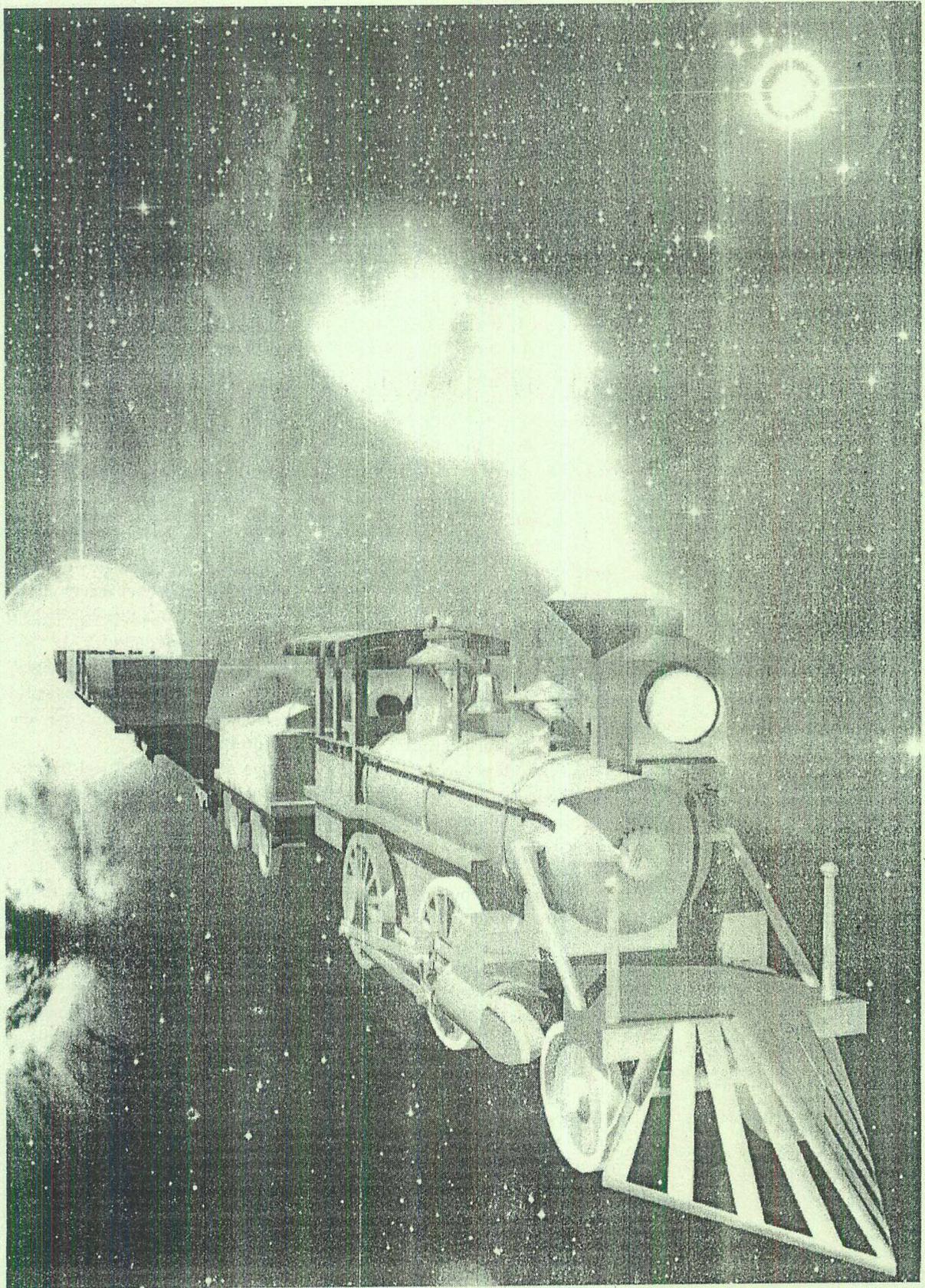


# Steam Engine Time



Issue 1

April 2000

## Steam Engine Time

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# We're Here Because We're Here

Bruce Gillespie

## Cover

*Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)*

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I'M ONLY ONE OF THREE EDITORS, BUT HERE'S MY STORY OF WHY WE'RE invading your mailbox with this new magazine ...

The first day of Aussiecon 3, September 1999, is where it started.

For the first time I met Paul Kincaid and Maureen Kincaid Speller. We felt we knew each other already, because for some years we had been corresponding as members of Acnestis, the British-based apa for people who (still) read books. We realised we had been on the same wavelength all along.

First day of the convention. First panel on which I was scheduled to speak. Maureen is on the panel, as well as John Douglas from New York and Bill Congreve from Sydney. Subject: Review and Criticism. General conclusions? Not many, but we decided that what is lacking in sf reviewing and criticism is what George Turner called the 'review article': much longer than a book review, but not overburdened by theory or other symptoms of pretension. In short, we longed for the sort of meaty article that used to be the staple of the serious fanzines. Remember *Speculation*, *Cypher*, *Australian Science Fiction Review* ... even *SF Commentary*?

Maureen and Paul and I had long talks over long beers during the next week or so. Was I was the person who actually suggested a transworld fanzine? Or was it Paul, excited by the possibilities offered for Internet file-swapping by such new programs as Microsoft Publisher?

Several ideas caught fire in the collective editorial nut. I feel that the best pieces from Acnestis should be resurrected, polished and presented to people who (a) haven't seen an issue of *SF Commentary* for awhile, and (b) don't receive *Vector* because they don't subscribe to the British Science Fiction Association. Paul and Maureen want a platform for publishing review articles. Paul saw, as I didn't, how easy it might be to publish on two continents simultaneously.

At the moment I'm not quite sure what will appear in *Steam Engine Time* No. 1. I've offered several of the best pieces from the *SF Commentary* files. I don't know which direction Paul and Maureen will take. Paul shows great élan in using Microsoft Publisher, but it drives me crazy. I'm preparing my files in MS Word, and trusting to Paul's design skills to make this magazine look good.

What, then, is happening to *SF Commentary*? I've made so many promises over the last two years and broken them all that I refuse to make more promises. The George Turner Special is nearly finished, but it's been nearly finished since April 1999. If I hadn't had to write two speeches for Aussiecon 3, it might even have appeared in September. There are hundreds of pages of superb material in the *SFC* files, but to avoid bankruptcy, Maureen, Paul and I are sticking to 40-page issues of *SET*. We believe there is no lack of interest Out There for the kind of fanzine we hope to develop. Let us know what you think. ♦

## The Instrumentality Saga

David Seed

DAVID SEED is a member of the English Department at Liverpool University. He is the editor of Liverpool University Press Science Fiction Texts and Studies series. He edited *Anticipations: Essays on Early Science Fiction and its Precursors* for the series; is currently working on a study of the Cold War; and is editing a collection, *Imagining Apocalypse*, for Macmillan.

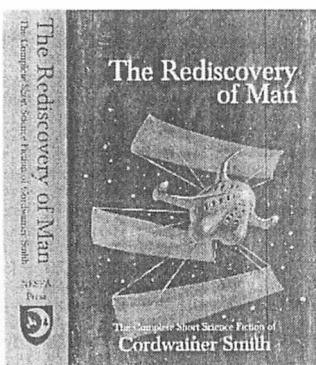
*THE REDISCOVERY OF MAN*, THIS COLLECTION OF CORDWAINER SMITH, HAS BEEN assembled with a very clear and specific aim in mind. Instead of placing Smith's stories in their order of publication, the editors (James A. Mann and a group of people associated with the New England Science Fiction Association) have arranged them according to their places within the larger sequence of the Instrumentality history that Smith devised.

One justification for this arrangement lies in the stories themselves. 'Mark Elf' (1957) begins: 'The years rolled by; the Earth lived on, even when a stricken and haunted mankind crept through the glorious ruins of an immense past.' Many of the stories place themselves within an historical sequence but without the inset 'histories' of many sf novels. Smith's master narrative is that the Old World has wiped itself out in the 'ancient wars'. The following dark ages have ushered in a regime presided over by the Jwindz, a ruling caste of Chinese origin which tranquillizes the people. The next historical phase marks the emergence of the Instrumentality, the development of space travel, and the creation of a utopia. The last phase of Smith's history, which critics have compared to Olaf Stapledon's chronicles, marks the Rediscovery of Man, where old cultures re-emerge and the conditions of the underclass are relieved.

These stages in the broad historical cycle feature very differently in the stories. The earliest phases are not narrated at all, only indicated through their traces, for instance. But the stories regularly build on each other. 'Mark Elf' capitalises on the reader's memory of the Second World War; we are now in the *Sixth Reich* under a government run by morons, probably a glance at C. M. Kornbluth's famous dystopian story 'The Marching Morons'. 'The Queen of the Afternoon' (1978) opens with a reprise of Smith's earlier story, which fills out the background of the latter's protagonist.

And terminology in one story will be explained in another. We have to cross-reference works to discover the meanings of terms like 'scaruers' and 'pinlighters'. Typically, Smith's stories carry a referential margin which is never closed off. He wrote this device explicitly into a 1959 story 'When the People Fell', which describes the Chinese invasion of Venus. Events are recounted by an eye-witness to a bemused journalist, whose ignorance places him in the position of the reader. The narrator's opening question challenges the journalist's capacity for response: 'Can you imagine a rain of people through an acid fog?' The journalist struggles with such images and unfamiliar terms right through the story, and finally manages a clear sense of events, but his editor files the story away in the archives because 'it wasn't the right kind of story for entertainment and the public would not appreciate it any more'.

'Entertainment' strikes an ironic note here, because Smith usually avoids narratives of sensational action, instead of confronting the reader with enigmas to be puzzled over. 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town' begins with a reversal of the usual sequence of storylines from a known beginning to an unpredictable conclusion: 'You already know the end — the immense drama



of the Lord Jestocost'. The starting point to the sequence is described as a place: An-fang Square ('beginning' in German). This same Jestocost features in 'The Ballad of Lost C'mell' (1962, published two years before 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town') where we are told that 'he had no idea ... that he would willingly fling himself into conspiracy and danger for a cause which he only half understood'.

Again and again Smith stresses how time and circumstances hide knowledge from his characters, who regularly struggle to understand their situations. Smith brilliantly enacts dramas of understanding, as in 'Drunkboat' (1963), the story of 'Rambo' as a space voyager. Drawing on Rimbaud's famous poem 'Le bateau ivre', Smith transposes exploration on to the sea of space, so that his character becomes an extraordinary voyager beyond human limits. The Lord Crudelta ('cruelty') designed him and his rocket for a voyage of discovery that would repeat that of Columbus, but the story actually focuses on Rambo's status as a figure of mystery after his naked body is found back on Earth. His unnatural strength makes the authorities suspect that he possesses 'planet-killing powers', but the real thrust of the story is towards Rambo's final revelation of his experiences in outer space. Just as Rambo's past must be revealed, so must the collective history of mankind be reconstituted.

The title of this collection appropriately stresses rediscovery, and that process forms the narrative of 'Alpha Ralpa Boulevard' (1961). This story opens with saddened memories of euphoria when the 'treasury' (that is, the archive) was being opened by the Instrumentality and lost cultures brought to life. The protagonists, Paul and Virginia, experience this as a revival of the French language and manners, but at the heart of Paul's narrative lies the bitter knowledge that this 'renewal' was a collective illusion stage-managed by the authorities. Searching for confirmation of their identity, Paul and Virginia set out on the boulevard of the title to consult a mechanical oracle. The road mimics spiritual ascent by rising into the sky, but it symbolically fractures, and the oracle turns out to be a disused meteorological station.

