version, *The City and the Stars*.

Introducing it, Clarke muses that many people still prefer the 1948 original. *City* improves on *Night* in hundreds of ways: the mechanisms, pastimes and decor of the eternal city Diaspar are lovingly depicted, a routine minor character is replaced by a wonderful polyp-creature, travelogues are made more colourful, and so on. But every moment of high emotion (and for all its youthful literary fumbblings this is the supreme Sense of Wonder novel) is carried over intact from *Night*: plangent chords, dying falls and cosmic vistas. Clarke had the sense not to tinker with any of this.

Benford's follow-up *Beyond* explores the areas left barren in *Night*. The worldwide deserts have been reseeded from ancient gene banks, the Solar System already teems with spacegoing life (including a living homage to the Clarke space elevator), the Sun itself has been moved during those huge wastes of time evoked by Clarke... and the biggest, nastiest and most implacable loose end of *Night* is on the rampage.

The tone of the sequel is very different, nodding to its original across another expanse of time — forty-odd years of frenetic technological progress, decades over which Clarke's doomy vision of Man and the Universe has become less convincing than Ben-

ford's view of solar life as a linked whole. 'Man' is less prominent here. The lead characters are a woman and an evolved quasi-raccoon, and their travels through a wildly revised solar system make for good stuff — though not, perhaps, a good sequel. Surely there should be some continuity of tone?

I think Greg Benford suffered one bout of amnesia when writing this. In both *City* and *Night* it's a historical fact (with a plot turn depending on it) that the Moon has long been destroyed. In *Beyond*, without a word of explanation, it's back again. Naughty!

*The Magic Spectacles* (Morrigan, hardback, 181pp, £13.95) is James P. Blaylock's first 'children's' novel. He's a quirky, distinctive author, and at first I wondered how he'd adapt to writing for children — who don't need to be written down to and are as quick on the uptake as adults, if not more so, but who would grow impatient with Blaylock's occasional fondness for atmosphere and allusion at the expense of actual plot.

This one moves well enough. American small town... mysterious magic shop... fantasy world visible through spectacles... kids climb through... goblins... eccentric but friendly characters... After these moderately familiar stages, the book focuses on one eccentric, Mr Deener, who is more than a figure of fun. His situation is a painstaking allegory of mental illness, retreat from the world, retreat from himself.

If Blaylock were to zoom in any closer on this chap, the book would take on an altogether darker (and more Blaylockian) tone. Instead he keeps his distance. The boy heroes watch as Deener tries to escape himself in an abortive climb to the Moon, hindered by the goblins of his own dark side; they watch his self-fragmenting magic; they finally take action as he lapses into complete delusion. It's his story more than theirs.

Interesting, but from Blaylock I expected something richer and stranger. Maybe next time. Besides the story there are illustrations by Ferret, who doubtless appeals hugely to some, and a copyright page referring (in the maddening way of small presses) to an afterword by Lewis Shiner which you can't actually read without paying £45 for the special edition. Boo, hiss.

Yes, I did sample Piers Anthony's *And Eternity* (Grafton, paperback, 411 pp., £4.50), which rounds off the 'Incarnations of Immortality' series by having everyone gang up on God.

The best moment is another of Anthony's sensitive feminist insights: in turn, two women are turned into chaps and instantly run amok, overcome by dread male hormones, unable to resist raping the nearest female. Yes, they've learned their lesson all right: 'It seems that men have passions that women do not.' Now they know that rapists can't help it really. No more, please: I need a month to recover....

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## Critical Mass 12

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One supposedly disparaging thing reviewers say is: 'This book is all right for train journeys.' In fact, the timeless aeons of British Rail offer a good chance to settle down in peace and get to grips with a big demanding book. Keep good books for trains. Which is what I tried to do on the way to Mexico.

I thought you'd never ask. Mexican is a biannual [British] convention devoted to SF in its original form of words on paper. What makes this so Mexican is shrouded in the mists of time and in-jokes. It's deeply weird to sit around talking professional shop in an old-fashioned hotel while drinking vile imported Mexican beer containing slices of lime. Favourite guest this year was the indescribable Howard Waldrop from Texas, whose highly addictive collection *Strange Things in Close-up* came out a while ago (Legend, paperback, 363 pp., £4.50) and will shortly be followed by *Night of the Cooters* (again Legend).

On the way I bit the bullet and tackled Dan Simmons's Hugo-winning *Hyperion* (Headline, hardback, 346 pp., £13.95): also, some hours later, its conclusion *The Fall of Hyperion* (Headline, hardback, 468 pp., £14.95). Waiting for book two to be on hand was sensible, because you pick up so much momentum by the end of book one that it's painful to stop.

This is cosmic stuff, full of ideas and literary jokes. It opens in *Canterbury Tales* fashion, with pilgrims to the mysterious world Hyperion swapping stories as they travel... but the stories intertwine, parts of an ambitious whole. Bit by bit you get the picture of galactic civilisation: Earth devoured, thousands of new worlds linked by a web of matter-transmission, high-tech barbarians lurking offstage, artificial intelligences about their own incomprehensible affairs, and imminent war. At the same time Hyperion itself grows more enigmatic. Time Tombs moving backwards from a distant future are

due to open. The Shrike, an invincible death-machine associated with the Tombs and forming the centre of a new cult, prowls through each story. And that's just a taste of book one.

Book two goes much further. Some later revelations are so brain-boggling that Simmons can't let them emerge with his usual subtlety: they have to be more or less spelt out (albeit by an eccentric AI who obfuscates with a weird mix of Keats and Zen koans — two characters being reconstructions of John Keats himself, whose epic poem also supplies both titles . . .). For example, what the Shrike actually does seems gratuitous sadism but is reasonably if wordily explained as the baiting of a trap for God. Other ironies are left unemphasised, like one memorable spasm of destruction whose perpetrator eventually turns out to have been desecrating his own tomb. In context, the final grand slam of galaxy-wide violence is tragic, triumphant and logically necessary.

These are recommended reading. I could do without certain relentless allusions (humanity's leader is a woman called Gladstone, a minor character is named for Keats's publisher Leigh Hunt, the final confrontation with the Shrike loses force in a groan-making reference to an old Harlan Ellison story, etc.), and far too many conveniently enigmatic actions of the Shrike fail to make sense in the light of its actual purpose . . . but overall, it's too much fun to pick holes in.

Enigmatic alien artifacts, left by almighty Builders who have not stuck around to answer questions, are an old favourite of hard sf. Charles Sheffield offers an entire trilogy about artifacts and Builders in 'The Heritage Universe'. Out so far are *Summertide* (VGSF, paperback, 257 pp., £3.99) and *Divergence* (Gollancz, hardback, 281 pp., £13.99).

Perhaps it's unfair to come to this unambitious, schematic stuff after the richness of *Hyperion*, but although the characters are pretty good for Sheffield (characteristically for him, the most engaging is a computer), it all seems a bit weary. There are 1236 mildly mind-boggling artifacts dotted round the galaxy. One looks particularly dull but for awkwardly explained reasons is Special: something is going to Happen. Rival factions converge, one as a result of numbing coincidence, and start double-crossing each other. Hellish cataclysms are promised. An anticlimax is delivered, and book one ends.

In *Divergence* we come two stages closer to the Builders, via awesome super-entities who correspond to their

doorman and reception clerk. Also on hand are preserved representatives of an 'extinct' race of murderous alien bullies who eat people, breed like flies, and have no tact. What the still absent Builders want emerges with staggering banality: it's time for a spot of serious natural selection, with the major races toughing it out precisely as in *Arena* of Fredric Brown and *Star Trek* fame. On this cliff-hanger, the curtain falls. Book three awaits. God help us, for we knew the worst too young.

It was a long journey back from the merry fun of Mexican. I was a bit distracted from *Catface* by Clifford Simak (Mandarin, paperback, 251 pp., £3.99) owing to the singing drunk who sat behind me, spreading dismay and a thick haze of beer down the railway carriage. . . . Simak's sf always seems better than his fantasy, perhaps because his personality radiated a sort of gentle Midwestern sanity with no room for the madness of Old Magic or Wild Hunts. This one is sf.

It's the story of a nice academic on rustic vacation, his nice if pushy girlfriend, the village simpleton, and a friendly alien . . . which could be any of a dozen Simak tales. This alien makes tunnels in time for its friends; pretty soon a dotty commercial operation is offering safari facilities for those who've always wanted to shoot a tyrannosaurus. Things get more complicated until. . .

Wait a minute, I remember thinking during the twenty-minute unscheduled halt while police coaxed the singing drunk away. This book is about tinkering with the past. There's even a plan to ship back the world's starving millions to the lush, unspoiled Miocene. Which raises major questions: are they all foredoomed to die out in prehistory? Or will their presence and consumption of natural resources wipe out the 'future' from which they came? Or is there some sort of alternate-world escape from the looming paradoxes?

None of this is even momentarily considered. The narrative is vaguely enjoyable, but I decided poor old Simak had been way past his sell-by date when he wrote *Catface* (1978). And for my blasphemy I was punished by sf's Elder Gods, who escalated that delay into a series of missed connections that made me five hours late. Don't giggle.

A British Rail-haunted midnight found me gibbering over the occult revelations of *The Book of the Sub-Genius* (Simon & Schuster, large paperback, £8.95) — the alternative

religion (or joke, con trick, insane artform) that makes Scientology look like Secular Humanism.

Astonishing revelations fill this unlikelyst of holy books: 'Yes, the foot is actually a gland.' Rival saviours are condemned: 'No matter what their IQs they are all a brick short of a full load (so are we, but they're missing the wrong bricks).' And psychic mysteries are explained: 'All the rest of the cattle mutilations, as well as 75% of all other paranormal phenomena of a similarly hideous nature, were perpetrated by the Elder Gods' Watchers for no other reason than to confuse the living day-lights out of us and let us know in no uncertain terms that we are UTTERLY HELPLESS.'

The Book contains more unlikely pop-art, CAPITAL LETTERS, excessive emphasis and RANT than you'd believe possible. (Plus exclamation marks!!!!) Treat it as a joke at your peril. Possibly the least suitable ideas supplement for a Call of Cthulhu adventure yet marketed, but don't let me stop you trying. . . .

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### Critical Mass 13

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Do you cringe on reading the words 'Set in the same universe as . . .', or do your eyes light up with feverish enthusiasm? Of course it depends — on whether it was a good universe to begin with, and whether the writer has something decent to add. The awful temptation is to squeeze one more book out of a once successful background, and then another, and another: it's a long time since Anne McCaffrey's dragon soaps produced the old thrill, or since the Stainless Steel Rat acquired a halfway new plot device.

I had a different problem with Paul J. McAuley's *Eternal Light* (Gollancz, hardback, 384 pp., £14.99). McAuley has for some while been tipped as the young British hard-sf writer to watch, and this is billed as his breakthrough novel. Megastardom awaits. Good for him: but I found the opening slightly heavy going (admittedly I had a stinking cold, but the third sentence on page one made me wonder how far the proof reader got). Suddenly the laborious backfill of crowded sentences and technical information tipped me off: this is a sequel to McAuley's *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, in which *Eternal Light's* lead character obviously goes through many preliminary adventures, and which I'd neglected to read. No time now, not before delivering this column. If only books carried govern-

ment health warnings about this.

Somebody out there has decided I'm a UFO expert. Here to purge us with pity and terror is *Abduction: the UFO Conspiracy* by David Bischoff (Warner, paperback, 328 pp., \$4.95). This breaks new ground in being billed not as sf or True Fact but as a thriller.

In fact it's clearly intended as a best-seller. There is much padding (the author even takes time out to tell you about the word processor he uses, and which function key you press to save a document). The characters are all solid, triple-ply cardboard. Venal, coke-snorting *National Intruder* reporter, unwashed and babbling UFO nut, Sagan-like sceptic with drink problem and mind as flexible as a steel trap, sceptic's beautiful daughter who inevitably has an Encounter. . . . Most of all I enjoyed the psychopathic CIA killer, just barely reminiscent of the Executioner in *From Russia with Love*: they have to keep him doped to stop him running amok, and he gets in the mood for murder by sensually dropping a hamster into his kitchen-sink disposal unit, turning the switch, and savouring the tiny screams. Subtle, eh?

Naturally there's plenty of mayhem, all ludicrously overdone. Victims are tortured or knocked off to the accompaniment of corny remarks intended not for them but for readers: as in a grade-Z movie, the baddies are playing to the audience. So before being shot, a broadcaster who has stumbled on the Secret is gloatingly informed: 'It's time for the big sign-off . . . Your ratings were just terrible.'

The plot concerns another (yawn) conspiracy theory. Stop me if you've heard this one, but it's that desperately villainous and clandestine organisation the US Government which is behind flying saucers — using drugs, painful medical examinations and robot aliens to establish the story of UFO abductions which it's simultaneously denying, refusing to believe and struggling to cover up. Conspirators, who can figure 'em? Meanwhile, what about these enigmatic chaps who walk on occasionally and act all enigmatic: could they be real aliens? Who are the sinister 'Publishers' who control everything, including most especially the CIA, and arrange routine murders through their diabolical hitmen the 'Editors'? (This post-Le Carré terminology is the best thing in the book.)

*Abduction* is so awful that I'd have no hesitation in revealing the answers, but Bischoff neglects to provide them. After a false climax which leaves one villain dead and one beautiful daugh-

ter abducted, the book stops. The hideous revelation is presumably that there's more to come; meanwhile, you're cheated of the one slender reason for finishing such dross, the catharsis of learning whodunnit and what on earth it was all about. If volume two shows itself on my doormat, it will follow the hamster into oblivion.

You never know what to expect from Ian Watson. *Stalin's Teardrops* (Gollancz, hardback, 270 pp., £13.99) collects a dozen of his wildly varied stories, first published in 11 different places. The title story is wonderfully surreal mixture of Orwellian and folklore Russias: in the first, geography as well as history has been rewritten by repeatedly falsified maps — 'the lie of the land' — resulting in dead spaces, unmapped quarters, secret territories where logic doesn't prevail.

Elsewhere in the book, a ghost flits through the insubstantial spires of a holographic cathedral; the Inter-City from Birmingham to London shortcuts through the Cretaceous period; South Africa is mapped on to a single strange household; Sherlock Holmes tackles the Cinderella case; a pharaoh undergoes a strange resurrection (much of this one in eccentric blank verse — blimey); and for an impressive finale the eye of the late Ayatollah lives on to direct Islam's high-tech and low-magic search for an author condemned to die. There is more. Some of the horror tales seem too slight, but the collection has more weird ideas per page than anything since Watson's last.

Can one imagine a humorous collaboration between the raucous slapstick-merchant Harry Harrison and the whimsical, often spaced-out Robert Sheckley? No, not really, and from internal evidence *Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Bottled Brains* (VGSF, 236 pp., £3.99) is mostly the latter. Alas (and it is a genuine, heartfelt alas), Sheckley's best work was long ago. That hallucinated humour, those disorientating transitions, ornery computers and philosophical asides: this story offers pale echoes of them all but lacks the old sparkle.

Certainly I'd never have imagined Sheckley resorting to such emergency life-jokes as yet another *Star Trek* spoof, complete with Captain Dirk, Mr Spock and a full ensemble of pointed-ears gags. Oh, how we all laughed.

[May 1992 addendum: much later I ran into Harry Harrison himself, who complained that Bob Sheckley's draft hadn't been funny enough and that

Harry himself had had to spice it up with lots of really good jokes about pointed ears. H'mm.]

As Bill remarks: 'I think I have heard of computers writing novels. . . . At least I have read lots of them that could have been written by a computer.' This feels like one. Except that a computer would have registered the extreme improbability of thicko Bill reading anything but low-grade comic strips, and erased that particular speech.

The next in this appalling series, *Bill, the Galactic Hero on the Planet of Tasteless Pleasure* (Gollancz, hardback, 213 pp., £13.99) has guest author David Bischoff . . . who has already received enough of the heady wine of Langfordian praise for one column.

One semi-famous oldie that I'd never read is *The Boats of the 'Glen Carrig'* (Grafton, paperback, 188 pp., £3.50), by William Hope Hodgson of *House on the Borderland* fame. This was a period horror novel even when first published in 1907: it's set in the eighteenth century, a sort of 'Robinson Crusoe meets Cthulhu' with the authentic creepiness of unknown seas.

Note the page count. There's no padding: Hodgson starts with the ship *Glen Carrig* already five days sunk, and its escaped boats are just coming to an unpleasant estuary. No Lovecraftian adjectival gibber: we get tight-lipped descriptions of the roaming thing that seems to be made of raw beef, and of some vegetation whose nasty habits are not too fully spelt out. After this first episode, the remaining boatload of seamen ends up beached with masses of interesting nautical problem-solving to do . . . the contrast of hard slog by day and terrors by night is effective.

Slight but more readable than many an acknowledged 'classic', this one deserves its revival.

The first of the British 'shared world' anthologies I mentioned months ago appears from Penguin in August: *Temps*, a sort of sleazy, low-budget (and not wholly unsatirical) equivalent of the American *Wild Cards* superhero series. Next comes *The Weerde*, with a horror scenario about shapeshifting nasties, and then *Villains*, being genre fantasy from the viewpoint of the bad guys. That nice Mr Crump had better review the first and third, which contain Langford stories, and the second, against which I'm prejudiced because of this here rejection slip. Follow-ups are planned.

[May 1992: Alan Crump was the magazine's other regular book reviewer.]

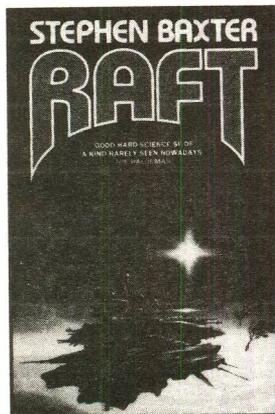
## Critical Mass 14

I'd like to let you into one of the closely guarded secrets of SF: reviewers are not infallible. No, not even Alan Crump. (Half the audience swoons.) In an ideal world each 'Critical Mass' would carry a cigarette-style warning panel, reminding everyone that phrases like 'This book is lousy' need to be prefixed with 'Langford says' and footnoted 'Who does he think he is anyway?' And there'd be a banner headline: MOST DOCTORS DON'T READ THIS COLUMN.

Last issue, medical science was helpless against my foul cold, under the influence of which I confessed total inability to get into Paul McAuley's new book. Perhaps this was unjust... later research revealed that it helps to have absorbed the complex galactic background from his first novel *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, and even more to have recovered from your cold.

The new *Eternal Light* (Gollancz, hardback, 384 pp., £14.99) is a very ambitious blockbuster indeed. Rather like Greg Bear, McAuley tackles cosmological ultimates with great confidence and still keeps interesting characters in motion against his gigantic backdrop. He also does well at the difficult task of blending real and unreal science, where wrong notes are so easy. (In the earlier book I boggled at scientists' calm acceptance of a low-density shield against neutrinos, particles which ghost their way happily through entire planets.) There's some particularly cheeky play with pure mathematical weapons...

The sobering background is a galaxy shaped (literally) by an ancient alien race's family wars, which led to all sorts of minor side effects such as



human intelligence. As the characters move in a complex web of plot, via neutron star and spatial wormhole to the galaxy's central black hole, it emerges that the nastiest alien brood of all is working away there on a gigantic *Lebensraum* project which endangers the physical universe. When you add religious fanatics, empathy, telepathy, parasite personalities, time travel and a non-religious view of angels, creation and Heaven, the word 'ambitious' seems a little feeble.

It all works rather well. There are perhaps a few too many words, and I wasn't wholly convinced either by the late-breaking melodrama of a combat pilot shooting up suns or by the precocious wonder-child born in the final section (we had quite enough of her in *Dune*). But *Eternal Light* is a good big book, already exuding the unearthly glow of award shortlists.

If McAuley has a touch of the Greg Bears, Stephen Baxter looks more like Britain's answer to Larry Niven. *Raft* (Grafton, hardback, 264 pp., £14.99) might seem powerfully reminiscent of Niven's *The Integral Trees*, both featuring free-fall ecology in a vast breathable gas-cloud enfolding a dense core... but there are differences.

The less important one is the wildly audacious setting. One of our spacecraft has gone astray, slipping on an inter-universal banana skin and lurching into this otherspace where the gravitational constant is a billion times greater. Turbulences in the gas nebula routinely collapse into short-lived stars hardly bigger than Ben Nevis; *Raft* opens on and around a burnt-out star just fifty yards wide, whose surface gravity is a crippling 5g. Human survival seems impossible. People manage in ingenious ways, but mere generations after their arrival the waste products of dying stars are poisoning the whole ecosystem, and...

The important difference from Niven's somewhat flabby travelogue is what follows that 'and'. From chapter one there's a certain driving urgency. Everyone will die unless something drastic is done. Revolution and war follow. Inevitably our hero passes through the three human habitats — the iron miners orbiting that star core, the flying *Raft* constructed from the original stranded ship, and a third option of remarkable if not quite credible grisliness — and onward in a Wonderful Journey which reveals a solution. Though not an easy one.

This is a solid example of 'traditional' hard sf, simply told, with the heavy physics kept offstage (apart

from a few excusable pop-science lectures). In keeping with the same tradition, there are traces of 'idiot plotting' and the characterisations are lumpy and unpolished. Likewise much of the writing, although Raft makes one witty addition to Samuel Delany's list of phrases which take on new meanings in sf. Meeting a woman and feeling 'the pull of her body' sounds clichéd. But here, even people have a noticeable gravitic field.

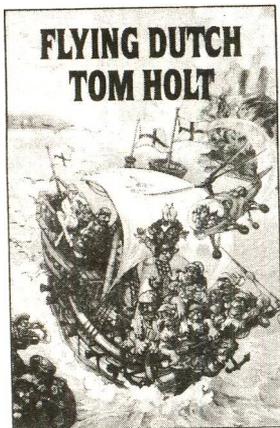
[May 1992: every single reviewer seems to have picked up on this one neat detail, and the author himself is particularly fond of it. In retrospect we could really have done with several more such touches.]

Yet another Great British Hope is Storm Constantine, who does not have a lot of time for physics and the hardware of boys' toys. *Hermitech* (Headline, paperback, 502 pp., £4.99) is set in another of her ravaged near-future worlds. Above are space habitats and below is an Earth of partial eco-disaster: domed cities, variously barren lands, flesh-eating fog, and 'Naturotech' wanderers vaguely reminiscent of those convoys they won't allow near Stonehenge. Once again the only creative, transforming force in Constantine's lurid landscapes is 'Magick', accessed by Sex.

Two storylines converge. Ari Famber is fourteen and has been genetically rearranged by her vanished father: when she enjoys, er, intimate congress she'll be able to tap into this world-shaking primal force, if she can control its awesome might, etc. She joins a passing convoy and goes looking for her destiny. Meanwhile, lowlife city boy Zambia Crevecour is persuaded by evil madame Jahsaxa Penumbra into becoming an intersexual 'SHe' [sic], pronunciation uncertain. This involves surgery to implant, in the book's most brain-stopping phrase, a 'fleet of sphincters'. Further gaudy names abound: Cabochon, Quincx Roirbak, Tammaz Malamute, Alix Mickleamas, and so on.

It's a heady, offbeat story which surges towards, in every sense, a climax. I doubt that one can achieve much in the real world by abandoning all logic and reason in favour of leaping into bed and tapping that old orgasmic potential ('Drop your pants, Luke, and use the Force!')... but Constantine's energy and colourful intensity force you to accept it as an sf/fantasy premise as valid as McAuley's or Baxter's variant physics, which is what counts. Gripping stuff. I need a cold shower.

*Flying Dutch* (Orbit, hardback, 252



pp., £12.95) is Tom Holt's third funny fantasy about ancient and/or legendary characters loose in today's Britain, and he still makes me chuckle. As in *Expecting Someone Taller*, he draws on Wagner's operas . . . the Flying Dutchman, of course. The trouble for Captain Vanderdecker and his crew isn't a curse but immortality plus a serious personal problem which isolates them almost entirely from civilisation. The trouble for civilisation is that a tatty piece of vellum the Captain has been carrying since the sixteenth century could wreck the world economy.

Like Terry Pratchett, Holt is a very practical joker with a shrewd eye for the humour in how things would actually have to work . . . the real-world complications of alchemical immortality, and what to do about repairing a vessel doomed to sail forever. He also explains who truly runs the world, why the Spanish Armada failed, when computers were actually invented (1694), the real reason for nuclear power stations, and the terrible secrets of Radio 3 and the Milk Marketing Board.

Vanderdecker gets plenty of good lines: 'I remember when you could have bought all the beer in Bavaria, plus sales tax and carriage, for the price of half a pint of this. I even remember flared trousers. That dates me.' But there's an undertow of seriousness which makes it quite difficult for Holt to engineer the happy-ever-after ending he wants. The result is pleasant enough but has an odd fuzziness, as though it needed one final twist or punchline. Good fun nevertheless.

### Critical Mass 15

I've just been helping unveil Penguin's new fantasy and SF imprint, 'Roc'. Unexpectedly in these times of recession, they threw a huge launch party which had SF pundits groaning and taking

aspirin for days after. . . .

This happened in one of those subterranean London nightclubs with black decor and an invisible entrance . . . my fervent thanks to Kate Stableford, daughter of the more famous Brian, for brilliantly spotting the Roc logo on a bunch of balloons outside. Appalling scenes of scheming, boozing and group photography duly took place, and countless notables were reduced to the level of the beasts as they struggled to eat (without cutlery) chicken legs engulfed in thick, Lovecraftian barbecue sauce.

The 'Midnight Rose' editorial collective (Neil Gaiman, Mary Gentle, Roz Kaveney and Alex Stewart) gloated over the appearance of their first SF anthology, *Temps* (Roc, paperback, 354 pp., £4.50) — or perhaps not its appearance exactly, since it looks decidedly odd and unbooklike. 'Precisely why do you want a cover picture of a flying Swiss Army knife?' Roz had reputedly asked the Penguin art department, sarcastically adding, 'I suppose it's the cutting edge of sf. . . .' Penguin liked this phrase so much that they added it to the cover. Anyway, *Temps* seemed popular at the party: vast stacks of display copies were nicked within about an hour, while no one showed much interest in stealing the three fantasies by Americans which formed the rest of the Roc launch.

Next day's event was more typical, an evening session at Waterstone's in Bath where six *Temps* people and the aforementioned three Americans faced an eager audience of (I calculated, subtracting Penguin and bookshop staff) seven actual members of the public. Two of these later proved to be lady companions of the US contingent. It was an uproarious occasion, you bet. Neil and Alex attempted a rather shifty-sounding explanation that, far from being an imitation of *Wild Cards*, the *Temps* idea had actually predated it: controversy was defused when the audience proved never to have heard of *Wild Cards* either. We signed all the books in the shop and ran for it.

Orson Scott Card has added a third book to the *Ender's Game / Speaker for the Dead* series which has won implausibly many awards. *Xenocide* (Legend, hardback, 463 pp., £14.99; or paperback, £8.99) is the most determinedly ambitious yet. It's well written, it has a lot going for it, and I was sorry to feel let down by the climax. . . .

We're back on Lusitania, the world of *Speaker*, where a highly resourceful and unpleasant virus has reshaped native life and threatens the human

colonists. Despite not understanding its full menace, humanity's devious leaders have already despatched a spacefleet with world-wrecking weapons. Luckily the continuing hero Ender has an artificial-intelligence friend who can cut off this armada's communications. But on another human world is this special breed of geniuses (who pay a nasty genetic price for their talent), one of whom is on the case and could at any moment sniff out the AI and loose the slaughter. Meanwhile, the surviving queen of the insect race exterminated in *Game* has redeveloped space technology and offered the native Lusitanians the chance to spread across the stars, with their appalling virus. . . .

There's much more: in lesser hands the book would be a jumbled mess, but Card works long, hard and successfully to make it harrowingly convincing. It seems that the fearsome moral burden of xenocide — the wiping out of an entire alien race — must fall on someone. Even the quasi-intelligent virus might not deserve extinction (though this speculation is in the end quietly dropped). I promise that you'll be biting your nails.

Having constructed his enormous moral and technological problems, Card proceeds to solve them. Two minor characters die en route, and the tragedy of a third provides a strong final chapter . . . but in between, alas, there's a ghastly old sf cop-out. Resolving their differences, the best brains of two worlds rapidly fudge up a new physics which out of a single hat produces: (a) faster-than-light travel; (b) a means of synthesising an 'impossible' counter-virus merely by thinking about it; (c) a quick cure for genetically inherited obsessive-compulsive disorder; (d) the healing of an incurable cripple; and (e) the resurrection of the dead.

It is all too much of a good thing, and it is a shame.

There is usually rejoicing when a new Barbara Hambly novel appears. She has a real gift for dusting off old fantasy props and showing them in a fresh, appealing light, against grittily realistic backgrounds (the sleaze and grime of *Dark Hand of Magic* were so effective that one wanted a hot bath after each chapter). Something of this quality appears in *The Rainbow Abyss* (Grafton, hardback, 256 pp., £14.99), an enjoyable yarn of an aged magician and his cheery young apprentice, with interesting new slants on magic.

They bumble around, getting run out of towns for various reasons and

barely escaping with their lives. There are several exciting adventures and a strong romantic subplot. But clearly the real plot has to centre on the magical 'Dark Well' which the old wizard opened near the beginning and through which he heard a cry for help from another universe. Then it's destroyed and they're on the run. On and on...

A terrible suspicion gripped me at the two-thirds mark, and I peeped at the last page, which reveals the secret Grafton have carefully neglected to mention anywhere else. *Abyss* is merely part one of a sequence called 'Sun-Cross', presumably a trilogy. Hambly writes as well as ever, but there's something frustrating about an entire book devoted to elaborate games of procrastination (one maddening plot device is that Dark Wells only work at a solstice or equinox!), deftly avoiding its own promised theme until the final pages.

*Albion* by John Grant (Headline, hardback, 311 pp., £14.95) stands alone as a complete fantasy, and a very strange one. *Albion* is a different sort of magic island, whose geography rearranges itself capriciously and whose inhabitants suffer complete tyranny without even knowing that they suffer, because they have no memories. Dimly, instinctively, they till the land, unable to resent it more than briefly when the oppressors come to loot the harvest and enjoy a little rape...

This is a hideously effective metaphor, the background for a grim, bloody and powerful book. Every so many generations, someone from the World outside is shipwrecked on *Albion*; immune to the clogging amnesia, he gives people names and a past and a future; and in due course there's an insurrection which always, ultimately, fails. Until the last one.

(Er, since resistance to *Albion*'s disease of amnesia seems to be hereditary and since the non-amnesiac oppressors go in for so much rape, I'd have expected a whole crowd of new revolutionaries each generation, without need for castaways...) [Later: 'Oh bugger,' said John Grant to me, 'the sodding copy editor cut out the explanation that only the pure-bred oppressor aristocracy are immune.']

It's an adult story, featuring tortuous personal relationships and less-than-nice good guys while rejecting too-easy answers like 'Hey, let's just slaughter all the baddies now.' It also offers some inventive magical twists, like the Dreamers whose sleeping nightmares take all too tangible shape

for everyone awake around them. One snag is that by starting with all the gory details of what happens to the leader of the book's first, failed revolution, and then going into a long, long flashback, Grant replaces the potential tension of half the narrative with mere gloom. Another is that the author seems so infected with the hopelessness of the situation he's set up that a more or less literal *deus ex machina* has to be introduced.

Grant is perhaps best known to *GMI* readers for his co-authorship of the 'Lone Wolf' novels (loosely based on Joe Dever's gamebooks), and his eccentric goddess Alyss has strayed across from these to *Albion*. She's fun, though sometimes a shade too cheerful for this dark tale.

Another lawsuit. Psychic investigator and fraud-detector James Randi is being expensively sued 'in every state and in every country' by the infamous Uri Geller. A defence fund exists. SAE for details: 23 Woodbastwick Road, London, SE26 5LG. Randi can sometimes be (nay, usually is) irritating, but free speech remains important...

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### Critical Mass 16

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Does world recession continue? According to doom-laden pronouncements by publishers (suspiciously similar to what they've been saying without pause for as long as any living author can remember), the industry is dying and next year there will be approximately 2.4 books published in Britain, by 1.7 remaining publishers. We'll have to make them last somehow... but meanwhile, the autumn splurge of books seems as huge as ever.

Hugest on my current pile is R. A. MacAvoy's *Lens of the World* (Headline, hardback, 286 pp., £14.95), perhaps the most interesting thing she's done since her first novel *Tea with the Black Dragon*.

MacAvoy writes well, but we knew that already. Her fantasy world is just different enough from the 'generic' consensus to come up fresh and new. Here an industrial revolution is beginning, with fine metals, lenses, telescopes. There's apparently no magic, although we meet strange creatures and ambiguous visions... the narrator Nazhuret makes a special point of the ambiguity.