This quest, which results in disillusionment, parallels in reverse the narrative of 'Under Old Earth' (1966), where the archive is represented spatially as an area beneath the surface of the Earth named Gebiet (that is, 'province') and Bezirk ('district'). In an echo of Joseph O'Neil's *Land Under England* (1935), the protagonist is taken underground by two Roman legionaries. The echoes of ancient

gods and sages (Odin, Akhnaton, Laodz (Lao-Tze?), etc.) are quite diverse in this story, while in Smith's later tales access to ancient wisdom specifically involves rediscovering the symbols of Christianity — fish, cross, and so on. In his excellent survey of Smith's career and work in *Speculation* No. 33 (1976), John J. Pierce argues that 1960 marked a turning point. After a serious illness that year Smith began introducing religious motifs more and more into his writing, signalling a move away from a previous emphasis on the relation of mankind to machine. Smith's sole SF novel, *Norstrilia*, marks this important transition for Pierce. It was first drafted in 1960, part-published in 1964 (*The Planet Buyer*) and 1968 (*The Underpeople*), but not issued in its entirety until 1975. Rod McBan is the 'last heir' to an area of Old North Australia (a colony planet) where the drug stroon is produced. By cornering the market in the drug, he

manages to carry off a commercial coup in buying the Earth. From a condition of exile Rod returns to the latter planet ('Marhome'), which he discovers to be run on the lines of a benevolent dictatorship by the Instrumentality. The dystopian features that occur in Smith's other stories accumulate to the point of satire here. News is forbidden; the 'underpeople' are conditioned to attend to the technology necessary for society's functioning; citizens

are expected to learn the laws off by heart, and if they show any signs of dissident behaviour are 'brainscrubbed'. Rod is introduced to a massive store in an underground city, representing a kind of consumer wish-fulfilment fantasy (the Department Store of Heart's Desires).

Smith was clearly drawing on his experiences in Korea and his knowledge of psychological warfare in such scenes; and the Hate Hall, where Rod sees a display of the races, surely owes a debt to Orwell.

But the dystopian ironies disclose a deeper level of dissidence on Earth. Rod descends even below the underground city to find a secret organisation of insurgents who use Christian icons like the fish and who have looked for Rod's coming, since he represents a 'source of unallocated power' outside the political structures of the regime.

The narrative of discovery following a return from exile also underpins a series of stories from the 1960s: 'On the Gem Planet' (1963), 'On the Storm Planet' and 'On the Sand Planet' (both 1965). The hero this time is one Cashier O'Neill, the name chosen by Smith, according to his Australian friend Arthur Burns, 'because he wanted the idea of an adventurer' (Andrew Porter, *Exploring Cordwainer Smith*, pp. 20-1). Cashier travels from the gem planet

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(a hereditary dictatorship) to the planet Henrieda whose landscape is modelled on the Gulf of Mexico around Biloxi and Mobile. He encounters a hybrid girl named T'ruth, who watches over the master of the planet, who is in a state of suspended animation.

The climax to the sequence is when Casher reaches the planet Mizzar, based on Egypt, which is also a dictatorship. Smith has mirrored the officers' coup of 1952 which established Nasser as ruler, in the deposing of Kuraf (that is, Faruk). Cash, implicated in this coup by being the nephew of the former dictator, meets the new ruler Colonel Wedder, and subtly alters the latter's biochemistry towards a more benign character, thus altering his country's history. Casher's homecoming, however, acts as a prelude to a more spiritual quest, and he sets off on a mythical journey 'to the truth' from the City of Hopeless Hope through Mortoval (the Valley of the Dead?) to Kermesse Dorgueil, a perfectly ordered city. The goal of this quest constantly recedes, so that the final point Casher reaches is simply the best place to search from.

It should be obvious from the examples mentioned so far that Smith delighted in cryptography. His fiction is peppered with names that carry a buried significance of greater or lesser obscurity. In the stories just discussed, Casher O'Neill's forename is discussed within the text as signifying his pursuit of money; within the Egyptian context it derives from Qasr El Nil, a street in Cairo. On the first planet in the sequence a horse is discovered by a lake at Hippy Dipsy ('thirsty horses' in Classical Greek). Casher returns to Mizzer ('Misr' is Egyptian for 'Egypt'), travels on his quest with D'Alma ('of the soul' in Spanish) and reaches the 'final source and mystery', the Quel ('Quelle' in German) of the thirteenth Nile.

Some of these meanings are glossed within the stories, some concealed by false glosses. So Meeya Meeffa (that is, Miami, Fla.) is described as a 'meaningless name'. One of the most obscure instances is Kermesse Dorgueil, the City of Happiness that Casher reaches. The first name appears to derive from an insect whose body was used to produce a bright red dye. The second name suggests 'of pride' in French, which would clearly underline the city's function as a place of spiritual risk, where Casher needs the guidance of the fish sign to proceed. Whatever the significance of particular examples, it is important to notice this cryptic dimension to Smith's texts, and the reader can do worse than consult John J. Pierce's commentary in his introduction to *Quest of the Three Worlds*.

These interlocking names and Smith's general use of terms from different languages suggest that he saw his texts as networks of references, and in most of his stories he dramatises the working of systems of authority – political, social and military. 'Scanners Live in Vain' (1950), one of his most famous stories, has been read as a psychological narrative because it shows the efforts of Martel the protagonist to regain his own humanity, particularly the use of his senses. As a 'scanner' he is a kind of man-machine, a member of the élite guardians called to duty when the universe faces a threat from outside. Reading the story on an exclusively psychological level ignores its political dimension, since Smith dramatises the forms authority takes among the scanners. The group demonstrates its discipline by stylised gesture and movement, and they recite their history through a formal question-and-answer sequence which is essentially a ritual of obedience.

The external threat posed to the authority structure that scanners really do live in vain forces Martel to break out of the bonds of his confraternity in order to save a higher truth, and the whole *status quo* is changed as a result. Martel, in other words, like Philip K. Dick's characters, is placed within a power system, and it is a curious anomaly that Smith should so often dramatisate a questioning of reality but at the same time retain such hierarchical titles as 'lord'.

These hierarchies represent not only a ranking of awareness but

also a layering of the societies Smith depicts. Critics have made rather heavy weather of trying to attach a specifically American racial relevance to Smith's 'underpeople' (usually part human, part animal species), when in fact they can be read within the parameters set by H. G. Wells's science fiction. The traditional positioning of an underclass underground simply reflects their inferior social status as workers, and Smith often depicts societies where there is a gap between the masses and the ruling élite. 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town' dramatises a character's discovery of such a situation. A 'witch', Elaine, opens a door in her city and finds a whole town spreading under the familiar city streets. Elaine is repeatedly crossing thresholds. She enters a 'thought tunnel' screened from the civic authorities as a 'sewage tank', and moves to an antechamber where she crosses an even more crucial threshold – that of individual consciousness. She discovers a new capacity to enter the minds of these underpeople, a telepathic way of dramatising Elaine's realisation of the others' humanity. She then leads the underpeople out into the upper streets in a pacifist revolution. From this

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point on the story resembles that of Joan Arc, and the similarity has been discussed interestingly by Sandra Miesel (in *Exploring Cordwainer Smith*) and Pierce. The latter argues that the story describes the deliberate engineering of a martyrdom – its sombre implications of social manipulation more than offset the positive side to the revolution.

In 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town', Elaine is explicitly told that her story was scripted in advance, and there is often a recession of power in Smith's fiction towards an elusive origin that can never quite be identified. Casher O'Neill, for instance, takes over power from the girl T'ruth, who has in turn been shaped by an anonymous 'them'.

'A Planet Named Shayol' (1961), one of Smith's grimmest narratives, describes the dehumanisation of a political victim into a medical specimen according to procedures devised and exercised elsewhere.

Drawing on the Western myth of Sheol and capitalising on the reader's memory of concentration camps, Smith describes a going into exile, not a return. The protagonist Mercer's transit to the new planet is described as a symbolic death, a rite of passage where he is stripped naked in the ferry and offered the option of losing his memory. He becomes 'Mr Specimen, guilt of the crime without a name' and, as in David Karp's *One* (1953), he endures a punishment rationalised as medical therapy. Through the medium of a pod – shades of invading bodysnatchers – he is transported on to the exile planet to join the others whose bodies are used as hosts for alien life forms. The result is a Bosch-like phantasmagoria of humans with extra displaced limbs, a Hell within which Smith reserves a humanistic loophole for Mercer. Thanks to his memory he preserves a 'secret little corner of his mind' that keeps him sane until news breaks about the colony and it is closed down.

In this story Smith is caught between the need of preserving a consciousness that can register the horrors of Shayol and introducing an option (to keep memory or not) which softens the totalitarian force of the regime he is describing. The result is therefore a compromise, but elsewhere Smith shows the mind to be vulnerable to manipulation and technological alteration. It could be argued that Smith even anticipates some of the themes of cyberpunk by showing a synergy between mind and machine. 'Scanners Live in Vain' describes two levels of being, humanity and scanning, that can be bridged by a process Smith calls 'craching', whereby a force field can transmit consciousness from one level to the other. In 'Nancy' a drug is implanted in an individual's body. It works for the subject,

anticipating and realising desires.

More negatively, Smith applies the notion of tranquillizers as drugs administered to the populace by the authorities in order to maintain the status quo. In this respect Smith describes literal opiates, whereas writers like Ray Bradbury and Philip Wylie depict the media as inducing a political narcosis. A number of Smith's stories depict the field of consciousness as being subject to political scrutiny and surveillance. Smith takes the term 'peeping' from Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man* (1953), where a regime perpetuates itself through a whole system of telepathy and applies it in *Norstrilia* and stories like 'The Ballad of Lost C'mell', where the Lord Jestocost 'peeps' C'mell for signs of conspiracy. We have already seen how brainwashing figures in *Norstrilia* as a means of erasing 'unauthorised opinion' that might pose a political threat.

The major threat posed in Smith's fiction is not from dictatorial political systems but from the Other, the horror of the alien forms that might exist in outer space. At the end of 'The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-all' the protagonist recalls his terrifying experiences on a space voyage: 'We felt that we had been made the toys or the pets of some gigantic form of life immensely beyond the limits of human imagination'.

It is only when he can overcome his suppressed horror that he can make such an admission, whereas 'The Game of Rat and Dragon' gains much of its power by struggling to articulate this fear of the Other. Smith may have taken the phrase 'up and out' from John Cowper Powys's novel of that title, which is a fantasy of dimension. There, moving into the 'vast unending gulf' of space is figured first as a liberation and then as a conceptual test. Can we imagine space without a 'thinkable limit'? Powys asks. Smith dramatises this issue as a struggle for expression, a panic-stricken realisation that 'there was something out there underneath space itself which was alive, capricious, and malevolent' (Smith's emphasis). Hence the significance of the dragon of the title, which is brought in as a traditional and no longer adequate means of expressing the monstrous.

The fear of the Other directly threatens the sanity and sense of reality of characters like 'the Game'. If their autonomy is perceived to be damaged, autonomy is anyway repeatedly questioned in Smith's stories. The tales of the early 1960s particularly refer to a process of 'imprinting' whereby characteristics are transferred or encoded in the consciousness. 'The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal' contains a group of figures created by imprinting human characteristics on

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*'We felt that we had been made the toys or the pets of some gigantic form of life immensely beyond the limits of human imagination.'*

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mouse brains. The Arachosians fall victim to a disease that kills off the entire male sex: 'femininity becomes carcinogenic'. These figures in an oddly gynophobic fantasy devise a 'disaster capsule' that lures a space traveller to their planet, and so they emerge as essentially updated syrens. Suzdal significantly can only escape by creating a race of cats with genetically coded instructions to combat the Arachosians. Despite Smith's growing interest in spiritual motifs, the cats' behaviour is expressed in physical, even deterministic terms: they must follow a 'destiny printed into their brains, printed down their spinal cords, etched into the chemistry of their bodies and personalities'. This imprinting is made possible by futuristic technology, which Smith renders plausible by precise references to the different areas and centres of the brain. To a certain extent the process resembles in guided form the spontaneous accumulation of the engram bank by the 'recording' of the mind's data that L. Ron Hubbard describes in *Dianetics*. Smith was at college with Hubbard, and according to Alan C. Elms (*Science-Fiction Studies* 11 (1984), p. 275) wrote a book in 1950 called *Ethical Dianetics*. A promised biography of Smith should clarify this connection.

*The Rediscovery of Man* makes available for the first time all of Smith's short sf stories in one volume. It is now to be hoped that his non-sf novels will be reprinted, and that his manuscript works will be published at last.

The New England Science Fiction Association complements *The Rediscovery of Man* with a new

edition of Smith's only sf novel *Norstrilia*, which had an unusually complicated publishing history.

It originally appeared in two magazine parts: 'The Boy Who Bought Old Earth' (most of the first half of the MS) and 'The Store of Heart's Desire' (parts of the second half). Its first book publication kept the novel in two separate parts: *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*. Smith wrote a new epilogue and coda for the first and an introduction to the second, which are reproduced in the appendix to this new edition.

Alan C. Elms notes that there were many detailed differences between the texts of *Norstrilia*. This reprint is based on the Ballantine/Del Rey edition, and gives the main passages not in this version, noting the major differences from the magazine text. Elms's introduction sets the novel in the context of Smith's life, dating its gestation from his 1957 visit to Australia, and notes its debt to the Chinese legendary narrative *The Journey to the West*. This reprint completes the republication of Cordwainer Smith's sf in reliable editions. ♦

Discussed:

*The Rediscovery of Man: The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith* New England Science Fiction Association 0-915368-56-0; 1994; xvi + 671 pp.; US\$24.95/\$A39.95)

*Norstrilia* by Cordwainer Smith New England Science Fiction Association 0-915368-61-8; 1994; xiii + 249 pp.; US\$20.95/\$A34.95)

awards

THE

Arthur C Clarke

AWARD

The Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlist consists of:

- Time* – Stephen Baxter (Voyager)
- The Bones Of Time* – Kathleen Ann Goonan (Voyager)
- Silver Screen* – Justina Robson (Macmillan)
- Cryptonomicon* – Neal Stephenson (Heinemann)
- Distraction* – Bruce Sterling (Millennium)
- A Deepness In The Sky* – Vernor Vinge (Millennium)

The Award will be presented in a ceremony at The Science Museum, London, in May 2000.

The judges are: Claire Brialey & Gary Dalkin for the BSFA; Caroline Mullan & Kim Newman for the SF Foundation; Doug Millard for the Science Museum; Administrator: Paul Kincaid

# essentials

At Potlatch, in February 2000, a panel — Jerry Kaufman, Ron Drummond, Tom Whitmore, Kate Schaefer and Paul Kincaid — was asked to nominate the 20 'essential' works of fantasy and science fiction from the last 20 years. Each panellist chose to define 'essential' in a different way.

We present the lists that each came up with. See also pages 12, 27, 35, 39.

## 20 Essential Documents of the Last 20 Years

Science fiction and fantasy do not exist in a vacuum. Cross-pollination between all fields of human expression is increasingly the norm. For me, an 'essential' document is first and foremost one that has enriched my life by altering, deepening, or reaffirming my perceptions and understandings of life and of what life is capable of being or becoming. Secondly, one that uniquely enhances my sense of the powers and potentials of the written word, both generally and as it relates to sf & f. Granting the above, I have nevertheless been keen to choose works that would particularly enrich any science fiction reader or writer's future encounters or engagements with the field.

*Engine Summer* — John Crowley (1979). How to contain or allude to all possible iterations of Story. As Connie Willis would have it, the greatest science fiction novel of all time.

*The Transmigration of Timothy Archer* — Philip K. Dick (1982). How to turn into a robot; how to turn back into a human being.

*The Names* — Don DeLillo (1982). How meaning evaporates in the presence of mystery; how mystery generates meaning.

*Software for People* — Pauline Oliveros (1984). How to listen.

*Confessions of a Taoist on Wall Street* — David Payne (1984). The poo of Tao.

The two-paragraph scene on pages 83-84 of *Palimpsests* — Carter Scholz and Glenn Harcourt (1984). How to tell a story, and why you'd want to.

'The Mummer's Tale' and sections 5.21, 5.22, 5.23, 9.6, 9.81, 9.82 & 9.83 of 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', *Flight from Neverjon* — Samuel R. Delany (1985). How to escape from someone else's story, and, more importantly, why you'd want to; or, Scary monsters.

'Trojan Horse' — Michael Swanwick (1985). How to become God without really trying.

*A Song of Love and Death* — Peter Conrad (1987). Opera as fantasy, or, Unlimited mythopoesis.

*The Satanic Verses* — Salman Rushdie (1988). How to become the Devil without really trying. Many consider *Midnight's Children* (1981) to be the better

novel. But the reception of *The Satanic Verses*, a fine novel in its own right, reaffirmed, in an age wherein the power of the written word is continuously diminished, that the written word is still capable of being powerful in its effects, if sometimes unhappily so. Reading the novel itself is an essential counterpoise to the monster of its reception.

'A Fury of Symbols' — Joel Agee (1989). How to convincingly demonstrate that one's conversations with Creation (or the Universe or the Infinite) are indeed two-sided, or, Why you'd want to be under the influence of a large quantity of pure LSD.

*Tours of the Black Clock* — Steve Erickson (1989). How utterly claustrophobic the 20th century was. The scary thing is, by the end of the 21st, people will find the preceding statement laughable.

*The Kindness of Women* — J. G. Ballard (1991). The kindness of women.

*The Autobiography of My Body* — David Guy (1991). How to be a man, and, more importantly, why you'd want to.

*The 'Galitzin' Quartets of Beethoven* — Daniel K. L. Chua (1995). How to subvert any and all attempts at analysis or deconstruction, and, more importantly, how to turn the tables by analysing the analyst, deconstructing the deconstructionist; or, How to be minutely scrutinised by a great work of art without squirming.

*The Mars Trilogy* — Kim Stanley Robinson (1993-97). How to be exuberantly hopeful about the future of the human race while keeping both feet firmly on the ground.

*Mason & Dixon* — Thomas Pynchon (1998). How to build and fine-tune a monster myth-making machine; America as subjunctive mode.

*The Love of a Good Woman* — Alice Munro (1998). How to make what's unspoken positively crackle and smoke beneath the surface of a story.

*The Vagina Monologues* — Eve Ensler (1998). How to give voice.

*Daemonomania* — John Crowley (completed 1999). How to save Giordano Bruno from burning at the stake.

Ron Drummond

## polemic

## When Our Toys Were Taken Away: Science Fiction In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Paul Kincaid

THIS IS THE FUTURE.

We're in the world that science fiction has been telling us about for decades. Look in the newspapers: we've got clones and robots, life on other planets, intelligent computers, genetically modified animals, smart drugs, virtual reality. Any sf cliché that isn't here, soon will be; or so scientists confidently predict.

There's one problem with this world: around about – now – it stops being the present and turns into the past. Time still marches on at an implacable one second per second, and there are new futures coming up just as quickly and as certainly as the old futures arrived.

But what are they? Science fiction isn't telling us. Our toys, the things we've decorated our futures with for so long, have been re-appropriated by real science; and now that our toys have been taken away we haven't devised new ones, as we once would have done. Instead, we've just stopped playing. With a few honourable exceptions (there are always exceptions, but they are rare and getting rarer) science fiction has given up on the future. Which prompts the question: has the future given up on science fiction? Did the archetypal literature of the twentieth century have a set course to run, and having completed the course will it have anything left to say in the twenty-first century?

Just consider what so much of science fiction has been doing of late.

Time travel stories were once a way of examining our past and, by implication, how it turned into our present. But now, novels like *Corrupting Dr Nice* (1997) by John Kessel, *Time On My Hands* (1997) by Peter Delacorte, *Mendoza In Hollywood* (2000) by Kage Baker are less about the shaping of our world than the authors' obsession with movies of the past. But at least they represent an engagement with wider aspects of our culture, which is positively healthy compared to some science fiction.

There are books – such as *The Time Ships* (1995) by Stephen Baxter, *Take Back Plenty* (1990) by Colin Greenland, *A Scientific Romance* (1997) by Ronald Wright, in all other respects very fine examples of the genre – which take as their subject nothing more

than science fiction itself. When Kim Stanley Robinson takes a look at the colonisation of Mars and the environmental and political questions it will raise in *Red, Green and Blue Mars* (1992-6), what it generates is *White Mars* (1999) from Brian Aldiss with Roger Penrose, and *Rainbow Mars* (1999) from Larry Niven. This is not science fiction as an ongoing discussion. This is science fiction eating itself.

What alternative are we offered to this inverted, hermetically-sealed little world? That old sf stand-by, a future so distant in time and space that it might as well be fantasy. The limitless wealth, the incredible technological accomplishments of Iain Banks's *Culture* confirms Arthur

C. Clarke's dictum that any sufficiently advance science if indistinguishable from magic. And it is all too easy for fantastical trappings to slip in amid the space opera, from the supernatural horror in Peter F. Hamilton's *Night's Dawn Trilogy* (1996-9) to the feudal power structures in so much militaristic SF. Even when writers like Vernor Vinge, in *A Fire Upon The Deep* (1992), struggle to keep space opera (mostly) within science fictional bounds, this could hardly be called engagement with the present.

J.G. Ballard once described science fiction as the best way of writing about the present. But perhaps, for many science fiction writers, they've seen this present coming for so long they've got no interest in it now it's here. No interest in the present, however, means equally no interest in projecting today onto tomorrow. And without that, science fiction could lose its purpose and its way. ♦

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*'I think sf today is largely a historical project – that it doesn't, or cannot, exist in its classical form any longer.'*

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William Gibson

Criticism, of the sort espoused by *Steam Engine Time*, almost invariably means looking to the past. But we must also engage with the present, and the future. So we welcome any polemical arguments about where science fiction is, where it should be going, and how it should get there.

## Death of a Ghost?

Maureen Kincaid Speller

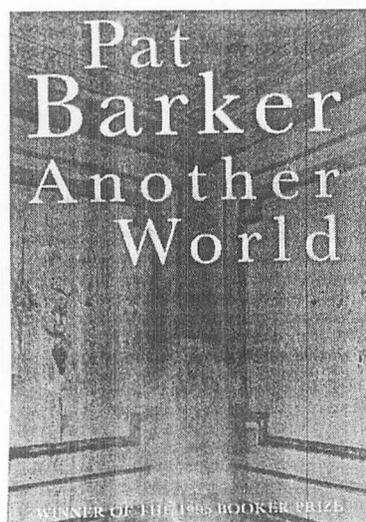
MAUREEN KINCAID SPELLER is a co-editor of *Steam Engine Time*. She edited *Matrix*, the newsletter of the BSFA, and has recently retired as BSFA administrator. She won a Nova Award in 1998 and was shortlisted for a Hugo Award as best fan writer in 1999. She is the founder of Acnestis, where this piece appeared in May 1999.

THE FOLLOWING IS A QUOTATION FROM A BRIEF INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES Palliser, author of *The Unburied* (Phoenix House, 1999) in 1999, in association with a radio article about whether there is any longer any rôle for the traditional ghost story in modern society. He said:

*I think, in the late nineteenth century, a lot of people, like the hero of my novel, were no longer Christian believers. They were rationalists, they were sceptics, agnostics, as people are now, and that's an interesting period, because the whole of their culture was still paying respect to Christianity and conventional belief and yet the intellectuals and the avant-garde really no longer accepted it. And it's at that point, I think, that the use of the supernatural and ghost stories and so on becomes particularly interesting and important. The French literary theorist, Tzvetan Todorov, has developed this theory that it's at the moment when belief can no longer be taken for granted, when it's under attack, that you get the rise of the uncanny, which is between the supernatural and the realistic, and that would explain very well why this becomes a literary form at the end of that period. M. R. James and Henry James, and Arthur Machen, one of the things I think they are doing with it is that they are still evoking a sense of evil. They can use it to evoke that as Henry James does brilliantly in 'The Turn of the Screw'. It remains completely ambiguous whether the ghosts seen by the governess and the children are literally there or are in some sense summoned up from the subconscious of the governess. It's not even clear that the children see them, in fact. It is a very powerful examination of what evil is.*

*But things have moved on. I think that our culture now probably no longer even accepts this notion of evil that was acceptable then. In a way, it's been thrown out by Freudianism. We don't think of evil as some kind of sinister power from another world. We think of evil as human behaviour which is caused by particular experiences in early childhood. We don't think Hitler was possessed by a sense of evil now. We think that terrible things happened to Hitler in early childhood which turned him in particular ways. So I think that as a device for literary fiction, the supernatural has largely had its day.*

I originally taped this because I was curious about what Palliser might have to say about the ghost story, and I wasn't going to be around to hear the whole article. As it turns out, this five-minute piece seems to raise as many questions as those it purports to answer, even putting aside its poor construction, which amply demonstrates the problematic understanding of ghost stories in the first place. The question I would dearly have liked to ask was why, if Palliser is apparently so gloomy about the form, did he choose to write a ghost story in the first place? And does he believe that a nineteenth century setting will somehow obviate the problem? I've not read his book yet but I'm tremendously curious to see how he handles the haunting. Does he, for example, present it simply and directly as a haunting, or does he use his position as a novelist writing in the late twentieth



century to apply the Freudian developments he mentioned? In other words, does he tell it with nineteenth or twentieth century sensibilities?