Nazhuret, regarded as small and ugly, spends his early years in a military school and is then taken in hand

by the very strange Powl, who trains him on eccentric lines reminiscent of the Zen samurai 'way'. The descriptions of mental and physical discipline are fascinating, full of good bits like the pupil's gradual and ingenious (but wrong) deductions about the purpose of Powl's astronomical observatory. Eventually, superbly trained but with absolutely no quest or objective, Nazhuret goes out into this violent world...

This is his autobiography, begun some twenty years later. There will be sequels, yet the book stands perfectly well alone. Will certain obscure points about werewolves and visions be clarified in future volumes, or does this text hold even more than I noticed on a first reading? It's possible, and I'll be glad to read it again.

Roger Zelazny's new fantasy isn't called *Forever Amber*, but it might as well be. *Knight of Shadows* (Orbit, paperback, 251 pp., £4.50) continues the story of young Merlin (no relation) from *Trumps of Doom*, *Blood of Amber* and *Sign of Chaos*, themselves built on the seething complications of his father Corwin's adventures through five previous 'Amber' books, and clearly set to chunter on forever.

There's little left of the descriptive dazzle and inventiveness of Zelazny's heyday. Innovation is choked in a dusty clutter of plot devices and superpowers. Where were we? Merlin is a lord of Amber (good guys) who has walked its Pattern (gaining various powers like walking between worlds), and is also a lord of Chaos (formerly bad guys, now not so certain) with powers of shapeshifting and magic ('My Concerto for Cuisinart and Microwave spell would have minced him and parboiled him in an instant'), who has traversed the Logrus (resembling the Pattern but conferring powers of apportionment useful for summoning pizza) and additionally possesses Amber's inevitable Trumps (occult teleportation and cellphone service), a sentient and self-propelled strangling wire, the magical computer complex 'Ghostwheel' (which can do almost anything for him when not sulking), and... I forget the rest, but he collects further goodies here, including a magic ring controlling hordes of exciting new powers. Just what he needed!

It is difficult to provide this guy with credible opposition, especially since he also has sorcerous pals to help him out of tight spots. My lack of interest in Merlin's perils was fanned into a blaze of apathy by this book. Avoid at all costs.

From the 'younger readers' side of the tracks, here's *The Drowners* by Garry Kilworth (Methuen, hardback, 153 pp., £8.99).

This is a straightforward tale of rustic melodrama with ghostly trimmings, set early last century in the Winchester area. It comes alive through Kilworth's evident love for the river-country, and for farm technologies so nearly forgotten that (in an almost *sf* way) they seem new again. Drowners manipulate the river to flood and thaw water-meadows after the terrible winters of those years. The complex skills involved lead to a market advantage (early grass, fatter cows) and the enmity of the traditional Evil Baronet whose farm is in competition. Then comes tragedy.

Add the old belief that the dead can return if called three times, and the plot works itself out with a neat inevitability. A nice little story with nothing ponderous or 'major' about it. Methuen's copy editors can presumably take credit for the jarring anachronism of nineteenth-century measurements in metres and litres.

[Later, Garry Kilworth explained that the copy editor insisted on metric measures because children wouldn't be able to understand yards or gallons. Suddenly the generation gap seems a whole lot wider. . . . I had this fantasy of all mentions of half-sovereigns becoming an easy-to-understand '53p', and all references to playing halma or diabolio turning into Nintendo.]

Never thought I'd receive a new Robert Heinlein book again, but the dead can return if called. . . . *Grumbles from the Grave* (Orbit, paperback, 336 pp., £4.99), edited by Virginia Heinlein, is an annotated selection of Heinlein's correspondence.

If interested in his work (and despite later excesses he wrote an awful lot of solid and influential SF), you'll enjoy these peeps behind the scenes . . . but the curtain is never lifted far. His wife Virginia has been careful to blue-pencil personal revelations. There's still a fair bit of vigorous stuff on safe topics, insights into editorial horrors, and some bibliographically important information on certain cuts and changes in his books.

Some quibbles. Arranging the letters not chronologically but under topics (e.g. 'Fan Mail and Other Time Wasters') makes for tiresome reading — you keep being jerked back in time from Heinlein's final years to start again in the forties or fifties. One two-page credo ('Our nation has had the most decent and kindly internal practices and foreign policies to be found anywhere in history') appears twice in full. And since anyone who buys this will be a Heinlein fan, the gormless plot summaries of his books are a further waste of space.

Another author from whom I hadn't expected anything fresh is Lewis Carroll. *The Dedalus Book of British Fantasy: The 19th Century* (Dedalus, paperback, 416 pp., £8.99), edited by Brian Stableford, has several surprises including an absurdist (or just immature?) story not found in any of my twenty-odd Carroll books, which include two different 'Complete Works' volumes.

The 21 pieces here carry other familiar literary names — Coleridge, Keats, Dickens, Tennyson, Lear, Wilde, Christina Rossetti — and fantasy ditto: William Morris, George MacDonald, F. Anstey. All give good value. But some of the best items will be unfamiliar to most, like the story from Richard Garnett's splendidly satirical *Twilight of the Gods* collection, or Andrew Lang's moral fable about finding oneself in the wrong Paradise (like his token paleface retained in the Ojibway Happy Hunting Ground for regular scalping purposes).

This fine collection saves many good things from oblivion. It is conscientiously edited, with a sensible introduction and informative notes on every author present plus several more. Can we hope for companion volumes?

In brief. . . . Terry Pratchett's slim but appropriately priced *Eric* (VGSF, paperback, 155 pp., £2.99) is a minor romp which to many fans feels somehow out of sequence in the increasingly elaborate and complex Discworld series. Probably because it was written specifically to be illustrated by Josh Kirby for 1990's lavish

edition, and because Kirby took a long, long time to deliver. Without this artwork it now looks undernourished, though there's still plenty to raise a smile.

Robert Thurston's *Way of the Clans* (Roc, paperback, 284 pp., £3.99) is labelled as a 'Battletech' novel. Thus it's built around the daft-sounding premise of gigantic battle machines on legs, which may produce a good game but doesn't convince as fiction. (Bits of the introduction read more like rehashed game rules than SF.) Wouldn't tracked vehicles be more stable? With the given space technology, wouldn't these monsters be instantly taken out from orbit? One can swallow a certain amount of implausibility, but not when combined with the ludicrous military posturing of the opening chapters. Unreadable.

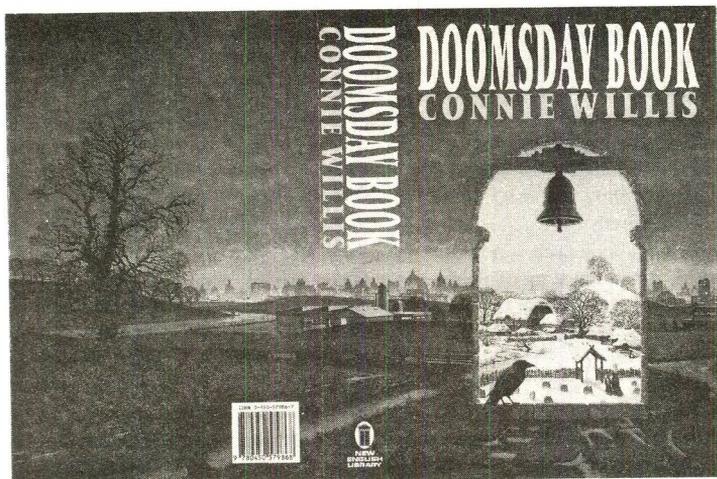
L. Ron Hubbard . . . oh goody, I've run out of space.

May 1992: And there, at no particularly good stopping place (is there ever one?), the magazine was pulled from under me. My pen halts, though I do not. Reader, you will walk no more with me. It is time we both take up our lives.

— Dave Langford, May 1992

(Editor's note: People like me who are addicted to Langford reviews will be pleased to hear that Dave has sent *The Metaphysical Review* some of the review columns he wrote for *Million* magazine. Unfortunately Dave has already continued its tradition of closing magazines: *Million* has just 'merged' with *Interzone*. Dave Langford's *Ansible* magazine is still distributed with *Thyme* magazine (A\$10 per subscription from Alan Stewart, PO Box 222, World Trade Centre, Melbourne, Victoria 3005, Australia) and a summary appears monthly in *Interzone* magazine (£34 per annual subscription from David Pringle, 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, United Kingdom).

COLIN STEELE is the Librarian at the Australian National University. He is also the SF Book Reviewer for *The Canberra Times*.



**DOOMSDAY BOOK**  
by Connie Willis  
(New English Library;  
527 pp.; A\$39.95)

With a Nebula Award already to its credit, Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* is certainly going to take some beating as the best sf book of recent years.

It begins in Oxford University in 2054 when Kivrin, a third-year female history student, obtains permission to travel back to the 'closed' fourteenth century. Time travellers can alter minor events but not the major course of history. They are inoculated against prevailing diseases, provided with built-in language translators, and dress according to local customs.

The trouble begins when Kivrin discovers that she is not in her intended year of arrival, 1320, but in 1348, the year of the arrival of the Black Death in Britain. The reason for the change in time parameters becomes clear in a parallel plot development as a mysterious virus outbreak causes the future Oxford to be placed in quarantine.

Kivrin misses her 'pick-up' dates, and therefore there is a race against two types of time as the Black Death works its way through the small community Kivrin has befriended. Willis superbly recreates the gritty realism of fourteenth-century Oxfordshire. Curiously, it is Willis's future Oxford that jars. The squabbling parochial dons

seem to resemble more those of Dacre Balsdon's Oxford of the 1940s and 1950s than the high-tech mixture of tourism and entrepreneurialism of the 1990s, let alone a city from the middle of next century.

In the end, this partially misconceived future scarcely seems to matter as the reader is drawn in by a successful combination of plot tension and historical invention. Willis shows that human virtues and vices can transcend the centuries, and that in some ways, while we have learnt everything, we have learnt nothing. In *Doomsday Book* Willis has created a window to an astonishing past.

**BACK DOOR MAN**  
by Ian McAuley Hails  
(Aphellion; 407 pp.; A\$14.95)

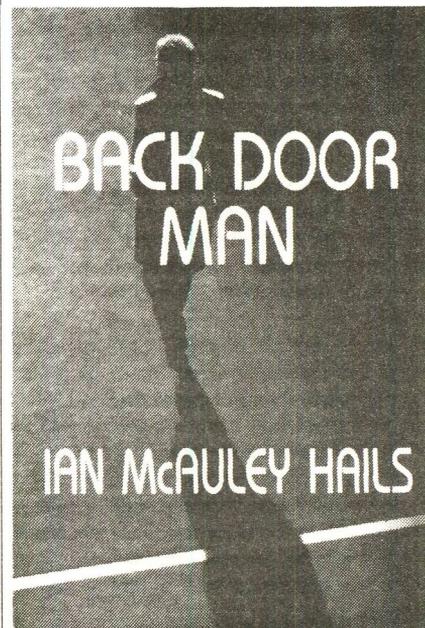
Adelaide-based small press Aphellion is establishing a growing reputation as a launch pad for interesting new Australian writers. *Back Door Man*, which is set in Sydney and Canberra in 1996, is the first novel from former teacher and rock singer Ian McAuley Hails.

In this novel intelligence operative Stephen Plat gradually unearths a right-wing conspiracy in the senior levels of government, industry and the media to control the political agenda in Australia. Hails extrapolates convincingly from current trends, such as racism and media uniformity, to create

a credible near future.

Less effective, however, is his main character, who seems to owe more to Humphrey Bogart's portrayal of a private eye than the hierarchy of the intelligence community. Effective portrayals of the bureaucracy really require an author of the calibre of John Le Carré or Anthony Jay. Hails is much surer in his background of the Sydney rock scene than the Canberra establishment.

Tighter editing would also have assisted the pace. The plot ultimately cannot justify the digressions into music, computer software and a low-life backdrop of Sydney. Nonetheless, while Hails may have entered by the back door of the thriller arena, there is enough promise to show he may well ultimately leave by the front.



## Encyclopedias! Encyclopedias!

### PRIMAL SCREEN

by John Brosnan

(Orbit; A\$40)

### HOFFMAN'S GUIDE TO SF, HORROR AND FANTASY MOVIES, 1991-92 (Corgi; A\$29.95)

Why is it that Australians rank amongst the world's best science fiction movie critics? Is it because we live in the land 'at the end of the universe', with strange fauna and animal life, and can recognise the intrinsic strangeness of human and alien life? John Baxter's *Science Fiction in the Cinema* (1970) was a trail-blazer, and now comes West Australian John Brosnan's profusely illustrated history of sf films *The Primal Screen* (Orbit; A\$40), which is a complete reworking and updating of his earlier survey *Future Tense* (1977).

The appearance at the same time as Brosnan's book of *Hoffman's Guide to SF, Horror and Fantasy Movies 1991-92* (Corgi; A\$29.95), with over 3300 video and movie entries, testifies to the continuing popularity of the genre despite there being arguably only a relatively small number of classics among the sf movie output.

Baxter in his earlier book alluded to the gap that prevented the total transition of the sf printed word to the screen. He wrote:

Even the greatest of cinema artists cannot do more than approximate in symbols the intellectual development of an abstract premise on which SF depends so much for its effects, while the lack of a set of symbols common to SF writer and film maker renders the work of one totally alien to the other. Science fiction film, then, is an intellectual impossibility.

Brosnan argues that in the thirteen years since his first book 'there have only been a small handful of SF movies that I rate especially highly, and admittedly few, if any of them are "intellectually satisfying"'. Certainly the golden ages of SF cinema, such as the 1950s and the 1970s, seem far away as more and more SF movies are made with stunning visual

effects (for example, *Terminator 2*) but with decidedly flawed plots. Baxter, quoted by Brosnan, reminds the reader of Theodore Sturgeon's rule that ninety per cent of everything produced is 'rubbish', so why should sf film be so different? Hoffman's *Guide to SF, Horror and Fantasy* reminds us of many of the worst — truly dreadful movies such as the Spanish movie *Aoom* (1970), in which Lex Barker transfers his personality to a doll, and the Italian spaghetti sf movie *Sterminatori del anno 3000*, about the aftermath of a nuclear war.

Hoffman's *Guide* itself teeters on the edge of the worst type of guide. An analysis of its publicity details shows it to be a French original. This ensures a good coverage of continental Europe's sf (Brosnan's book is very much from an Anglo-Saxon perspective), but there are some dreadful English translations — for example, 'death throws' — and comments — Cheryl Ladd wasn't great in *Millennium* (1989), but she certainly wasn't a man, as the Hoffman *Guide* alleges! The cult movie *A Boy and His Dog* (1975) is said to be from an 'SF story Harlan Ellison', when what is really meant is an sf story by Harlan Ellison! Hoffman calls this an 'unpleasant and badly made film', while Brosnan sees it as 'a rare example of a faithful movie version of an SF writer's work'.

Hoffman has no entry, yet there is a photo still for *The Terminator* (1984), in which Arnold Schwarzenegger brilliantly plays himself as a robot. Brosnan quite correctly, in my opinion, calls it a 'masterpiece'. Hoffman's entry for *Terminator 2* (1991) is so remote that one wonders if the compiler of the entry saw the film or merely the pre-publicity ads. To emphasise that 'the two terminators even discuss, in a metaphysical manner, the relation between human beings and machines' is to give it an intellectual edge that many would have missed.

What's worse in Hoffman is that the reviews and the star ratings (by zero to four stars) often contradict each other! The introduction says: 'This is quite probably the most comprehensive collection of fantasy film that has been brought together in one publication', yet clearly the cover and the contents reveal it to cover sf, fantasy and horror. The publishers

promise a new editor in due course. Let's hope they take on board the criticisms of the first edition so that the work's true potential and wide geographical coverage can be realised.

Brosnan arranges his book in a roughly chronological sequence divided by subject. His chapters range from the classics of the silent era such as *Metropolis* (1926) 'when nobody could hear you scream' to the present, 'space, time and the nerd factor'. His comments both illuminate and enrage, depending on one's point of view. *The Shape of Things to Come* (1936) is a 'cold and lifeless memorial to H. G. Wells' while *Star Wars* is 'mindless' because of its 'cheesy, California-style, New-age mysticism'. With reference to the *Star Trek* movies Brosnan says, 'I am the equivalent of Salman Rushdie — I am considered to be a blasphemer against the one true religion', as he believes the cult that emerged after the original tv series has 'marooned it within its own little universe'.

His interviews and correspondence with the creators of or participants in sf movies, such as Dan O'Bannon, Ridley Scott and Carrie Fisher, provide an added dimension that goes beyond the usual hack compendiums of sf criticism, although his views of prospective movies like *Aliens 3* fall into the Hoffman problem pit. Brosnan was much influenced by his sf reading of the 1950s, as were figures such as Lucas, Spielberg, and James Cameron, the director of the 'Terminator' movies.

Brosnan's first enthusiasm was whetted by the series of black-and-white American sf movies of the early 1950s that reflected the underlying fears of communism and the A bomb. Brosnan comments:

Movie aliens came to Earth for a variety of reasons during the fifties. Some came to drink human blood, some came to set up house with a healthy Earth-woman and breed, some ended up here entirely by accident, some came to take the entire place over and one or two came to tell us to pull our moral socks up or else'. Michael Rennie in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1953) warned us that the threat came from within rather than

from the stars, while *Forbidden Planet* (1956) — 'ahead of its time', says Brosnan — also reflected upon the monster within us all.

Brosnan leads us through the classics of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Bladerunner* (1982) and castigates the failures such as *Dune* (1984) (curiously omitted from his index), which he describes as the largest trailer ever made for a movie, to the inept 1970s back-to-nature movies, as he describes *Zardoz* and *Logan's Run* (1976). Some of his views on recent films will cause debate, such as his praise for *Total Recall* (1990), in which Philip K. Dick's original short story is butchered, and his view that the marines-like gung-ho action of *Aliens* (1986) is better than Giger's brooding sets of Ridley Scott's original.

While Brosnan may have lowered his critical expectations from his first book, this may be only yielding to the reality that most sf movies are, as one British critic has recently put it, 'mutant popcorn'. Nonetheless we must remember the best science fiction has to be internally consistent as it explores 'what if'. John Baxter muses, in Brosnan's interview conclusion, that he hopes the future will not lie in dumb big-budget movies.

As holographic images and changes in visual techniques in movies come about in the next decade, the attraction to spend more and more on the special effects is understandable, but alarming from the script viewpoint. Brosnan concluded a recent interview with the following prophecy: 'If I'm still around by the year 2001, I'll probably be churning out pieces about how Stanley Kubrick got it all wrong and reminiscing about the days when President Schwarzenegger used to star in SF movies'. Stranger things have happened in time and space.

**SCIENCE FICTION: THE  
AURUM FILM  
ENCYCLOPEDIA**  
edited by Phil Hardy  
(Aurum; 478 pp.; A\$75)

**GEORGE LUCAS: THE  
CREATIVE IMPULSE**  
by Charles Champlin  
(Virgin; 207 pp.; A\$39.95)

Phil Hardy's *Science Fiction: The Aurum Film Encyclopedia* is probably the best science fiction movie

history currently available. It aims to document the history of the sf film and 'to serve as a critical guide to the glorious (and many not so glorious) films that it includes'. Hardy and his various contributors, notably Kim Newman, provide 1450 entries that are divided chronologically, beginning in 1895 and concluding with *Total Recall* in 1990. Fifty colour plates and more than 600 monochrome photographs significantly enhance the critical pieces.

Hardy indicates that all of the films reviewed 'call into question the world we live in . . . the ideas that run through the films are often fanciful, but at bottom, they represent, in however distorted a fashion, attempts to think . . . about the futures that await us'. Images are prevalent — the cities of the future in *Metropolis* (1926), *Things to Come* (1936) and *Bladerunner* (1983); the 'antiseptic beauty' of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the decaying junk-ridden spaceship of *Alien* (1977).

Sf movies range from the vast emptiness of space, as in *Dark Star* (1974), to inside the body (*Fantastic Voyage*, 1966) or to a mix of past and contemporary worlds (*Quatermass and the Pit*, 1959). One of the strengths of Hardy's compilation is the emphasis it gives to non-Anglo-Saxon movies, such as those coming from Russia, France and Latin America. Science fiction, as in the United States in the 1950s under McCarthyism, was seen in Eastern Europe as a vehicle for submerged criticism of the state.

Hardy writes that *Star Wars* (1977) 'changed the position of science fiction in Hollywood'. Charles Champlin's sumptuous overview, *George Lucas*, provides a useful if decidedly eulogistic view of Lucas's career, including the now classic 'Star Wars' trilogy. Champlin quotes from many Lucas interviews, while the numerous black and white and colour illustrations recall all the favourite characters from movies such as *American Graffiti* to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Champlin covers movies that Lucas has produced or his production company has been involved with.

Lucas and Spielberg successfully recreated in their early blockbusters the rollercoaster emotional rides of the cinema serials of the 1930s, but added high-tech overlays and much stronger narratives. Don't look to Champlin, however for in-depth

analyses of technique or motivation, although he does list Lucas's failures, such as *Howard the Duck* (1986). The best approach to Lucas is to combine the photos and interviews of *George Lucas* with the critical comments in Hardy's *Encyclopedia*.

**SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY  
BOOK REVIEW ANNUAL  
1990**  
edited by Robert A.  
Collins and Robert Latham  
(Greenwood Press  
0-313-28150-5; 1991;  
711 pp.; US\$75)

At the May 1992 American Booksellers Association Conference at Anaheim (27,000 registrants!), which I attended, a queue formed outside Hall A on the first day. The subsequent stampede resembled the Great Land Claim Races of the American West. Middle-aged booksellers who should have known better, given their size and fitness, raced across the floor to obtain advance copies of Stephen King's *Gerald's Game*, enclosed in a cardboard slipcase and a facsimile handwritten letter from King on the flyleaf. Within the week collectors had paid more than \$200 for it in the San Francisco area. Elsewhere a special 1000-copy limited edition of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* drew a huge queue, as did book signings by science fiction authors such as Douglas Adams, Orson Scott Card and Ray Bradbury.

All this is a prelude to reviewing an essential guide to the sf, fantasy and horror genres, *Science Fiction & Fantasy Book Review 1990*. In this volume Samuel Key, reviewing *My Pretty Pony* by Stephen King (Knopf; 1989; US\$50), asks who buys such limited editions when they 'are as ugly as the book in hand' which is 'oversize and garish with huge moronic print, typos, ugly illustrations and a poor design'. He answers: 'people with the fever (and money) who just have to have "x" by "y" writer . . . and dealers who sell them to people with this consuming fever!'

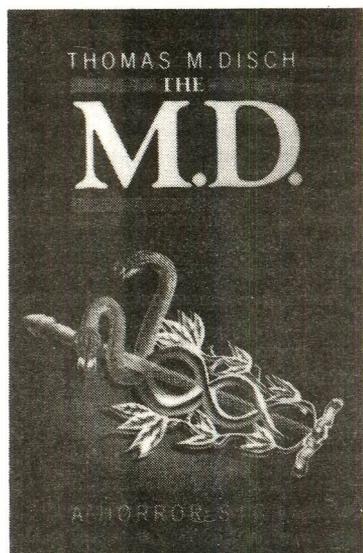
This is the third volume of the series to appear, although the first from Westwood, which has taken over publication from Meckler. My only quibbles would be that the publisher continues to call the volume by the year *after* the publications reviewed. In this case 1990 refers to

1989 publications, which is both confusing and irritating. Also significant is the fact that the horror content is not mentioned in the title.

This said, there are more than 500 reasonably detailed reviews of major works in the three genres. Separate

author profiles include those for Dan Simmons, voted 'Most Collectible Author of 1991' in a recent US poll, and Tanith Lee, as well as theme bibliographies. *SFFBRA* is essentially US-publisher-based, but there is limited British and Canadian coverage.

This could certainly be improved, as well as adding European and Australasian titles. Nonetheless, despite its necessary retrospectivity, this is a significant reference source to an eminently collectible literature.



#### THE MD

by Thomas Disch  
(Harper Collins; 401 pp.;  
A\$35)

#### THE ANGEL OF PAIN

by Brian Stableford  
(Simon & Schuster; 395 pp.;  
A\$35)

#### JAGO

by Kim Newman  
(Simon & Schuster; 537 pp.;  
A\$35)

#### THE FETCH

by Robert Holdstock  
(Orbit; 376 pp.; A\$29.95)

#### DARK SEEKER

by K. W. Jeter  
(Pan; 317 pp.; A\$10.95)

#### A TWIST IN THE TALE

by Hugh Atkinson  
(Penguin; 382 pp.; A\$16.95)

Possession is the name of the game in this sextet of books by American, British and Australian authors. The first four use possession induced by what might be termed elemental forces, while the fifth and sixth reflect the impact of drugs and madness respectively.

*The MD*, Thomas Disch's first novel since 1984, revolves around the staff (caduceus) of Mercury, which comes into the hands of a child, Billy Michaels. As he grows up and becomes



a doctor he believes he can cure mankind, but the end result brings distress to his surrounding friends and family and a new AIDS-like plague to humanity. Disch said recently that he chose the caduceus because of its symbolic meaning in Greek mythology. 'You can use it to help and you can use it to harm, and you're not necessarily in control of it... bad things can happen to good people in Greek myths.' Dr Michaels certainly proves that point in a cruelly comic novel of powerful dimensions.

*The Angel of Pain* continues Brian Stableford's multi-layered examination of Victorian England and its values through the possession of certain individuals by reawakened beings known as 'angels'. Power comes with pain as the main character, crippled scientist David Lydyard, finds out to his cost. Stableford's ultimate message seems to be for humanity to abandon its religions in order to survive, but this will not be clear till the last volume of this intriguing trilogy appears.

False gods walk the earth in Kim Newman's *Jago*, another dense, ambiguous book. The title derives from the Reverend Anthony Jago, whose bizarre religious cult group takes over a small Somerset village. Human evil interacts with the supernatural, erupting into a literally apocalyptic conclusion. Newman mixes small-town mores, in the style of Stephen King, pop culture and a critique of contemporary British values, into a pot-pourri of horror and hope.

Robert Holdstock's stock plot in *The Fetch* of a child possessed is enriched by his use of myth. This mythic quality is not as densely layered as in his award-winning books *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss*, but it does provide an unusual depth. The reader ponders the source of the mysterious and rare archaeological antiquities that a troubled child brings to placate his father, and who or what is the 'Chalk Boy' that emerges from the historical past of the Kentish Weald. *The Fetch* is not Holdstock's best, but it does reflect his continual interest in the power that the past exercises over the present.

The evil forces of K. W. Jeter's *Dark Seeker* are more conventional in form. Madness is induced by a drug, 'the host', that once enveloped a college group in Manson-style murders, who now reappear a decade later to confront Jeter's characters in their gritty American environment.

Hugh Atkinson's gentle Australian novellas of possession in *A Twist in the Tale* come as a some relief. 'The Burial of Robinson Crusoe', set in the long-forgotten gold-rush town of Sunny Corner, sees an obsession for the long-lost gold vein fall part in the local graveyard, while in 'The Language of Flowers' a mundane small-town bank manager's love of orchids not only brings about his death but also an ironic revenge on his vitriolic wife. In his case, possession is no longer nine-tenths of the law!

#### FLYING DUTCH

by Tom Holt  
(Orbit; 252 pp.; A\$40)

Oxford graduate Tom Holt's three novels to date fall in the comic tradition of Terry Pratchett. His publishers clearly think so, as they've used Pratchett's regular cover artist Josh Kirby for the cover of *Flying Dutch*.

Holt takes the legend of the Flying Dutchman and turns it upside down. Cornelius Vanderdecker and his hapless crew encounter the twentieth century in the form of modern bankers, rampant ecologists, laundromats and BBC-TV film crews. Holt reveals the real and pungent reason why the

Dutchman and his crew can only leave their ship for one month every seven years, and why Wagner got it all wrong.

Holt packs his text with Pratchett-style jokes ('I don't think just being alive is actually illegal anywhere, except maybe in some parts of South-East Asia' and 'A man who has just spent five minutes talking into a British Telecom payphone is not afraid to raise his voice') although his structure is less cohesive than those that Pratchett normally provides. Nonetheless *Flying Dutch* is an effective comic 'holt'-up!

#### N. SPACE

by Larry Niven

(Orbit; 617 pp.; A\$35)

#### FOOTFALL

by Larry Niven and

Jerry Pournelle

(Orbit; 700 pp.; A\$17.95)

#### VOODOO PARK

by Larry Niven and

Steven Barnes

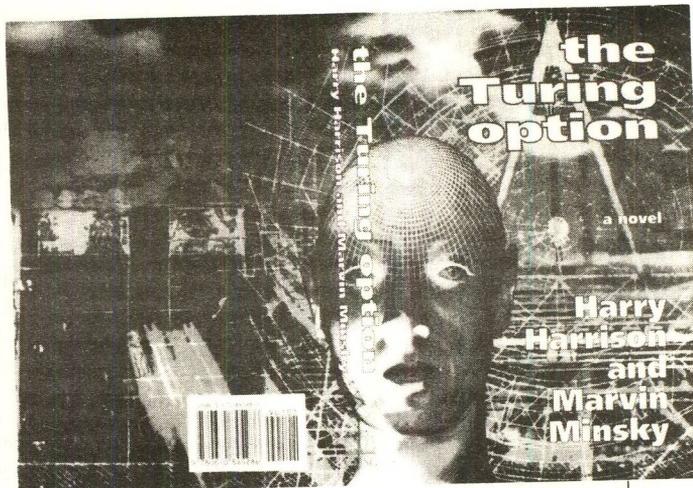
(Pan; 346 pp.; A\$19.95)

American writer Larry Niven, now in his mid-fifties, has been writing science fiction for over 25 years. He is probably best known for his 'hard' sf such as *Ringworld* (1970) and *The Integral Trees* (1983) and his work in series with other authors such as Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes.

*N. Space* purports to be a retrospective of Niven's work, but it is essentially a somewhat eclectic selection that needs to be supplemented by a further volume *Playground of the Mind* (1991), not yet released in Australia. What *N. Space* provides is a pot-pourri of Niven's fiction and fact, with side comments from Niven and tributes from other authors. The short fiction pieces stand up best, as the extracts from novels such as *The Mote in God's Eye* (1974) are too short to be really meaningful.

Niven's collaborations in the end may be seen to be less critically memorable, albeit more lucrative, than his own work. Thus his 'Dream Park' collaborations with Steven Barnes, of which *Voodoo Park* is the latest, are more role-playing extravaganzas than solid speculative fiction. In this novel, fantasy becomes reality through game-park computer simulations and holographic images. *Footfall*, which documents the invasion by aliens, who physically resemble baby elephants, is similarly an assertive right-wing romp best placed in airport lounges.

Niven is not a writer for complex characterisation. His heroes are almost always loners who possess an adver-



sarial, if ultimately optimistic, approach to life. Such optimism is usually associated with the notion of progress through scientific and technological developments. The best of Niven is when science and plot successfully blend, for example, in Niven's award-winning story 'The Hole Man' (1974), which involves a quantum black hole in murder! *N. Space* is a useful career retrospective, but it's not the definitive lifetime exhibition.

#### ACHILLES CHOICE

by Larry Niven and

Steven Barnes

(Pan; 214 pp.; A\$22.95)

#### SPEAKING IN TONGUES

by Ian McDonald

(Gollancz; 248 pp.; A\$38.95)

What if performance-enhancing drugs were the norm in athletics rather than the banned substances they currently are? What if the will to win was paramount above all other considerations? This is the premise behind *Achilles Choice* and the story 'Winner' in Ian McDonald's excellent collection of short stories *Speaking in Tongues*.

In *Achilles Choice* Niven and Barnes create a future world in which thousands of physically and intellectually endowed young people submit to the 'Boost' program that endows them with superhuman powers. Only gold-medal winners are 'linked' to the future, and the many losers die from the after-effects after eight to nine years. Niven and Barnes query the fate of heroine Jillian Shomer. Will she succeed in winning a gold medal and also unearth the real reason behind the new Olympics? Who runs wins, but few will care, as large type, old-fashioned and unnecessary illustrations, and lots of blank pages make *Achilles Choice* a very short novel. The ideas and charac-

ters needed much greater length to enlarge the novel's important theme. Maybe Niven and Barnes need some literary steroids to achieve the necessary stamina!

Young British writer Ian McDonald's short story 'Winning' in *Speaking in Tongues* confirms, as do the other ten stories, the continued fertility of his imagination. His poignant vignette of the rise and fall of a young Arabic sprinter echoes 'Flowers for Algernon', the classic sf rise-and-decline story by Daniel Keyes. Hammadi accepts the performance-enhancing drugs, surgical implants and psychological assistance that brings him to a final showdown with not only his Aboriginal rival but also his religion. This future wheel of athletic fortune goes full circle, but the question of whether the sporting end justifies the means remains to haunt the present.

#### THE POSITRONIC MAN

by Isaac Asimov and

Robert Silverberg

(Gollancz; 224 pp.; A\$34.95)

#### THE TURING OPTION

by Harry Harrison and

Marvin Minsky

(Viking; 422 pp.; A\$19.95)

#### DEAD GIRLS

by Richard Calder

(HarperCollins; 206 pp.;

A\$35)

What is human intelligence? What is machine intelligence? The three novels under review probe to varying degrees of success both scientifically and creatively the limits of artificial intelligence (AI).

Isaac Asimov began this exploration of AI with his short stories for *Astounding* magazine in the 1940s. He created a world of fictional robotic development that has enshrined Asimov's three 'Laws of Robotics'. One of

(Continued on Page 85)

## SCIENCE FICTION ROUND-UP, OCTOBER 1992

Professor Tom Shippey, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Science Fiction Stories* (Oxford University Press; A\$39.95), argues that a revealing way of describing science fiction is to say that it is part of a literary mode that might be called 'fabril'. Fabril, the opposite to pastoral, which is 'rural, nostalgic and conservative', is 'overwhelmingly urban, disruptive, future oriented and eager for novelty'. The books in this round-up of recent sf certainly reflect these latter traits.

Shippey has collected 30 stories ranging in date from 1903, 'The Land Ironclads' by H. G. Wells, to 1990, 'Piecework' by David Brin. Authors include the early *Astounding* authors, such as Jack Williamson, to the current 'cyberpunk' authors, such as William Gibson. Any editor who tries to represent a genre in one book is open to criticism, especially when famous writers such as Heinlein and Asimov don't feature. Nor, deliberately, when there are no authors outside Britain and America. Nonetheless, buttressed by a perceptive introduction and a select bibliography, this is a worthy addition to the current Oxford series of popular anthologies and should become a standard introduction to a genre that is quintessentially a literature of the twentieth century.

Mick Jagger, a phenomenon of the second half of this century, is an sf addict, although the critical reaction to his role as a twenty-first century bounty hunter in the movie *Freejack*, loosely based on the immortality novel by Robert Sheckley (*Legend*; A\$9.95), might remind him that good sf movies are few and far between. The 'Star Wars' trilogy had its detractors, but was firmly based on the 'Golden Age' sf stories that George Lucas read in his youth.

With no more 'Star Wars' films coming in the near future, Lucas

Films has allowed Timothy Zahn to take the stage forward in time in a trilogy that began with *Heir to the Empire* and continues with *Dark Force Rising* (Bantam; A\$24.95). With one quarter of a million copies printed of this recent volume, and sales sending it to second spot on the UK bestseller list, there is no doubt of the continuing popularity of the saga. All the familiar characters are here, although the stilted dialogue detracts from the rollicking space adventures as a further threat to the New Republic emerges.

Slightly more cerebral space opera comes in Frederik Pohl's *The World at the End of Time* (Grafton; A\$11.95), which traces the evolution across time of a wayward cosmic intelligence and a teenager, both remarkably similar in petulance! Pohl's moral seems to be that longevity and intelligence are only marginally linked.

The intelligence of the groups in Keith Brooke's *Expatria Incorporated* (Gollancz; A\$38.95) also takes some believing, as a long-lost Earth colony is found by the 'Holy Corporation' of Earth, a sort of corporate business religion that tries to evangelise stubborn colonists who have rejected technology.

Both sets of humans deserve each other, which is more than can be said for the giant spiders and subservient humans of Colin Wilson's twenty-fifth century *Spider World: The Magician* (HarperCollins; A\$18.95), the third in a series that depicts a natural world gone mad, although this latest volume hints at a hidden cosmic meaning.

Alien conditioning of a society also comes in Sheri S. Tepper's *Raising the Stones* (Grafton; A\$12.95). A colony's idyllic existence is threatened by the invasion of religious fanaticism. Tepper's diatribe against militarism and the bigotry of organised religion indicates, as Shippey does, that the best sf has a contemporary message.

'Urban disruption', to quote Shippey once more, is prevalent in the devastated future America of Neil Barrett's *Dawn's Uncertain Light* (Grafton, A\$10.95), in which the ultimate horror of structured cannibalism reflects the bleakness of Barrett's future.

More hallucinatory is the reissued *Dhalgren* (Grafton; A\$10.95), Samuel Delany's award-winning 1974 novel in which the hero's exploration of the ruined city of Bellona and its decadent and anarchic lifestyles symbolise the end of the American dream.

The dreams of the 1960s were encapsulated in the issues of Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* magazine, and several of these 'New Wave' authors are represented in Shippey's anthology. David Garnett is a more conservative editor of the new series of *New Worlds 2* (Gollancz; A\$14.95), which features outstanding stories by Ian McDonald and Ian Watson as well as a previously unpublished piece from Philip K. Dick. Garnett complains of the commercial difficulties of publishing original short-story collections, and the recent sale of Gollancz to Cassell highlights the troubles of relatively small firms in the blockbuster world of contemporary publishing.

'Big name' short story collections, such as Robert Silverberg's *Pluto in the Morning Light* (Grafton; A\$16.95), the first in a five-volume series collecting Silverberg's output, fare much better. Curiously, this first volume begins with stories written between 1981 and 1985, so the chronological sequence starts in Silverberg's mid career. Nonetheless, as Silverberg roams from the surface of Pluto to a Los Angeles under alien yoke, he remains one of sf's most creative talents, although he too fails to find a place in Shippey's Oxford universe.

the key works in the development of this robotic universe was the 1976 novella 'The Bicentennial Man', now expanded into *The Positronic Man*. This is the final volume, because of Asimov's death, in the Asimov and Robert Silverberg collaborative series that began with *Nightfall* (1990) and *Child of Time* (1991).

*The Positronic Man* covers 200 years in the life of the robot Andrew Martin as the robot struggles first to be declared a 'free man', and then to achieve the ultimate freedom, the right to die. Silverberg has cleverly 'fleshed out', in more ways than one, the Asimov original concept and historical evolution of humanity towards machine intelligence, and the latter in the reverse direction. *The Positronic Man* is a poignant if occasionally slow-moving novel of prediction.

In the Asimovian future robotic panoply is a roboticist called Mervin Minsky, clearly based on Professor Marvin Minsky of MIT, a leading researcher in the AI field. Unfortunately, Minsky's foray into the techno-thriller field *The Turing Option* with sf writer Harry Harrison is less successful than the Asimov/Silverberg collaboration. Set in the 2020s, this book tells of a brilliant young AI researcher who is left for dead when his laboratory is gutted by industrial competitors. As in the tv series of *The Six Million Dollar Man* the hero is rebuilt, while at the same time the development of machine intelligence recommences. Again there is the juxtaposition of two parallel developments of organic and inorganic entities, but the cardboard characterisation, pulp thriller clichés and solid slabs of virtual lecture notes leave the novel as a retarded development.

*The Positronic Man* and *The Turing Option* are as fictional waltzes compared to the cyberpunk rap dancing of *Dead Girls*, the first novel of young British writer Richard Calder, who lives in a small village on the Thai-Lao border. Calder creates a bizarre twenty-first century world where nano-engineers have unleashed machine consciousness. Android replicas, 'Cartier dolls', service Western tourists in a watery Bangkok, only for a mutant virus unleashed by rival European firms to turn them into deadly killers. The political framework of this world, from a run-down Britain to a resurgent USA attempting to overthrow the Pacific Rim dominance, and the mind-boggling scientific advance of 'fractal programming' that melds human and machine forms and intelligences, are only slowly sketched by Calder. The end result is certainly less than the parts — bizarre vignettes of

cyberpunk nightmare. Nonetheless Calder is going to be a name to watch in science fiction.

#### **NARROW HOUSES**

edited by Peter Crowther  
(Little Brown; 460 pp.; A\$40)

#### **UNCANNY BANQUET**

edited by  
Ramsey Campbell  
(Little Brown; 338 pp.; A\$40)

#### **THE INCARNATE**

by Ramsey Campbell  
(Warner; 490 pp.; A\$11.95)

#### **THE VICAR OF MORBING VYLE**

by Richard Harland  
(Karl Evans; 305 pp.; A\$8.95)

#### **CANDLELIGHT**

by Phil Rickman  
(Pan; 429 pp.; A\$11.95)

#### **CRYBBE**

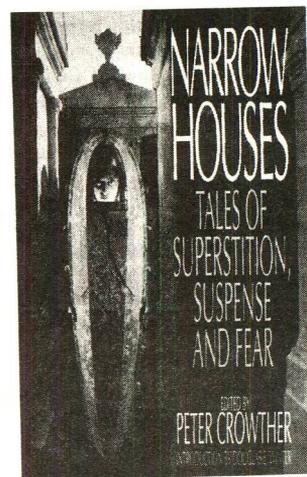
by Phil Rickman  
(Macmillan; 664 pp.; A\$35)

*Narrow Houses* is a superb original anthology based around the effects of superstition. Douglas Winter, in his introduction to Crowther's anthology, indicates that superstitions are 'a way of looking at our world that is not necessarily politic or polite, that challenges the official story . . . and suggests alternatives'. This may not necessarily be true in all of the 28 stories and one poem (by Ray Bradbury), but here we find an overall 'frisson'.

American realism novelist Andrew Vachss shows how a revenge for child abuse can take on a hidden meaning in 'Stone magic', while Jonathan Carroll in 'Learning to Leave' reveals that if you 'find a man's secret places, you start him towards death'. British writer Ramsey Campbell contributes a chilly piece, 'The Dead Must Die', on the superstitions that arise from evangelical fundamentalism.

Campbell's own anthology *Uncanny Banquet* of ten stories collects the old instead of the new in order to ensure that the present generation of horror readers do not lose touch with the traditions of the genre. Thus Campbell reprints classics such as Walter de la Mare's 'A Mote' to Russell Kirk's 'Behind the Stumps'. Nearly half the book is taken up with a reprinting of Adrian Ross's 'The Hole of the Pit', first published in 1914 but never reprinted since then. Ross was Arthur Rapes, a Cambridge don, who sets his supernatural tale in an English castle during the Civil War. This provides a sufficient backdrop for black magic and terrors from the deep!

Campbell's own horror novel *In-*



*carnate* first appeared in 1984, but has now been reissued with additional material. The participants in an Oxford psychological research unit find themselves, eleven years after the event, descending into a hallucinatory world of instability and paranoia. Campbell enters the nightmare world where dreams are as vivid as life itself.

Far less impressive as an examination of horrific unreality is Richard Harland's *The Vicar of Morbing Vyle*, despite it's being released at an attractive price by Wollongong small press publisher Karl Evans. An Australian student's discovery of the deranged inhabitants of a destroyed village in East Anglia brought about by Victorian horrors is reasonable enough, but the characters are so extreme and the plot so bizarre that the end result is total disbelief and a black comedy in more ways than one.

Award-winning Welsh journalist and tv reporter Phil Rickman sets Harland the standard to achieve, despite the banality of the covers of his first two novels. Unsuspecting readers thus might well ignore the quality of Rickman's scene setting and characterisation.

In *Candlelight* a remote Welsh village is the locale for some mysterious and ultimately gruesome events that can be linked back to Owain Glyndwr and the fifteenth century. The juxtaposition of contemporary Welsh nationalism and the potency of Celtic myths will ensure that this gripping first novel is read by electric and not candle light.

In his even longer second novel, *Crybbe*, Rickman details another secretive small town, this time on the Welsh Borders, that again holds a hidden terror from the past. A Richard Branson-style music mogul, who has bought the Elizabethan Crybbe Court as a site for his New Age philosophies, begins to disturb the ancient balances, with horrifying results. Rickman's

Wales seems set to rival Stephen King's Maine and Ramsey Campbell's Liverpool as the fertile setting for horror of the highest quality.

#### HIDEAWAY

by Dean R. Koontz

(Headline; 307 pp.; A\$29.95)

#### THE EYES OF DARKNESS

by Dean R. Koontz

(Headline; 468 pp.; A\$12.95)

#### THE HYMN

by Graham Masterton

(Macdonald; 346 pp.; A\$35)

#### THE STRESS OF HER REGARD

by Tim Powers

(HarperCollins; 431 pp.;

A\$19.95)

#### MORTAL MASK

by Stephen Marley

(Century; 404 pp.; A\$17.95)

These five novels view the past and present through a mirror darkly.

*Hideaway* recently topped the American hardback bestseller list, and it's not difficult to see why the novels of Dean R. Koontz are so successful. The plot lines are simple yet strong, characterisation is relatively black and white, and the dialogue appeals particularly to a youthful readership.

In *Hideaway* antique dealer Hatch Harrison has been revived after being clinically dead for an hour, but once he leaves hospital his troubles begin. Has he brought the dead back to life with him? Is he responsible for the deaths of people who have previously crossed him? Harrison's sanity is in doubt until the final horrific supernatural showdown in a deserted amusement park.

*The Eyes of Darkness*, a reprint of an earlier Koontz novel, stretches credulity somewhat, as a mother and her boyfriend attempt to rescue her lost son from the clutches of a sinister American intelligence unit.

Graham Masterton's *The Hymn* is an enjoyable piece of horror hocus pocus, as an upmarket restaurateur tries to find out why his girlfriend has committed suicide in a particularly gruesome fashion. The answer lies in the rediscovery of a lost opera of Wagner, conspiratorial Nazis, and North American Indian magic, with a denouement, set in the San Diego Civic Theatre, that is decidedly incandescent!

Tim Powers and Stephen Marley take their horror inspirations from the past.

Powers (*The Stress of Her Regard*) places his narrative in the Europe of the early nineteenth century, with the Shelley-and-Byron circle prominent in

the plot, while Marley (*Mortal Mask*) is influenced by the history of early China and to a lesser extent Egypt. Their supernatural females are both pursuers and pursued, but it is Powers' juxtaposition of nineteenth-century scientific melodrama and twentieth-century self-discovery that easily prevails over Marley's mix of horror kitsch and historical fantasy.

#### 'WAS...'

by Geoff Ryman

(HarperCollins; 356 pp.;

A\$32.95)

In *'Was...'* Canadian writer Geoff Ryman takes the background of *The Wizard of Oz*, both fictional and factual, and turns it on its head to produce an unusual and inventive vision of an America with dark secrets on its yellow brick road to so-called civilisation.

Dorothy, an orphaned child in rural Kansas in 1875, is sexually abused by her uncle, her dog Toto is killed by her sadistic aunt, and she retreats into madness. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, is an occasional school teacher who tries to rescue her from her misfortunes. 'Baby Frances' is the child prodigy of the 1920s who becomes the tortured star of the movie, while Jonathan, a gay actor dying of AIDS, returns to Kansas in the 1980s to retrace the memories of the movie he first saw on television in 1956.

Their interlinked stories reflect the perennial themes of the loss of childhood, of home, and of people we care about. It reveals how the psychological burden of the past is ever present in the future. *'Was...'* cannot be easily pigeonholed, but it constitutes one of the most original and intriguing books of 1992.

#### THE CHILDREN OF MEN

by P. D. James

(Faber & Faber; 239 pp.;

A\$32.95)

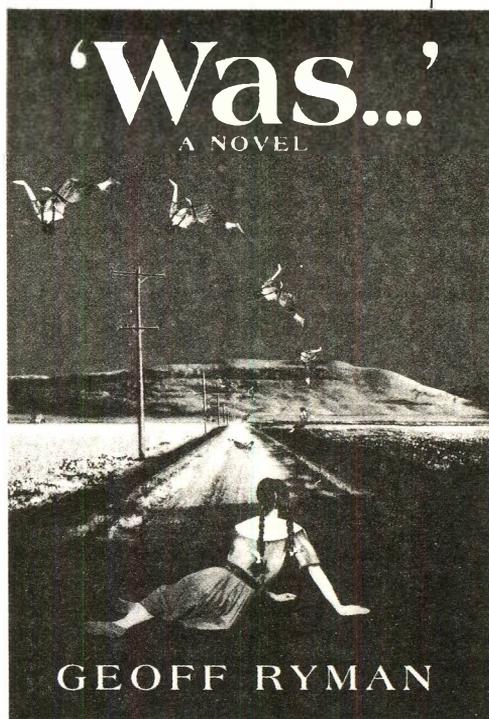
#### TRILOGY OF DEATH

by P. D. James

(Penguin; A\$17.95)

Science fiction and P. D. James? The idea seems incredible for the acknowledged 'Queen of Crime'. When we talked in London and Canberra in 1990 she gave no hint that her next and latest novel, *The Children of Men*, would be set in the year 2021, in a world in which no children had been born since 1995 because of zero sperm counts.

P. D. James has said that 'the structure of the detective story is what has



always attracted me', which she amply demonstrates in *Trilogy of Death*, which brings together her novels *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, *Innocent Blood* and *The Skull Beneath the Skin*. So why the change? She says that *The Children of Men* 'was a given book. It came and was there and I wrote it down. I thought if there was no future, how would we behave?' Her answer: not very well.

The story is told through the actions and diaries of the main character Dr Theo Faron. Faron is a crusty middle-aged Oxford history don who becomes the unlikely catalyst for a group of young Christian dissidents. Faron is the cousin of the oddly named Xan Lyppiatt, the dictator of a Britain subdued by a feeling of futility, brute force and controlled hedonism. The Isle of Man is a penal colony, and Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford is that city's central massage parlour! Undergraduate education is a volatile affair for the 'Omegas', for if there is no future, why study subjects like history? The punk 'Painted Faces' roam the countryside while the elderly are forced into relatively inefficient mass drownings at the seaside — the 'Quietus'. The middle-aged play golf, which is now the English national game.

James is not a science fiction writer. Science seems to have stood still, apart from its inability to counter the infertility issue. The England of 2021 is only a thinly disguised England of today — many people are watching reruns of *Neighbours* — 'somewhere under an antipodean sky this comforting, youth-

## Vance's strengths and weaknesses

### CHATEAU D'IF AND OTHER STORIES

by Jack Vance

(Underwood-Miller; 1990; US\$29.95)

Another sumptuous production by Underwood-Miller, *Chateau D'If and Other Stories* collects five of Vance's novellas that were originally published between 1950 and 1973. None is one of Vance's highest achievements, although 'The Gift of the Gab' is probably the best known, having been anthologised in Edmund Crispin's *Best SF 3*.

The first two stories, 'Abercrombie Station' and 'Cholwell's Chickens', feature one of Vance's most engaging female characters, Jean Parlier, who is irreverent as far as society's rules and morals are concerned. Offered two million dollars to wed the gross Earl Abercrombie, the eighteen-year-old owner of Abercrombie Station, an orbital space station where the fat really do 'hang out', Jean manages to survive some

grotesque encounters.

She returns in 'Cholwell's Chickens', where she discovers her cloned origins and overcomes some traditional male chauvinism and chicanery with the help of her 'sisters'.

The same bodily distaste as was exemplified in 'Abercrombie Station' is found in the title story 'Chateau D'If', which reflects the horror of young men being transplanted into the bodies of old men, and vice versa. This novella was more aptly titled 'New Bodies for Old' when it first appeared in *Thrilling Wonder Stories* in 1950. Even then the theme was hackneyed, but Vance injects it with life as the reader empathises with the young main character struggling to regain his body and overthrow the system.

'Rumfuddle' is the least satisfactory story. The main character Gilbert Duray finds the various portals to his alternate universe home, and thus to his family, barred to his access. The solution lies with the activities of the ambitious 'Rumfud-

dlers', but their power is demolished, as quickly as it appeared, by the omniscient inventor of the gateway. All dramatic tension quietly evaporates.

'The Gift of the Gab' poses the question, which Vance did so well in his early stories, of the conflict of cultures: can an alien race that possesses neither language nor technology be 'intelligent', at least judged by human standards?

*Chateau D'If* represents many of Vance's strengths and weaknesses: the idiosyncratic main characters, proud and independent, able to solve problems through their own resourcefulness and ingenuity; the desire to question or even tear down society's inherent traditions; and the imaginative portrayal of alien cultures. Underwood-Miller, with this and other Vance volumes, has done an excellent job in preserving the writings of Jack Vance in such fine packaging.

— Colin Steele, 22 December 1992

ful world still existed and could be entered at will'. This future world is also decidedly Anglocentric. Despite Faron's nostalgic European Grand Tour, the rest of the world might as well not exist.

*The Children of Men* is essentially a platform for James to argue against society's implicit moves towards self-gratification and pornography, to re-

inforce decent codes of behaviour, and above all to emphasise the power of 'love' over 'corruption'. The ambiguous ending, after a somewhat unlikely chase through the Oxfordshire countryside, is decidedly *deus ex humana*, with human redemption possibly emerging through faith.

Interesting, quirky and intriguing, *The Children of Men* is not up to the standard of the classic novels of P. D. James. The final message for Ms James has to be: back to Inspector Dalgleish rather than back to the future.

### THE VENGING

by Greg Bear

(Century; 269 pp.; A\$17.95)

### ANVIL OF STARS

by Greg Bear

(Century; 442 pp.; A\$17.95)

*The Venging* and *Anvil of Stars* cover American author Greg Bear's writing from his earliest short story in 1975 to his latest novel. In this period, but notably during the second half of the 1980s, he has established himself as perhaps the top American writer of sf 'ideas'.

*The Venging* is largely a reprinting of his first short story collection *The*

*Wind from a Burning Woman* (1983), with the addition of two reworked stories. The eight stories show Bear to be a creative 'hard science' writer in the Arthur C. Clarke mould, but with much better characterisation. The original title story sees a woman seeking the truth at whatever cost in a near-future society polarised by technology, while the novella 'Hardfought' allows Bear to muse on love and humanity in the context of involvement with strange alien forces.

Bear's themes of revenge, the quest for knowledge, and the nature of the universe are highlighted in *Anvil of Stars*, which is a sequel to *The Forge of God* (1987), in which alien robot artefacts bring about the end of the world. Bear has said it was a 'love song for Earth'. Now 82 teenagers and young adults from Earth set out in a space ark *Dawn Treader* to seek out the machines that have brought about this catastrophe.

Such a plot seems like *The Terminator* writ large, but Bear not only deals with large scientific issues but also with cosmological ones. Are, for instance, the children being programmed by their anonymous benefactors, or do they have free will? As in 'The Wind from a Burning



Woman', does the end justify the means? Are people responsible for their leaders? Can mass extinction of innocent people be justified to root out evil? C. S. Lewis, from whom *Dawn Treader* is taken, would have probably approved of this examination of suffering and self-examination on a cosmic scale.

#### **SAURON DEFEATED**

by J. R. R. Tolkien  
(HarperCollins; 482 pp.;  
A\$49.95)

#### **THE TREASON OF ISENGARD**

by J. R. R. Tolkien  
(Grafton; 288 pp.; A\$14.95)

#### **J. R. R. TOLKIEN**

by Humphrey Carpenter  
(Grafton; 288 pp.; A\$14.95)

#### **THE TOLKIEN AND MIDDLE EARTH HANDBOOK**

by Colin Duriez  
(Angus & Robertson;  
316 pp.; A\$19.95)

Humphrey Carpenter, the biographer of J. R. R. Tolkien, wrote recently that he is sure that Tolkien would have loved to have attended 1992's centenary celebrations of his birth. Tolkien told Carpenter that he desired longevity so that he could finish his self-appointed task of chronicling the history of his private world — 'Middle Earth' of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien's son Christopher has been doing his best to remedy earthly deficiencies by publishing the various unpublished drafts that constitute 'The History of Middle Earth'. *Sauron Defeated* is the ninth volume completing *The Lord of the Rings*, while *The Treason of Isengard* is the seventh to appear in paperback. Christopher Tolkien has said that, despite the plethora of footnotes and textual apparatus, his detailed history of his father's writings sells 'very respectably', which is testimony to the power of the original text and the new material that is being published.

*Sauron Defeated*, with its three distinct parts, is less unified than some of the previous volumes. It begins by concluding the account of the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*. As usual, there are some fascinating insights into the production of the final text, and unexpected delights such as the unpublished Epilogue in which Sam, the loyal companion to Frodo, tries to answer some of his children's questions. Christopher Tolkien reports that his father by 1954 was persuaded not to include it as it 'has been so universally con-

demned that I shall not insert it. One must stop somewhere.'

The second part comprises publication of 'The Notion Club Papers', written in 1945-46, which recount the discussions of a future Oxford literary club (based on the Oxford Inklings) that discusses, amongst other things, the nature of space travel and the legend of Atlantis. This fascinating pot-pourri of Tolkieniana is completed by the third part, 'The Drowning of Anadune', a new version of the *Nu-menorean Legend*.

Humphrey Carpenter's superb biography, *J. R. R. Tolkien*, first published in 1977 and now reprinted in paperback, remains the essential introduction to the man and his life, while the best scholarly approach is Professor Tom Shippey's *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1982).

Colin Duriez has attempted a new 'A-Z Guide to the Life, Thought and Writings of J. R. R. Tolkien' in *The Tolkien and Middle Earth Handbook*. This compendium, while useful, falls between two stools. Many general readers would not feel the need for such a glossary of Tolkien's work and life, while completists and devotees would turn to more authoritative listings such as Robert Foster's *The Complete Guide to Middle-Earth* (1978).

These volumes complete the recent plethora of books issued or reissued to coincide with the Tolkien Centenary, but thankfully we've not seen the last of Christopher Tolkien's homage to his father.

#### **THE OXFORD BOOK OF**

#### **GOthic TALES**

edited by Chris Baldick  
(Oxford University Press;  
533 pp.; A\$39.95)

Chris Baldick, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, writes that he believes this is the first anthology to 'exhibit' the tradition of short fiction known as the Gothic from the eighteenth century to the present day. His 37 authors are thus exceedingly diverse, ranging from Sheridan le Fanu and Thomas Hardy to Angela Carter and Isabel Allende.

The Gothic tradition conjures up an image of physical and mental decay. As such, therefore, eighteenth-century England was ideal stories set in remote and archaic settings that harked back to medieval times and the associated superstition and tyranny. It is, therefore, perhaps understandable that it resurfaced in the Deep South of the USA in the late nineteenth century and in Latin America in the twentieth.

The first half-century of Gothic writing, for which Baldick includes seven pieces, exemplified what he terms a 'vigilant Protestant xenophobia'.

In the nineteenth century Edgar Allan Poe, represented here by 'The Fall of the House of Usher', was a key figure. Poe stripped away the literary bloatedness of the past and made decadence a key element of Gothic fiction. The American adaptation of the Gothic in that century is exemplified by the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Bret Harte amongst others.

In the twentieth century H. P. Lovecraft, at one end of the supernatural scale, rubs shoulders with William Faulkner at the other end of it. Lovecraft's narrator in 'The Outsider' is a living embodiment of an unwelcome and abnormal past, while in Faulkner's 'A Rose for Emily' love and death, in this case murder, are starkly represented by the juxtaposition in the last paragraph of a skeleton and a 'long strand of iron-grey hair'.

The fact that the Gothic chill can be translated effectively to more remote geographical areas is seen in Isabel Allende's short story 'If You Touched My Heart', in which the cast-off love of an Argentinean caudillo, imprisoned for nearly 50 years, sees nothing wrong in his actions when she is released.

Angela Carter's 'The Lady of the House of Love' not only reverses the usual vampire/victim scenario in pre-World War I Transylvania but shows that the desires of the female vampire are trivial compared to the foreshadowed horrors of the trenches.

The recent Oxford anthologies of theme collections have represented superb value. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* proves to be no exception. The fears, repressions and phobias of the present time provide just as powerful a breeding ground for the exponents of Gothic fiction as did the feudal villains and crumbling ruins of previous centuries.



### THE COUNT OF ELEVEN

by Ramsey Campbell  
(Macdonald; 374 pp.; A\$40)

### BLOOD GAMES

by Richard Laymon  
(Headline; 311 pp.; A\$36.95)

### BLOOD MOON

by Melanie Tem  
(Women's Press; 170 pp.;  
A\$16.95)

### THE WEERDE

edited by Mary Gentle and  
Roz Kaveney  
(Roc; 365 pp.; A\$10.95)

The best writing in a genre, whether it be crime or fantasy, is often neglected because it is packaged and reviewed in such a way that the general reader is unable to separate the gold from the dross.

A gold medallist in the horror stakes is undoubtedly British writer Ramsey Campbell, whose dark psychological dramas have perhaps more in common with, say, Patricia Highsmith's writings than those of Richard Laymon. *The Count of Eleven* is a tragi-comedy detailing the descent into serial killerdom of a Liverpoolian family man Jack Orchard, who believes that his family's bad fortune is somehow connected to a chain-letter circulation that has gone wrong. Campbell concentrates perhaps overmuch on the localities of Orchard's decline rather than the plight of the victims and their families, but otherwise this is a *tour de force* of psychological horror.

Campbell also succeeds in the detailing of everyday mundanity in his Liverpool of the nineties. Richard Laymon's *Blood Games* is a much more contrived affair. When five American women decide to spend a week in a deserted rural lodge in the middle of nowhere, the reader knows what is coming. Murder does occur, but at the end of the novel the reader is left with little to ponder other than a commercially staged horror set piece.

Social worker Melanie Tem sees more horror every day in her work with abused and disadvantaged children than Laymon does in his imaginary world. Her second novel *Blood Moon* evokes memories of Stephen King's *Carrie*. Her main character, a female investment counsellor, Breanne Novak, adopts a troubled eleven-year-old boy Greg who may or may not have psychic powers. The present-day horrors are enough for Breanne, as her widowed father has a stroke, she may lose the baby she is carrying from a one-night stand, and Greg runs away. Tem's sparse storytelling and realistic characterisation put many of today's

bloated horror stories to shame.

Mary Gentle and Roz Kaveney have conjured up *The Weerde*, who are an ancient race of shape changers cum predators who have hidden from humanity throughout the centuries. The twelve contributors, who include some of the best young British imaginative writers, document the Weerde in time and place from ancient Greece to a near-future Manchester. There is, however, not enough evil to terrify and not enough normality to be relevant. The end result is quirkily British and not a little weird in itself.

### GERALD'S GAME

by Stephen King  
(Hodder & Stoughton;  
348 pp.; A\$35)

### THE FUNHOUSE

by Dean R. Koontz  
(Headline; 313 pp.; A\$35)

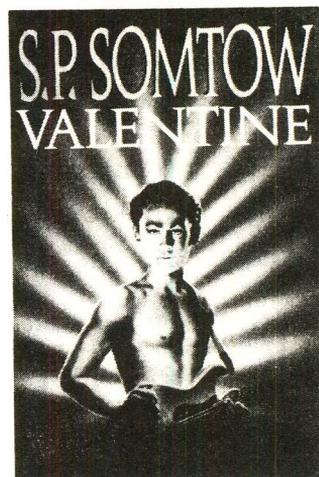
### VALENTINE

by S. P. Somtow  
(Gollancz; 383 pp.; A\$35)

*Gerald's Game* has already topped the American and British bestseller lists and reaffirmed King's stranglehold on the horror market.

The first few chapters set the scene of a book both compelling and repelling. Jessie and Gerald Burlingame are partial to a little S&M in their desolate rural retreat, but it all goes horribly wrong. Jessie, manacled half naked to a bed, chooses the wrong time to needle her husband, whose subsequent assault leads to his fatal heart attack and the manacle keys out of her reach. With over 300 pages to go, the reader can be sure that there will be no easy escape for Jessie, especially when a stray dog arrives on the scene. Its bite is decidedly worse than its bark. Jessie believes it 'could be scarier than Freddie Krueger', but then comes a Krueger-type figure and her recurrent hallucinations of her father's childhood sexual abuse. King has concocted a bedtime story of nightmare proportions.

*The Funhouse*, by contrast, is merely a well-constructed piece of horror hokum. Written by Koontz under a pseudonym in 1980, it has now been republished to capitalise on the recent huge success of Koontz in America. It recounts the revenge exacted on a woman and her children by a deranged carnival barker and his mutant son. *The Funhouse* is fast paced and the denouement is suitably gory, but the terrors lurking in travelling circuses have been more subtly evoked by others, such as Ray Bradbury in *Something Wicked This Way Comes*.



Thai-American writer S. P. Somtow has followed his 1985 cult classic *Vampire Junction* with a sequel, *Valentine*, that is perhaps unnecessary other than financially. His immortal boy vampire, wandering the centuries, became the world's greatest rock star, Timmy Valentine, only to disappear at the end of the novel. *Valentine* begins some years after as a talent search for his replacement is just concluding. The very strange plot is really only a device for Somtow to satirise contemporary America, indulge in some numbing carnage, and ponder the nature of human existence. The vampire is clearly depicted as an archetype, the link between alternate worlds. Valentine is the innocent catalyst, as the best and worst of reality and unreality battle it out, but most readers will look to Anne Rice for their vampires! As King shows, it is only humanity that can be truly horrific.

### THE CARPET PEOPLE

by Terry Pratchett  
(Doubleday; 176 pp.;  
A\$18.95)

### SMALL GODS

by Terry Pratchett  
(Gollancz; 272 pp.; A\$29.95)

The incredibly prolific and popular British author Terry Pratchett returns to his origins with *The Carpet People*, which was first published in 1971. Pratchett writes in an Author's Note to this extensively revised edition that 'it had a lot of things wrong with it, mostly to do with being written by someone who was seventeen at the time'. The current phenomenal success of Pratchett led not only to the long-out-of-print book becoming a collector's item but also to a constant demand for its reprinting.