I'm curious about this because I've lately read a couple of things that have been described as ghost stories, whereas I've not been entirely convinced in either case that this is so. I'm now wondering whether authors are reluctant to simply write a ghost story, not because of a problem with evil, but because they feel less comfortable with handling the straight supernatural than they might do if they give it post-Freudian metaphoric content. (It also does cross my mind to wonder how much Henry James was influenced, in this regard, by his brother William's work, given the comparatively late date of 'The Turn of the Screw', 1898, and whether he consciously set about incorporating this into the novella.)

One of the novels that made me think about this is Pat Barker's *Another World* (Viking, 1998). Some of you are probably familiar with the Regeneration trilogy, set around the First World War, exploring its effects on people. Although set in the here and now, *Another World* might easily be seen to be closing off that trilogy. It focuses on Nick and Fran, each on their second marriage, newly moved to a rather larger house, which needs a lot of work done to it. The situation is ripe for something explosive to happen. The step-children don't really get along well. Gareth is addicted to computer games and rarely stirs from his room, while Miranda, a year or two older, is very self-possessed but silent. Gareth, furthermore, appears resentful of Jasper, baby of the second marriage. Nick and Fran are under pressure, because of the house move, and because Nick's grandfather, Geordie, is terminally ill with cancer, not likely to last much longer, and also suffering from dreams which relate to his experiences in the First World War, when his brother died. His mother had felt that the wrong child died, and told him so. Furthermore, Geordie steadfastly insists that his illness is related to a bayonet wound rather than cancer. And then, to top off everything, a very fraught family evening of working together on the house uncovers an extraordinary, obscene mural of the family that once lived there, a real exercise in hate. The analogy between the Edwardian family of Fanshawe and this one is not lost on any of those present and old enough to work out what's going on (and the resonances with Alan Garner's *The Owl Service* (1967) are difficult to ignore. A remarriage, family tensions, a mural on the wall, supernatural events; they're all there.)

The house, Lob's Hill, inevitably has a history. It turns out that the smallest child in the painting, child of the second marriage, was mysteriously murdered, probably by his older brother and sister, children of the first marriage, although both strenuously denied this. Of course, we immediately see this reflected in the modern family, especially when Gareth begins to seize chances to injure his young half-brother.

Once the mural is uncovered, things begin to happen. In particular, several members of the family see a young girl; everyone assumes it's Miranda, except of course Miranda herself, who I think probably suspects that it's the ghost of Muriel Fanshawe, as indeed I think we're all supposed to believe it is. 'Muriel' always seems to be around when the situation is getting bad; for instance, Gareth sees her as he begins hurling the stones that will injure Jasper sufficiently to put him briefly in hospital.

However, the haunting, such as it is, is not at the centre of the book, not by any means. Indeed, my sense is that Pat Barker, having created this mirror of the modern family's situation, is either at a loss to know what to do with it, or perhaps feels that it speaks for itself, without further embellishment, whereas my own feeling is that the haunting needs some sense of resolution or 'healing' that Barker doesn't actually provide, except insofar as we finally see the modern family's differences reconciled, but with no corresponding revelation about the Fanshawes. While it's true that a good ghost story can work entirely through inference rather than actual spectres flitting

across the pages, it seems to me that there does need to be a firmer explicatory base than Barker offers.

Which is not to say that there aren't other ghosts in this novel. There are metaphoric ghosts, in that Geordie is haunted by his war experiences, and after his death it's revealed that the reason he is haunted is because he actually had to kill his injured brother in No Man's Land, something none of the family ever knew. This, of course, is the Freudian ghost, the ghost generated by the sub-conscious. Paul Kincaid commented, when he read it, that he found the sequences where Geordie re-enacted his trench experiences during his sleep very haunting, as indeed they are, but they're not ghosts.

More conventional, in fact, and really rather charming in its way, is a scent of aftershave that persists for several days after Geordie's death. It's not actually his own aftershave, but something that Nick left in the house when he used to live there, and which Geordie has lately used when being visited by Helen,

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*Pat Barker, having created this mirror of the modern family's situation, is either at a loss to know what to do with it, or perhaps feels that it speaks for itself ... my own feeling is that the haunting needs some sense of resolution or 'healing'*

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an academic who featured him in a book of war reminiscences. Immediately after Geordie's death, Nick finds himself haunted by the smell, particularly if he's with Helen ... there is a hint that he and Helen go to bed together, although there's the stranger implication that if they do, then he's doing this for his grandfather, whom he suddenly realised had been in love with Helen. But Barker dodges the explicitness of that one as well. Ellipsis, frustratingly, is all.

In many ways, this book seems to confirm Palliser's implicit suggestion that the modern taste for metaphor cannot sustain the traditional ghost story, and yet mainstream writers persistently go for the form, even though they don't handle it that well. Paul Kincaid suggested that they handled it better than they do science fiction, which is undoubtedly true, but only insofar as we are perhaps more accustomed to telling ghost stories than we are science fiction. Even so, telling what are little more than embellished scraps of folktale, with more or less plausible explanations attached to them, isn't the same as telling a full-blown literary ghost story.

That need to turn the ghost story into a metaphor surfaced again in a play on Radio 4: *I See The Moon*, by Alex Ferguson, was promoted as a 'thrilling' ghost story, but proved to be anything but. In essence, it was the story of a man who met the ghost of a child when he was attending a town-planning course at the stately home of a prominent architectural theoretician. He thought it was a real child, gave it his watch, promised to return, but the husband and wife denied all knowledge of there being a child in the house and he never went back.

The experience, in particular his failure to keep his promise to the child, although it's not actually expressed as such, becomes a metaphor for his life during the 'caring' nineteen-eighties. As a town-planner, he realises he is responsible for destroying a good deal of beautiful architecture and eventually walks out of his job, only to start doing the same thing in the private sector. All through this time, he keeps

encountering the girl, or thinks he does — in a photograph he finds on site where a house is being destroyed, and later, at another site, when a child's walled up skeleton has been discovered, she reappears, momentarily, superimposed over the bones. Is she his conscience, haunting him? Possibly, except that after he has served a spell in prison, for bribing a town-planning official, he decides he must lay the ghost of the child, once and for all, and returning to where he originally saw her, finally learns that she was the child of the couple who organised the course. Because she was mentally disabled, they kept her hidden and, it's suggested, perhaps starved her to death. He had seen her ghost and now, having fulfilled his promise to return, he ensures that her grave has a proper marker, and ends up working on a charity for disabled children.

So, in this instance, we have all the elements of the traditional ghost story, overlaid by the apparently necessary metaphoric content, suggesting perhaps that we are now uneasy with a ghost story unless it has such metaphoric content, and that the metaphoric content has to be there to validate it as a story, otherwise it can't be 'true'. What a tangled web indeed! But if we, with our twentieth century sensibilities, try to write a good old-fashioned ghost story, can it then be nothing more than pastiche? Or is there good pastiche, the sort that feels 'right', as though it were written by M.R. James himself, and bad pastiche, the sort that is written by far too many authors who think they understand the form of the classic English ghost story without having got under the skin, so to speak? I cannot help but think that, in its way, the traditional ghost story is a genre form as specialised as science fiction and, much as we all wish the likes of Paul Theroux and P.D. James, to mention two particularly striking examples of the failure to understand the roots of the genre, would leave well alone, we might easily argue that the Pat Barkers and Charles Pallisers of this world should exercise their talents elsewhere.

♦

### 20 Books That Shook the World (or should have, anyway)

## essentials

*The Snow Queen* — Joan D. Vinge, 1980  
*Little, Big* — John Crowley, 1981  
*Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* — Samuel R. Delany, 1984  
*Neuromancer* — William Gibson, 1984  
*Fire Watch* — Connie Willis, 1985  
*Talking Man* — Terry Bisson, 1986  
*Soldiers of Paradise* — Paul Park, 1987  
*The City, Not Long After* — Pat Murphy, 1989  
*Rats and Gargoyles* — Mary Gentle, 1990  
*The Start of the End of It All* — Carol Emshwiller, 1990

*Stations of the Tide* — Michael Swanwick, 1991  
*White Queen* — Gwyneth Jones, 1991  
*Woman of the Iron People* — Eleanor Arnason, 1991  
*Synners* — Pat Cadigan, 1991  
*China Mountain Zhang* — Maureen F. McHugh, 1992  
*Red Mars* — Kim Stanley Robinson, 1993  
*Slow Funeral* — Rebecca Ore, 1994  
*The Diamond Age* — Neal Stephenson, 1995  
*Black Wine* — Candace Jane Dorsey, 1997  
*Starlight 2* — ed Patrick Nielsen Hayden, 1998

Kate Schaefer

## Discovering Olaf Stapledon

Bruce Gillespie

BRUCE GILLESPIE is one of the editors of this magazine. He began publishing *SF Commentary* in 1969 and *The Metaphysical Review* (which discusses almost any subject except metaphysics) in 1984. To his regret, he waited until the 1990s to discover the works of Olaf Stapledon.

This paper was first presented as a talk to the Nova Mob on 2 April 1997.

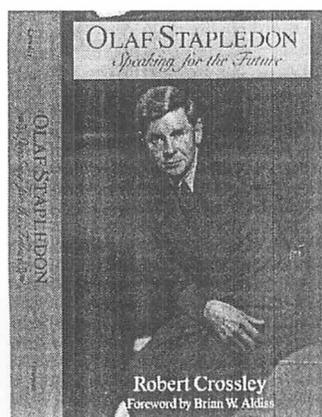
OLAF STAPLEDON — WILLIAM OLAF STAPLEDON — HAD NO SCANDINAVIAN family links, but even his given name made him seem slightly alien in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s, when his books first appeared. He was brought up mainly in Port Said, in Egypt, where he and his family were the only permanent white residents. When he returned to England, he lived in or near Liverpool, becoming one of the few famous Liverpudlians never to move permanently to London. An earnest man who desperately wanted to help humanity, he proved inept at almost everything he did but writing. To his ongoing shame he was only able to support his family because of the inheritance he received after his father died. He remained an outsider all his life, yet few isolates have produced works that are as interesting as those of Olaf Stapledon.

Why should one pay attention to Stapledon and his works? As far back as I can remember, he has always been the *other* great British literary sf writer. H. G. Wells is the first: *the* father of science fiction, the galaxy where it all begins. An empty space seems to separate him from Stapledon, who remains an island universe there in the 1930s, writing his major works almost before the birth of modern Campbellian science fiction. He's the second great figure in British science fiction: unread today, and for many people, unreadable. When his major novels were reissued in 1973 by Penguin, I gave up on *Star Maker* after reading 70 pages of it, and therefore did not try *Last and First Men*. A few years ago, I sold most of my Stapledon books. Thanks, Dick Jenssen and Alan Stewart, for lending me copies of the books I no longer have.

I've returned to Stapledon only because of Robert Crossley's biography, *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*, which I came across only because of the indirect intervention of Brian Aldiss, who writes its Foreword. A few years ago David Seed of Liverpool University was setting up a program of critical books about science fiction. He asked Brian Aldiss for suggestions for volumes. Brian suggested *The Best of SF Commentary*. That book still does not exist, although that's hardly the fault of David Seed, but dealing with Seed alerted me to the fine books that had already appeared in the program. One of the review copies I received was the Crossley biography of Stapledon. Reading it sent me straight back to the fiction.

Two particular images of Olaf Stapledon stay clearly with me after reading *Speaking for the Future*. The first appears in the Acknowledgements:

*The person most instrumental to this project and who most deserved to see it come to fruition is no longer alive. Agnes Stapledon, whose preservation of her husband's papers made a circumstantial account of his life possible, gave me unrestricted access both to manuscripts she had donated to the University of Liverpool and to the great wealth of materials she retained in her possession. Although we had only corresponded, never met, when I first talked with her in a nursing home in 1982, she handed over the keys to her house and invited me to move in and read whatever I found. This was the single most generous offer I have received in my career as a scholar, and now many years later I remain moved by her extraordinary gesture of trust. Agnes Stapledon died in the*



*Spring of 1984, three days before her ninetieth birthday.* (p. xv)

As Crossley says, 'when he died in 1950, nearly everything [Stapledon] had written and everything he had stood for was fading from popular memory'.