Doubleday has now obliged with

(Continued on Page 91)

## Dracula's long road

### BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA OMNIBUS

(Orion; 543 pp.; A\$24.95)

### BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA

by Fred Saberhagen and  
James V. Hart

(Pan; 310 pp.; A\$10.95)

### THE ULTIMATE DRACULA

edited by Byron Preiss

(Headline; 275 pp.;

A\$12.95)

### THE TALE OF THE BODY THIEF

by Anne Rice

(Chatto & Windus;

430 pp.; A\$29.95)

### THE PICADOR BOOK OF THE NEW GOTHIC

edited by

Bradford Morrow and

Patrick McGrath

(Picador; 336 pp.; A\$35)

### YOUNG BLOOD

by Brian Stableford

(Simon & Schuster;

329 pp.; A\$35)

Dracula never dies — at least fictionally or cinematically. Francis Ford Coppola's new version of *Dracula*, plus the latest volume, *The Tale of the Body Thief*, in Anne Rice's phenomenally successful vampire series, ensure that 1993 will see no let-up in the public passion for books that readers can sink their teeth into!

Fay Weldon, in her fascinating introduction to *Bram Stoker's Dracula Omnibus*, which reprints *Dracula* (1897), *Lair of the White Worm* (1911) and *Dracula's Guest* (1914), correctly identifies *Dracula* as Stoker's one masterpiece, which despite committing 'all possible literary sins, carries the reader along with its wild energy'. Stoker's portrayal of the vampire Count Dracula, forever on the search for human blood until his final dramatic demise, has indeed caught the imagination of each successive generation.

Some of this attraction has been the result of over 200 cinematic portrayals. One of the best is the latest, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola from a book that he used to read as a drama counsellor to eight- or nine-year-olds at summer camp. When James Hart produced a script that not only

emphasised the historical roots of Dracula but also emphasised the underlying eroticism and passion of the original, Coppola felt he had the basis of his 40-million-dollar film.

Fred Saberhagen in turn has produced the novel of the script of the novel, in a typical American marketing ploy! Signet editor Peter Boland said when launching the million-copy edition of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* that 'the original novel is a great piece of literature, but it's very Victorian, not a real page-turner. The novelisation is a page-turner and we think it will appeal to a younger audience.' You pay your money and you take your choice, but most would surely want Stoker's original, particularly with Weldon's introduction.

Weldon muses whether Stoker 'once had oral sex with a girlfriend and found it was her time of the month, was revolted and the rest of us have been suffering from it ever since'. Vampire blood symbolised for Stoker a forbidden intimacy. Coppola also explores, in a postscript to the novelisation of the movie, the symbols of blood, and as Dracula rejects God, blood becomes the basis for all kinds of unholy sacraments. Coppola emphasises the fifteenth-century original Vlad the Impaler (1431-1476) for Dracula and the idea that Dracula is a 'fallen angel at war with God'.

Anne Rice's vampires are a perverse reflection of the Church, not simply enemies of it. She sees them as 'angels going in another direction' who are also tragic in their capacity to understand evil and suffering. *The Tale of the Body Thief*, released in a 500,000 hardback edition in the USA, has already topped the American hardback bestseller lists. The fourth in the series that began with *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), it is a complex and intriguing book. Rice has said in a recent interview: 'The gulf between the way my books are received by readers and the way they are received by reviewers is larger than with most American writers. Reviewers don't expect books about vampires or mummies to have subtlety or nuance'.

In *The Tale of the Body Thief* her world-weary cultured immortal vampire Lestat aches to be a human again and arranges a substitute body

to return to human form. Unfortunately the chosen exchange partner is an accomplished 'body thief' who, once empowered, has no intention of reversing the deal. Rice roams the globe from Miami, the 'perfect city' for vampires, to the West Indies and Europe as the 'thief', learning what it is to be 'transformed to a dark god of sorts'. Lestat in turn realises what it is to be deprived of his power, and must rely on humans to restore his inhumanity.

Stories from Anne Rice, naturally about her vampires, appear in *The Ultimate Dracula* and *The Picador Book of the New Gothic*, which reaffirm the novel *Dracula* was squarely in the Gothic tradition.

*The Ultimate Dracula* is a largely original, if derivative in theme, anthology featuring stories from genre authors such as Philip José Farmer and Janet Asimov. Dan Simmons' extract from his recent book *Children of the Night* is neither the first nor the last to link AIDS and Dracula. A useful introduction by Leonard Wolf on the history and myth of Dracula, and a very limited filmography, buttress the stories.

*The Picador Book of the New Gothic* is much more ambitious, with selections from well-known authors such as Martin Amis and John Hawkes. One wonders, however, why Ian McEwan and Stephen King were excluded. As in the recent *Oxford Book of Gothic Stories*, the contributors to the Picador book reaffirm that the 'Gothic' is just as relevant today as in its popular late-eighteenth-century manifestations, although several are placed in the trappings of the Gothic, such as a ruined abbey or a claustrophobic room. One slight criticism of this generally excellent anthology is that there are too many extracts from already published works — for example, from Amis's *London Fields* and Ruth Rendell's (Barbara Vine's) *King Solomon's Carpet*, although they may whet the appetite to seek out the complete products in each case.

Morrow and McGrath, in their introduction to *The Picador Book of Gothic Stories*, state 'the prospect of apocalypse — through human science rather than divine intervention — has redefined the contemporary psyche'. Brian Stableford in

*Young Blood* has skilfully, like Dan Simmons, interweaved science with the Dracula myth. A young female philosophy student at a provincial English university not only takes a vampire into her life but also becomes embroiled with an American

postgraduate student working on mind-altering viral experiments. Is the vampire a reality or a product of the virus? In the end, both students pay a heavy price for knowledge as Stableford takes us to the borderlands of reality.

Bram Stoker's Dracula says to Jonathan Harker: 'I fear I am but a little way on the road I would travel.' The twentieth century has seen him travel a phenomenal way and there is no reason to doubt that the twenty-first will be any different.

an edition that is priced in Australia well below the UK sterling equivalent. Without having the original edition to ascertain the exact revisions, I find it fascinating to spot precursors of Pratchett themes or characters. Thus the microscopic beings who inhabit the 'carpet' recall the later 'Truckers' milieu, while echoes of Pratchett's 'Discworld' characters, such as Rincewind, are evoked.

The carpet world contains many different tribes whose peaceful existence is threatened by the forces of evil. Before good prevails, Pratchett creates a miraculous world in which harvests are culled from the varnish of chair legs and fallen sugar crystals become artefacts of wonder. In the end the thread of carpet history is successfully restored.

*Small Gods* has already topped the hardback bestseller charts in Britain, and reveals once more Pratchett's comic genius. Pratchett has said in a recent interview that he got the idea for the novel when he heard

some unspeakable religious person say what a marvellous thing it is die for your god — I thought this was exactly as far away from the truth as it possible to be. So *Small Gods* is an attack on churches — but not on religion. I hope I have offended bigots.

Unfortunately for that sentiment, Pratchett's humour is so delightful than probably even bigots will smile at the posturings of Discworld's numerous small gods.

It begins when the earnest and naïve novice Brutha is told by the god Om to worship him. The trouble is that Om seems only to be a one-eyed tortoise. Om, after a sort of sabbatical, had intended to reappear as a large bull, but during his absence some of his followers had lost their faith. The trouble is that unless people really believe, gods are literally reduced in stature! The plot of ecclesiastical expansionism is largely irrelevant as Pratchett superbly lampoons the historic and current church, from the Inquisition to the dogma of theological bureaucracies. On the basis of this novel, arguably his best, Pratchett is on the way to

becoming a small god of comedy in his own write.

#### THE RING OF CHARON

by Roger McBride Allen  
(Orbit; 500 pp.; A\$35)

#### TRANSCENDENCE

by Charles Sheffield  
(Gollancz; 270 pp.; A\$32.95)

#### JACK THE BODILESS

by Julian May  
(HarperCollins;  
421 pp.; A\$35)

#### MEMORIES OF EARTH

by Orson Scott Card  
(Legend; 294 pp.; A\$35  
(hb), A\$17.95 (pb))

'Hard' science fiction is essentially an American specialty. The difficulty comes in the marriage of the hard science, plot dynamics and adequate characterisation. Gregory Benford and David Brin remain the best exponents, while Allen and Sheffield rank just behind them in the second division.

Roger McBride Allen's *The Ring of Charon*, the first volume of a trilogy, is set in the twenty-fourth century when a gravity-wave experiment from Pluto triggers off a long-buried alien device on the moon. As a result the earth literally 'goes walkabout' through a wormhole in space, and the protagonists try to restore contact and cosmic order, against a scientific background that includes Dyson spheres and Von Neumann machines.

The 'sense of wonder' is let down, however, by a novel that is poorly printed (page 371 has had the text scratched in on the print negative) and too tightly bound.

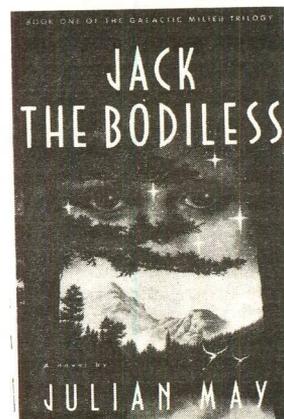
Charles Sheffield's *Transcendence* is the third in a four-volume series that includes *Summertide* and *Divergence*, both available in Gollancz paperbacks. The plot follows the tracking down of long-lost civilisations and their artefacts, notably the mysterious 'Builders'. In this latest volume, a group of humans and aliens learn of the existence of a race previously believed to be extinct, the Zardalu, who have survived in a stasis field, and a quest begins to contain them before they can

threaten the universe again. Sheffield's entertainment value remains undoubted, but his characterisation remains one-dimensional.

Julian May's novel and Orson Scott Card's share the themes of mystery revelations, young heroes and family rivalries.

May's *Jack the Bodiless* is the start of yet another trilogy that outlines the interaction of the psychic Remillard (read Kennedy) family, in the middle of the twenty-first century, and the aliens who are overseeing Earth's entry into the 'Galactic Milieu', the galactic confederation. Someone, however, wants the Remillards and other 'psychics' dead, and it becomes a race against time for both personal and collective survival.

The race is going to be even longer in Orson Scott Card's *Memories of Earth*, which stretches credulity more than a little. The reader is expected to believe that a colony that fled Earth 40 million years ago to escape nuclear devastation, and which is now controlled by a master computer, the 'Oversoul', would act little differently from people today in a setting, moreover, reminiscent of early Biblical settlements. The fact that the computer is now failing and needs to 'activate' the young hero to lead everybody back to a reconfiguration on an Earth that may not exist is the backdrop to this projected five-volume saga. Card hammers home his traditional family messages — for example, that father (in this case, the computer/God) knows best! Card fans will want this five-card trick, but others will probably stay their hand!



## QUARANTINE

by Greg Egan

(Legend; 219 pp.;

hb A\$37.95, pb A\$17.95)

Young Western Australian author Greg Egan is probably better known in England than in Australia. Most of his 30 short stories have been published there, and he has twice won the readers' poll for Best Story of the Year in Britain's *Interzone* magazine.

*Quarantine*, Egan's second novel, is set in the second half of the next century. The problem is that 'the stars went out' in the year 2034, which not unnaturally causes considerable anxiety! Who created the 'Bubble', which effectively quaran-

tines Earth? For what reason?

Some 30 years later, several groups are actively seeking the answer, which becomes apparent only in the second half of *Quarantine*, which is decidedly a novel of two parts.

In the first part, a private investigator tries to fathom the disappearance of a retarded patient from a seemingly impenetrable Perth hospital. The action is fast paced as the trail leads him to New Hong Kong, which has been established in Arnhem Land, and has a greater GDP than the rest of Australia! Egan's technical background detail is impressive. Bio-engineering is commonplace, ranging from skin colouration (to provide UV relief) to neural phone links.

Details of software packages and network access abound but without cluttering the text and diverting the reader's attention.

Where the problem resides is with the overall structure. Egan's longer second half almost needs a knowledge of quantum mechanics in order to follow its metaphysical explanations and conjectures. A denouement that is almost of Ballardian (J. G.) hallucinatory dimensions adds up to a work of staggering imagination but flawed in completeness.

Once Egan harnesses the tightness of his award-winning short stories to the novel structure, there will be few to equal him in the realms of imaginative fiction.

## CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT

by Dan Simmons

(Headline; 408 pp.; A\$39.95)

## THE HOLLOW MAN

by Dan Simmons

(Headline; 312 pp.;

hb A\$39.95, pb A\$24.95)

Dan Simmons has been almost a victim of his own versatility. He has published science fiction books *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* (1988-89), a massive future epic with significant Chaucerian, Miltonic and Keatsian influences; fantasy in *The Song of Kali* (1986), his first novel; horror in *Carrion Comfort* (1990) and a 'mainstream' book *Phases of Gravity* (1991). All have won major awards in their various fields but have not yet given Simmons the wide readership he deserves. He said in a recent interview: 'I tend to bridle when there is an adjective before the word "writer", but the one thing I will try to preserve is the freedom to write what I damn well please.'

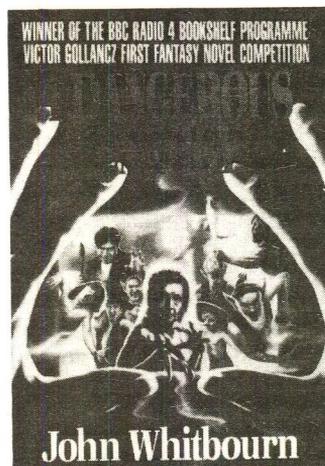
His latest novel, *Children of the Night*, highlights both his versatility and his wide choice of subject matter. He combines post-Caeulescu Romania with the Count Dracula myth, for which he provides a rational scientific explanation. As a result, the 'supernatural' disappears, and what is left is a thriller with medico-political overtones.

The main character, Dr Kate Neuman, an American haematologist, strives to save a very sick baby whose immune system may contain a key to the cure for AIDS and cancer. Her fight to retain the child crosses continents as the Dracula saga and medical history intertwine.

*The Hollow Man* continues Simmons' amazing range of subject topics.

Dr Jeremy Bremen is a leading mathematician who shares a telepathic ability with his wife Gail. Together they are exploring the scientific wave nature of personality, but Gail's death leads Bremen almost to emotional collapse. He burns down their home and sets off on a random Dantesque journey across America. This odyssey involves Mafia gunmen, a gruesome female psychopath and a dying blind, deaf and brain-damaged boy amongst a colourful range of characters. The interaction with the boy leads to a conclusion of decidedly mystical tones and provides an unexpectedly upbeat ending.

Simmons is an author of versatility and vision, but in *The Hollow Man* he may have mixed together too many ingredients to be completely successful. Encounters with mobsters sit uneasily with explorations of the nature of reality, but fans of Simmons will have no major problems.



## THE DOMES OF FIRE

by David Eddings

(HarperCollins;

470 pp.; A\$35)

## THE ELF QUEEN OF SHANNARA

by Terry Brooks

(Legend; 403 pp.; A\$17.95)

## BLOOD TRILLIUM

by Julian May

(HarperCollins;

336 pp.; A\$35)

## WAYLANDER TWO

by David Gemmell

(Legend; 296 pp.; A\$17.95)

## A DANGEROUS ENERGY

by John Whitbourn

(Gollancz; 317 pp.; A\$38.95)

Fantasy continues to be the boom element of the publishing industry. In times of economic recession and personal disorientation, the appeal of clearly imagined alternate worlds where evil is present but kept at arm's length is attractive. The sense of familiarity is embodied in multi-volume sequences that are almost the literary equivalent of long-running television series.

All the books except that of Whitbourn are part of such series. Eddings and Brooks, in particular, are mining lucrative lodes: the books under review have topped the UK and US bestseller lists respectively. In their novels a small band of heroes, and to a lesser extent heroines, band together to fight off threats, usually supernatural, to an empire. Familial loyalties, coming of age, unscary violence, muted or no sex and, in the case of Eddings, lots of eating (remember Enid Blyton's Famous Five!) leave a warm cosy glow for the usually youngish reader.

*The Domes of Fire* calls for a knowledge of Eddings' previous Elenium trilogy, as it draws on the characters of that series, notably the warrior ruler Sparhawk, to rebut the new threats to the Empire.

Terry Brooks similarly follows his successful formula in *The Elf Queen of Shamara*, the third of a quartet, in which a girl's search for 'lost elves' reveals her own origins. Brooks's characters agonise more than those of Eddings, while death comes more often to the 'good' characters.

In *Blood Trillium* the three princesses brought together by May with Marion Zimmer Bradley and Andre Norton in an earlier book now face different individual threats from their arch-enemy Orogastus. The resulting instability threatens the fabric of their kingdom. May produces nothing exceptional, but her female protagonists are a welcome sign in a largely male-dominated fictional environment.

David Gemmell's Drenai series continues with *Waylander Two*, as his sword-and-sorcery hero, now nearly fifty, fights off bounty hunters aided by his feisty daughter, then takes on the Drenai empire again. Gemmell's sparse prose and simple action come as a relief after the other fairly lengthy sagas.

James Whitbourn takes a more contemporary fantasy direction with a first novel, *A Dangerous Energy*, that won the 1991 BBC-Gollancz fantasy award. He creates a world in which the Reformation failed, and present and future England is one where the Catholic Church reigns supreme, electricity has not been invented, but magic can be harnessed. The plot follows the life of Tobias Oakley as he ascends the power structure of the English Catholic Church while at the same time living a sordid double life far divorced from the morality of Christianity.

Whitbourn fails, however, to evoke any empathy for Oakley, and all that is

left is a series of vignettes about an intriguing but ultimately empty alternate world. Whitbourn possesses more creative energy than his fantasy colleagues, but he may be too misfocused to achieve success in this competitive genre.

#### **MOSTLY HARMLESS**

by Douglas Adams

(Heinemann;

219 pp.; A\$24.95)

#### **THE SUBURBAN BOOK OF THE DEAD**

by Robert Rankin

(Bloomsbury;

262 pp.; A\$34.95)

#### **THE BRENTFORD TRIANGLE**

by Robert Rankin

(Corgi; 237 pp.; A\$10.95)

#### **BILL THE GALACTIC HERO AND THE PLANET OF ZOMBIE VAMPIRES**

by Harry Harrison and

Jack Haldeman

(Gollancz; 217 pp.; A\$38)

Humour in science fiction can be dated as before and after AD and PT — that is, Adams, Douglas and Pratchett, Terry. Before *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, published in 1979, humour was restricted in sf to the slapstick of Harry Harrison, the satire of Robert Sheckley and the black comedy of Philip K. Dick.

It is probably accurate to state that the most successful sf humour is essentially British. Adams, Pratchett and now Rankin owe much to the tradition of the Goons and the Monty Python crew, and spend much time satirising the foibles of English suburbia.

Adams, in *Mostly Harmless*, the fifth of the Hitchhiker 'trilogy' (sic) has as many jokes about chemists, pubs, home computers and subeditors as he has about galactic escapades. In his latest volume Arthur Dent, Ford Prefect and the rest of the cast have to come to terms with a new version of the *Guide*. While Arthur grapples with several alternate Earths and threatening Vogons, Tricia McMillan finds it all a bit bewildering, although she has a 'profound understanding of strategic lip gloss'.

Elvis Presley was apparently kidnapped by aliens in *Mostly Harmless*, while he is larger than life in the last volume, *The Suburban Book of the Dead*, of Rankin's 'Armageddon' trilogy. This is British zany humour at its best, or depending on taste, worst, as Rankin recounts his 'far-fetched fiction' of an alternate future in which an omniscient talking sprout called Barry

and Christeen, the twin sister of Christ, who was written out of the Bible, feature! All the characters believe they're acting in a movie, the plot is meaningless, yet it is delightful comic anarchy, as is Robert Rankin's previous trilogy, which is being reprinted by Corgi. *The Brentford Triangle* is the second in the series, as the inhabitants of Brentford and the aliens make first contact.

The less said the better for the latest in Harry Harrison's saga of 'Bill, the Galactic Hero'. In *The Planet of Zombie Vampires*, written with Jack Haldeman, his mercenary soldier hero wanders through a plot derived from the movie *Alien* and the mutiny on the *Bounty*. While this has comic potential, the crude satire and limp characterisation reduce the reader's brain to its own zombie-like state.

#### **DOLORES CLAIBORNE**

by Stephen King

(Hodder; 241 pp.; A\$35)

#### **HORROR: ONE HUNDRED**

**BEST BOOKS**

edited by Stephen Jones

and Kim Newman

(New English Library;

366 pp.; A\$14.95)

#### **LOST BOYS**

by Orson Scott Card

(HarperCollins; 448 pp.;

A\$35)

#### **BOY'S LIFE**

by Robert McCammon

(Michael Joseph;

538 pp.; A\$19.95)

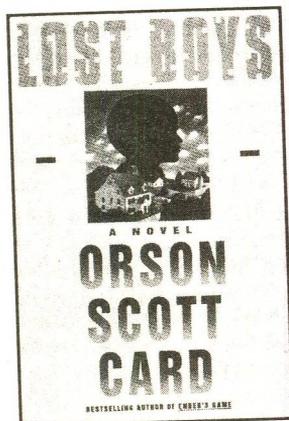
#### **BEDLAM**

by Harry Adam Knight

(Gollancz; 215 pp.; A\$38.95)

The Stephen King production line of horror grinds inexorably on. After the recent release of *Gerald's Game* comes *Dolores Claiborne* with a print run in the US alone of 1.5 million hardback copies. Collectors should note that the UK edition seems to precede the US release.

*Dolores Claiborne* is far superior to *Gerald's Game*, and must rank as one of King's best novels. The horror is subdued but always lurking beneath the surface, as King explores the lives of two women with guilty secrets. Dolores Claiborne recounts her story of abuse from a drunken husband who also sexually assaults her daughter. After his death — did she kill him? — she becomes the housekeeper to a crippled widow who also has secrets to hide. King depicts with great empathy the character of Claiborne, while the petty jealousies and mores of his small island off the Maine coast are superbly evoked.



In *Horror: One Hundred Best Books* Stephen Jones and Kim Newman list King's *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining* amongst the 100 best books of horror as chosen by 100 writers. Their list starts with Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, written circa 1592, and ends with Ramsey Campbell's *Dark Feasts* (1987). Their hundred contributors include Brian Aldiss on Kingsley Amis's *The Green Man* and Terry Pratchett on William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908). Don't be put off by the cover of this book. The end result is a delightful and idiosyncratic reference compendium to horror writing.

The American South is well known as a rich source for the Gothic tale. Orson Scott Card and Robert McCammon both evoke childhood memories of pleasure and horror in North Carolina and Alabama respectively.

Card has expanded his 1989 award-winning short story ('the most painful I have ever written') into the novel *Lost Boys*, recounting the fate of an eight-year-old child who becomes embroiled with a mysterious group of young boys. Card, like King, is a master of the evocation of small-town life; in this case a little favoured by Card's Mormon viewpoint and the bitter-sweet discovery of the real nature and fate of the lost boys.

Robert McCammon, in *Boy's Life*, which won the Bram Stoker Award for Best Novel in 1992, recreates a small sleepy Alabama town in 1964 when a young boy witnesses a brutal murder scene in which a car is found in the local lake with a naked body handcuffed to the wheel. The effects of this event ricochet through the novel, particularly for the boy's father, until the whole affair is exorcised. The Stephen evoked by *Boy's Life* is Spielberg, not King. McCammon has said 'reality has become so horrific there's no point in trying to compete with the evening news', so his is a gentler horror as the realities of growing up are juxtaposed with the unravelling of the murder.

John Brosnan, an Australian living in London, writes his horror novels under the pseudonym of Harry Adam Knight. *Bedlam* begins when a British serial killer is used as a guinea pig for new drug-rehabilitation techniques. The killer's old police adversary, Terry Hamilton, finds his past traumas returning as the fabric of reality becomes blurred. The eventual terror becomes supernatural, as in Card's novel, but Brosnan fails to weave as convincingly a family background and his suspense build-up is not as carefully depicted. Nonetheless the quality of horror is not strained in this or any

of the other four books under review.

#### PORTENT

by James Herbert  
(Hodder & Stoughton;  
384 pp.; A\$29.95)

James Herbert's latest bestseller *Portent* is decidedly 'green'. Set towards the end of this decade, Herbert's novel takes James Lovelock's Gaia theory to an extreme conclusion. Eruptions on the Barrier Reef, earthquakes in London and tidal waves in the Caribbean are just some of the natural disasters that reveal a world ecological balance out of control.

The problem is that Herbert uses a British climatologist and two orphaned children with telepathic abilities to symbolise 'good', and an oversized New Orleans voodoo 'mama' to symbolise evil in the power struggle that will determine the fate of the Earth. The end result is lightweight but excellent airplane reading, as long as you don't look out of the window.

#### AFTER SILENCE

by Jonathan Carroll  
(Macdonald; 240 pp.; A\$35)

American author Jonathan Carroll, based in Vienna, is without doubt a 'sleeper'. His seven novels to date have, in general, received excellent reviews both in America and Britain, but the general reading public has yet to wake up to his talent. This may be because, like fellow American writer Dan Simmons, he jumps genres with bewildering ease. A serious novelist of the fantastic may perhaps need to write initially in Spanish!

*After Silence* ranks amongst his best novels as it explains the darkside of the American dream. Cartoonist Max Fischer falls in love with a divorcee, Lily, and her delightful young son Lincoln. Here apparently is a ready-made family, but happiness cannot be bought as easily as the consumer goods and fast foods that pepper the backdrop to Carroll's plot. Max slowly discovers, however, that not only is Lincoln not Lily's son but that she probably kidnapped him as a baby from a Pennsylvania couple.

Even though Max gradually learns to live with this knowledge, the seeds of disaster have been sown. Carroll's leap forward to Lincoln at seventeen and his dramatic rejection of his false world mixes both horror and sadness. Like J. D. Salinger, Carroll brilliantly evokes the disjointed world of the teenager and the optimistic yet immature

world of the American male. Max and Lincoln, mirror images of each other, move inexorably to the bleak conclusion where to be alive is to be punished.

#### LORDS AND LADIES

by Terry Pratchett  
(Gollancz; 275 pp.; A\$32.95)  
ONLY YOU CAN  
SAVE MANKIND  
by Terry Pratchett  
(Doubleday;  
174 pp.; A\$17.95)

*Lords and Ladies* is Pratchett's fourteenth 'Discworld' novel, and features some of his best-loved characters, notably his trio of witches headed by Granny Weatherwax (more and more discernible perhaps as Pratchett's true voice?); the Arch-Chancellor and the Librarian of the Unseen University; and the dwarf Giamo Casanunda, the 'world's second greatest lover', whose visiting card combines the motto 'we never sleep' with 'step ladders repaired'.

*Lords and Ladies*, the sequel to *Witches Abroad*, sees Magret Garlick hoping she is about to be married to Verence, King of Lancre, who is nicer than most royalty, as 'no one had ever told him how to be a king'. The uncertainty has come about because both of them are so shy they forget to mention the subject when next they meet! Pratchett gleefully satirises the pompous trappings of royalty. Magret and Verence see their wedding plans threatened from the elves unleashed when the Lancre All-Comers Morris Dancers get drunk on a fairy mound. The humour comes at the usual frenetic pace, and Pratchett muses on such diverse topics as how bits of chocolate are successfully baked into biscuits and the fate of charity workers.

Despite Discworld's intrinsic absurdity, the reader actually *believes* in the world created. This is not the case in *Only You Can Save the World*, in which Pratchett needs stronger detail and character interaction to uplift the hackneyed plot of a young boy for whom a computer game becomes reality. Johnny is an average child on a less-than-average British housing estate. He finds the aliens on his screen wish to surrender to him rather than be wiped out. Pratchett ponders the issues of war and peace underneath the wry humour (some excellent aliens and anorak jokes), but the whole is one comic level below the Discworld level of achievement.

## Horror and incest

**CLIVE BARKER'S  
SHADOWS IN EDEN**  
edited by Stephen Jones  
(Underwood-Miller; 1991;  
368 pp.; US\$39.95)

**THE THIEF OF ALWAYS**  
by Clive Barker  
(HarperCollins; 1992;  
232 pp.; A\$19.95)

**JAMES HERBERT:  
BY HORROR HAUNTED**  
edited by Stephen Jones  
(New English Library;  
1993; 320 pp.; \$39.95)

The top end of horror can be a little incestuous. Stephen King provides the introduction to the 'congratulatory' volumes to Clive Barker and James Herbert, both edited by Stephen Jones. Clive Barker praises Stephen King in *Shadows of Eden* and provides the 'Afterword' about James Herbert in *By Horror Haunted*.

In such a welter of incest there is often little room for criticism of any significant nature. There is certainly more substance in the Barker volume than in Herbert's, but both have essentially come to praise rather than bury.

The structure of both books is similar, in that they are essentially 'scrapbooks' of critical writings, interviews, drawings, colour illustrations, bibliographies and some fiction. They are not meant to be read in one sitting, but dipped into. The element of repetition, particularly in the Herbert volume, would jar if read in one sitting, particularly in the biographical pieces on the early life of Herbert ('Call me Jim'). Both are well produced, with Underwood-Miller providing the better value in size,

content and presentation. Barker writes to 'disturb, excite and subvert', while Herbert claims he is just a 'storyteller'.

*Shadows of Eden* traces Barker's career from his childhood in Liverpool through his early dramatic pieces to the success of *The Books of Blood* (1984-85), which launched his career. Barker has said that 'horror fiction reinvestigates mythology and imagery which in a rational age we are distanced from'. *Shadows in Eden* examines the religious subtexts of Barker's work, which has grown increasingly bloated in size with *Weaveworld*, *The Great and Secret Show* and *Imajica*, although his latest book *The Thief of Always* is a delightful dark fable.

In this novella, ten-year-old Harvey Swick is seduced from his studies on a bleak February day to an enchanted 'Holiday House', where seasons come and go but children can satisfy their every wish. Clive Barker's gentle build-up of the dark side is enhanced by his own black and white illustrations, while his use of time shifts adds a poignant dimension for the returns to the real world. Harvey's struggle against some gruesome manifestations of evil is perhaps a little too easily accomplished. Nonetheless *The Thief of Always*, which sees a return to the controlled prose of Barker's early work, may well become a modern fairy-tale classic.

Of the 49 pieces in *Shadows of Eden*, a lengthy and controversial piece on Barker is Gary Happenstand's 'From Here to Quidelity: Clive Barker's *The Great and Secret Show*', while other notable writers on Barker include Neil Gaiman's interview re comics and Kim Newman on

movies. Barker's discussion with J. G. Ballard brings forth the comment from Barker: 'I don't give a fuck about the critics.' He later says: 'I'm writing popular fiction . . . you get your material to the largest cross-section of people you possibly can.' And yet while Barker is undoubtedly, like Herbert, a popular writer, he does seem to have more to leave to posterity than a statistic on the bestseller lists. Taking note of criticism might be one way of achieving continuing artistic development?

James Herbert, by contrast, is essentially a storyteller. There are no significant subplots or material for budding PhD students. There is less critical analysis in *By Horror Haunted* and more hagiography. From *The Rats* in 1974 to *Portent* in 1992, Herbert has established himself as Britain's most successful horror writer. Stephen King believes the key works in Herbert's development are *Fluke*, *The Spear*, *The Magic Cottage* and *Creed*.

The interviews with Herbert give the background to the novels and some insights into his work habits that the fans will lap up, but when Herbert makes comments like 'I'm a member of Lloyds Insurance', the once yuppiedom financial heaven, there is no mention of the traumas of the 1990s that afflicted Lloyd's underwriters. The description of 'luxurious living rooms' and pictures of his swimming pool are not equivalent to James Joyce's Trieste apartment, or are they? Michael Morrison's analysis of Herbert's work in a science fiction setting is one of the best critical pieces. A useful bibliography complements the 36 contributors.

**GREEN SHADOWS,  
WHITE WHALE**  
by Ray Bradbury  
(HarperCollins;  
266 pp.; A\$32.95)

John Huston's movie of *Moby Dick*, screenplay by Ray Bradbury, appeared in 1956. *Green Shadows*,

*White Whale* gives Bradbury's 'factionalised' account of his seven-month stay in Dublin in 1953 and his involvement with Huston in particular and the Irish in general during the screenplay's writing.

Bradbury was then a relatively novice script writer arriving in a green and damp land. Bradbury brilliantly evokes the Irish scene and scenery, from the dullness of a wet Dublin winter Sunday to an anarchic hunt wed-

ding and the richness and raucousness of Irish pub life. Huston emerges as a larger-than-life character, alternately harassing and flattering Bradbury, whose learning and drinking curve necessarily ascends.

Bradbury merges some of his previously published short stories, such as 'Getting Through Sunday Somehow' and 'Banshee', into a nostalgic and somewhat romantic account of his discovery of Huston and the Irish.

### RED MARS

by Kim Stanley Robinson  
(HarperCollins;  
501 pp.; A\$32.95)

### LABYRINTH OF NIGHT

by Allen Steele  
(Century; 353 pp.; A\$18.95)

### HELLBURNER

by C. J. Cherryh  
(New English Library;  
359 pp.; A\$35)

### A DARK AND HUNGRY GOD ARISES

by Stephen Donaldson  
(HarperCollins;  
477 pp.; A\$35)

### A FIRE UPON THE DEEP

by Vernor Vinge  
(Millennium;  
391 pp.; A\$19.95)

Mars is back in vogue as a fictional subject following years of neglect. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, the first of a trilogy, builds on the latest scientific information to chronicle, through the eyes of the six main characters, the colonisation of Mars in the first half of the twenty-first century. Robinson has said in a recent interview that he 'didn't want to make up an imaginary Mars', so we get a gritty, dusty Mars where no indigenous life of any form is assumed. Mars is the 'hero' of the book. The characterisation of the protagonists is less impressive than the scientific high-tech, which includes some stunning genetic engineering and scientific advances, such as orbital towers.

From the landing of 100 scientists and explorers in 2027 to the establishment of a colony of over one million by 2050, *Red Mars* sketches in the various personality conflicts and the corporate and national rivalries. One group wants to leave Mars as it is, while others wish to 'terraform' it, in a scenario that recalls the colonisation debates of the nineteenth century.

Allen Steele also takes twenty-first Mars as his setting in *Labyrinth of Night*, as a deadly alien artefact is found in the Cydonia region of Mars. Steele is less interested in the terrain of Mars than is Robinson, although he convincingly depicts the realities of daily life. He explores instead the origins and role of the rather poorly named 'Cooties' whose artefacts are discovered on Mars and who point to an ambiguous future for humanity.

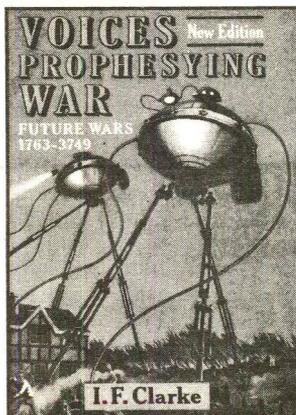
Corporate power struggles are no less evident in C. J. Cherryh's twenty-fourth century. *Hellburner* takes up the same quartet of anarchic characters

that featured in her last novel *Heavy Time*. One of these, a military combat pilot, Paul Dekker, is badly injured in the simulation testing of a new hyper-space 'jump' ship that needs split-second man-and-machine interactions. Has there been any scientific or psychological malfunction? Who is manipulating whom as the pilots become pawns in a galactic struggle? Cherryh has produced an intriguing far-future version of *The Right Stuff* and *Top Gun*.

No one will probably care about the fate of the four main characters in *A Dark and Hungry God*, the third in Stephen Donaldson's increasingly weird and morbid quartet 'The Gap into Power'. Space pirates, alien forces and, yet again, corporate chicanery exist in a loosely defined future. Donaldson has indicated that his plot is following Wagner's 'Ring' cycle, but no literary resonance prevails — only discordant notes. All of the main characters are decidedly unsympathetic, the background is vague and unscientific, with a plot line that constantly switches.

Donaldson is too clever a writer not to know that he is doing. Maybe his intention is to provide a nightmare of the future. In that he is succeeding.

Vernor Vinge's *A Fire upon the Deep* is as extroverted as Donaldson's novel is introverted. Set far in the future, it evokes the memory of Olaf Stapledon in the breadth of its vision. An evil intelligence is inadvertently let loose. It threatens the fabric of the whole galaxy. The key to survival lies with two human children whose spaceship has crashed on a remote planet. Underneath this pulp plot is a rich and rewarding novel that convincingly outlines a four-zoned universe of different properties, a myriad of life forms, and galactic information networks of stunning complexity. Vinge has, like Robinson, produced a winning blend of hard science and high drama.



### VOICES PROPHECYING WAR

by I. F. Clarke  
(Oxford University Press;  
268 pp.; A\$39.95)

### THE DEATH GUARD

by Phillip George Chadwick  
(Roc; 393 pp.; A\$16.95)

### THE STONE WITHIN

by David Wingrove  
(New English Library;  
425 pp.; A\$39.95)

### DOWN AND OUT

### IN THE YEAR 2000

by Kim Stanley Robinson  
(Grafton; 351 pp.; A\$14.95)

### KINGDOMS OF THE WALL

by Robert Silverberg  
(HarperCollins;  
288 pp.; A\$32.95)

The war to end all wars' — how often has that phrase or a variant of it echoes throughout history? In *Voices Prophecying War* Professor I. F. Clarke of Strathclyde University reveals in his revised survey of future wars (with the time parameters 1763 to 3749!) that any account of the origin and course of imaginary wars 'will also be a history of the changing attitudes to war itself'.

Clarke's descriptive survey of largely Anglo-Saxon visions of future war begins with the anonymous *Reign of George VI* published in 1763, through to such classics as *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980). The nationalistic heroic tales of the nineteenth century merge into the post-Hiroshima images of total destruction. Clarke's survey and bibliography, written in the period of Gorbachev détente, is perhaps unduly optimistic in its relief at the 'sudden disappearance of the idea of armed conflict' in contemporary writings.

*Voices Prophecying War* is an extremely useful survey of one set of visions of the future. Needless to say, many are terribly inaccurate, but others contain the terrifying seeds of actual conflict.

Philip George Chadwick's *The Death Guard* is a rare forgotten classic, only listed by Clarke, and now reprinted with an introduction by Brian Aldiss. Originally published in London in late 1939, its entire stock was destroyed in the very war its author feared. *The Death Guard* tells how a British government secretly develops 'the flesh guard', a mindless humanoid military force, that provokes the rest of Europe into a pre-emptive strike on Britain. The subsequent carnage foreshadows the engines of mass destruc-

tion unleashed in World War II.

*The Stone Within* is the fourth volume of David Wingrove's 'Chung Kuo' series featuring the 'War of Two Directions' between Western ideas of progress and Eastern stability. In this twenty-first-century world ruled by the Chinese, Wingrove moves the struggle to the ruins of old Washington where Wu Shih, the T'ang of North America, faces the inevitable challenges, from inside and outside, to his power in Wingrove's usual mixture of intricate detail and drama.

Kim Stanley Robinson's Washington, featured in the title story of the collection of stories *Down and Out in the Year 2000*, is a depressing extrapolation from today's Washington as the 'street people' fight out their own war to survive in a society polarised between the very rich and the very poor. The run-down ghettos and abandoned city centre buildings are of today's USA, but the absolute despair is hopefully only a fictional tomorrow.

Robert Silverberg takes us to another tomorrow and another world, but one in which humans are the aliens, in *Kingdoms of the Wall*. The war, such as it is, is a final pathetic conflict between two races, one of which has enshrined deep in its mythology the scaling of a mountain by the best of its young to uncover the secret at its summit. Many do not return, and it is left to Silverberg's young hero to seek out the truth and reveal that each race should pursue its own destiny.

That destiny, however, always contains choices which, as Chadwick indicates in his preface to *The Death Guard*, includes the power to destroy ourselves or not. Let us hope that fiction in this instance is stronger as well as stranger than fact.

#### DRAGON TEARS

by Dean Koontz

(Headline; 371 pp.; A\$34.95)

#### HEART-BEAST

by Taniith Lee

(Headline; 282 pp.; A\$35)

#### CHILD OF AN ANCIENT CITY

by Tad Williams and  
Nina Hoffman

(Legend; 80 pp.; A\$17.95)

*Dragon Tears* has already confirmed the position of Dean Koontz as one of the most popular American 'chiller' novelists by topping the US hardback bestseller listings.

Koontz, with 90 million of his works sold worldwide, has a winning formula, with an easily readable style, vivid if basic characterisation, and plots that are easily digestible if not

exactly palatable. *Dragon Tears* reads like the movie script it might well become, as Harry Lyon, a Californian policeman, finds himself and his female partner pursued by a golem-like apparition whose evil creator gives him sixteen hours to live. The tension builds inexorably as the clock ticks down to the final confrontation.

British author Taniith Lee sees her female protagonists in *Heart-Beast* face another shape-changing killer in the depths of the English countryside. No character remains untainted, for Lee is something of a Greek tragedian. She has said of *Heart-Beast*: 'Certain things happen which are not really explainable . . . and they are deliberately so, because I wanted there to be a feeling of unstoppable fate.'

American writers Tad Williams and Nina Hoffman allow an element of challenge to predetermine events in *Child of an Ancient City*. In the historical Middle East a caravan train is pursued by a vampiric beast who can only be held at bay by telling the 'saddest tale'. The result is an engrossing fable of novella length that reaffirms, as did the short stories of M. R. James, that true horror does not always require the sprawling blockbusters of American bestsellerdom.

#### VON BEK

#### THE ETERNAL CHAMPION

#### HAWKMOON

#### CORUM

by Michael Moorcock

(Millennium;

504, 530, 533 and 393 pp.;

A\$24.95 each)

Michael Moorcock is one of Britain's most prolific and popular authors, with over 70 novels and short-story collections, most of which are still in print. Moorcock's work roughly divides into two groups: mainstream, exemplified by novels such as *Mother London* (1988) and *Jerusalem Commands* (1992), and heroic fantasy, such as the four books under review. Of these, the vast majority are linked by being placed in Moorcock's 'multiverse' and featuring his 'Eternal Champion' avatars, romantic Everymen like Von Bek, Erekoze, Hawkmoon, Corum, Elric and Kane, with Jerry Cornelius, his fictional symbol of the sixties, loosely attached.

Millennium is now producing a sumptuous definitive edition of Moorcock's 'Eternal Champion' series. The first four volumes collect twelve previously published novels that have been revised and feature new introduc-



tions by Moorcock. The only drawback is that the huge paperback versions could easily separate from their bindings if read more than once.

Moorcock says in his preface to *The Eternal Champion* (Volume 2) that his multiverse 'is a multitude of alternate universes intersecting sometimes with our own . . . an infinite number of slightly different versions of reality'. Into these various worlds come his flawed heroes, each waging battle against threats to the cosmic balance exemplified by the shifting balances of 'law' (order) and 'chaos' (entropy), both of which, if taken to extremes, overwhelm the individual.

The 'champion' never really understands his place in the scheme of things. Moorcock's moral ambiguities are far divorced from traditional sword-and-sorcery novels. In the first volume *Von Bek* and his descendants are secular avatars of the search for the Holy Grail as a means to bring together God and Lucifer. Fantasy begins with Erekoze in the second volume, the only champion conscious of his enforced destiny. In *Hawkmoon*, Volume 3, Dorian Hawkmoon is Moorcock's most concentrated character, and decidedly colourful compared to the detached Prince Corum of Volume 4 (*Corum*), whose society leans heavily on Cornish mythology.

Moorcock indicates that 'betrayal' is one of his primary themes 'but we are not betrayed by others but we betray ourselves by too readily accepting easy myths to explain the things which bewilder us . . . most of my books are anti-romances'. Many readers are attracted to Moorcock for his fast-flowing, colourful and poignant story lines, but now that Millennium is bringing together in what will be fourteen huge volumes a significant corpus of his material, one can appreciate the complex underpinnings of what is virtually one gigantic supernovel. Moorcock can

now be seen as a true successor to Mervyn Peake, and one of the true originals of British creative fiction of the twentieth century.

#### ELVISSEY

by Jack Womack  
(HarperCollins;  
319 pp.; A\$35)

John Lennon was quoted in the 1960s at the height of the fame of the Beatles that he was now more popular than Jesus Christ. Jack Womack, in the four of his novels set in a twenty-first century dominated by multinational companies, documents the growing force of the Church of Elvis (Presley).

The huge corporate group Dryco attempts a 'regooding' image by trying to snatch the young Elvis from an alternate 1950s where the American Civil War never took place and the Nazis dominate much of Europe. The fact that Elvis turns out to be a sullen bigot who has just killed his mother is no deterrent to Dryco and their vulnerable time travellers, whose mission is to bring back Elvis to his true believers. The final scene, with Elvis set to return to St Paul's Cathedral in London, is suitably bizarre.

Womack's powerful depiction of society's need for charismatic figures and the corrupting influence of power are a little lost in the gonzo-type plot and characters. Nonetheless he has created two bleak dehumanised alternate Americas that really do question whether the human lot improves over time.

#### SUCKERS

by Anne Billson  
(Pan; 315 pp.; A\$12.95)

#### PERSONAL DARKNESS

by Taniith Lee  
(Little Brown; 435 pp.; A\$35)

#### ANNO DRACULA

by Kim Newman  
(Simon & Schuster;  
359 pp.; A\$34.95)

#### SAVAGE

by Richard Laymon  
(Headline; 535 pp.; A\$24.95)

Anne Billson has recently been named by *Granta* magazine as one of Britain's top twenty young writers. The previous 1983 list included such notable writers as Ian McEwan and Graham Swift. On the evidence of *Suckers*, however, Billson has some way to go to reach their elevated status.

*Suckers* is a black comedy satiris-

ing the upwardly mobile yuppies of the 1980s who have bled Great Britain dry economically as well as spiritually. Billson's depiction of this morally bankrupt society also involves the other kind of blood-sucking — a vampiric takeover of London! Doira, Billson's hardnosed narrator, tries to save the man she loves from the vampires, but their relationship of uncertainty mirrors that of society, a society where the trains *will* run on time but only at night!

Taniith Lee's Egyptian gods cum vampires in *Personal Darkness* also stalk the England of the 1980s; again women have the upper hand. Lee continues her story of the obsessive and mysterious Scarabae family that began in *Dark Dance* (1992) and now chronicles the story of Ruth, a teenage girl who wreaks havoc and death. The dark wheel finally turns full circle, reflected in the sentences of the text at beginning and end of the novel, where a final definite judgment occurs.

Kim Newman in *Anno Dracula* goes back to the original Dracula in Victorian England, but one in which Count Dracula ends up as Prince Regent. Newman mixes real figures, such as Shaw and Wilde and Jack the Ripper, with fictional characters such as Sherlock Holmes to create a Victorian fictional goulash that always entertains but never terrifies.

Richard Laymon's seventeenth novel *Savage* could never be meant to be taken seriously. In it, his young teenage hero confronts Jack the Ripper in the American West of the 1890s. With clear homage paid by Laymon to *Huckleberry Finn*, the end result is a *Boy's Own* adventure that proves, like *Anno Dracula*, that the horror genre is indeed fertile ground for 'ripping yarns'.

#### VERMILION SANDS

by J. G. Ballard  
(Phoenix; 208 pp.; A\$14.95)

#### THE VENUS HUNTERS

by J. G. Ballard  
(Flamingo;  
142 pp.; A\$12.95)

#### LOW FLYING AIRCRAFT

by J. G. Ballard  
(Flamingo;  
184 pp.; A\$12.95)

#### THE UNLIMITED DREAM COMPANY

by J. G. Ballard  
(Flamingo;  
220 pp.; A\$13.95)

J. G. Ballard is probably best known to the general reading public because of his 1984 novel *Empire of*

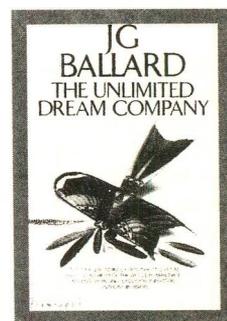
*the Sun*, later filmed by Steven Spielberg. Much of Ballard's earlier work is now being reissued by Phoenix and Flamingo, placing the semi-autobiographical *Empire of the Sun* squarely in Ballard's surreal and symbolic fictional landscapes.

'Prima Belladonna', contained in the collection *Vermilion Sands*, was Ballard's first ever short story, published in 1956. Set in a future landlocked leisure-devoted resort in which computers compose poetry, it tells of sand yachts that traverse the desert and sculptures that emit sounds. This may have seemed fantastic in the drab England of 1956, but reality is now much closer. Ballard says now that 'my other inventions like the houses sensitive to their owners' moods and the sculptors who carve the clouds' in 'The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D' will soon follow. The setting of gentle and genteel decay of *Vermilion Sands* highlights the contemporary dangers from the 'glaucous paradises' that now dot the coastlines and hinterlands of America, Europe and Australia.

The short stories in *The Venus Hunters* and *Low Flying Aircraft* also reflect Ballard's fertile imagination, in particular his ability to take the physical manifestations of twentieth-century society as diverse as motorways, space gantries and swimming pools, and use them as symbols of entropy. In 'The Dead Astronaut' the deserted Cape Canaveral represents the Ballardian view that space exploration is an expression of earthbound neuroses, a way of damnation rather than a way of delivery.

A more exotic depiction of neuroses comes in *The Unlimited Dream Company*, first published in 1979. Ballard transforms his home town of Shepperton, via the spirit of the main character, who crashes his plane into the Thames, into an exotic tropical locale. Influenced by William Blake's pansexualism, Ballard queries whether life is a dream as the protagonist's dreams become reality.

Ballard's early visions remain as potent today as they did in the 1950s, perhaps even more so. As he states in



*Low Flying Aircraft*, 'the ultimate dystopia is the inside of one's own head'.

**THE COMPLETE STORIES, VOL. 1**

by Isaac Asimov  
(HarperCollins;  
615 pp.; A\$45)

**FORWARD THE FOUNDATION**

by Isaac Asimov  
(Doubleday;  
417 pp.; A\$29.95)

**THE MOAT AROUND  
MURCHESON'S EYE**

by Larry Niven and  
Jerry Pournelle  
(HarperCollins;  
402 pp.; A\$39.95)

**THE SUMMER QUEEN**

by Joan Vinge  
(Pan; 1091 pp.; A\$22.95)

**THE SEA'S FURTHEST END**

by Damien Broderick  
(Aphellon; 192 pp.; \$12.95)

Isaac Asimov died in April 1992 leaving behind over 400 books of science fiction and fact. His 'Foundation' trilogy, published between 1951 and 1953, has been voted the best sf series of all time. *The Complete Stories, Volume 1* is the first part of a project to publish all of his short stories, a project that provides a suitable tribute to an extremely ingenious if rarely complex writer. It's a pity, however, that HarperCollins did not include reference to Asimov's death and a retrospective rather than simply reprinting the original 1990 Doubleday edition of *The Complete Stories*, which in turn derives from Asimov's earlier collections, *Earth is Room Enough* (1957), *Nine Tomorrows* (1959) and *Nightfall* (1969).

The 44 stories and four poems contain some of Asimov's classics, such as 'Ugly Little Boy', which tells of the transportation of a Neanderthal boy to the present day and the consequent emotional upheavals. Asimov's own all-time favourite, 'The Last Question', covers the cyclical evolution and running down of the universe, and one in which man/machine becomes God-like.

*The Complete Stories* could have been improved by a chronological approach and the inclusion of some of Asimov's own observations on the stories, but nonetheless it is an excellent buy for libraries and Asimov fans alike.

Asimov's 'Foundation' trilogy has been expanded by the bid dollars of the

contemporary publishing world into seven volumes, of which *Forward the Foundation* is the last to be published, but second chronologically in the series. It tells the life from middle age to death of Hari Seldon, the inventor of 'psychohistory', the science of prediction that allows Seldon to anticipate future history and to sow the seeds of survival for the galactic civilisation through the forthcoming centuries of darkness. Despite its length, not much action takes place in *Forward the Foundation*, as Seldon cum Asimov muses on life and the universe. A final assessment of Asimov's 'Foundation' series as an imaginative entity will now require a re-reading of the entire seven volumes.

More Malthusian space opera, but of an essentially Ruritanian nature, is to be found in Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's awkwardly titled *The Moat Around Murcheson's Eye*, a sequel to their 1974 bestseller *The Mote in God's Eye*. In this book the alien race of the stratified gender-shifting Moties, who have been effectively quarantined in the first volume, come into contact with humanity once more. This time, unfortunately, the novelty of the original has worn off and the stereotypical characters detract from the detailed backdrop of interstellar conflict.

Another sprawling sequel is Joan Vinge's *The Summer Queen*, a superior follow-up to her 1980 novel *The Snow Queen*, in which the primitive society of Tiamat, with its generation-long seasons, holds the secret that can allow the ruling 'Hegemony' of civilised worlds to tap the secrets of the fallen Empire. Plots and subplots proliferate, while the technoviral 'sibyl-net', a powerful galactic computer net, echoes Asimov's Hari Seldon in the validity of its predictions.

Australian author Damien Broderick's *The Sea's Furthest End* manages to tackle large issues of cosmological rise and fall in a text that is admirably condensed compared with most novels currently offered by his American peers. More playful than some of Broderick's earlier works, *The Sea's Furthest End* juxtaposes the trials and tribulations of a Sydney teenager and the father-son battles in a far-future universe of Asimovian dimensions to highlight the ultimate message that 'you create your own universe'. Broderick may get his geography of travel to Canberra slightly wrong en route to the Australian National Research Foundation, but he scarcely presses a wrong input key in this galactic *jeu d'esprit*.

**POOR THINGS**

by Alasdair Gray  
(Bloomsbury;  
317 pp.; A\$34.95)

Alasdair Gray is one of the most stimulating and, to some, infuriating writers in Britain today. *Poor Things*, a Scottish Gothic fantasia, is set in the early 1880s. Purporting to be the memoir of one Archibald McCandless, entitled *Episodes from the Early Life of a Scottish Public Health Officer*, it tells of McCandless's relationship with the deformed surgeon Dr Godwin Baxter.

Baxter has resurrected the 'beautiful, full-bodied' Bella, dead from drowning, 'by subtle use of electrical stimulus', and implanted in her the brain of the baby she was carrying at the time of her death. Bella advances from childhood to intelligence without any moral obligations, and her ultimate marriage to McCandless provides the mechanism for her rebuttal, also subsequently included in the text, of the events of her 'birth'. Victorian pastiche, postmodernist frolic, or feminist polemic? Call it what you will, this mixture of *Frankenstein* and *Pygmalion* is *bellissima*.

**WHY DO BIRDS**

by Damon Knight  
(Tor; 272 pp.; \$US18.95)

Would you believe a man who in the year 2002 said that the world is about to be destroyed and that the only way to save humanity is to place all the world's people in suspended animation in a huge vault that will then be taken by aliens to another planet? Science fiction often requires some major suspension of disbelief, but the *Why Do Birds* plot line takes some beating!

Knight's main character Ed Stone has the added burden that he states he has been transported by aliens from the year 1931 to save us from our fate. The fact that he then bases a lot of his description of the unseen aliens on a novella in *Astounding* for May 1931 hardly helps! Stone, however, overcomes doubts with the aid of a ring, allegedly given to him by the aliens, which has magical powers. Despite the zany plot line, Knight does sweep the reader along with him in a black comedy that satirises governments, media and ultimately the whole human condition.

— Colin Steele, April 1992–July 1993

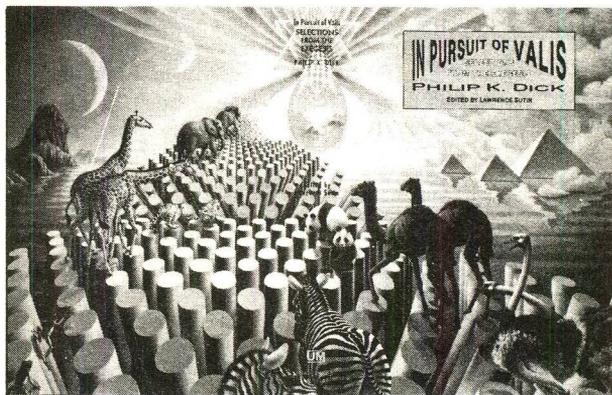
MICHAEL TOLLEY is perhaps the busiest person I know: papers on Blake, research on Australian crime fiction, publication of *The Body Dabbler*, plus articles on many subjects, not to mention his teaching duties in the English Department at Adelaide University. Somehow he gained enough time to write these reviews for *SF Commentary*:

## 'A tumultuous stream of visions': Philip K. Dick's Exegesis

### Reviewed:

**IN PURSUIT OF VALIS:  
SELECTIONS FROM  
THE EXEGESIS**  
by Philip K. Dick; edited by  
Lawrence Sutin  
(Underwood-Miller; 1991;  
xxxviii + 278 pp.; US\$14.95)

In February and March of 1974, Philip K. Dick was assaulted by, in Sutin's words, 'a tumultuous stream of visions, hypnagogic voices, dreams and altered states of consciousness'. Lawrence Sutin has written a biography, *Divine Invasions: A Life of Philip K. Dick* (NY: Harmony Books, 1989), and I had best refer you to that for a full account, in Chapter 10, with its heading: 'Annus Mirabilis: Information-Rich Pink Light, the Black Iron Prison And The Palm Tree Garden Superimposed, Christopher's Life Saved, A Meta-abstraction of Ultimate Infinite Value — But Who KNEW What The Hell It REALLY Meant? Not Phil, Not Even As It Beamed Out Nightly Dreams Explaining It All in Giant Books'. These were not just any old visions; they really did help Phil, who was not a medical expert, to save his son's life by diagnosing a hernia. He spent the rest of his life, all eight years of it, trying to sort out what the visions 'REALLY Meant'. They prompted him to write his late, great strange novels, notably *Valis* and *The Divine Invasion*, and a huge manuscript that he called the Exegesis. Some of the Exegesis gets into the text of *Valis*, especially the fifty-two-paragraph Appendix, one for every week of the year, entitled *Tractates Cryptica Scriptura*, which tells us all we really need to know and more than some of us



want to know.

Sutin's brave and laborious attempt to reduce the Exegesis not to a system but to a set of intelligible selections performs a highly useful service. The fact that it fails, in some degree, seems to be the fault mainly of poor indexing, a fault that could easily be set right in a second edition. Ideally, I suppose, we would wish to use the Exegesis on CD-ROM, to be able to random-access the full text. Sutin's division of the material into eight chapters allows for a good deal of overlapping, which is not in itself a bad thing, because going through unfamiliar territory several times is a good way of learning one's way about in it.

Some of the unfamiliarity lies in the use of acrostic or personal shorthand references such as BIP (Black Iron Prison), and Sutin attempts to cope with these in a Glossary: page-indexing within the Glossary would have been helpful. The Glossary is not fully inclusive; thus a mention of *Koinos* on p. 157 has a footnote referring us to the Glossary, where there is no entry on *Koinos*; it would have been better to refer us to p. 166. The Index itself is not thematic, but of 'Persons and Writings', and thus offers only limited as-

sistance: we can find in it a reference to 'Gnosis' and to 'Gnostic Jung, The' but not to Gnostic ideas (on which see pp. 141f).

The major chapter divisions, following Sutin's 'Preface' and an 'Introduction' by Jay Kinney, are fivefold: 'Direct Accounts of Personal Experience', 'Theoretical Explanations', 'On His Writing Techniques and the Creative Quest for Truth', 'Interpretations of His Own Works' and 'Plot Outlines and Explorations for Works-in-Progress'. It is obvious that these chapters hold valuable biographical and critical material. Even if, fearing 'Divine Infection', we do not care to read the book as a whole; even if we would rather not speculate upon the strange mad author lying dead behind the living texts, we may well wish to know what the author thought of particular canonical works, such as *The Man in the High Castle* or 'Faith of Our Fathers'. Working through the book as a dutiful reviewer must, I found the reading process tedious and at times overwhelming, as I used to do when even the most interesting of my university tutors (John Dodgson) poured some of his vast knowledge over me. In the *Tractates*, we are told that 'the universe

is actually composed of information', but an information-rich environment can be as uncomfortable as an oxygen-rich atmosphere; we can absorb only so much at a time.

The problem was compounded for me in some ways, lessened in others, by my bringing different or supplementary information to the task. I could fit some of Dick's ideas into my mind-set easily but others did not sit well. Merely to read as if one were a watcher, a looker-on at the playing of Dick's mind, as if one could oneself be free from the need to believe, might be more amusing than to read in the knowledge that one should ideally engage seriously with Dick's ideas — and cannot, because he is not there; he provided the seminar paper and then absconded.

Mixed up with Dick's information is a lot of nonsense or noise; the *Tractates* tells us that, although the universe is composed of information, we do not live in that universe because ours is a kind of battleground between the source of information and the source of noise; ours is, however, only a 'hologrammatic universe' damaged by the noise source (Hyperuniverse II) but redeemed or redeemable by the information source (Hyperuniverse I). Dick's dualism, which at the biographical level he related to his separation from his twin sister, by her pathetically early death, was drawn on a more formal level, says Sutin, 'from the dualisms of Gnosticism, the Presocratic philosophers Heraclitus and Parmenides, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism'. Dick was extremely eclectic and he enjoyed weaving these various dualisms in and out of each other, trying to evolve a new (I suppose we may be allowed to call it) Phildickism. Much of this working out is likely to infuriate the trained philosopher; it has the indiscriminating mawkish mark of the typical autodidact.

I myself experience few frissons from the study of most of these pre-Phildickian dualist writings, and indeed have avoided studying them wherever I could. I have, however, studied at some length the works of another great autodidact, William Blake, and this study has allowed me to recognise the Exegesis as having its place within a tradition of esoteric learning to which Blake also belonged. The *Tractates* in *Valis* sometimes read very like the sort of communications we have in Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as for instance No. 45:

In seeing Christ in a vision I correctly said to him, 'We need medical attention.' In the vision

there was an insane creator who destroyed what he created, without purpose; which is to say, irrationally. This is the deranged streak in the Mind; Christ is our only hope, since we cannot now call on Asklepios. Asklepios came before Christ and raised a man from the dead; for this act, Zeus had a Kyklopes slay him with a thunderbolt. Christ also was killed for what he had done: raising a man from the dead. Elijah brought a boy back to life and disappeared soon thereafter in a whirlwind. The Empire never ended.'

A difference is that Blake in his 'Memorable Fancies' was operating deliberately as a satirist; another difference is that, when Blake writes of his own visions, he has a secure mental and theological framework for them. Granted that, in the context of *Valis*, Dick's mixing of mythologies can be passed off as mere Vonnegutianism; within the Exegesis, such arbitrary conflation has to be taken straight. Jay Kinney in his Introduction refers to Jung's *Seven Sermons to the Dead* as a model, but Jung was able to confine his exegesis to the size of a pamphlet. Sutin says that Jung was a great favourite of Dick's, which seems likely enough, although these extracts from the Exegesis include no direct mention of the psychologist. Dick pretended not to know Blake; indeed, according to a letter he wrote to me, he deliberately avoided Blake for fear of being over-influenced by him. When I get the chance to read Dick's collected letters, I will be interested to see whether he maintained this decidedly perverse stance consistently.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book is Chapter 4, where Sutin groups together 'Interpretations of [Dick's] Own Works'.

Much of this interpretation is *post hoc*; it is accordingly not to be supposed that Dick consciously planned a kind of decalogue, a 'whole 10-volume meta-novel' to which *Valis* (making eleven volumes; ultimately we have something larger than a dodecalogue to consider) is the key (p. 200). Rather, Dick keeps discovering new links between his novels as he proceeds with the Exegesis, and gets considerably excited by the associations he finds. The reader of the novels concerned will not be surprised to be told that there are many idiosyncratic connections between them; it is obvious that all of Dick's novels and stories, even the ones he wrote with collaborators, form a canon. Dick, however, as he had a peculiar

insight into the workings of time, was struck particularly by the way that until *Valis* appeared 'the others did not make sense — i.e., they were taken to have been written as fiction & hence hypothetical. *VALIS* retroactively reinterprets them — shows them in a light that could not be anticipated by an analysis of them — until *VALIS* came out.' Correspondingly, *Valis* without the others 'means nothing!' *Valis*, that is, is a validating novel; it makes what once seemed to be fictions become true. Readers other than Dick will perhaps remain sceptical about this claim.

The ten works in the metanovel are *The Man in the High Castle*, *Eye in the Sky*, *Martian Time-Slip*, *Flow My Tears*, *the Policeman Said*, 'Frozen Journey' (a story published in *Playboy*, December 1980), *A Maze of Death*, *Ubik*, *The Game Players of Titan*, *Time Out of Joint* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. It is not a satisfactory selection, excluding as it does *A Scanner Darkly*, which is clearly one of Dick's major novels, and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, to go no further. Actually, *Scanner* and *Sheep* both occur in an earlier list (pp. 186f) of eleven novels and four stories 'for starters' — this list excludes *Martian Time-Slip* and the yet unwritten 'Frozen Journey'. *Time Out of Joint* and *Game Players* but includes *We Can Build You*, *The Penultimate Truth*, 'Retreat Syndrome', 'Precious Artifact', 'Impostor' and 'The Electric Ant', with the underestimated *Galactic Pot-Healer* added immediately as an afterthought — written before *Valis* was published, in which *Ubik* seems to be the central validating work: 'It's obvious that the real author of *UBIK* was *Ubik*. It is a self proving novel; i.e., it couldn't have come into existence unless it were true.' Dick's pattern of system building is clear: cf. the famous line of Blake's *Los* in *Jerusalem* 10:20, 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans'. Ultimately, he would seek to tie everything he had written into one great Testament.