The second image from Crossley's biography tells us much about the position that Stapledon's work retains today; legendary, but little read:

*On 29 March 1949 my only biographical predecessor, Sam Moskowitz, saw Stapledon on a stage at a peace rally in Newark, New Jersey, in his single brief moment of international notoriety. The Cold War was in progress. He had just crossed the Atlantic for the first time in his life and encountered the new American witch-hunt in its first virulent outbreak ... On that March night Moskowitz may have been the only person in the Mosque Theater who had read any of Stapledon's fiction, the only one hadn't come to hear political oratory but to see a legend. The name of Olaf Stapledon had passed by word of mouth through a small group of American science fiction readers who had discovered his out-of-print fantasies and fables in the 1930s ... Theodore Sturgeon ... phoned the Waldorf and asked if he could spare time for a social evening with some New York fans of his fiction. Stapledon had reason to make room in his schedule for Sturgeon and his friends. Several science-fiction writers had learned that his funds were frozen when he entered the United States and that he had appealed, unsuccessfully, to an American publisher for pocket money. Frederik Pohl immediately wrote to Stapledon with an offer of help and asked in return only that he try to meet with some of his American colleagues when he was in New York. On 31 March, Stapledon showed up at the West Side apartment of Fletcher Pratt, who was hosting the Hydra Club, a science-fiction discussion group that included two of the most important American editors of the genre - John W. Campbell and Donald Wollheim. A night of handshaking, autographing, and discussion of Last and First Men, Odd John and Sirius with an author who was a legendary figure for American science-fiction readers provided the solitary and wholly unpublicized moment when Olaf's literary accomplishment was recognized during his American journey.* (pp. 8, 9, 379)

Why are these images important for understanding the life and work of Olaf Stapledon?

Meet Agnes Stapledon, Olaf's Australian cousin with whom he fell in love with when she was only twelve and he was in his late teens, but for whom he waited more than a decade; a classic love story that has had its own book written about it. Yet she was a woman much sinned against during the last decade of Stapledon's life. Stapledon, who looked youthful until his death while his wife aged at the normal rate,

conducted several love affairs during his last decade, and seriously suggested to Agnes the 1940s equivalent of an open marriage. Nevertheless, Agnes maintained the marriage, and kept her husband's study intact after his death, nearly as he left it thirty-two years earlier, patiently waiting for the biographer who might never have turned up. She was one of the few human beings to whom Stapledon was close, and she is presented in various idealised guises throughout the novels.

Stapledon's first three novels, *Last and First Men*, *Last Men in London*, and *Odd John*, were received ecstatically by reviewers in Britain and America, and sold very well. Crossley recalls the roll-call of puzzled praise from journals such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Oxford Magazine*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Tribune*. J. B. Priestley declared *Last and First Men* the season's 'outstanding odd book', which resisted 'any recognised category'. *The Oxford Magazine* said that the 'boldest imaginings of Mr Wells pale before the dreams of Mr Stapledon'. In the late 1930s, *Last and First Men* was well enough regarded to be picked as one of the first ten books in Penguin's series of Pelican paperbacks.

Ten years after their success, Stapledon's books could not be bought, except in secondhand stores. His influence remained not in the mainstream of English intellectual life, but deeply imprinted on the field of science fiction, both on writers and fans.

He was the author whose influence set Arthur C. Clarke towards a writing career. In a medical officer's quarters in India during World War II, Brian Aldiss glanced through a copy of the Pelican edition while he was awaiting an inoculation and was so captivated that for the only time in his life he stole a book. Stanislaw Lem's method of taking an idea for a walk seems to owe much to Stapledon, as does the scope of the work of Cordwainer Smith. In fandom, his influence appeared in the famous Eight Stages of Fandom, invented by Jack Speer and Robert Silverberg to mirror Stapledon's Eighteen Stages of Mankind.

If Stapledon's memory is kept faithfully, but rather vaguely, only by science fiction people, why remember him at all? I find that a hard question to answer, but I can assert that there would be an enormous gap in the sf universe if he had never existed.

I'm rarely prepared to talk about a writer whose style I can hardly recommend. In *Last and First Men* and *Last Men in London* his tales are reports from some far-future observer delivering by telepathy a historical document to a receptive scribe of the 1930s. There are few definable characters; instead, the characters are entire races of people. Stapledon writes in a nineteenth-century over-fussy style that must have seemed quaint by the 1940s. Even his two novels, *Sirius* and *Odd John*, are related by narrators who are not on stage during most of the events of the book. Relying on secondhand reports, each narrator pre-

sents what is more like a documentary than a novel. Remember, Penguin first published *Last and First Men* as a Pelican, i.e. non-fiction. Only Stapledon's ability to highlight sharp images or events — often very funny images or events despite the solemn imperturbability of the author's sentences — gives artistic power to these books.

Reading Stapledon, then, presents a real problem of style versus content. A reader of science fiction cannot avoid being interested in Stapledon because the whole field is indebted to him. One can make a fairly long list of stories that owe some or all of their ideas to Stapledon, yet I suspect that many of these unwitting plagiarists have never read his works. Between them, Wells and Stapledon created modern science fiction, yet Stapledon knew little of American genre science fiction until after he had done most of his best work.

In *Last and First Men*, Stapledon's first novel, he tells the history of humanity from his own present time until two billion years in the future. Humanity rises and falls on Earth until the year five million, when the human race moves to Venus. After several ups and downs there, human beings migrate to Neptune, which has become habitable as the Sun swells into a giant star. After two billion years, the Sun is about to fill the entire solar system, destroying the Sixteenth Men even as they try to find a way to spread the seeds of humanity to the stars.

The main features of *Last and First Men* are its sense of time and its emphasis on the cyclic nature of human endeavour. Very little science fiction, even today, embraces the vast amounts of time that Stapledon takes for granted. Given that, he shows an acute sense of current history. For someone writing in 1930, Stapledon gets the main features of World War II fairly right — although I find in a later, 1954, edition of the book, the chapters on the 1930s and 1940s have been deleted because they are regarded as no longer accurate! Stapledon is rather fond of destructive forces, so there is not much left of Europe after World War II. America and China dominate the world. Later, a war between them leaves viable human activity only in small sections of the southern hemisphere. Civilisation renews itself in Patagonia: a civilisation that is much more self-aware than ours, but lacks much of our technology, because physical resources have been destroyed during the wars. Every Utopia has an Achilles' heel; the Patagonian civilisation falls; humanity is reduced to a tiny group of people living in the Arctic; but over time the race resurrects itself, only to find that the Moon is about to crash into the Earth. Off to Venus we go for umpteen

million years; in part as a conquering race, destroying the native Venusians, and later by becoming flying creatures. When humanity gets to Neptune, we adapt ourselves to massive gravitational forces and change shape altogether.

What makes Stapledon a follower of H. G. Wells, but very different from the nineteenth-century British Utopians who preceded him, is his refusal to believe in a prescriptive Utopia. His vision is always Darwinian, not Marxist. Humanity does not inevitably improve; no revolution will settle human destiny once and for all. Instead, every now and again the vastness of time and the profligacy of human activity will enable some great society to emerge. Stapledon has no faith that evolution will automatically turn out a 'superior' species. He clearly approves of some of his far-future varieties of humanity, but he sees that nobody is immune to the massive natural forces that

actually decide our fates. The overall flavour of *Last and First Men* is of melancholy; even the greatest achievements of humanity will be disappear in time.

It's fairly easy to see in *Last and First Men* an extension of the melancholy that pervades the penultimate scene of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), in which the very last living creature on Earth, possibly our remote descendant,

crawls along a beach beside a silent sea while a giant sun fills the sky. The end of everything. What makes Stapledon different is not only the immensely greater time perspective that he gives his book but his unwillingness to confine his viewpoint to that of a lone time-traveller. In cutting himself off from a single character, he loses that tactile excitement of adventure that one always finds in Wells. He replaces it with width of perspective and completeness of detail. Using what quickly became one of the main clichés of science fiction — telepathy — as the means by which the far-future narrator tells his history, Stapledon tries to give his book the scope of an epic in which any individual disappears into the background of millions of years of history. The effect is to make all events co-existent, but it also removes the urgency of adventure narrative. To make up for this, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* function as encyclopedias of exciting sf ideas, most of which have been used by later writers, but many of which remain unexplored.

Stapledon is fond of little idea chapters that often have the vivacity lacking in the book as a whole. For instance, in *Last and First Men* he uses a few chapters to tell of the alien race that develops on Mars and later attempts to conquer Earth. Very different from Wells's Martians, this alien race is a group mind made up of ultra-microscopic, independent flying, moving creatures. You can almost watch Stapledon's

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*His vision is always Darwinian, not Marxist. Humanity does not inevitably improve; no revolution will settle human destiny once and for all.*

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mind elaborating on the original idea: first the tiny creatures, then 'vital unities' forming nervous systems, then forming complicated neural systems; then 'the Martian cloud-jelly' which 'could bring to bear immense forces which could also be controlled for very delicate manipulation'. Lem's cloud-like creatures in *The Invincible* (1964) are very much like Stapledon's Martians.

In *Star Maker*, nearly a decade later, all the elements of *Last and First Men* are pushed to their furthest limit. Despite the recent efforts of such authors as Greg Benford, Stephen Baxter and Greg Bear, *Star Maker* still remains the most ambitious sf novel ever written. As with the works of those other authors, its sheer ambition often makes it just a bit unreadable.

The plot of *Star Maker*, such as it is, is founded in an unexplained fantasy, which perhaps suggests why the book is not better known:

*One night when I had tasted bitterness I went out on to the hill. Dark heather checked my feet. Below marched the suburban street lamps. Windows, their curtains drawn, were shut eyes, inwardly watching the lives of dreams. Beyond the sea's level darkness a lighthouse pulsed. Overhead, obscurity ...*

*I sat down on the heather. Overhead obscurity was now in full retreat. In its rear the freed population of the sky sprang out of hiding, star by star. On every side the shadowy hills or the guessed, featureless sea extended beyond sight. But the hawk-flight of imagination followed them as they curved downward below the horizon. I perceived that I was on a little round grain of rock and metal, filmed with water and with air, whirling in sunlight and darkness. And on the skin of that little grain all the swarms of men, generation by generation, had lived in labour and blindness, with intermittent joy and intermittent lucidity of spirit. And all their history, with its folk-wanderings, its empires, its philosophies, its proud sciences, its social revolutions, its increasing hunger for community, was but a flicker in one day of the lives of stars. (To the End of Time, p. 231)*

And then, just like John Carter in the first of Edgar Rice Burroughs's Mars novels, the narrator looks back down the hill, to find his house and home town vanished. 'I myself was seemingly disembodied, for I could neither see nor touch my own flesh. And when I willed to move my limbs, nothing happened. I had no limbs. The familiar inner perceptions of my body, and the headache which had oppressed me since morning, had given way to a vague lightness and exhilaration.' (*To the End of Time*, p. 233)

Just like that, the narrator's disembodied mind takes off for the stars. As a method of transport, it certainly beats the faster-than-light spaceship.

It's impossible to summarise the content of *Star*

*Maker*, so I won't. It's enough to say that it takes in, absorbs and spits out the entire action of *Last and First Men* as the merest footnote in its own time-scale, which is the entire history of the universe. The narrator quickly loses track of Earth and our solar system. Somewhere out there he finds an alternative Earth where life merely mirrors the rather dismal recent history of his own Earth, so obviously heading towards World War II. He finds as a companion Bvalltu, both an inhabitant of the Other Earth and a mind who can accompany him as he ventures further into the universe.

*Star Maker* is both dazzling and wearying because Stapledon sets himself free from all constraints of time and space, while maintaining the prose of a scrupulous documentary observer. The nearest thing to passion is:

*As our skill in disembodied flight increased, we found intense pleasure in sweeping hither and thither among the stars. We tasted the delights at once of skating and of flight. Time after time, for sheer joy, we traced huge figures-of-eight in and out around the two partners of a 'double star'. Sometimes we stayed motionless for long periods to watch at close quarters the waxing and waning of a variable. Often we plunged into a congested cluster, and slid amongst its suns like a car gliding among the lights of a city... (End of Time, p. 269)*

His range of glimpsed civilisations includes an extraordinary number of biologies that are not based on our own assumptions. Most aliens in most sf books are basically ourselves in funny suits, but Stapledon's aliens are regularly based on truly alien premises. One planet's race has evolved from essentially slug-like ancestors. On another planet, a mollusc-like creature evolves until it becomes a living ship, with sails, rudder and prow, all part of the creature itself. Says the narrator:

*It was a strange experience to enter the mind of an intelligent ship, to see the foam circling under one's nose..., to taste the bitter or delicious currents streaming past one's flanks, to feel the pressure of air on the sails as one beat up against the breeze, to hear beneath the water-line the rush and murmur of distant shoals of fishes... (End of Time, p. 286)*

The more alien the creature, the more the narrator seems to identify with it. Towards the end of the book, his main races form a vast empire of associated stars, then universes. Vast plumes of gas erupting from the stars, destroying entirely planetary systems, turn out to be the weapons of sentient creatures — the stars themselves — irritated by pesky upstart planets. The planetary races are able to establish contact with the stars, temporarily ending the havoc. On the surface of stars live the flame creatures, who reappear in a rather poor novella of Stapledon's, 'The Flames'. Anticipating by some years all those stories

of the heat death of the universe, the travellers see a future in which all the stars begin to falter and die. They venture backward in time, looking for the origins of the universe, and discover that even the nebulas were originally aware creatures, before they began to break down into separate stars.