The innocent reader may not be sure whether to be saddened by Dick's inevitable discovery that he is God. Phil 'remembers' (courtesy of *anamnesis*) that he is Christ (pp. 84f):

Zebra [ultimate reality, disguised by its stripes] equals Christ. Christ equals God. Thomas [Dick's persona in NT times, who had crossbonded with living knowledge from a higher wisdom] equals Zebra. I equal Thomas. (For equals read is.) Thus I equal God.

But I've forgotten again. Oh well — I wrote it all down, heh-heh. Knowing I'd again forget. I was invaded (theolepsy) by Christ, all right. But as I say supra, it was I who remembered being Thomas or Christ and living back in Rome c. AD 45. So, like in 'Impostor', I am —

I love it. It's delightful. It's a dance. Brahman dancing with joy. (Felix [Greek words sound more imposing].) And so was Pinky [Dick's cat, perhaps suggested by his use of the word 'Felix', must have been like Christopher Smart's]; he knew and remembered, too.

Christ (the Creator) is among us, disguised. Even He has forgotten. He could be any person, any animal. We do not know; He does not know. But eventually He will remember; He has set clues in his own path to trigger off his true memory and powers. Then we will find ourselves judged for the way we treated him, as told in the NT. He who was our victim, our object, will be our judge.

In 3-74 [March 1974] I sat down on the judgment seat, when I re-

membered.

(I note that Blake has a similar idea in his myth of the sleeping Albion.) Such sports or dances of Sophia, wisdom, before the God of Proverbs 8:30-31, can be exhilarating, and it is perhaps better for the reader simply to share Dick's well-communicated delight than to ponder seriously its implications: there may be as much humility as megalomania in such private ejaculations.

The novel to which *In Pursuit of Valis* will redirect me is *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, because Dick often linked it directly to his belief that he was being interpenetrated with the world of the Book of Acts of 45 AD. This novel, which I would have liked to set for my 1993 class, seems to be out of print just now. I must also get around to reading, for the first time, *Radio Free Albenuth*, the posthumous work that, with *Valis*, *The Divine Invasion* and *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, is most openly linked to the 1974 experiences. I shall use the Exegesis as a stimulus to my reading of such earlier works as *The Man in the High Castle*, but I will not accept it as fully authoritative. After all, I disagree

with Dick's reading of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* some years ago, and I see no reason to change my view, despite the uncritical 'face-value' acceptance of the Palmer Eldritch figure that he maintained in his attempts to explain this earlier revelation. What the figure meant to him and what it means in his book are not necessarily to be supposed identical: I will subscribe so far, at least, to the popular view that authors do not know all of what they are doing when they write.

*In Pursuit of Valis* is a bit like the Bible: we read Dick reading Dick (and so read Dick in new ways) but Dick also reads us. I am glad that I have not had to cope with such 'revelations' as Dick and John of Patmos had; I am also glad that not every author I read with pleasure and instruction bombards me with such illuminations. They do not authenticate the novels in the way Dick concluded that they must; neither do they disauthenticate them for 'reasonable' people. The Exegesis must now be considered integral to any scholarly understanding of this great modern writer's work.

— Michael J. Tolley, December 1992

## Shorter reviews

### TIDES OF LIGHT

by Gregory Benford  
(Gollancz 0-575-04066-1;  
1989; 362 pp.; £13.95)

I reviewed the first book of the trilogy (of which *Tides of Light* forms the second part) in *SF Commentary*, March 1990. *Great Sky River* is impressive, but I found that my memory of it was so weak that the second book gave me, at the outset, similar difficulties with reading. Killeen, the principal hero, is not the sort of character with whom it is easy to become acquainted. He has other implanted personalities within him and he is irritatingly self-conscious about his position as Cap'n of the Bishop tribe and father of one of the crew of his ship. It is a relief for both him and his readers when he is demoted from the leader's position.

In this episode, the Bishops arrive in their spaceship *Argo* at a planet they expect will be a rendezvous, but there is nobody on the spot obviously waiting for them. On what they call Abra-

ham's Planet the human fight against Mechs goes on, but another party dominates the scene, a group of Cybers, who are giant insectoids with mechanical implants. The Cybers wield an extravagantly vast planet-carving hoop and are siphoning out minerals from the core. To the Cybers those pestilential little humans already existing on the planet are dubbed Noughts, a Swiftian satire that continues and extends the humiliation of humans by the Mechs on Snowglade in *Great Sky River*. The human tribes are led by a Hitlerian figure who insists on being known as His Supremacy. Although merely reaching the planet's surface is quite a task for the Bishops, it is no surprise that getting off again before they are quickly annihilated is where their serious work begins.

One of the Cybers, Quash, is given a narrative point of view and becomes a secondary hero in this book. Her character is sufficiently interesting, but the other Cybers, like most of the humans, are mere stereotypes. Nevertheless, the novel is a good example of hard sf: it is not every writer who will

run his hero through the core of a planet from one side to the other and have him plausibly survive the trip.

*Tides of Light* is best read immediately following the first novel in the series. A visit to the great Eater (black hole) at the heart of our Galaxy seems in prospect to complete the trilogy.

### MINDPLAYERS

by Pat Cadigan  
(Gollancz 0-575-04242-7;  
Feb. 1988; 276 pp.; £10.95)

Pat Cadigan achieved fame as a short story writer before she wrote her first novel *Mindplayers*. Her Nebula Award-nominated 'Pretty Boy Crossover' (1986) placed her amongst the cyberpunk writers, and she is now recognised as one of the major contributors to the subgenre of sf devoted to celebrating or criticising virtual reality, Artificial Intelligence and the values of rebels against urban corporate society.

*Mindplayers* begins excitingly, with the writer wasting no words as she

presents her protagonist, Alexandra Victoria Haas, being picked up by the Brain Police for using an illicit 'mad-cap', then recruited to be trained as a kind of psychic healer, a licensed 'mindplayer'. When we consider that she has to invent her subject as she goes along, we must be impressed by Pat Cadigan's firm command of her material, her crisp narrative and her relative lack of obscurity.

The narrative continues to trace 'Deadpan Allie's' career to the point where she almost gets killed by one of her clients. The cases she deals with are interesting in themselves and varied, and seem to become more difficult and dangerous as she develops her range of skills — skills we can almost believe she might have after surviving such experiences as none of us can have undergone. On the way she contributes to the genre mindscape images that I suppose must have been influential, though they do not seem over-ambitiously original.

The narrative is too episodic to sustain readerly engagement with pathos-finder Allie's life story, as she moves uneasily towards confrontation with the ghosts of friends and patients past, who remain as taints or even as personalities within her mind, particularly the dead McFloy, a fellow student who committed suicide. Cadigan tries heavy-handedly to suture the episodes together with the picaresque character of wild Jerry Wirerammer, but he is too outrageous to harmonise even with her world, which is one of drug-stimulated lunatics and artificially enhanced guardians, where even the healers are insecurely sane. The important recurring characters of her husband Jascha, her employer Nelson Nelson, her roommate Fandango and her teacher Ryotr Frankis (an android) impinge too remotely upon her, and remain somewhat opaque.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole is readable and significant as a vehicle for debate about the integrity of individual personality.

### THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE

by Arthur C. Clarke

(Gollancz pb)

0-575-04590-6; Dec. 1992,

first publication 1979;

258 pp.; £4.99/A\$11.95)

A new reprint of what Peter Nicholls calls 'the most considerable work of the latter part of ACC's career' is welcome. *The Fountains of Paradise* won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 1980. Clarke's reputation as prophet of satellite technology is further enhanced by the idea of a 'space

elevator' promulgated in this novel, which is not original with Clarke, but drawn on the proposals of several scientists, going back in Russia to 1960 and in the USA to 1966 (as is duly acknowledged in an Afterword, updated for the Gollancz paperback edition).

The establishment of the first space elevator above Earth is celebrated here as a technological feat of the twenty-second century — which Clarke has come to think may be a conservative forecast. It is a product of the development of high-tensile microfilaments. Clarke invents snags, both of a physical and a political nature, in order to provide a sufficiently interesting story — but he also exhibits compensatory wonders for the delectation of the imaginative reader: among them migrating golden butterflies, and auroral effects above the equator.

In this novel Clarke also expresses his delight in his adopted home, Sri Lanka, but in order (for technical reasons) to make it a plausible base for the 'Tower', he shunts the island 800 kilometres to the south and reconfirms its famous mountain, Adam's Peak, calling it Taprobane. He provides the island with a history, derived closely from actual events, incorporating aesthetic and technical marvels of the past, notably the 'Fountains of Paradise' of the title.

Clarke's hero, Vannevar Morgan, is an engineer, famous for a bridge that spans the Straits of Gibraltar, now lured out of retirement to take charge of the space elevator project. (The finance comes from settlers from Mars, where the elevator would, it is thought, be easier to establish.) Clarke takes his time, using short chapters, flashbacks to old Taprobanean history and shifts to various points of view, but eventually sets up a fine setpiece suspense plot for Morgan, who has to use all his skill to rescue a group of scientists stranded 600 kilometres above the Earth, while he is handicapped by untoward incidental problems and a dangerous heart condition.

All this, one would have thought, should have been enough for a single novel, but Clarke distractingly feeds in a first-contact subplot as well, to provide a perspective on the human achievement embodied in the main narrative. Oddly, he appears to set up and then abandon characters who oppose the elevator project, although at least one of the setbacks (a severe, unanticipated storm) looks as if it should have been explained as an act of sabotage by someone with access to the weather control agency. (This whole episode seems fudged to me.)

The novel gets high marks as a sense-of-wonder generator, and should please most readers. As a characteristic work of this master of the genre, *The Fountains of Paradise* should be more widely known than, I suspect, it is by those who, like me, were content to retire from reading Clarke for a while after *Rendezvous with Rama*.

### THE HAMMER OF GOD

by Arthur C. Clarke

(Gollancz 0-575-05616-9;

July 1993; 205 pp.; \$34.95)

*The Hammer of God* is based on a short story that was commissioned by *Time* magazine for the autumn of 1992. I don't remember seeing this in our Australian edition. In a lengthy afterword, the author suggests that this is, in one way at least, the third in the trilogy that began with *Rendezvous with Rama*, because it takes up the Spaceguard idea adumbrated there and subsequently taken up by NASA. Fiction and space technology are once again seen to intertwine in the productions of Arthur C. Clarke. The 'Hammer' of the title is an asteroid headed for Earth. It is discovered in the twenty-second century almost too late for its trajectory to be altered. (Clarke mentions other 'Hammer' stories that use comparable ideas, but neglects Wynne Whiteford's 1983 thriller *Thor's Hammer*.)

Using a narrative pattern similar to that of *The Fountains of Paradise*, Clarke devises plausible problems for the group who are given the task of putting some swerve on the asteroid (nicknamed Kali) as it passes Jupiter. Sabotage is one of those problems: the culprits are religious fundamentalists who actually want the world to end (they belong to Chrislam, an unlikely enough conjunction even for two centuries hence).

The principal hero, Captain Robert Singh, aged in his sixties, is similar to Vannevar Morgan of *Fountains* in type, but less interesting — although a flashback is provided to give him some depth: he did not design a bridge to cross the Straits of Gibraltar, but he engaged in a great foot race on the Moon.

Although the plot is suspenseful, it is again not very thrilling. A collision of Kali with Earth is not going to terminate the human race, which is already colonising the Moon and the planets, but we may note how much more excitement is generated by a comparable threat in the new book by D. G. Comp-ton and John Gribbin, *Ragnarok* (1991); if a choice has to be made between the

two, *Ragnarok* offers better value for the general reader. Nevertheless, those who like Clarke's style of hard sf will not be disappointed by his new novel.

### RAGNAROK

by D. G. Compton and  
John Gribbin

(Gollancz pb)

0-575-05321-6; 1992,

original publication 1991;

344 pp.; £4.99/A\$11.95)

*Ragnarok* presents the paradoxical idea of a cosy holocaust as it might be initiated (if things go wrong) by peace-loving terrorists, who (at the end of the Cold War, remember) seek to coerce the superpowers into abandoning their nuclear arsenals. A small nuclear bomb is placed in an Icelandic cove, just on a crack in the seabed, ready to be triggered from a ship moored nearby. The ship is a research vessel, and the leader on board is the daughter of a scientist, Robert Graham, whose two Nobel Awards include one for peace. If the bomb explodes, the resultant volcanic eruption (*Ragnarok*) will result in a long winter for the northern hemisphere but will not destroy the planet altogether. The myth of *Ragnarok* includes such a provision, known as the time of *Fimbulvetr* (a name appropriated for the ship used by the conspirators), after which the Earth would be renewed.

Worse things could happen to humankind than this, but the story, inevitably, is more concerned with what will happen to the good terrorists, the focus of sympathy. Ranged against them are not only American and Russian government agents but also an infiltrator who takes his orders from Mediterranean criminals. (Members of the media cause complications, as expected.) Although the authors manage the exposition clumsily by interrupting the ongoing thriller narrative with formal character biographies, they succeed in involving the reader with the threats and hopes provided by the changing situation. As we would expect from Compton, what happens to some of the participants is not for the squeamish reader.

Although this particular form of international crisis is not likely to occur again soon, the basic instabilities upon which the authors play remain in delicate balance: it is to be recommended as an unsentimental thriller that, although not convincing politically, includes some splendid, carefully

thought-out episodes. These authors have worked hard to get the physical (and geophysical) details right, whether dealing with a car chase or a ship in a storm or a sea-magma interface. Although I am not convinced that they know much about scuba diving (insulated wet suits, not dry suits, are worn), perhaps I'm out of date — and my knowledge does not extend to cold-water diving. Iceland, described as a scab on the skin of Gaia, makes a splendid setting for such a story.

### NOMANSLAND

by D. G. Compton

(Gollancz 0-575-05422-0;

1992; 286 pp.; £15.99)

When *Nomansland* appeared, it had seemed a long time since I had read a new D. G. Compton novel. It gave me a surprise because parts of it register as extremely anti-feminist. Although the main argument of the book is that forty years without baby boys will be a good round, biblical solution to the problem of war and certain other ills brought upon the planet as a result of male mismanagement, what registers more strongly on the reader is a consistent tone of mockery against the consequent Gaian cult of God the Mother. One of the main characters is a man who hates his own mother so much that even thinking about her is liable to turn him into a killer of innocent women: he joins forces with another misogynist to launch serious murder attacks on those who frequent PTC (parthenogenesis) clinics.

The heroine has spent much of her working life trying to find a way of bringing male babies back into circulation; when she makes a key breakthrough in her research and is about to publish her findings, she and her daughter are menaced by a terrifying woman who seems to represent the government (which government is not quite clear). The Minister, she is told, insists that publication must be delayed for six months. The daughter, Anna, is eventually abducted, an action forcing the novel's violent climax.

What Compton has provided is a disturbing thriller that also may be read as a serious novel about some conceivable social consequences of the drying up of the supply of males to the human race. The theological speculations offered to explain the phenomenon of the forty years' 'Attrition', which are as embarrassing (and just as likely) as those adduced by some sec-

tarians to explain the AIDS epidemic, will make most of Compton's intelligent readers uncomfortable.

I have admired Compton's work in the past, although I suppose I never enjoyed it so much that I had to read everything he wrote. Having *Nomansland* to review, I took the opportunity of reading an earlier success of his, *The Steel Crocodile* (1970; published in the UK as *The Electric Crocodile*); the two books are surprisingly similar. *The Steel Crocodile* has been called perhaps his 'most accomplished work' by Don D'Amassa in an article for *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*. The name 'Kahn' figures in both stories, as does the music of Scarlatti. Both feature heroines who work against dangerous conspiracies that involve corrupt individuals who represent the government (the British government in *Crocodile*). The heroine's brother is murderous and subversive in both stories, and her knowledge of his activities is crucial in both plots. Fear and avoidance of surveillance generate much of the runabout action in both stories. In *The Steel Crocodile* most of the action takes place in a research institute near London in which the workers must live in thoroughly bugged houses with colleagues who are spying for various groups.

Both novels press Christian issues upon the reader. In *The Steel Crocodile*, the heroine is a devout Catholic, but her husband (the research worker) merely a nominal one; his work precipitates a crisis of trust and understanding in their marriage.

The problem in the earlier novel is whether scientists should be allowed to employ a super-computer to play God, using it to decide which new discoveries shall be allowed to flourish, which be suppressed. That problem escalates into the one of whether the computer is to replace God, or be promoted as a new messiah.

Because *Nomansland* is more powerful, more intense, even longer than *The Steel Crocodile* (which is only moderately thrilling, at least by present-day standards), it may be expected to gain a wide readership. I shall probably continue to prefer my memory of *The Unsleeping Eye* (*The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*) and even his austere novel of Martian colonisation, *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*, as more securely representative of Compton's talent.

— Michael J. Tolley,  
April 1992–August 1993

By day ALAN STEWART can be found at his desk somewhere on campus at Melbourne University, where he works towards his Master's Degree in Materials Science (Extractive Metallurgy). By night and at weekends he can be found at the keyboard of his fabulous computer, from which he dominates the far-flung worlds of *Thyme* (Australia's sf newsmagazine), ANZAPA (just about to celebrate its Twenty-fifth Anniversary), the Melbourne Sf Club, the Australia In '99 bid, and many, more more. In his spare seconds he reads books; in his other spare seconds he writes reviews of them:

## Original shared world anthologies: a critique

### Part 1: Laying foundations

#### Discussed:

#### THE PETRIFIED PLANET

Authors: Dr John D. Clark, Fletcher Pratt, H. Beam Piper, Judith Merrill  
(Twayne hc; 1952; 263 pp.)

#### A WORLD NAMED CLEOPATRA produced by Roger Elwood

Authors: Poul Anderson, Michael Orgill, Jack Dann, George Zebrowski  
(Pyramid pb  
0-515-03743-5; March 1977;  
192 pp.)

#### MEDEA: HARLAN'S WORLD

edited by Harlan Ellison  
Authors: Poul Anderson, Hal Clement, Thomas M. Disch, Harlan Ellison, Frank Herbert, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Kate Wilhelm, Jack Williamson  
(Bantam Spectra trade pb  
0-553-34170-7; June 1985;  
532 pp.)

The recent development of original shared world anthologies, where a particular world or city background is created specifically for the series, appears to have emerged in the mid-1970s, although the 1952 collection *The Petrified Planet* was conceptually similar.

It has since been bastardised into subsets where many-authored works

are set in a universe already created by another writer, such as the *Friends of Witchworld* collections based on Andre Norton's work, or even whole novels, for example, Paul Preuss's *Venus Prime* series drawn from Arthur C. Clarke's work. In some cases the milieu has persisted for several volumes, but the idea of an anthology of original short fiction set in a shared world began with complete one-off works.

Fletcher Pratt organised the first construction along Original Shared World Anthology Avenue. Using plans supplied by a friend he invited two others to help him. Unfortunately the materials and styles they brought along varied wildly and didn't mesh well at all. 'Uller' was just too uncomfortable, and it was left to fall into obscurity after one holiday fling.

*The Petrified Planet* used descriptions of silicon and fluorine planets as background for three stories, but the authors each wrote such divergent plots and so differed in their depiction of native life that there is no feel of continuity or 'gestalt' in the book. They proved that an identical background could work, but that a firm guiding hand was required for the best results. From a forty-year perspective the stories themselves appear dated. It was an interesting experiment, but probably ahead of its time, and so doomed to obscurity.

The next effort was a rather modest affair, built alongside the ruins.

Poul Anderson arrived, armed with sketches and plans from his earlier efforts, and put up a wooden skeleton and serviceable roof. At this stage three friends turned up and helped him finish off the brickwork and plastering. Roger Elwood advised on the paint scheme and garden-scaping, and probably handled the original land sale. A discreet 'Cleopatra' sign was nailed to the picket fence.

Examining the copyright pages of the two latter volumes, it is very difficult to decide which came first. For *A World Named Cleopatra* the original short story by Poul Anderson ('The Serpent in Eden') was published in 1973, and the planetary system descriptive background article, which lends its title to the overall book, appeared in 1974, both in collections edited by Roger Elwood. The other three stories in the book debuted at the time of its printing, March 1977, probably commissioned by Elwood.

One morning Harlan Ellison drove up to the large vacant lot across the way. He was accompanied by three friends who argued a bit but got down to work. Poul went across to help them, and eventually four others arrived to assist. By this time a busload of onlookers had pulled up, and they heckled as well as offering practical suggestions. In the end it was pretty much like Harlan's original plans, but each contributor, including two late arrivals, did their own decor and there were

a few problems such as doorways not quite matching in adjacent rooms. Lou Aronica screwed the 'Medea' nameplate onto the stone gatepost and a quiet celebratory party was held.

As detailed in *Medea: Harlan's World*, the original design seminars were held in April 1975, but the collection as a whole did not appear until 1985. Various stories were published in the intervening years, commencing with six in 1978, then one each in 1979, 1980 and 1981, with the final two appearing in 1983 and 1985. It is possible that Roger Elwood knew what was happening with *Medea* and then commissioned the *Cleopatra* project to beat Harlan into print, but that is merely speculation. Perhaps the original shared world anthology concept was simply an idea whose time had come, similar to the 'sky elevator' that appeared simultaneously in *The Web Between the Worlds* by Charles Sheffield and Arthur C. Clarke's *The Fountains of Paradise*.

The parallels between the two collections are striking. As well as being named for wilful historical/mythical women, each tells the story of the settling of a planet by Terran colonists, with intelligent or at least proto-intelligent native life present. Over the course of the tales the history of the colony unfolds, and in both cases the effort can be said to be unsuccessful. Exploitation of native life forms is explicitly stated: in *Cleopatra* lizard-like fabers are surgically adapted for servitude, and later war; while *Medea* describes an intelligent fux implanted with a neurological probe/transmitter for research tracking. The legacy of biological warfare ultimately defeats the settlers on *Cleopatra*, while Medean natives never really succumbed to the invaders, and a cataclysmic end of a millennia-long cycle forces the Terrans to depart. Both series conclude with

their respective planets reverting to their aboriginals.

*Medea* appears to be your big budget extravaganza effort at world building with well-known authors and publicity. By contrast *Cleopatra* starts with Poul Anderson, who had already written his story and background article, and builds with writers who were relatively unknown at the time of publication. Between them Orgill, Dann and Zebrowski had about 50 short stories or novels in print or pending, according to the author biographies at the end of the book. This slightly rough-and-ready approach shows a bit, with only a few specific references carrying from story to story.

By removing the four tales from each other in time (they are set approximately 0, 200, 450 and 1200 years respectively after initial Terran colonisation, based on my reading and references in 'historical-note' linking sections between the stories), the differences in tone and style of each piece do not matter as much. The authors follow the rigid *Cleopatan* timeline and physical descriptions, but add atmosphere and emotion to each section. In such a small anthology — 192 paperback pages and four stories — each is different enough to provoke interest, yet contain similarities to provide an essential sense of unity.

Perhaps the very size of *Medea* worked against it. With ultimately eleven contributing authors and a thousand participants in the world-building seminar, the resulting number of 'must-include' details seems to have smothered individual contributions. Finishing the collection I was left with the impression of a very detailed world, only shallowly explored or explained. Perhaps that was Ellison's intention, but *Cleopatra* felt more immediate and solid.

Some authors still transcended their assignments. Theodore Sturgeon's 'Why Dolphins Don't Bite', a

tale of a disciple of the school of Acceptance and his confrontation with the alien fuxes, is a wonderful invention. Poul Anderson won a Hugo for his 'Hunter's Moon', not the last shared-world story to be nominated for the major awards, which contained particularly vivid scenes and evocations of the native fuxes and balloons.

Trying to fit everything — the long history, interesting details, big names — into the one volume may have been too much. Without the freedom of development offered by a series of several novels, or the ability to restrict authors to approximately equal story length, *Medea* had no room to iron out the bumps. Things not explained in a story remained enigmatic. Close temporal settings led to contradictions between some tales, and if you wanted to find out what happened to a particular character after story's end you're out of luck.

*Cleopatra* and *Medea* are both worth reading, and should be deemed successes. *Cleopatra* gains in a sense of immediacy and vigour, proving shared worlds can be entertaining and novel. *Medea* is worthwhile, if only for the important names who appear therein, and served to point out some of the joys and problems of limited shared world projects. It was a promising start, but start was all it was.

**After a while construction started on a new place, but it was built in secret and at night. All the neighbours could see were numerous comings and goings, and occasionally a loud argument. It was an extensive sprawling edifice with many add-ons and a wild confusion of architectural styles. Investigation showed that the title was held by Robert Asprin, but that's another story.**

— Alan Stewart, 1991

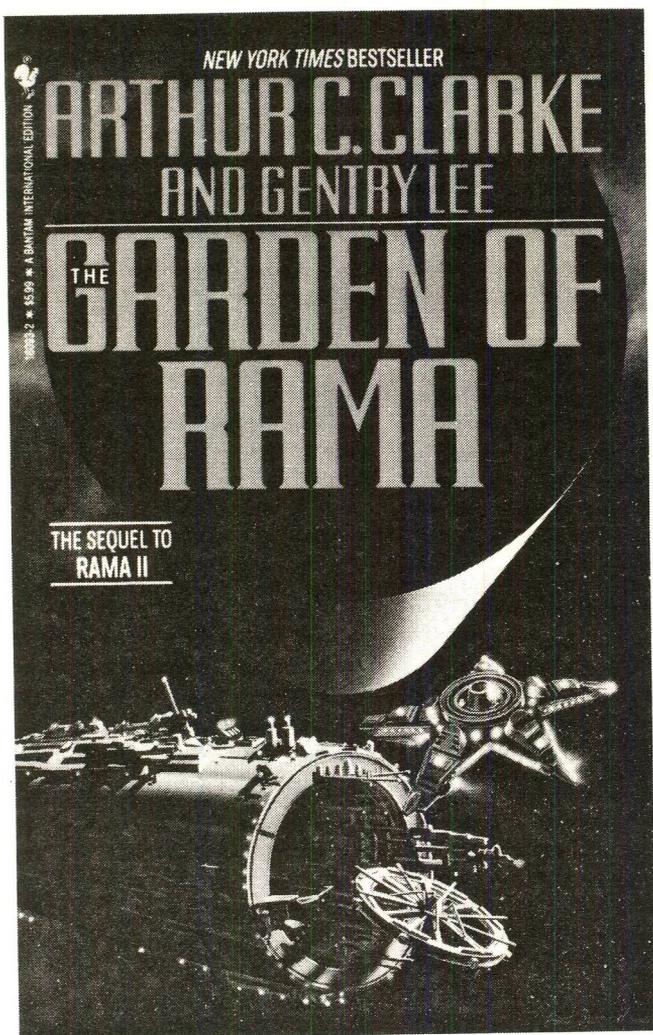
## Short reviews of recent books

**THE GARDEN OF RAMA**  
by Arthur C. Clarke and  
Gentry Lee  
(Gollancz 0-575-05169-8;  
Jan. 1992; 398 pp.; £14.99)

In this third novel of the 'Rama' series, the story continues immediately after the earlier volume. The

three survivors left in the alien ship at the end of *Rama II* continue to grow, procreate and survive. The first section details the development of this group; the second describes what happens when Rama reaches its next destination; and the final section begins the chronicle after about 2500 more humans join *Rama* on its return to our solar system.

A sense of wonder returns to the saga with this volume, as new vistas are explored. Different alien artefacts are encountered at Rama's primary destination, and much more of the complex machinery that makes up the craft itself is revealed. Unfortunately there are quite a lot of people being depressingly human, both in the lengthy initial section about the Wake-



field group, and again during the voyage of the colonists. Another problem is the concluding cliff-hanger. The book reads like the first half of a novel, not self-contained, like the first two 'Rama' books.

Overall the new discoveries carry the novel, and it's an exciting read as you want to find out more about *Rama*, its builders, and the larger plan. On the other hand, the authors tend to telegraph future problems, mainly caused by certain characters. You're so sure they'll cause trouble, and they do. It's just a matter of waiting for the authors to spell out how bad it will be. There's a note of optimism at the end, and the next volume will probably continue detailing how bad the situation aboard *Rama* will get before there's a happy conclusion.

*Garden of Rama* is more entertaining than its predecessor, but still can't convey the impact of the original  *Rendezvous with Rama*.

#### DIVERGENCE

by Charles Sheffield  
(Gollancz 0-575-04999-5;  
July 1991; 281 pp.; A\$35)

In this follow-up to *Summertime* Charles Sheffield continues the adventures of a small band of sapient, human and alien, and their travels amongst newly awakened Builder artefacts. Subtitled *Book Two of the Heritage Universe*, it fulfils the requirements of a sequel, and leaves openings for further instalments. We don't really see much of the Universe in this volume. In fact, apart from a couple of spaceships and transport systems, all the action takes place on and in two major millennia-old constructions.

Once again Sheffield produces wonderful ideas and intriguing possibilities as he unravels some secrets of the now-vanished Builders, but *Divergence* fails to satisfy me as a reader. There's the feeling that the characters are only there on a tour to provide a means of imparting what Sheffield's imagined. Their actions won't change anything he still wants to reveal.

Because of their various physical and mental powers and differences, various difficulties are overcome, but it seems all too neat. Perhaps it's the book's sense of artificiality, of being too clinical and contrived, that leads me to rate it an interesting diversion, but not a read-again book.

#### TRANSCENDENCE

by Charles Sheffield  
(Gollancz 0-575-05264-3;  
July 1992; 270 pp.; A\$38.95)

Charles Sheffield is off exploring his Heritage Universe again, for the third time, and the reader is taken along for the ride. There's the same (not very lovable) characters from earlier adventures, and quite a few planets and locations are visited along the way. In a typical Sheffield tour it's non-stop action and a whirlwind rush, with no one, characters and readers, given time to catch their breath and concentrate on just where they are, just what's going on, and why it is all getting so complicated.

*Transcendence* is great reading for what Sheffield does well — ideas. In exploring further Builder artefacts, in this case perhaps the biggest of them all, macroscopic quantum effects come into play. This, and other effects such as the vandalising of alien machines, aims to dazzle the reader with the sense of wonder of it all. Forget characterisation. The protagonists remain as alien and ill-defined emotionally as the dreaded monster aliens encountered. You don't really care that someone has scraped his knees raw crawling along ducts during a desperate escape attempt. It just means that he's reached another point of the travelogue.

I'll continue reading the series just to see where Sheffield's heading. He seems to raise more questions than he answers, not to mention dropping tantalising hints, and it will be interesting to see how he ties things together.

I'm not sure about the significance of the title, as it was a pretty ordinary reading experience this time.

#### STALIN'S TEARDROPS

by Ian Watson  
(Gollancz 0-575-05281-3;  
1992; 270 pp.; £3.99)

*Stalin's Teardrops*, Ian Watson's latest collection, contains twelve tales with copyright dates between 1988 and 1990, except for one from 1985 that had appeared only in a limited edition. Drawn from magazines such as *Fear*, *Interzone* and *F&SF*, the stories are a mixture of fantasy, science fic-

(Continued on Page 110)

# Alan Stewart interviews Robert Jordan

Some extracts from an interview conducted 13 April 1993 by Alan Stewart, who also transcribed it. Edited to the current length by Bruce Gillespie.

## Alan Stewart:

In an interview with you published in a Western Australian paper you said that you know where you'll arrive at the end of the seventh book of 'The Wheel of Time'. Do you have other definite visions along the way?

## Robert Jordan:

It's like trying to get from this corner of the table to that corner of the table. I know that on the way I intend to stop at each of these plates, but the precise order isn't necessarily fixed and the exact path I take from one to the other isn't exactly fixed, but the major points are. In that sense I know the rough outline. I know where all the mountains are, the big peaks; this must happen; this I want to happen; what gets interesting; what happens to the secondary or tertiary characters that you meet for a page or half a page and are gone. They return many times in those meanderings from one major point to another.

## Stewart:

You introduce new things along the way, for instance, the race from across the sea and the different aspects of the channelling of powers.

## Jordan:

That's done quite deliberately. In *The Eye of the World* you're really seeing the power of Moiraine and the Aes Sedai through the eyes of very unsophisticated villagers. Rand and Matt and Perrin, Nynaeve and Egwene, they've never been more than ten miles, twenty miles, from their home village. They get their

news of what happens outside from a pedlar who comes down once a month, and from merchants who come in once a year to buy wool and tobacco. To them the one power is something mysterious, perhaps unknowable. Moiraine is infinitely powerful.

As the story goes along, they begin to know more about the world. Some of them begin to know more about the power, the one power. Suddenly they realise that Moiraine has limits, and the one power has limits and rules. And you'll continue to learn things as they learn them. It's not so straightforward. The one power itself was never intended to be as straightforward a proposition as it seems in *The Eye of the World*.

## Stewart:

And as they grow and the contacts expand, so does the overall view.

## Jordan:

A series of linking rules.

## Stewart:

Such as in the training for the dream road in *The Shadow Rising*. I felt that you'd gone back and particularly emphasised that they had to be trained, that there were rules and they didn't know totally what they were dealing with.

## Jordan:

It is not simply being able to dream yourself there. Even with that ability, there are rules to the world.

## Stewart:

At the moment can you envisage where you're going after 'The Wheel of Time'?

## Jordan:

Yes, there are several possible novels belting around in my head. The 'Wheel of Time' series I had sort of known about for a good ten years, maybe twelve, before I first put words on paper. The front runner at the moment, the one that's interesting me most of all, is a fantasy that is set not in a world that never was but in this world. I don't want to give too much away about it. It will involve time travel and perhaps a fantastical explanation for certain historical events. I don't know. That's something that's interesting me for a number of reasons.

## Stewart:

The 'Wheel of Time' has become more interesting because of your conscious references to a distant past of high technology. The reader wants to know just what's happened in the past.

## Jordan:

You may find out some of it. You won't find out all of it. Part of what I do is realism, if you can talk about having realism in fantasy. In a lot of fantasies people find out what they need to know when they need to know it. Maybe just barely in the nick of time, but they find it out. In these books, often they don't find it out. They may manage to save themselves because, although they've done something for the wrong reason that happens to work out, it's the right thing to

do. They have to make decisions based on incomplete information. They know a little bit. Maybe it's not enough, but they make a decision anyway, because that's the way things happen in life. There will be a few things at the end of the books that aren't really resolved. The major threads of the story will be resolved, but some things will be left dangling. Life goes on. This is not the end; it's part of the whole thing. This is the 'Wheel of Time'. Hey, this story might be over, but there are other stories to be told, except I don't intend to tell them. When I've finished with these people, that's it.

**Stewart:**

Was the structure of the fourth book, with its blocks of chapters dealing with a few characters before switching to others, something you settled on from the start? Did you have much trouble settling on the length of such sections?

**Jordan:**

No. It was something I wanted to do. I quite often try different ways of structuring a book. I think of the books as musical compositions. I come from a family of raconteurs. Not only does my father tell stories, but my uncles tell stories, and so I have a tendency to think of any story as being something oral, something that is audible. At the same time music is always a part of our family, not just piano lessons. None of us ever thought it strange to go to concerts, classical or jazz, and other things of that sort such as ballet or whatever. It's just what you did. I noticed very early on when I was a boy that a good story-teller would have a rhythm and flow to his story. It simply wasn't presented flatly. And it was a similarity between the rhythm and flow and structure of a good story and the rhythm and flow

and structure of a concerto or a good Herbie Hancock riff, you know. I see books in a way as if they were musical compositions, and I experiment to some extent with the structure and flow of this piece of music, this story that I hear. Think of it as being told aloud or being read aloud.

**Stewart:**

I assume references to the sword in the stone and Excalibur just didn't happen, that you put them there deliberately.

**Jordan:**

Of course they're deliberate. The echoes are very deliberate. Not just of Arthur and Excalibur. When I wrote *The Eye of the World* I was terrified people were going to come up and say: 'This is another Arthur book; we've got another bloody Arthur book here; everybody's writing bloody Arthur books.' I wanted to hide all of the myths I was getting at, because my story is not just that of Arthur. I've gone into not only the Arthurian legends and other Celtic myths, but also Norse legends, some other European myths and legends, into some bits from Hindu mythology, African mythology, Chinese and Japanese to North American Indian legends.

**Stewart:**

The black and white symbol for the seals, being the yin and yang representation.

**Jordan:**

That's a very obvious one. In each case I've tried to shave the cultural references away so that what I'm left with is the bare bones. I've taken away the cultural references and disposed of the duplicates, because when you get rid of cultural references and get it down to the bare bones sometimes you find that the Chinese story is the same as the Celtic story, which is almost the

same as the North American Indian story, or very close. I get rid of 'those. Then begins the interesting bit, because I'm not trying to retell anybody's legends. This is not a retelling of the Arthurian tale. It's not a retelling of the Norse gods, not a retelling of any of these things.

What it is, is this: Have you ever played a game where the first person at a party is given a joke on a piece of paper and in a whisper that person reads the joke to somebody, into somebody's ear? Then that person, without anything more than just having heard it, tells it in a whisper to the next person, and it goes all around the room to the last person, who stands up and tells the joke. Then you compare it to the joke that's on the piece of paper. Well, the legends that we have are the joke that the last guy stood up and told aloud. What actually happened is what was on the piece of paper. What I'm trying to write is what's on the piece of paper. But by the time the story got up it was all changed. Rand drew the sword out of the stone, but he's also in a way the guy who drove the sword into the stone. And the stone wasn't a stone, in the traditional sense.

I got a letter from a woman who was ecstatic that she'd picked up Wagnerian influences with the Norse and German gods. But I try to keep things as submerged as I can so it seems as if this is just what's happening — no big deal — no big significance. This is just what's happening. Quite often it's the little things that come along at the sides that are really a big part of the legends that the guy at the end of the line told. As far as the people who are living them, those big parts of the legend are not even on the piece of paper, not important at all.

tion and horror. Watson writes about ideas, and the short form seems to be his forte, showing a verve and impact that is stifled in his longer works.

My personal favourite this time is 'The Pharaoh and the Mademoiselle', a novella that previously appeared in *The Book of Ian Watson*. It tells of an archaeological expedition to Egypt during the 1920s and of 'living' artefacts, or Ushabti, they discover in a tomb. The sections dealing with the people are written as a play script, while the adventures of the Ushabti are given in conventional narrative.

The volume includes a retelling of Cinderella, with Sherlock Holmes as protagonist, and the title story set in a Russia where redrawing the maps allows magical areas to exist and people to experience rejuvenation and other effects.

The strength of the collection is the variety of topics and ideas covered. No two tales are really alike, and the characters come across as interesting and quirky. Watson's gift for descriptive language enables him to set the scene quickly and efficiently, leaving room for the action. It's a good introduction to Watson's writing.

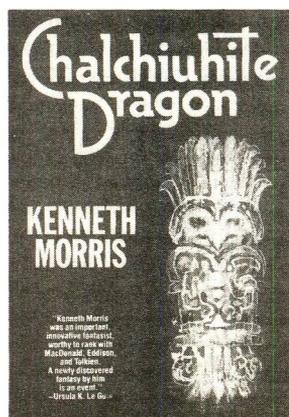
### THE CHALCHIUHITE DRAGON

by Kenneth Morris

(Tor 0-312-85264-9; 291 pp.;  
March 1992; US\$18.95)

Originally written over fifty years ago but only now achieving publication, *The Chalchihuite Dragon* presents a book different in tone and content from Kenneth Morris's Welsh fantasies. Set in the fictional kingdom of Huitznahuac in the somewhere Toltec time, the novel tells of the events leading up to the birth of a reincarnation of Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Dragon, bringer of peace. This retold Central American myth blends historical details and mysticism in an intriguing way.

The story is told in a straightfor-



ward manner by which interactions with gods and miraculous powers are taken as facts of life. The duplicity of people, as well as goodness of heart, all find a place in the tangle of events that bring kingdoms to war and ruin, in order to ensure a brighter future. Although the introduction spells out what is to come in Quetzalcoatl's later life, such knowledge doesn't spoil our enjoyment of the events covered in the narrative. Morris writes well about the minutiae of everyday life, tragic mix-ups and the high drama of battle.

Kenneth Morris has written a fantasy that doesn't seem to have dated, probably because it is set so far in the indeterminate past. A new stand-alone single-volume fantasy is welcome, particularly one such as this that deals with a culture unfamiliar to most readers. Unexpected touches, such as the meaning and behaviour of the chalchihuite dragon of the title, add delight to the tangled plotline. Recommended.

### CRISIS ON DOONA

by Anne McCaffrey and

Jody Lynn Nye

(Ace 0-441-23194-2;  
March 1992; 328 pp.;  
US\$4.99)

A book whose packaging and certain details are more interesting than the text! The cover fairly screams 'Beauty and the Beast (TV version) derivative artwork' and the pictured implied couple (male Hrruban and female Human) have no counterpart in the novel. I won't even comment much on the misleading preview page that ends: 'Jilamey . . . reached for the crossbow. He never got the chance to use it.' Then the credits page ascribes the copyright to Bill Fawcett and Associates. How intriguing. Just who wrote this novel? Where do the royalties go? The whole exercise seems aimed at turning a buck, not rewarding readers with a sincere reasoned expansion of the original *Decision at Doona*.

It's hard to find much to redeem this novel, given the false promises of the cover and preview page that you are forced to assimilate before reaching the text proper. Once you are there, you find the characters are either goody-goody or psychopathically evil. You can't really identify with anyone, let alone care what happens to them. There is no doubt that the innocent framed heroes Todd and Hriiss will clear their names before the book ends; it's just a question of how long it will take. Unfortunately it takes almost all of over 300 pages to spell out all the details. What a surprise. They are inno-

cent, and the Treaty of Doona can be extended.

What I would have liked from this sequel was more detail on the Hrruban society, perhaps glimpses of the lifestyle of their home planet, and some description of how a Hrruban/Human combined colony works and is different from their solo endeavours. Forget it. What's offered is a modern-day good guy-bad guy tale, with a couple of minor future trappings adding nothing to the created universe of the original story. Not recommended.

### A FIRE UPON THE DEEP

by Vernor Vinge

(Tor 0-312-85182-0; April  
1992; 391 pp.; US\$21.95)

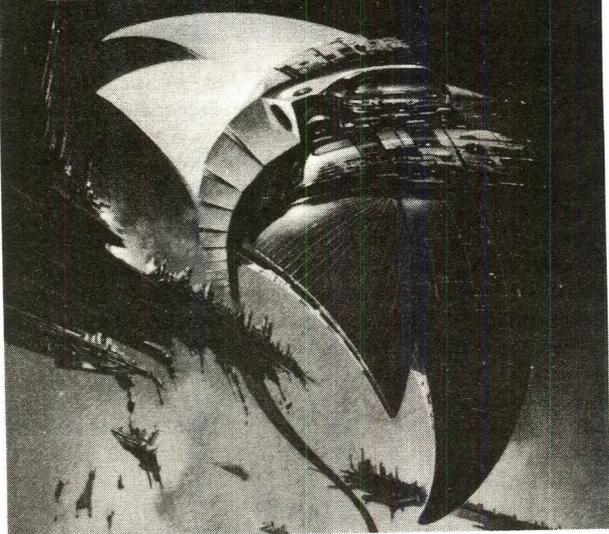
Vernor Vinge's latest novel is a far-future hard sf epic. Set against a galactic background divided into Thought Zones, where faster-than-light travel won't work in the Slow Zone, and races transcend to godlike Powers in the Far Beyond, humanity is lost amongst billions of alien sentients. Unfortunately an ancient evil power is awakened, and the race for a possible salvation involves two stranded human children on a medieval world and a human woman accompanied by aliens flying to their rescue, pursued by a fleet controlled by The Blight.

Only four of the major characters are *homo sapiens*, and Vinge's depiction of aliens, including a group-mind race, adds much to the success of the tale. Covering two simultaneous stories — the medieval world and the rescue ship — Vinge includes lots of detail and intrigue. Describing a race against time and incredible odds, the writing allows for development of characters over the time span covered. Despite wholesale death and destruction, most of the events arise out of human, or indeed alien, nature.

Enough of the background galactic civilisation is included to fill out Vinge's far-future vision. Reports from the communications net add background and perspective. One book can't hope to cover the societies portrayed here, and Vinge concentrates on individuals and their actions. Ambitious in its scope and ideas, *A Fire upon the Deep* succeeds in being an entertaining and intriguing novel. Recommended.

The first great space epic of the nineties

# VERNOR VINGE A FIRE UPON THE DEEP



## CARVE THE SKY

by Alexander Jablovok  
(Morrow 0-688-10324-3;  
March 1991; 298 pp.;  
US\$21.95)

Alexander Jablovok's first novel covers a lot of ground in a quest across the solar system in the twenty-fourth century. Beginning with a murder over an art treasure, it skirts interplanetary war and reaches towards a new future for humanity. Along the journey the reader attends parties, meets intriguing characters, and is easily carried away by the prose. There's plenty of detail as well as action, and it adds up to an excellent read.

*Carve the Sky* tells of a treasure hunt after a fabulous rare mineral. But the main characters are also connected to political and espionage groups, which adds complications to their interactions. Additional players include obsessed artists, followers of a religious cult, and eccentric rich patrons of the arts. It is this wide variety of well-defined characters that makes the novel entertaining and engrossing.

The technology seems workable,

based on extrapolation from today. There is no faster-than-light travel, for instance, and activities like art are still important to the wealthy. The detective part of the novel works well, with clues being given to both the hero and the reader. But the major surprises are not obviously telegraphed. You're not sure exactly where the novel is heading, but it keeps its interest.

The cover illustration even uses elements from the text.

## MURASAKI

edited by Robert Silverberg  
(Bantam 0-553-08229-0;  
May 1992; 290 pages;  
US\$20)

*Murasaki* is a shared world novel, with chapters written by different writers. In this case all the authors are Nebula Award winners, and the collection is produced under the auspices of the SFWA, the organisation that presents the Nebula. Two technical sections by Frederik Pohl and Poul Anderson are also included. They provide scientific background to the double planet system, orbiting a red dwarf, upon which the fiction is set. The six authors, in order of reading them, are Pohl, David Brin, Anderson, Gregory Benford, Greg Bear and Nancy Kress. The chapters follow chronologically, albeit with breaks of location and years between, and build upon the previous stories, with Nancy Kress tying it all together and explaining the 'puzzle' of the twin worlds of Genji and Chujo.

The stories are divided roughly equally between settings on the two worlds, and the time frame covers a generation, with both male and female protagonists. The background Earth society is a reasonable extrapolation, with political and religious differences being carried into this new stellar system as part of the exploration team's baggage. The sapient aliens are different from most you meet in sf novels — visualisation is helped by drawings throughout the text — and the whole comes across as a strange world.

Such a shared world novel, in common with earlier works such as *A World Named Cleopatra* and *Medea*, has both the strengths and weaknesses of such a project. It is interesting to see what different authors make of it, given certain constraints and facts, giving several interpretations and experiments for the price of one. But there's



no room for development or follow-up of any one particular effort. All you get is a short story, even if the ideas could fuel a novel. Just when you are really interested, on you go to the next other-authored chapter. The overall sense of the 'novel' is jumbled and jerky. Despite being a continuous story, it has none of the feel of being a solid book. You must decide whether or not the interest of seeing familiar writers competing and playing off each other in a set piece is greater than the disappointment of reading only a chapter from your favourite author.

## HOT HEAD

by Simon Ings

(Grafton 0-586-21496-8;  
300 pp.; £4.99)

*Hot Head* deals with a warrior of the future, young Malise Arnim, who's been modified and trained to combat mankind's new enemies. These include Von Neumann machines, originally despatched to mine the Moon and outer planets, that have developed rogue intelligence and attacked Earth. Moonwolf has been defeated, but something stranger has emerged around Jupiter, and Malise's encounter with it years before may hold the key to a new threat.

Ings posits the development of intelligent Von Neumann machines, as well as an enforced ecologically caring society, both reasonable extrapolations. Nanotechnology doesn't appear, though space colonies and references to wars in our near future do. Given the possibility of machines such as Moonwolf, the role of Malise as human/machine fighter reads okay, although the actual hardware and physical location of her missions hides behind neuro-mancer-like iconic generalisations.

Although a straight chronological tale detailing the response to a threat to



the system, *Hot Head* is interspersed with flashbacks that are at times confusing until the reader realises what is happening. Perhaps strict chronological telling, albeit with time gaps of years in some instances, might have worked better. The depiction of a 'caring' Europe is interesting, but as much of the technology, such as 'data-fat', is alien to today's society, it's not readily visualisable.

This book is worth reading for several unusual reflections on how current society might evolve in the near future, but it is a bit flat, as the reader cannot become emotionally involved. This alien society confirms that the future is another country; perhaps this is an accurate and successful missive from a what-if time.

## EXPATRIA

by Keith Brooke

(Gollancz 0-575-04921-9;  
1991; 252 pp.; £13.99)

## EXPATRIA INCORPORATED

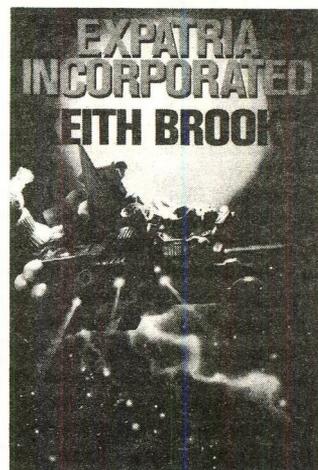
by Keith Brooke

(Gollancz 0-575-04922-7;  
May 1992; 319 pp.; £14.99)

The latest tale from Keith Brooke, expensively published in two volumes, concerns the interstellar human colony of Expatria. Just when the uneasy peace between tribes is breaking down, researchers allowed to investigate old technology manage to contact people in orbit, apparently living in the abandoned 'Ark' ships. They have received a message from an Earth ship, after a break of many years, and the second half deals with the arrival of this ship. Conflict arises between the Expatrian factions, both on the surface and in orbit, and the Earth personnel of the ship, members of the Holy Corporation of GenGen.

The action of the story could have been condensed down to one volume, but the development of character quirks and the description of Expatrian societies benefits from the length. We identify easily with the main character of the first book, and his 'rediscovery' of technology strokes the reader with superior knowledge, hooking his or her interest. As expected in an interstellar encounter, there's conflict and death, as the centuries since the last contact with Earth have made the societies into strangers.

The Earth society, developed after the Consumer Wars and the publication of 'The Third Testament', is an interesting extrapolation. There is always the feeling that such a society, abhorrent from today's point of view



and reminiscent of Islam and cults, won't win on Expatria, and that turns out to be the case. The main interest of a predictable ending is finding out which characters survive.

Overall these books add up to a good read, if a bit predictable. The developed Expatrian societies and the strange future Earth Corporation are worthwhile exercises. Some of the religious overtones won't be to everyone's taste, as Brooke appears to be trying to pass on a message about present Earth civilisation. Recommended for when the paperback(s) appear(s).

## BEDLAM

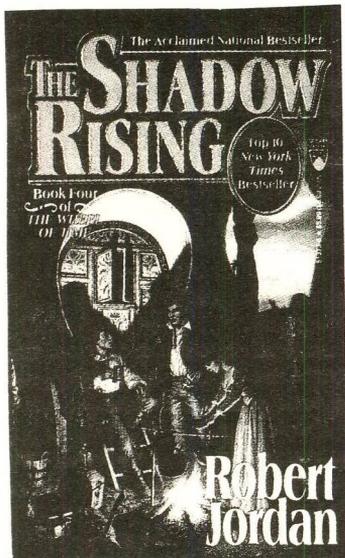
by Harry Adam Knight

(Gollancz 0-575-04995-2;  
May 1992; 215 pp.; £14.99)

*Bedlam* combines quite a few elements I've just happened to come across in other works recently. Either this is coincidence or the number of stock horror/sf clichés is growing. There's a serial torturer/killer (refer Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*); also someone acting as God in a strange reality (see *The Lawnmower Man*); people forced to experience their worst fears (similar to *The Fog*); and experimental drugs with unfortunate pside effects (*Firestarter* springs to mind).

What *Bedlam* does is to combine them in a fast-paced scenario in which a deranged serial killer is able to create his own alternate reality, trapping anyone who is in range. The action carries the novel, but there are a lot of gratuitous scenes along the way as people experience living hells. They just seem to be nasty neat ideas the author wants to include.

A reasonably short, compressed tale, *Bedlam* manages to be almost a pastiche of recent horror works. For that reason, some effects do not make as much impact as the author intended.

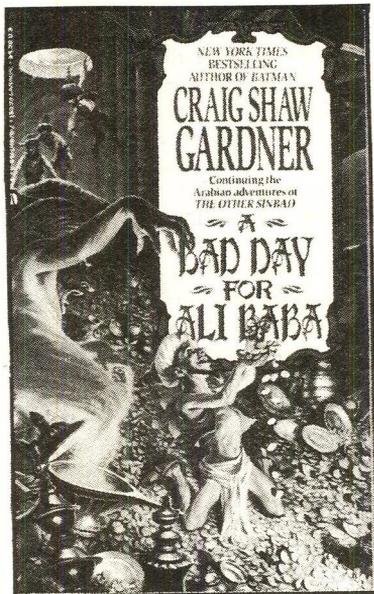


Good pacing and writing, but not novel or outré enough to become a classic.

**THE SHADOW RISING**  
by Robert Jordan  
(Tor 0-312-85431-5; Nov. 1992; 671 pp.; US\$24.95)

This fourth volume of the 'Wheel of Time' series continues the tale of Rand, once humble shepherd boy, now proclaimed 'The Dragon Reborn'. Because members of Rand's band of followers are spread across the country on vital missions, Jordan tells his story in chapter chunks. Therefore the whole book moves rather slowly towards a final confrontation. For those already versed in the tale, in this volume Rand battles with the mysterious Aiel people and their ruined sacred city; Perrin fights to protect his homeland; and Elayne and Nynaeve face the Black Ajah in the western coastal city of Tanchico. There's bloodshed, encounters with Forsaken, rampaging Trollocs — pretty much what you'd expect.

This volume has a few interesting developments — progressions along the apparent path of prophecy — but no major shocks or upheavals. Jordan just expands the details of his plot, still keeping much hidden from the reader, and it looks as if there will be another four volumes or so to unravel all the details. One feels that Rand will ultimately succeed, but which companions will he lose along the way? How will the final battle be fought? It's definitely capital-E epic fantasy, with clear Good and Evil sides, and enough fascination to make Evil somewhat attractive.



**A BAD DAY FOR ALI BABA**  
by Craig Shaw Gardner  
(Ace 0-441-04676-2; Sep. 1992; 248 pp.; US\$4.50)

This second chronicle of 'The Other Sinbad', in another Gardner three-some (does he write anything else?) retells the story of Ali Baba, who manages to meet up with Thirty-Eight Thieves, Aladdin, (The Other) Sinbad and a demon named Ozzie, amongst others, while having sundry adventures.

While sticking to major points of the original story, Gardner's embellishments are entertaining, and seem to work better than in the earlier volume. The tale of a poor woodcutter getting in over his head still appeals, and Gardner's touch is surer this time. It will be interesting to see if the forthcoming third (and final?) book caps the series or merely tiredly echoes what's gone before.

## VALENTINE

by S. P. Somtow  
(Gollancz 0-575-05018-7;  
June 1992; 383 pp.; £14.99)

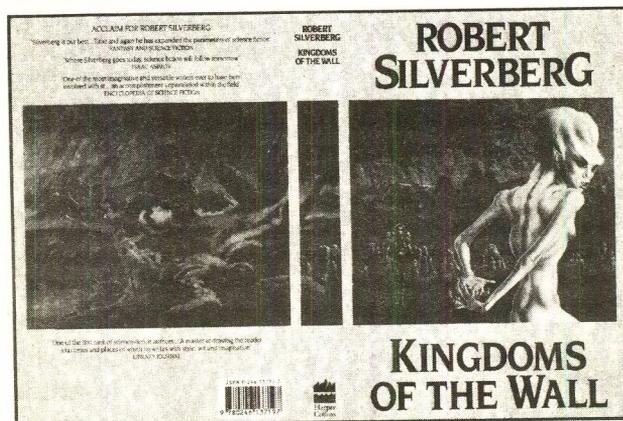
With *Valentine: Return to Vampire Junction*, Somtow continues the story of Timmy Valentine, once a teen rock idol, seemingly forever a vampire. The sequel focuses on the search for a Valentine lookalike to star in a film based on his rock-idol life, and the planning and execution of the shoot. Valentine himself is off stage for most of the book, and it's the people who seek his power gathering round the film crew who control the action and events.

As in the earlier *Vampire Junction*, there's plenty of blood and guts, and again they are explained away as 'special effects' to the public when they occur on tv sets. Somtow remains true to his depiction of a vampire — that the beliefs of the victim affect their reaction to 'traditional' weapons such as garlic — though he can hardly 'explain' the vampire's ability to change shape. This time Somtow explains Timothy's vampiric origins, but does not tie up all the loose ends, and there's the possibility of another volume in the series. The tale is very atmospheric and earthy, with violence and blood as necessary ingredients, as the protagonists fight for dark supernatural power. The question of good and evil is not directly addressed, and Timothy remains more a victim than a monster.

Recommended as a good vampire novel, but *Vampire Junction* should be read first for background material.

**KINGDOMS OF THE WALL**  
by Robert Silverberg  
(HarperCollins  
0-246-13719-3; 288 pp.;  
Dec. 1992; A\$32.95)

Robert Silverberg has written another serviceable sf novel. Like his recent *The Face of the Waters*, it con-



cerns a trek across an alien world. In this case the travellers are aliens, but the impact of humans on a world is again a main theme. The protagonists can easily be thought of a 'people' by the reader, and there's a straightforward journey of discovery through the 'kingdoms' of a mountain chain. The subtext deals with the obligations and delights of being part of a group of society, albeit a strangely ritualised one.

*Kingdoms of the Wall* offers entertainment and a well-told tale. You want to keep reading to find out what happens to the pilgrim band, to see what strange sights and people they will encounter. But in the end it's just an amusing divertissement. The outcome won't change your worldview, any commentary on the grief of the human condition is that we're part of a group, and the whole thing is perhaps just a bit too saccharine. It seems a comfortable tale, not confrontational or outrageous, and, like recent Silverberg novels, workmanlike and competent — no flame, no glory.

#### VIRTUAL MODE

by Piers Anthony

(Grafton 0-586-21346-5;

Dec. 1992; 381 pp.;

A\$11.95)

#### FRACTAL MODE

by Piers Anthony

(HarperCollins

0-246-13902-1; Dec. 1992;

302 pp.; A\$19.95)

Piers Anthony's latest series kicks off with Colene, a suicidal adolescent girl, who finds a strange man, Darius, lying by the side of the road. Soon she follows him off on a 'Mode', a pathway between dimensions, and meets a telepathic horse, a woman who remembers the future, and other wonders. Darius, Colene and some of the creatures they meet are the anchors of the Mode they travel on. Necessities such as food and clothes must be carried from each of their home realities if the group is to survive.

The basic plot device is that some, or even all, of the travelling group get trapped in a strange reality, and the others have to save them. This happens in numerous ways through the first two novels of the series. Who will be the new anchor and join the group? When will a member leave permanently? Such questions are supposed to keep our interest. However, the characters on the Mode are not particularly interesting or memorable, and whether they're in trouble or not

doesn't seem to affect them much. The reader soon gets blasé about another trap or complication and skips ahead to the expected rescue.

There's an Author's Note in both of these novels. As usual, Anthony details trivia from his life and some of the interactions with people who influenced these books in particular. Suicidal female teenagers and abused female children are his subject this time. Despite these messages, the 'Mode' books work reasonably well as adventure tales, but the trap-escape formula wears pretty thin. Even Anthony's earlier works, like the 'Cluster' series, are preferable.

#### CASABLANCA

by Michael Moorcock

(Gollancz 0-575-04528-0;

Dec. 1989; 267 pp.; £13.95)

This Moorcock collection is a strange miscellany, with a bit of everything for long-time fans and newcomers alike. There's a rewritten 'Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle', the title story is an episode of the Third World War, and there's an End of Time and the Chrononauts piece, plus original quirky works. The non-fiction articles and introductions cover such well-known authors as Harlan Ellison, Mervyn Peake and Angus Wilson, with subjects ranging from London through feminism onto pornography.

Previous knowledge of Moorcock's created literary worlds adds enjoyment to these pieces, but is not essential. The critical articles show a keen mind not afraid to speak its opinions, with Moorcock often writing from personal acquaintanceship or experience. Some of the stand-alone fiction comes across as a bit flat, with one great idea not effectively fleshed out — in particular 'The Frozen Cardinal', which first appeared in the *Other Edens* original fiction anthology.

Overall *Casablanca* is an interesting sampler of Moorcock's output through the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it seems to confirm that he's spending a lot of time revisiting his past works and worlds, reducing opportunities for creating new original works. *Casablanca* is a good insight into where Moorcock's been recently; I just hope it's not an indication of where he's heading now.

#### THE PAPER GRAIL

by James P. Blaylock

(Ace 0-441-65126-7;

May 1991; 371 pp.;

US\$17.95)

*The Paper Grail* is a tale of fantasy in the real world: a museum curator ventures northwest and encounters relatives, friends and villains. The prize is a paper sketch, supposedly of the legendary Grail, and along the way there's a 'ghost' machine, gunfire and true parents' revelations.

Told in a straightforward style, *The Paper Grail* blends the fantastic elements with the account of the strange society in which the narrator arrives. With ageing hippy communes, families of 'gluers' and desperate real estate developers, the fact of a supernatural storm comes as just another disaster, up there with truck theft and arson.

Very much in the vein of Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs*, Blaylock's book succeeds in a delightful blend of updated myth and a modern community, albeit a somewhat outré one. The characters are interesting and quirky; everyday things like jumpers and paperweights have their place; and it's an interesting read. Recommended.

#### THE DARK BEYOND THE STARS

by Frank M. Robinson

(Tor 0-812-51383-5;

March 1992; 408 pp.;

US\$4.99)

On board a generation ship exploring the galaxy for signs of extraterrestrial life, a decision point is reached. The immortal obsessed captain wants to undertake a hundred-generation-long trip across a region of dark space to reach a new area of stars, a voyage with no planetfalls, nothing. Some crew members feel the ship won't make it, and look to Sparrow, a young technician, to lead them against the captain.

*The Dark Beyond the Stars* covers a few months aboard a Terran exploration vessel, but the chronicle also examines humanity as a whole, not just the major crew members featured. There is the moral question of whether a risk undertaken in pursuit of what a majority believe to be a chimaera is worth it, given the importance of the quest — extraterrestrial life. Mutiny and murder play a part, along with their associated rights and wrongs, as Sparrow discovers what he must become to save the ship and his friends.

As the puzzle and background his-

## CASTLE OF DAYS

by Gene Wolfe

(Tor 0-312-85209-6;

December 1992; 447 pp.;

US\$22.95/A\$32)

*Castle of Days* begins with three pages of acknowledgments, showing the extent to which it is a book of reprints.

Part One contains the text of *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, a collection originally published in 1981, which contains 18 stories copyrighted between 1968 and 1980. Most appeared in original fiction anthologies such as *Orbit* or in genre magazines such as *F&SF*. About 200 pages (approximately 10 pages per tale), it's a reprint of short stories, all collected before and loosely linked to appropriate (US) holidays — hence the title of that collection.

Part Two is *The Castle of the Otter*. It includes 11 pieces about the first four volumes of Wolfe's 'The Book of the New Sun' series. This originally appeared from Ziesing in 1983 and later from the US SF Book Club. Only one of these pieces had appeared before that publication. Again, each is short: about 10 pages per item.

The final section, 'Castle of Days', is itself split into three sections: 'Writers', 'Writing' and 'Books', covering material from 1982 to 1992. Much of it is collected here for the first time: excerpts from letters, unpublished articles and recent writings. Two of Wolfe's conference speeches are included (from Aussie-

con II, 1985, and the Conference of the Fantastic, 1991). The 29 pieces of this section average about 4.5 pages each.

Overall the serious Wolfe collector receives only about 142/447 pages (32 per cent) of new material. The rest you probably already had in hard cover anyway. If you are a casual browser, you get a lot of short pieces for your money (58 at 40c each). If you have no background in Wolfe's writing, particularly the 'New Sun' sequence, you might be a bit lost. Even the letters and articles are only really pertinent if you know the written work of the people concerned.

Wolfe fans will buy *Castle of Days* anyway; you don't need any recommendation from me. Casual short story readers would be better off buying *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, which should still be available in paperback.

But what if you're somewhere in between?

The fiction includes pieces like 'La Befana', 'How the Whip Came Back' and 'Car Sinister', which illustrate Wolfe's range from extraterrestrial sf through to fantasy that verges on horror. The publications in which they first appeared are long out of print. Here is a good sampler of Wolfe's minor work from the period.

Wolfe's best short fiction appears in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories* and *Other Stories*. Like *Endangered Species* and *Storeys From the Old Hotel*, the 'Book of Days' is a nice addition to your collection.

*Castle of Days* might be your only chance to pick up 'The Castle of the Otter'. The Ziesing small press edition is expensive, if still available, and US Book Club editions can't be purchased in Australia. There is no guarantee that this current edition will see paperback. Included are fascinating articles on such topics as how 'The Book of the New Sun' came to be written, background on the poems/songs and strange words used in the text, a joke from each of the main characters, and the basis for the cavalry descriptions used in those books. If you know what those teasers mean, or have heard of the original book, you'll have bought this omnibus already.

The final section offers such a potpourri of short pieces that it's hard to categorise. Letter extracts do say something to the general reader, but out of context they lose some of their impact. It's nice to see the speeches in print, but not really essential. Did the publisher feel that a 300-page book, mostly reprints, wouldn't be enough for readers, and that a filler should be added? Confusingly, there are touches of fiction in this section, and indeed in 'The Castle of the Otter'. There's commentary on 'The Book of the New Sun' here as well, and playfulness in its chapter titles ('Where Castle?' and 'Peace of My Mind').