Unfortunately religion raises its ugly head, giving rise to the title of the book. In this, Stapledon was very much a thinker bound by his times. His star travellers look for a barely glimpsed supermind, or super star, that lies behind all this vast activity. What they find is hardly any conventional God, but a remote experimenter that has spent forever making universe after universe. Our universe, billions of years old though it might be, turns out to be merely one of a long series of experiments. In the book's last pages, Stapledon speculates about the evolution of the Star Maker itself, writing some of his finest prose.

Why was Stapledon able to write these two novels, seemingly without any precedent but Wells? Not even his biographer can answer this question. Stapledon destroyed the working notes for all his novels, and once he was published and recognised, he was not above contributing to his own legendary status. Stapledon told the story that *Last and First Men* began with a holiday that he and Agnes took on the cliffs of Wales. In later years he talked about his 'Anglesey experience', of standing on the cliffs and watching seals play on the rocks below him. He would claim later that the plan of *Last and First Men* came to him 'in a flash'. 'The seals he observed were sunning themselves on the rocks, squirming and squealing with almost human vulnerability as the waves hit and drenched their warmed skin with cold spray. This much Agnes Stapledon, nearly fifty years after the event, could say for sure.' Stapledon wrote later: 'Long ago (it was while I was scrambling on a rugged coast, where great waves broke in blossom on the rocks) I had a sudden fantasy of man's whole future, aeon upon aeon of strange vicissitudes and gallant endeavours in world after world, seeking a glory never clearly conceived, often betrayed, but little by little revealed.' Crossley doubts Stapledon's claimed timetable of events, i.e. that *Last and First Men* was written shortly after the 1928 experience. It is much more likely, and much better fits Stapledon's personality, that he had been making laborious notes, and corresponding with researchers in many fields, long before 1928.

Curiously, Crossley fails to mention a very similar incident that occurs in Stapledon's oddest book, *Last Men in London*. This is the second of the novels supposedly narrated by the far-future Neptunian to

someone of Stapledon's time. After a preamble in which the Neptunian tells of his idyllic life in the extreme far future just before the solar system is about to be destroyed, he tells of how he became an official time explorer. In order to research Stapledon's own era he hitched his mind to a man of the time, Paul. Paul is, of course, Stapledon, but so is the 1930s teller of the tale, and the far-future Neptunian. In telling Paul's story, Stapledon gives us what must be very close to an autobiography. It lacks the immediacy of an autobiography because it is also the story of a far-future researcher very puzzled by our own civilisation. Crossley finds in *Last Men in London* a valuable record of Stapledon's hair-raising experiences as a stretcher-bearer in France during World War I.

In *Last Men in London*, Paul and his father stand on a crag overlooking a lake:

*It was his father who first pointed out to him the crossing wave-trains of a mountain tarn, and by eloquent description made him feel that the whole physical world was in some manner a lake rippled by myriads of such crossing waves, great and small, swift and slow... They counted five distinct systems of waves, some small and sharp, some broad and faint. There were also occasional brief 'cat's paws' complicating the pattern. Father and son went down to the sheltered side of the lake and contemplated its more peaceful undulations. With a sense almost of sacrilege, Paul stirred the water with his stick, and sent ripple after ripple in widening circles. The father said, 'That is what you are yourself, a stirring up of the water, so that waves spread across the world. When the stirring stops, there will be no more ripples.' ... Thus did an imaginative amateur anticipate in a happy guess the 'wave mechanics' which was to prove the crowning achievement of the physics of the First Men. Paul was given to understand that even his own body, whatever else it was, was certainly a turmoil of waves, inconceivably complex, but no less orderly than the waves on the tarn ... It gave him a sense of the extreme subtlety and inevitability of existence. (Last Men in London, pp. 84-5)*

If Stapledon's work is based on certain basic images, then this must be the major one, not just the vision of seals on rocks. To see the universe as a pattern of intersecting ripples appears to have freed Stapledon from the intellectual constraints of traditional religion. At one time he was much influenced by an inner-city pastor, who stood for traditional religion. Paul (i.e. Olaf) shows this pastor, called the Archangel in the novel, some of his youthful poems. What for Paul had seemed a growing sense of God-in-the-Universe seems like heresy to the pastor. His efforts rejected, Paul returns to a sense of 'all that vastness

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Why was Stapledon able to write these two novels, seemingly without any precedent but Wells? Not even his biographer can answer this question.

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within which man is but a tremulous candle-flame, very soon to be extinguished'. With this sentence we are back at the kernel of *Last and First Men*.

Stapledon wrote two novels that are very different from his time chronicles. *Odd John* and *Sirius* are both limited to small time- and space-frames, are structured quite conventionally, and are absorbing as novels. *Sirius* is certainly the best written of all Stapledon's works; the most dramatic, the most comic, the most vivid, and, interestingly, the first of his books to be largely ignored in Britain and not taken up by an American publisher.

Both *Odd John* and *Sirius* are superman novels – or, in the case, of *Sirius*, a super-dog novel. Both owe much to Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911), which is one of the few British novels that link Wells's work and Stapledon's. Beresford's book tells of a super-intelligent child who is eventually so bored and dismayed by the human race that he commits suicide. The hero of *Odd John*, very similar to Beresford's superchild, and also to the main character of George Turner's *Brain Child* (1991), is horrified and disgusted by the human race to which he feels superior. He assembles a small group of like-minded children spread throughout the world and sets up a Utopia on a Pacific island. In turn, the rest of humanity tries to capture the island, whereupon the children destroy their Utopia and commit suicide. The superchild idea has been used plenty of times since, especially in John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) and Sturgeon's *More than Human* (1953), but *Odd John* was rightly judged a remarkable book when it appeared in 1936.

*Sirius*, published in 1944, is a much more closely observed book, and much more adventurous. *Sirius* is one of a number of dogs specially bred to be a super-dog, but he is the only experiment that succeeds. Stapledon's scientific reading is as exemplary as ever, since the combination of gene selection and foetus manipulation he describes sounds much like methods that might be used today. Stapledon had no time for the crude theories of eugenics that were popular in the 1930s and remained prominent in magazine science fiction for decades to come.

*Sirius* grows up in the household of his 'inventor', Thomas Trelone, his wife Elizabeth (based on Agnes) and his daughter Plaxy (almost certainly based on Stapledon's unconsummated love of that time). Part of Trelone's method is to slow down *Sirius*'s development so that he ages at much the same rate as Plaxy, the daughter. In this way *Sirius* and Plaxy, who can never become lovers, become deeply at-



Stapledon's painting of *Odd John*, taken from *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking For The Future*, where it is reproduced courtesy of John D. Stapledon.

tached to each other. The family grows up on a farm outside Liverpool. For much of his life *Sirius* is employed as a very clever sheep-herder, but Trelone also teaches him to speak and to read. Since *Sirius* cannot reveal his accomplishments to more than a small number of humans, he is separated from humanity. He is separated from his own kind, except when he can find a willing bitch. *Sirius* suffers from a deep isolation much like the poignant loneliness of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

*Sirius*, like *Odd John* before him, is Stapledon's ideal observer of human foibles. Except that, unlike a satirist, Stapledon is not interested in human frailties, except as evidence of some deep horror at the centre of human endeavour. Like *Odd John*, *Sirius* is eventually destroyed by stupid, blind humanity, but not before he has invented a new kind of singing and come to some kind of understanding of a world in which he is always a stranger. Much of the cleverness of the book is the way in which Stapledon shows how *Sirius* remains doggy as well as human: his assumptions based on smell, not sight; constantly frustrated because he does not have hands; constantly tempted to abandon his training program and revert to wild-dog status.

What links the two sides of Stapledon's work? Most of the clues can be found in *Last Men in London* which, on any other grounds, is Stapledon's least readable book. In that book he speaks of Paul's sense of the 'overwhelming presence of the Cosmos'. Stapledon's father was an amateur astronomer, and in every one of the books the stars are seen more as personal friends than far-off objects. In *Star Maker* we find sentient stars; in *Last Men in London* Stapledon speaks of most members of the human race as 'unlit beacons'. In 'The Flames', published in 1947, his alien creature wants to take over the human race, saying: 'You will no longer be the frustrated, bewildered, embittered, vindictive mental cripples that most of you now are'. Stapledon's two super-beings, *Odd John* and *Sirius*, escape from being 'mental cripples', but there is no place for them in the world.

During the 1920s and 1930s Stapledon became convinced that there was little hope left for civilised humanity. He had undergone World War I. Traveling as a speaker and pamphleteer for the various Working Men's Groups in Liverpool he had seen the effects of the Depression on society during the 1920s and 1930s, and he could see clearly the approach of World War II. He believed that conventional weapons would destroy most of the northern hemisphere during the War. His prophecy proved incorrect, but

by the end of the War, the power of atomic weapons had been unveiled. No wonder he was pessimistic!

However, many thinking people during the 1930s were as disturbed by events as he was. What made Stapledon different was his unwillingness to see a hope of a solution in any of the alternatives offered. In one of the better passages of *Last Men in London*, the main character debunks every single solution, either social or personal, offered during the 1930s to solve the crises at the time. The social engineering solutions offered by either Nazism or Communism are unacceptable, because they allow no room for the personal; intensely personal solutions, such as Buddhism, are unacceptable because they allow the meditator to ignore the world. Stapledon shows the harsh side of his personality: his belief that only an evolutionary superior human being could bring hope to the world – hence his two most interesting novels, *Odd John* and *Sirius*. But his proposed superior beings are not superior in the way that pervaded fascist thought at the time and continued in much science fiction throughout the next thirty years. Born into our civilisation, Stapledon's superior beings are largely ineffective in society, since they will see things clearly and not be gulled by the assumptions of that society. They will have a sense of responsibility for the whole of humanity, but will put this responsibility into action only at the personal level, not as a collective party of government.

If I'm not clearer than that, it's because Stapledon becomes very muddled when he tries to show us what his superior human being or cosmic philosophy will be like. It has something to do with the Cosmic Mind, hence his interest in telepathy, but Stapledon would never allow the individual mind to be swallowed up by such a Cosmic Mind. The only way he can think about his ideal humanity is to skip current

humanity and write of various Utopias in *Last and First Men*, or skip humanity altogether in *Star Maker*. There's Olaf, and there's the universe, and not much in between.

In Olaf Stapledon we find a fertile mind forced to arid conclusions. Hence the rather dry way he has of writing. Hence the lack of human characters, except in *Odd John* and *Sirius*. Worse, Stapledon is a would-be monk who would throw off traditionally puritanical constraints on sexual expression; a would-be believer in God who cannot believe in anything but the great forces of the universe. What we continue to be grateful for is that this very frustrated individual was also wonderfully inventive, and that we science fiction readers, if hardly anybody else, can still enjoy the best of his inventions. ♦

Discussed:

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Olaf Stapledon: *Last and First Men* London: Methuen, 1930, 355 pp.

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Sam Moskowitz: *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction* NY: Meridian Books, 1963, 354 pp.

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## Mistah Kurtz, He Dead

Paul Kincaid

PAUL KINCAID is one of the editors of this magazine. A former reviews editor of *Vector*, he has contributed to *Foundation* and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. He is the author of *A Very British Genre*.

This article was originally delivered as a talk at Intuition, the 1998 British National Science Fiction Convention.