Sorry for the mixed summary, but the book is such a hodge-podge that it's not going to please everyone. There will be parts that read like 'the Book of Gold', as Wolfe puts it, and others that will bore you silly.

tory of the ship are revealed, the reader becomes involved with Sparrow, his companions and their plight. Frank Robinson sets up an interesting scenario and changes the situation, as well as explaining it, by new information. The technology of the ship is relegated to the background, and personal interactions form the meat of the plot.

Recommended for entertainment value as an exciting yarn.

## ALTERNATE PRESIDENTS

edited by Mike Resnick

(Tor 0-812-51192-1;

Feb. 1992; 466 pp.; US\$4.99)

With stories by 28 authors, covering a period from 1789 to 1988, *Alternate Presidents* offers a lot within its 466 pages. Here are stories that give us the alternative reality had particular

US Presidential candidates won in particular years of our recent history. Two of the stories also appeared in *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* in 1991, but all claim to have been written for this anthology.

Because of the limitations of the theme, some of the stories read much like each other, but the diversity of authors guarantees some variety and a few outstanding tales. Probably the most effective stories occur in the last section of the collection. Because the stories are arranged in order of chronological setting, the final tales, set in times the authors have lived through, come across with greatest impact. 'Suppose They Gave a Peace . . .' by Susan Schwartz describes a reality in which McGovern won in 1972 and immediately began withdrawing troops from Vietnam. 'Demarche to Iran' by Alexis A. Gilliland concerns

Ford's handling of the hostage crisis. Both these stories remain in the reader's mind as intriguing possibilities. The earlier stories, however interesting, are too far removed in time to give an emotional impact for most readers.

Overall the collection is excellent as a 'what-if' intellectual exercise, and the authors do a serviceable job, giving the strictures of the theme. But *Alternate Presidents* is too dry a collection to attract the casual reader. Readers who would be interested in the later stories will probably be bored by most of the earlier ones. Recommended only for alternate history fans.

### THE CRYSTAL PALACE

by Phyllis Eisenstein

(Grafton 0-586-20729-5;

April 1992; 416 pp.; A\$10.95)

*The Crystal Palace* tells the tale of a sorcerer, Cray Ormoru, who sees a beautiful girl in a magic mirror that shows your heart's desire. Using his demon friends he locates her and gradually wins her trust. Eventually he admits he loves her. In order to fulfil his ambitions he must defeat her evil grandfather.

Phyllis Eisenstein has created an unusual world, with its demons of Air, Water, Ice and Fire, as well as sorcery and magic. Much of the background of the human realm remains vague, as only the immediate locales around the characters are described. The locations of various 'castles' in the human realm are also too vague, and a bit contradictory. The heroine, Aliza, lives in a region totally strange to Cray, virtually otherworldly, yet she is visited by her grandfather, who travels from his own castle, which in turn is in a land similar to Cray's. The properties and behaviours of the demons also vary throughout the book, and these inconsistencies interfere with the smooth flow of reading the novel.

There always seems to be an inevitability about Cray's success, and any tension set up failed to grip this reader. Worth reading for the ideas and surprises of the magical world, *The Crystal Palace* has little action and no real puzzle to solve. Since it deals with few characters and locales, it hasn't the feel of an epic, but at least it's a stand-alone novel.

### THE POSITRONIC MAN

by Isaac Asimov and

Robert Silverberg

(Gollancz 0-575-04700-3;

1992; 223 pp.; £14.99)

This latest collaboration takes a 38-page novelette, 'The Bicentennial Man', and expands it to a 223-page novel. Is such an expansion warranted, particularly as the Hugo and Nebula Award-winning original story would be familiar to many readers? And why does Gollancz change the name of the novel-length versions (such as *Child of Time* and *The Positronic Man*) while the US publisher leaves the new versions with the same titles as the original shorter pieces?

Although it's been years since I read the original novelette 'The Bicentennial Man', I didn't find much new here. Perhaps Andrew carrying the

young girls down to the beach, and even the challenge to swim out to the rock may be new, and the novel version gives extra details about the robot's construction, but that's about it. The driving force of Andrew's progression from robot to 'man', achieved mainly via legislation, is still here, and can't be dressed up much, though Andrew seems a more pitiful case in the new version.

I'd only recommend this novel if you haven't seen the original story.

### THE DRAGON KNIGHT

by Gordon R. Dickson

(Grafton 0-586-21327-9;

Dec. 1992; 503 pp.; £4.99)

### THE DRAGON AT WAR

by Gordon R. Dickson

(Ace 0-441-75698-0;

Nov. 1992; 375 pp.;

US\$18.95)

Continuing his series begun with *The Dragon and the George*, Gordon Dickson has now reached Volume 4, *The Dragon at War*. Each novel tells of a familiar company of heroes on a quest against evil, defending their homes. The two latest titles involve an expedition to France to thwart an evil sorcerer and prevent a disastrous battle, and an alliance between the French and the sea serpents that threatens all of England.

These tales are entertaining because of they tell of a twentieth-century couple struggling to come to terms with an alternative fourteenth century in which magic works. Dickson plays with conflicting ways of thinking, while the reader wants to know how the main characters will escape each predicament. We can see that they will escape and survive, even if one companion dies along the way.

These are entertaining books that move at a fast pace, with action and fighting as well as commentary on scientific thinking. The good guys are just a bit too pure, and the bad ones wholly evil, but that's acceptable in Dickson's alternate world.

### THE CATERPILLAR'S QUESTION

by Piers Anthony and

Phillip José Farmer

(Ace 0-441-09488-0;

Oct. 1992; 264 pp.;

US\$18.95)

This collaboration by two of the biggest names in sf and fantasy has some interesting parallels with the works of both of them, but it hardly towers above the past achievements of either of them.

In the Author's Note Piers Anthony admits to writing the first chapter. As expected, it contains a traumatised girl who chooses not to speak, a character similar to ones from his own books. Once the main characters reach an alien world, their explorations have the feel of the adventures in Farmer's 'Tiers' series.

*The Caterpillar's Question* is a competent novel with a mixture of fantasy (a portal between worlds, hidden in a rock) and sf (advanced alien technology and evolved creatures), perhaps a bit uneasy in either camp, although the technology could be advanced enough to be considered magic.

But is this tale of alienation, bloodshed and people being forced to do things against their will worth the read? Although the main characters are only a few individuals, they are manipulated into a situation in which they can influence the sort of empire or regime that will rule on a galactic scale. It sounds implausible, and the details don't really make this reader believe in it. There is no willing suspension of disbelief, no spark of wonder.

### ARISTOI

by Walter Jon Williams

(Grafton 0-586-21388-0;

1993; 448 pp. A\$12.95)

Far in the bright future, the best of humanity, the Aristoi, exist as masters of hi-tech. They've conquered their individual daemons, personality shards capable of independent action in the oneirochronon (a sort of virtual reality communications world), and their multi-tasked existence is supposed to serve the people, the Demos. Until Aristoi begin to die, with others snuffed as a by-blow, to protect the fact that someone is not content to serve any longer, and wants to play God...

Williams has fun with this future: nanotechnology, both benign and dangerous, terraforming, and virtually doing magic with advanced technology. The text layout attempts to show the simultaneous exchanges between inner and outer consciousness as the protagonist's daemons help conduct his affairs, and in some cases preserve his life.

Williams has created a group who have transcended humanity, and thus cannot be fully described in the novel, giving the reader a feeling of blandness — that something is missing.

But what's here is entertaining and believable within its own assumptions.

— Alan Stewart,  
April 1992–May 1993

ANDY SAWYER has been many things in his life, but suddenly he has been elevated to the position of new Administrator/Librarian of the Science Fiction Foundation, recently relocated from London to Liverpool. I trust that his new duties will not prevent Andy from continuing to write book reviews for *SFC*.

**A FIRE UPON THE DEEP**  
by Vernor Vinge  
(Millennium 1-85798-003-4;  
391 pp.; \$8.99 tp)

*A Fire Upon the Deep* is the debut title from Millennium, the new British publishing house, and it's really rather stunning. Set in the far future where humanity and other species share a galaxy divided into concentric geographical zones where, apparently, different physical laws can determine the rate of technological development, it's an old-fashioned race-against-time story with underlying metaphysical implications.

One feature of the outlying regions of the galaxy is the ability of its civilisations to transcend into godlike if ephemeral Powers. A spaceship on the run from such a civilisation, which has become a Perversion or Dark Power of immense and dangerous capabilities, has crashed on a remote and backward planet inhabited by a race where individual intelligence is shared among multiple bodies. Two children survive the crash, and they are captured by opposing factions among the natives.

On the way to rescue them — but, more importantly, to investigate the possibility that this escaping ship possessed a clue to the defeat of the Power — is a rescue ship crewed by a librarian, a resurrectee from an earlier human civilisation, and two plantlike 'skroderiders'. Meanwhile, forces under the control of the Perversion are pursuing them.

Vinge embodies his milieu with life and detail, creating a vast background made up of the sometimes ambiguous messages passed back and forth over the galactic communications systems and the long and involved history of his civilisations, bubbling up from the Unthinking Depths and the Slow Zone through the Beyond to the Transcend where the Powers dwell. Equally gripping is his picture of the 'Tines' and their reaction to the idea of a life form that has only one physical member per individual, and the equivalent of Machiavellian politics and inter-state rivalry that follows this discovery.

Only in the last chapter or so does it seem that Vinge is rushing things to get the story over with, and this feeling might be put down to the fact that *A Fire Upon the Deep* is, like the space operas of Iain M. Banks, the kind of New Golden Age far-future epic that I keep reading sf for, find so rarely, and didn't want to lose. It's a beautifully wrought, imaginative adventure story; less jokily blackly surreal than Banks's work but still a gloriously addictive damn-that-was-my-bus-stop-that's-just-gone-past book that, however much I want to avoid ending a review with a cliché, I just *couldn't put down*.

**GERALD'S GAME**  
by Stephen King  
(Hodder & Stoughton  
0-340-57493-3; 352 pp.;  
£14.99)

A mildly kinky S&M game goes wrong, and Jessie ends up handcuffed to the bed in a cabin miles from anywhere with her husband dead from a heart attack. At first it didn't look as though King was going to make this idea stretch to novel length, particularly as we'd gone through a similar if more psychological bondage-torment in *Misery*, even with the subplot of Jessie's abuse by her father during an eclipse of the sun (which leads to some powerful if obvious images) to flesh out the only possible linear plot of how the hell she is going to get out of this situation. Tense, yes; some of the little problem-solving sequences — such as showing how Jessie manages to get the glass of water from the shelf above the bed — are masterly, but good short-story material padded out nevertheless. Then during the night, Jessie has a visitor.

Here the story leaps into another plane. *Gerald's Game* is psychological horror (though there are a couple of tiny references to Castle Rock and the events of *Needful Things* right at the end, as if King just couldn't keep from worrying at that particular bone) but the psychology is distinctly abnormal, and I'm not talking about the hand-

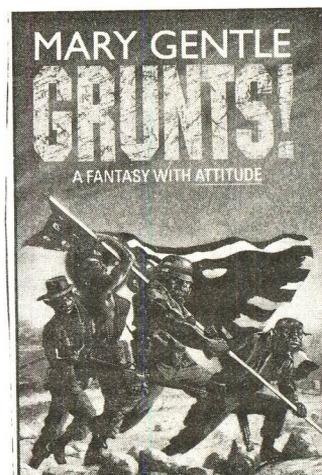
cuffs. Various strands — the shackling, the sexual abuse (King uses to great effect the idea that multiple personality is often the result of childhood abuse) and the disintegration and reintegration of Jessie's sanity — are interwoven into a nightmarish story that is much better than I thought it would be when I paused after the first couple of chapters.

More than the overblown *Needful Things*, *Gerald's Game* seems to take the different levels of horror on which King tries to operate and make them one.

**GRUNTS!**  
by Mary Gentle  
(Bantam 0-593-01956-3;  
1992; 429 pp.; \$14.99)

*Grunts!* is very different from *Rats and Gargoyles* and *The Architecture of Desire*; it comes from the Mary Gentle of the spoof-shared-world *Villains!*, with its subversive orc's-eye view of Tolkienesque fantasy.

The Last Battle is about to begin when Ashnak and his band of orcs discover new weaponry among a dragon's hoard. Like your usual gold rings, these have mystic writing on them; but in this case it's not incantations but words like 'KALISH-NIKOV'. . . . And so the Orc Marines are born, violently romping their way through a story that has more DAKKA-DAKKA-DAKKA-FOOMs in it than



anything since I last read *The Victor*, and takes in such tasteful minor characters as the halfling thieves Will and Ned Brandiman (aka The Little Sisters of Mortification) and their Mother Magda (alias Madam Whip). Somewhere along the line a *real* marine from our world appears, along with a race of cybermech insectoids bent on galactic domination, and a Dark Lord who has decided that the ballot box might be an easier route to world domination than a Ravening Horde.

It sounds enormous fun for someone fed up with the endless cosiness of post-Tolkien fantasy, and it is — until the hearty subversion gets a bit wearisome and you suddenly realise that not all the jokes are coming off. Much as I love Mary Gentle's work, I have to say that while this would have been wonderful as a short story or even a novella, it feels curiously incomplete as a novel. There are what look like various attempts to set up a running series of gags, but the only one that steams through to the end is the basic situation about Orcs as marines tearing limbs off halflings, raping elves, and saying 'Yo!' and 'kick ass' and generally being *really mean motherfuckers*. Which isn't quite amusing enough to last 400-plus pages.

#### SERPENT MAGE

by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman  
(Bantam 0-593-02386;  
1992; 407 pp.; £14.99)

Weis and Hickman write epic fantasy. None times out of ten this means role-playing Tolkien-clone elf-dwarf-wizard stuff that almost exactly misses the point of the original, and Weis and Hickman made their names with the 'Dragonlance' books that fall precisely into this category. But it would be a mistake to judge their 'Deathgate' series (of which this is the fourth volume) on past work.

Over the past couple of years I've completely changed my mind on this pair.

The 'Deathgate' cycle is a long and complex series based on the premise that after a titanic conflict between two races of wizards (the Sartan and the Patryn), the victorious Sartan have split the world (our future Earth, but at what time is unclear) into four realms of Sky, Stone, Fire and Sea and imprisoned their enemies in the murderous labyrinth. After long eons, Haplo the Patryn is sent out by his Lord to explore the sundered worlds and prepare for their conquest. Among the companions Haplo picks up are Alfred, a bum-

bling Sartan given to fainting fits, and a highly mysterious dog.

Volume One (*Dragon Wing*) was irritatingly readable.

Its successor, *Elven Star*, shattered my prejudice against these writers. It has some of the best comic fantasy I've read for a long while. Most US fantasy is appallingly hearty. Even when it tries to be funny it rarely goes beyond whimsy. *Elven Star* showed — moment of moments! — that some American fantasy writers could poke fun at the genre, even at their own previous writing, and contained some rich stream-of-consciousness stuff from an ultimate in dotty wizards, looking at everything from Middle-earth to moon landings with tongue placed firmly in cheek.

*Fire Sea* brought some dark contrasts, with necromancy and the deepening relationship between Alfred and Haplo.

Now *Serpent Mage* sees Haplo explore the water-world of Chelestra, where the sea water washes off his magical runes and mysterious dragons have threatened the peaceful human, elf and dwarf races.

There's an elf in drag, a doughy dwarf-maiden, and Alfred again, who awakes the Council of Sartans who sundered the realm in the first place, and then can't decide where his true loyalties lie, just as the dragons are telling Haplo that this old fool who falls over as soon as you look at him is really the Serpent mage. Whatever that is. And the dog continues to mysteriously appear and sit around as if to say 'I am an important plot device. Pay attention.'

*Serpent Mage* isn't perfect, and if you loathe this sort of fantasy utterly, be careful if you approach this. Yes, there are *still* elves, dwarves, etc. There are hints that we are within a vast theological tract. Occasionally some of the mystery seems obfuscation as events that both reader and characters know are illogical are waved aside to instill the sense of suspense that will, presumably, be resolved over the next three books, which will be the saga's action and climax. But it seems churlish to criticise genre fantasy writers for not spelling out everything in words of one syllable and for making a determined effort to take a moribund form one step forward.

This I think Weis and Hickman have genuinely done. So far the 'Deathgate' series embodies a much more creative approach to its sources than any other similar series. There are suggestions of hard science fiction beneath the language of fantasy; the world-building concept (largely Hickman's)

is wonderfully ambitious, owing as much to quantum theory and higher geometry as to *The Lord of the Rings*, and, above all, the pair are not above some sly nudging of the reader brought up on nothing but role-playing fantasy. Yes, there is life beyond 'Dragonlance'.

#### ONLY YOU CAN SAVE MANKIND

by Terry Pratchett  
(Doubleday 0-385-403089;  
1992; 172 pp.; £9.99)

Johnny is engaged in the teenage male's second favourite activity: zapping alien ships on his computer screen. Then they surrender.

Everyone knows that the ravaging alien hordes aren't supposed to *do* that, but Johnny finds himself in an awkward moral dilemma while the alien Captain has to persuade her fleet that a negotiated peace settlement is possible with a race whose finger is perpetually on the button marked 'fire!'

Pratchett parodies computer games and the *Aliens* mentality, though the best part of this book for children (following the 'Truckers' trilogy and the reissue of *The Carpet People*) is the way it's built upon character. The kids — Wobble, Bigmac, Yo-less and the intensely competitive Kirsty (aka Sigourney) are wonderful misfits, but it's Johnny, stoically wrestling with Trying Times (his parents' marriage is disintegrating) who holds the thing together in his dogged search for wisdom. Even a game can have moral implications for real life. Just why do we play all these shooting-up games in the first place?

Having said *that* . . . the story is good, the writing and observations are (as always) sharp, but this is not perhaps Pratchett at his best, and I think it's because there's a bit too much metaphysical and actual social realism in here. But you know you're enjoying Pratchett when you quote bits out loud to a half-comprehending family; this has quite a high quote rate, and I loved the joke about Johnny's nickname. (It's obvious; but I'll bet Pratchett put it in to worry prudish librarians.)

#### A TASTE OF BLOOD WINE

by Freda Warrington  
(Pan 0-33-32578-7; 1992;  
£8.99 tp)

It is a few years after the First World War. Karl von Wultendorf, an Austrian, charms himself into the family of Professor Neville because of his scientific reputation. Karl believes that through the scientist's work he

can examine his own nature as a vampire — indestructible, able to move in another dimension called the Crystal Ring, and a passionate feeder upon the blood and life essence of humans.

The professor's daughter — shy, dutiful Charlotte — is attracted to her father's new research assistant. And the feeling is mutual . . .

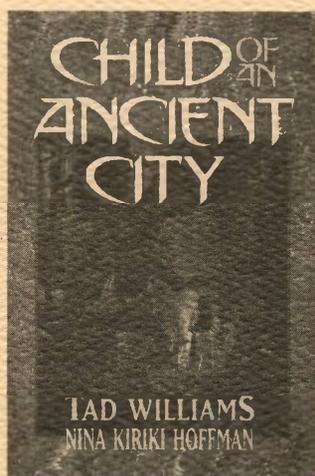
All very Gothic. And in fact, this is a really good vampire novel, possessing — as do all good vampire novels — a slightly different explanation of the vampire (no nonsense about garlic, the sun's rays, and crosses here), a romantically decadent eroticism (humans can respond to a vampire's bite as if to a drug), and a really powerful villain (the King Vampire Kristian), against whom both Karl and Charlotte are almost powerless. The way Warrington charts the choices Karl and Charlotte have to make, the different viewpoints of human and vampire, and how they may possibly be reconciled (or not) is worthy of the comparison to the picture composed by Anne Rice in *Interview with a Vampire*.

Yet is this a classic vampire story? Almost, almost. But the most memorable line comes on page 190, where Karl reassures Charlotte that 'I do not generally feed on people to whom I have been introduced'. Do you not, on reading that, immediately flash 'Alice — Mutton: Mutton — Alice'? After reading that, I found it hard to recapture the willing seduction that you need for losing yourself in the depiction of sensuality, alienation, and the conflict of the Will to Power and the Desire to Love in terms of biting people in the neck until they die.

I did it, though, and loved the story nevertheless. Apart from that one line, it's expertly handled and touches all the right erogenous zones. It's also quite dazzlingly good in the way the author incorporates the metaphorical and the actual in her 'explanation' of vampirism right at the end, an explanation I don't recall being put in quite that form. What it means for the next instalment I'm not sure, but it will be interesting to find out.

**CHILD OF AN ANCIENT CITY**  
by Tad Williams and  
Nina Kiriki Hoffman  
(Legend 0-7126-5499; 1992;  
£7.99 tp)

A novella in trade paperback has to be good to be worth the cover price, and at first this leads you to believe that it won't be, as *Child of an Ancient City* is an 'Arabian Nights' sort of story, and that usually means



soggy pastiche at best, if not the sort of writing that conjures up childhood memories of unfunny adults in silly costumes spouting incomprehensible off-colour jokes at Christmas pantomimes.

However, Williams is always a storyteller worth giving a second chance. As the story narrated by Masrur al-Adan (there's resonance in that name) unfolds, and we hear about what dogged his footsteps in the Caucasus, it becomes a powerful dark fantasy. The ability to tell stories turns out to be more than an after-the-banquet accomplishment: it is what keeps Masrur and his comrades alive.

For once, the tone is just right, because the focus is not upon exotic cliché but storytelling; not just *this* story but how stories can provide the only human contact for something unutterably damned. The result of the storytelling contest is, of course, a foregone conclusion, but there is even more to humanity than the shared pleasure of a story. At greater length this would have been overblown, but as it is *Child of an Ancient City* is a memorable story with touches of horror and humour — especially the final scene that recapitulates events in a totally different key.

**DOOMSDAY BOOK**  
by Connie Willis  
(NEL 0-45-57986; 1992;  
527 pp.; £15.95)

This is one hell of a book. At one point, I looked up from it. One character had died, a character for whom I was mentally, with the protagonist, begging and pleading with the author not to die *did* die, and I had tears in my eyes and was swearing at Connie Willis, 'It's not fair!'

And of course, it isn't fair.

Interviewed in *Locus*, Connie Willis spoke about *Doomsday Book* being a kind of an end-of-the-world book in the way it examines an event which to

contemporaries was the equivalent of a nuclear holocaust today: the Black Death of the fourteenth century. People died apparently at random, from a cause no one could fathom; we read in history books that a third to a half of national populations, entire communities in some areas, were wiped out. Willis tries to make the reader feel how this must have felt.

A time traveller is sent, over the objections of her supervisor, to observe a fourteenth-century Oxford village. The supervisor is right. The only technician who knows what he is doing collapses with a fever as one of the twenty-first century's many epidemics sweeps Oxford while Kivrin, picked up ill and confused and fostered by a family with troubles of their own, discovers with horror that she is twenty years out of time and can't find her way back to the pick-up point. On both sides of the time link, a savagely ironic tragi-comedy is played out.

The novel alternates between past and future, with each level playing back on the other. Not all of this is successful. The vivid medieval scenes are among the best historicals I've ever read, with Willis emphasising the differences and similarities between our society and a society in which death was far more commonplace and far less understood than in our own. Her characters — in particular the children Agnes and Rosemund and the illiterate, incompetent, heroic priest Father Roche — are brilliantly conceived. In comparison, the future-Oxford milieu seems to be written through the haze of an American's viewpoint of dons and dreaming spires, yet the closing scenes are wonderful, as the themes and character relationships of the medieval scenes are restated. *Doomsday Book* is an emotion wringer, and the comedy inherent in the similar resolutions of both central dilemmas is bitter indeed, but what else can you expect, given the appalling situation that unfolds before Kivrin? Yet Willis has her two main characters achieve some form of transcendence of the bleakness and incompetence and helplessness around them. In two words: they care.

This is one of the few sf novels I'd well imagine hyped into the bestseller charts because of its emotion-tugging, blockbuster elements. Both the author and the hackneyed concept of 'bestseller novel' deserve such a fate. It would do them both good. Best sf novel of the year, I'd say.

— Andy Sawyer,  
July–December 1992

# Best books read during 1992

## compiled by Justin Ackroyd of Slow Glass Books

**Editor's note:** The following lists were sent to Justin Ackroyd to include in *Slow Glass Catalogue* No. 57, April 1993. The comments are by Justin. I don't know what Justin has against short stories. The only Gillespie list he deleted was Best Short Stories 1992, so I've included it.

The following lists are for my and your entertainment, and to get some idea of what people read and enjoyed during 1992, plus a few of the worst of 1992. Amongst these lists you might find someone who reflects your taste in books, and as a result find new writers to read. Most books listed are available from **Slow Glass Books, GPO Box 2708X, Melbourne, Vic. 3001** (phone: (03) 489-8416), so if you're interested in any particular titles, drop me a line and I'll quote you a price. Have fun!!!

### JUSTIN ACKROYD

#### Science fiction/horror:

*Is* by Joan Aiken  
*Her Pilgrim Soul* by Alan Brennert  
*Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede* by Bradley Denton  
*The Exile Kiss* by George Alec Effinger  
*The Dark Beyond the Stars* by Frank M. Robinson  
*The Hollow Man* by Dan Simmons  
*Bug Jack Barron* by Norman Spinrad  
*Stations of the Tide* by Michael Swanwick  
*Steel Beach* by John Varley

#### Crime and mystery:

*In the Midst of Death* by Lawrence Sanders  
*The Sins of the Fathers* by Lawrence Sanders  
*Nibbled to Death by Ducks* by Robert Campbell  
*Whiskey River* by Loren D. Estleman  
*Tourist Season* by Carl Hiaasen  
*A Red Death* by Walter Mosely  
*White Butterfly* by Walter Mosely  
*Indemnity Only* by Sara Paretsky  
*Deadlock* by Sara Paretsky

#### Mainstream fiction:

*Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky  
*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison  
*The Cement Garden* by Ian McEwan  
*The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

### BRUCE GILLESPIE

#### Science fiction and fantasy:

*Tehanu* by Ursula K. Le Guin  
*The Architecture of Fear* edited by Katherine Cramer and Peter D. Pautz  
*The Bridge of Birds* by Barry Hughart  
*The Destiny Makers* by George Turner  
*Unicorn Mountain* by Michael Bishop  
*Remaking History* by Kim Stanley Robinson  
*Call to the Edge* by Sean McMullen  
*And Disregards the Rest* by Paul Voermans

#### Crime and mystery:

*Guardian Angel* by Sara Paretsky  
*For the Sake of Elena* by Elizabeth George  
*A Great Deliverance* by Elizabeth George  
*Body of Evidence* by Patricia Cornwell  
*A Suitable Vengeance* by Elizabeth George  
*Indemnity Only* by Sara Paretsky

#### Mainstream fiction and non-fiction:

*The Last Magician* by Janette Turner Hospital  
*The Birds Fall Down* by Rebecca West  
*Was . . .* by Geoff Ryman  
*Woodbrook* by David Thomson  
*The Adventures of Augie March* by Saul Bellow  
*Spit Delany's Island* by Jack Hodgins  
*After Silence* by Jonathan Carroll  
*The Last Picture Show* by Larry McMurtry

#### Short stories:

'By the River' by Jack Hodgins (*Spit Delany's Island*)

'The Fetch' by Robert Aickman (*The Architecture of Fear*)

'Nesting Instinct' by Scott Baker (*The Architecture of Fear*)

'For Mr Voss or Occupant' by Janette Turner Hospital (*More Crimes for a Summer Christmas*)

'Follow Me' by Marele Day (*More Crimes for a Summer Christmas*)

'Penelope Comes Home' by M. J. Engh (*The Architecture of Fear*)

'Rainbow Bridge' by Kim Stanley Robinson (*Remaking History*)

'A History of the Twentieth Century, with Illustrations' by Kim Stanley Robinson (*Remaking History*)

'Three Women of the Country' by Jack Hodgins (*Spit Delany's Island*)

'The Eyes of the Green Lancer' by Sean McMullen (*Call to the Edge*)

**JONATHAN STRAHAN** (one of the editors/publishers of *Eidolon*):

#### Fantasy:

*Lord Kelvin's Machine* by James P. Blaylock  
*Paperjack* by Charles de Lint  
*The Road to Paradise* by Keith Roberts  
*Was . . .* by Geoff Ryman

#### Mainstream fiction:

*The Crow Road* by Iain Banks  
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain  
*Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson

#### Horror:

*Lost Souls* by Poppy Z. Brite

#### Crime and mystery:

*Where Is Joe Merchant?* by Jimmy Buffet  
*Body of Evidence* by Patricia Cornwell  
*Lullaby Town* by Robert Crais  
*Staking the Angel* by Robert Crais  
*The Monkey's Raincoat* by Robert Crais  
*G is for Gumshoe* by Sue Grafton  
*A Deadly Shade of Gold* by John D. MacDonald  
*A Purple Place for Dying* by John D. MacDonald  
*Last One Left* by John D. MacDonald  
*Nightmare in Pink* by John D. MacDonald  
*If I Ever Return, Pretty Peggy-O* by Sharyn McCrumb  
*The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* by Sharyn McCrumb  
*Killing Orders* by Sara Paretsky

#### Science fiction:

*Anvil of Stars* by Greg Bear  
*Count Geiger's Blues* by Michael Bishop  
*Chanur's Legacy* by C. J. Cherryh  
*Quarantine* by Greg Egan  
*Red Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson  
*Russian Spring* by Norman Spinrad  
*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson  
*Naming the Flowers* by Kate Wilhelm  
*Doomsday Book* by Connie Willis  
*A Bridge of Years* by Robert Charles Wilson  
*Castle of Days* by Gene Wolfe

**YVONNE ROUSSEAU** (Adelaide author and critic):

*Trottie True* by Caryl Brahms and S. J. Simon  
*Account Rendered* by Vera Brittain  
*The Player Comes Again* by Amanda Cross  
*Among Friends* by M. F. K. Fisher  
*Old Days, Old Ways* by Mary Gilmore  
*Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* by Germaine Greer  
*Opium and the Romantic Imagination* by Alethea Hayter

*Beat Not the Bones* by Charlotte Jay  
*The Last Farmer: An American Memoir* by Howard Kohn  
*The Collected Stories* by Jean Stafford

**MICHAEL CLARK** (Adelaide single malt critic):

*Little, Big* by John Crowley  
*LA Confidential* by James Ellroy  
*Unicorn Mountain* by Michael Bishop  
*Days of Atonement* by Walter Jon Williams  
*The Newtonian Casino* by Thomas A. Bass  
*The Witching Hour* by Anne Rice  
*Boy's Life* by Robert B. McCammon  
*The Great Mambo Chicken and the Transhuman Condition* by Ed Regis  
*The Ragged World* by Judith Moffett  
*Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede* by Bradley Denton  
*The Big Nowhere* by James Ellroy

**ALAN STEWART** (editor of *Thyme*):

*The Crow Road* by Iain Banks  
*A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving  
*Prayers to Broken Stones* by Dan Simmons  
*A Fire Upon the Deep* by Vernor Vinge  
*Stalin's Teardrops* by Ian Watson

**STEVEN MILLER** (budding author #1):

*Tales of the City* (first three in the series) by Armistead Maupin  
*Outside the Dog Museum* by Jonathan Carroll  
*Immortality* by Milan Kundera  
*Still Life With Woodpecker* by Tom Robbins  
*The White Hotel* by D. M. Thomas  
*Damage* by Josephine Hart  
*Memoirs of an Invisible Man* by H. F. Saint  
*The Oxford Dictionary* (It was a bad year!)  
*Maybe the Moon* by Armistead Maupin  
*Lost Futures* by Lisa Tuttle

**ANDREW SULLIVAN** (budding author #2):

#### Horror/dark fantasy:

*The Stand* (uncut) by Stephen King  
*Dracula* by Bram Stoker  
*Ghost Story* by Peter Straub  
*Summer of Night* by Dan Simmons  
*Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley  
*Tempter* by Nancy A. Collins  
*The Nightrunners* by Joe R. Lansdale  
*The Drive-In 2* by Joe R. Lansdale  
*The Drive-In* by Joe R. Lansdale

#### Fantasy:

*The Waste Lands* by Stephen King  
*Shoeless Joe* by W. P. Kinsella  
*The Story of the Stone* by Barry Hughart  
*Rumors of Spring* by Richard Grant  
*Flying in Place* by Susan Palwick  
*Flying Dutch* by Tom Holt  
*Infernal Devices* by K. W. Jeter  
*The Last Coin* by James P. Blaylock  
*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain

#### Science fiction:

*Desolation Road* by Ian McDonald  
*Sugar Rain* by Paul Park  
*Nothing Sacred* by Elizabeth Ann Scarborough  
*More than Human* by Theodore Sturgeon  
*Startide Rising* by David Brin  
*The Hollow Earth* by Randy Rucker  
*Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury  
*Raft* by Steven Baxter  
*The Postman* by David Brin  
*Arslan* by M. J. Engh

My thanks to everyone who sent in their lists. I'm sorry I couldn't use them all.