*The brown current ran swiftly out of the heart of darkness, bearing us down towards the sea with twice the speed of our upward progress; and Kurtz's life was running swiftly, too, ebbing, ebbing out of his heart into the sea of inexorable time. The manager was very placid, he had no vital anxieties now, he took us both in with a comprehensive and satisfied glance: the 'affair' had come off as well as could be wished... The pilgrims looked upon me with disfavour. I was, so to speak, numbered with the dead. It is strange how I accepted this unforeseen partnership, this choice of nightmares forced upon me in the tenebrous land invaded by these mean and greedy phantoms...*

*Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again... It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw in that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair... He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision – he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath –*

*'The horror! The horror!'*

*I blew the candle out and left the cabin. The pilgrims were dining in the mess-room, and I took my place opposite the manager, who lifted his eyes to give me a questioning glance, which I successfully ignored... Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt –*

*'Mistah Kurtz – he dead.'*

AND SO, BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION WAS BORN.

Well, not quite. Though it is sometimes hard to imagine how J.G. Ballard could exist without Joseph Conrad.

I am starting this discussion of the character of British science fiction with a quotation from a Polish writer who never wrote science fiction (except for one curious collaboration) for one simple reason. What Conrad did in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) was establish a tone and a quality that have become inextricably linked with British science fiction.

By the time Conrad's novella was published, British science fiction was already old. Even if we agree with Brian Aldiss that the very first science fiction novel was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), we're going back nearly a century. If we start thinking of the robinsonades of the early 18th century, or the fanciful voyages to the Moon and the Sun of the 17th century, of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the centuries just pile up. But let's face it, such ur- or proto-science fiction wasn't that much different from the other literature going on around it. Even when we get indisputably into the history rather than the prehistory of sf, there's nothing necessarily or distinctly British about any of it. The dark and gloomy Gothic imagination which inspired Mary Shelley was little different from the dark and gloomy Gothic imagination which inspired, say, Edgar Allen Poe or Nathaniel Hawthorne. The bright and vivacious adventures of Jules Verne were siblings to the bright and vivacious adventures of Robert Louis Stevenson.

Indeed, it is only when we come to H.G. Wells, right at the end of the 19th century, that science fiction itself starts to acquire any of the distinctive characteristics that separate it from fantasy, or even from what I suppose we might call mainstream fiction. And you wouldn't necessarily brand Wells as a distinctly British sf writer. There's too much of the excitement at the possibilities of the future, for instance, that would become characteristic of American science fiction. Too much of the urgent political underpinning that can be found in, say, Russian sf. No, Wells is just too important as an ancestor of all science fiction to be rudely thrust into one narrow pigeonhole.

Nevertheless it is here, at the beginning of our century, that we first start to trace the split – or shall we be generous and say the parallel development – between what would become, in America, science fiction and what we, for a time at least, called scientific romance. It is this split that I want to examine, or rather, the British side of it. Here I must admit to rampant parochialism. After all, sf is not exclusively British or American. It is French, Russian, Chinese, Japanese and Romanian and heaven knows what else, and they have all developed in their own individual ways. These days we have access to a large body of Australian science fiction which, despite being in the English language, refuses to conform to the patterns of either British or American sf. Even so, David Hartwell, as sententious as ever, says in his introduction to *The Science Fiction Century* (1997): 'American science fiction, in translation or in the original, dominated the discourse world-wide. It still does; even though there have been major writers in other languages who have made major contributions. American science fiction is still the dominant partner in all the dialogues.' Hartwell is wrong, of course. But if we substituted 'English language' for American, I think we would have to concede the point.

Now, the split. To a large extent this was due to what might be called an accident of birth. We all know the story of Hugo Gernsback sticking the occasional didactic tale into his gung-ho pulp magazines extolling the wonders of American technology. And that's not too far from the truth. Science fiction emerged into its modern American form at a time, not long after the First World War, when the United States had become the world's dominant economic power, while politically it was entering one of its periodic isolationist phases. While American magazines did reprint stories by Wells and other British writers, and Wells in particular was a major influence on early American science fiction writers, the emphasis was on stories which reflected

the traditional American virtues much like the ones reflected in stories of the old West. Thus emerged, for example, the image of the competent man as lone hero, an iconic figure in American sf who would not be challenged until the New Wave of the 1960s.

The British scientific romance emerged in the latter part of the 19th century, in popular magazines like *Pearson's* or *Blackwell's*, which flourished until the various publishing crises of the early 1900s. The stories these magazines published tended to be as garish and as simplistic as those in the American pulps, but they were not split along genre lines. The same magazine might well publish a ghost story and a detective story, a romance and a fantasy. On a popular level, a writer like Conan Doyle could write of Sherlock Holmes and of Professor Challenger. *The Just So Stories* and *With the Night Mail* could come with equal facility from the pen of Rudyard Kipling

and be greeted with the same appreciation. And Henry James could seriously suggest to H.G. Wells that they collaborate on a novel about Mars. James and Wells may have fallen out later, the artist versus the populist foreshadowing the high-art/low-art split that would cast science fiction forever from literary respectability, but even exponents of high art would decry sf by writing it, as E.M. Forster did with 'The Machine Stops', and even this anti-sf was archetypal British

science fiction in its fear of the consequence of change. This continuity between science fiction and the mainstream, even in the face of dismissal by the establishment, would be important later.

But first, let me go back for a moment. Early science fiction, the proto-true quill as it were, from Thomas More's *Utopia* to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), tended to be satires in which you could safely question the foibles of contemporary society by casting them upon alien shores. These were times of European expansion into a world that was still largely empty (at least to our eyes), and these literal New Worlds were also in some way a measure of our own humanity. John Donne could see sex as a 'new-found land', while Walter Raleigh thought Virginia might provide the setting for a genuine Utopia. The inner and outer worlds were mirrored; wild travellers' tales and genuine exploration, political satire and the quest for El Dorado all merged into a fictional stew which produced fanciful stories such as *Gulliver's Travels* and more sober works such as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). After all, there were still plentiful blank areas on the map to provide an appropriate and safely distant stage upon which to present dramas which questioned our certainties.

Such questioning was as characteristic of scientific

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was archetypal  
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change.*

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endeavour as of political satire, and when Mary Shelley projected certain scientific questions of her age upon the Other of an artificial man she wasn't so much starting a new genre as following along the same route as More and Swift. *Frankenstein's* most immediate literary precursors were the Gothic novels, those expressions of literary Romanticism which saw wild landscapes as the model for the human condition. John Donne's sexual 'new-found land' had become a storm-lashed country of rugged peaks and Arctic wastes wherein one might find oneself away from the ordered and manicured landscapes of the 18th century city or country estate.

Mary Shelley's combining of the Gothic Otherness of wild landscapes with the scientific Otherness of the Creature did not immediately set a trend. By the latter half of the 19th century, however, the notion that the Other might reflect our own social rôle was being explored in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), while the notion of journeying to a strange land (the future) as a means of examining our place in the world was resurfacing in *The Time Machine* (1895). These two ways of presenting the Other, would come together in British science fiction through the unlikely medium of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

*Heart of Darkness* is an axis around which much of modern fiction, and particularly modern British science fiction, revolves. It was written as the last empty places on the map were being filled; it was indeed the last book that could be written about the strangeness lost in the secret places of our world without a venture into fancy. (When J.G. Ballard virtually rewrote *Heart of Darkness* as *The Day of Creation* (1987) he had to take the fantastic leap of creating a river from nowhere before he could get his story going.) And as these empty places were filled, Conrad replaced them with an emptiness in the heart of his characters. Alienation, the *leitmotif* of so much twentieth century science fiction, was symbolised by the alien landscape of Conrad's Africa, while Kurtz, that tenebrous character so much talked about but so little known, is as directly alien to our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world as Mr Hyde or Frankenstein's Creature.

Without itself being science fiction, therefore, *Heart of Darkness* united the themes that were to become the dominant patterns of science fiction, particularly British science fiction, as it developed throughout our century. In *New Maps of Hell* (1960), Kingsley Amis quotes Edmund Crispin: 'Where an ordinary novel or short story resembles portraiture or at widest the domestic interior, science fiction offers the less cosy satisfaction of a landscape with figures.' In *Heart of*

*Darkness*, we see how the landscape and the figures are made to reflect each other. Though the figures may be small and lacking detail, we know exactly who and what they are because of the landscape through which they move. Kurtz has gone native, he and Africa are one: we learn all we need to know of his character from Marlow's experiences on the journey up river, just as in Ballard's *The Crystal World* (1966), for example, the psychological depths of the explorer are displayed in the crystalline landscape, or, taking a more recent example, decay in the tropical forest that has taken over London in Ronald Wright's *A Scientific Romance* (1997) parallels the rapid decay (from CJD) of the narrator.

In his survey of British science fiction, *Ultimate Island* (1993), Nicholas Ruddick suggests that the island, real or metaphorical, is the device, the symbol, which best represents British science fiction. He

illustrates this argument with examples that range from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611) to William Golding's *Pincher Martin* (1956), from Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) to Ballard's *Concrete Island* (1974). Certainly, it is easy to think of many more 'island' stories in British sf, and the identification of the distinctive characteristic of our science fiction with our island state is almost too tempting. But at

the same time, it is too easy to think of many characteristic works of British science fiction that have no island in them – Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Keith Roberts's *Pavane* (1968), Arthur C. Clarke's *2001* (1968) – or American works that do feature islands – whether physically as in Kim Stanley Robinson's *A Short Sharp Shock* (1990) or Lucius Shepard's *Kalimantan* (1990), or metaphorically as with the Golden Gate Bridge in William Gibson's *Virtual Light* (1993) or the space station in more stories that I could possibly enumerate – for this notion to completely hold water.

Islands may feature largely in British science fiction because, as an island race, it is easy for us to imagine a massive flood as the instrument for transforming our world. That's what happens, for instance, in S. Fowler Wright's *The Amphibians* (1925) and Christopher Priest's *A Dream of Wessex* (1977). However, I suspect the island is a significant feature of British science fiction because it is an isolated landscape against which to place isolated characters. In so far as setting and psychology resonate with each other in British sf, islands fit the characters of most protagonists while keeping within a restricted area the action that has to be encompassed, though other settings meet these requirements just as well – the forest, the lonely village, the wilderness, the ship

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*The identification of the distinctive characteristic of our science fiction with our island state is almost too tempting*

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or space ship or space station – and occur within British sf with almost as much frequency.

In many ways the split, the separate development, of British and American sf was at its most extreme between the wars. In America the simplistic pulp stories of Gernsback's magazines grew into the Campbellian Golden Age when many of the giants of the genre, people like Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, first came on the scene. John W. Campbell steered his writers, steered American science fiction, along very distinct lines. It was the ideas that American writers explored, the new, the strange device; American sf focused upon the relationship between the all-American hero, the competent man, and innovation.

During the 1930s, when some of these American magazines started to become available in this country, certain British writers such as Arthur C. Clarke, Eric Frank Russell and John Wyndham began to write stories aimed squarely at this American market. In the main, though, British scientific romance of the time was not following this path. Typically, British sf was concerned not so much with the new as with the effect of the new. Writers such as S. Fowler Wright, John Gloag and Aldous Huxley would spend less time than their American counterparts inspecting the wonderful machine and more time recounting life when the machine was working (or, more often, not). Their subject was not the relationship between the hero and the innovation, but the relationship between the ordinary person and the world after the innovation. When a British writer directly addressed ideas, it was not the idea made concrete and steel, as for instance in Robert A. Heinlein's 'The Roads Must Roll' (1940), but the idea as a sequence of transformations, of changed men in relation to changing landscapes, as in Stapledon's *Last and First Men*.

After the Second World War the split between the two English language science fictions had already started to narrow. In America, new magazines like *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and new writers like Frederik Pohl, Alfred Bester, Theodore Sturgeon and Edgar Pangborn, were moving away from their predecessors' gung-ho love affair with technology and the future. If nothing else, the atomic bomb and the cold war made it impossible to regard science and the future with unalloyed optimism.

In Britain, meanwhile, the pre-War generation whose imaginations had been fired by American sf magazines had come to maturity, and Arthur C. Clarke in particular was establishing himself as one of the greats of the genre, fully on a par, in tone as well as talent, with his American counterparts. Yet this, more than any other time, was when British sf was branded as distinctly different from American, a literature usually classed as downbeat and pessimistic. And it is the fault of one man.

John Wyndham, using bits of his interminable name to create a variety of pseudonyms, had started writing before the war. He sold his first story to Hugo Gernsback in 1931, and during that decade his work was primarily adventure fiction that fitted easily into the American style. After the war, however, he changed to the John Wyndham form of his name, and changed his writing style. His first major work after the war, the book that made his name and established the style with which he became synonymous, was *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). A string of other British writers – John Christopher, John Lymington, John Blackburn, Charles Eric Maine – followed his format during the 1950s and early 1960s, and what Brian Aldiss called the 'cosy catastrophe' became fixed in everybody's minds as being what British science fiction was all about.

These were, typically, stories in which some part of Britain was devastated by a catastrophe, usually of a bizarre sort (an attack by giant plants?). There were innumerable deaths, an odyssey through the devastated landscape, and in the end a small group of survivors would re-establish a sort of middle class normality in a world that had been wiped clean by the catastrophe. They were clearly stories about loss of power, they were also conservative in the way they clung to old-fashioned traditions and standards, and they were very, very English. They were, the common view would have it, about the loss of Empire, and they were very depressing.

Because the 'cosy catastrophe' is so important in the way people perceive British science fiction, even today, I want to spend a little time looking at the circumstances in which it arose.

Britain's commercial and political empire, particularly during the age of Victorian expansion, attracted many of our brightest young people into colonial service (as well as a fair number of younger sons and the less naturally gifted who were parcelled out to distant corners where they might do least harm). Those who stayed at home, meanwhile, were often involved in trade or directly benefited in other ways from these international contacts. The high casualty rate of the First World War, and the resultant shortage of manpower, meant that local peoples became more involved in their own government, business and commerce. Then, during and after the Second World War, sizeable areas of British influence were forcibly taken from British control: in the Far East; the British Mandate of Palestine; the jewel in the crown, India. Meanwhile, the dominions of Australia, Canada and New Zealand had developed a national pride and needed the mother country less and less, while South Africa was embarking upon its political experiment of apartheid and in effect turning its back upon the rest of the world.

The Empire – or shall we say the Colonies and

Dominions, as they were more and more often known – continued to feed Britain: New Zealand lamb, Cape oranges, other welcome variations on the dull rationing diet. But wealth was not flowing into Britain as it once had done, just at a time when Britain's own infrastructure was struggling to recover from the severe mauling it had suffered during the war. Britain had neither the will nor the wherewithal to rebuild its shattered empire after the war; all its energy had to go into rebuilding itself. Victory had left us little better off than a defeated Germany: bomb sites would remain a feature of the urban landscape well into the 1960s; rationing would completely disappear only in the early 1950s, while severe winters in the late 1940s and widespread disease completed the picture of national misery. We were as dependent on American aid for survival as any other country in Europe. At the same time, America's development of the atomic bomb had changed the whole nature of international power, and the end of one war had only brought about another cold one in which the enemy was again European. If Britain was to continue to think of itself as a player on the international stage – and right now, every other country in the world regarded Britain as such – then it was clear that its attention must be focused on Europe, on Russia, on America. The rest of the world, those places where the former empire had once ruled, were of considerably less importance, and were unlikely to command any greater attention in this country when we no longer heard about the wealth and benevolence of British rule but only about the terrorist activities of the Stern Gang in Palestine, the Mau Mau in Kenya, EOKA in Cyprus.

In other words, the empire was clearly ending, the world had undergone a sea change as a result of the Second World War, the biggest powers were America and Russia engaged in their Cold War stand-off, the place of Britain in the world was no longer so certain as it had been before. On top of this came other shocks to the system. Troops returning from liberating Belsen had horror stories to tell, as did the soldiers and civilians who survived Japanese captivity in the Far East (like J.G. Ballard). The world contained far worse things than most people could possibly have imagined before the war, and where were the good things to counter all this? In a Britain of hardship and rationing, the only good things were vague promises for the future, but it would take ten years and a diet of glitzy advertising from America before Britain really began to believe in the future.

Meanwhile, we had emerged victorious from the biggest war the world had known, but were not to

taste much in the way of the fruits of victory. As the war ended in Europe (indeed, while it was still going on in the Far East) we elected a Labour Government whose radical platform promised a break with the past; the masses were going to benefit from this brave new world. But despite moves whose scale captured the public imagination – the establishment of the National Health Service, the nationalisation of the coal industry – the new government's reforming zeal soon ran out of steam. The economy, still recovering from the war and dependent on foreign (specifically, American) aid, wasn't strong enough to sustain these changes; the public saw old certainties and securities being undermined. By 1951, the Labour Government had been voted out of power and Winston Churchill, with a Tory Government made up largely of the same people who ran the country during the war, was back in power.

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*It was a time when people looking forward could see only uncertainty, while those who looked back found disruption.*

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It was a time, in other words, when people looking forward could see only uncertainty, while those who looked back found disruption. The war still cast its long shadow: we were not yet able to eat all we might wish, bananas were still considered exotic, and even fashion had to replace the generous cut of pre-war clothing with the somewhat more dowdy New Look of post-war austerity.

The first years of peace seemed to bring only shortages, flu epidemics, and exceptionally hard winters. The Ealing Comedies of this period, such as *Passport to Pimlico* (1948) and *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953), perfectly captured the post-war mood, a nervous preservation of the past in the face of powers that thought only in terms of restrictions and cuts. So strong was this need to hold on to the familiar and the safe that, despite humiliations such as the Suez Crisis, scandals, accusations of mismanagement (which grew so vociferous they led to Macmillan's famous 'Night of the Long Knives') and a continuing policy of cuts and restrictions that continued right up to Dr Beeching's famous axing of many branch railway lines, the Conservative Government comfortably held on to power for thirteen years.

It is against this background that the rise in popularity of the British catastrophe story must be seen. Remember, as I've said, the main focus of the scientific romance – and whatever else it was, the cosy catastrophe was just an extension of scientific romances such as Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885), H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898), S. Fowler Wright's *The Amphibians* – was not the change, the novelty, what I believe Darko Suvin christened the 'novum', but the after-effect, the consequence of change. And people were seeing consequences of change all around them.

In America things were very different. America had emerged from the war bigger, better and brighter than ever. Victorious and unscathed, the pre-war depression had been turned into post-war boom. America was undefeated, as yet without the shadow of Vietnam to tarnish that optimism. America was, economically, politically and militarily, the most powerful country in the world. Every prospect pleased. The Cold War had created a collective paranoia which was reflected in uneasy stories of alien attack, but in general the future was full of golden promise. The nearest America came to the catastrophe story was in post-apocalyptic tales of nuclear dread, but even these somehow seemed to suggest it would be all right in the end.

For Britain where, in the long winters of the late 1940s and early 1950s, victory must have felt very similar to defeat, such an unquestioningly positive attitude towards the future must have seemed a triumph of hope over experience. The disrupted landscapes of *The Day of the Triffids* or *The Kraken Wakes* (1953) or *The Death of Grass* (1956) were transparent analogies for the way Britain actually was. The cosy catastrophe was not a story about loss of empire so much as a way of coming to terms with war, victory and reduced circumstances.

As the 1950s wore on, however, Britain experienced a pale, delayed, but nevertheless welcome echo of America's boom in consumer spending. We got televisions, which showed a lot of imported American programmes and gave us a taste of what the future might be. Harold Macmillan told us we'd never had it so good; and he was right. Cynical writers for decades to come would still find reason enough to write disaster stories – Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), Roberts's *The Furies* (1966), Priest's *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (1972), Richard Cowper's *The Twilight of Briareus* (1974) – it was, after all, a natural mode of expression for the British approach to science fiction. But the age of the cosy catastrophe was over within a decade of its birth. By the early 1960s, America had men in space, even though the assassination of President John F. Kennedy had been a blow to their optimism and esteem (and the American propensity for paranoia turned from the Red Menace to the conspiracy theory). In Britain we had a new Labour government, the 'white heat of the technological revolution', near-enough full employment, more money than we'd ever had before, the rise of a wealthy, informed and active youth, and the Beatles. For a while, with our pop stars and fashion designers and photographers and other exponents of style, it seemed that Britain led the world once more. We couldn't go on writing the same science fiction, because it no longer reflected the world that was Britain. And yet, despite the success of writers like Arthur C. Clarke, we couldn't start writing American science fiction either.

After all, the certainties that had underpinned American sf at its boldest no longer seemed so certain following the demise of Kennedy's Camelot, the increasing violence associated with the civil rights movement and involvement in the Vietnam War. The solution, in retrospect, is probably slightly less surprising than it must have seemed at the time. But only slightly.

Despite the way that sf had been cast into the outer darkness by the literary establishment, British science fiction had never quite lost contact with the mainstream. Mainstream writers would continue to write books that belonged within science fiction, as George Orwell did with *1984*, William Golding with *Lord of the Flies* (1954), Lawrence Durrell with *Tunc* (1968) and *Numquam* (1970), Anthony Burgess with *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and so on. Science fiction writers would write mainstream works, as Brian Aldiss has done ever since his first book, *The Brightfount Diaries* (1955). And sf would occasionally be deemed worthy of academic study – it took only 20 years for *The Day of the Triffids* to make the school curriculum. At the same time, in the 1960s, rebellious youth had to be rebellious in its choice of literature, and there was an upswing in the literary avant-garde. The trial of Penguin Books over *Lady Chatterley's Lover* early in the decade, and the string of obscenity trials that followed, had the effect of liberalising British fiction. Taboos were being broken all over the place, while writers such as Henry Miller and William Burroughs, who did away with traditional narrative structure, enjoyed a vogue – though this was, in part, because they dealt explicitly with sex, drugs and violence, the taboo subjects that were to be flaunted throughout the period.

Science fiction proved peculiarly fertile ground for such literary experiments. Since it was despised by the establishment, it was already part of, or at least close to, the underground. And it was easy to fit speculation about sexual possibilities or drug fantasies into the wide open subject matter of the genre. So the new generation of British sf writers took the literary techniques of the mainstream, most notably the stream-of-consciousness and unreliable narrators of modernism, techniques which had no place in the straightforward narratives that had been a feature of virtually all science fiction to this date, mixed in the avant-garde subject matter of the new underground, and the New Wave was formed.

It has to be said that the New Wave, as I am talking about it now, was an almost exclusively British phenomenon. Though a few American writers, notably Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek and Norman Spinrad, came to Britain and were a part of the experiment, practically all the work that defines the character of the British New Wave was by British writers. In particular I'm thinking of Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius stories, Brian Aldiss's

Acid-Head War stories, J.G. Ballard's condensed novels, John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968) and the early work of M. John Harrison, Christopher Priest and Josephine Saxton.

The new generation of American writers was similarly looking for a new way of writing science fiction that was more in keeping with the mood and attitude of the times. The older sf, with its positive view of the future and its implicit belief in America's role in that future, was inherently conservative. The new writers coming up were anything but. Some Americans did champion the British New Wave in the face of the horrified reaction of the old guard, in particular Judith Merril, whose anthology, *England Swings SF* (1968), probably did as much as any other publication, including Moorcock's *New Worlds*, to define the shape and characteristics of the British New Wave. But when American writers did pick up on the New Wave it was in a very different form than on this side of the Atlantic. The combination of literary technique and avant-garde subject matter was ditched in favour of a more straightforward iconoclasm. The American New Wave was more overtly revolutionary than its British counterpart, taboos were shattered by attacking them straight on and the glory was in the demolition, not in the manner of its achievement.

The New Wave made a far bigger splash than, perhaps, it warranted. Certainly, the whole movement had run its course by the end of the decade, a far shorter lifespan even than the cosy catastrophe of the previous decade. Yet it did nothing to change the image of British science fiction, probably because British sf, for all its literary experimentalism, was still concerned with exploring the aftereffects of change, while the Americans, with their delight in smashing icons, were still concentrating on the point of change. The British New Wave continued to be far less enamoured of the future than the American New Wave. Nevertheless, I think the New Waves on either side of the Atlantic became confused, so it becomes difficult to see that this was the last time that British science fiction had a distinctive character all its own.

The 1970s were a pretty dismal decade for British science fiction. *New Worlds* staggered on as a 'Quarterly' that managed only ten issues over six years, and although it contained good stories there was little of the daring of its earlier incarnation. Some of the writers who had emerged during the 1960s were producing some of their best work — Roberts's *The Chalk Giants* (1974), Priest's *Inverted World* (1974), Cowper's *The Road to Corlay* (1978) — but few new

writers were coming up. Those that did emerge during the decade — Garry Kilworth, Ian Watson, Robert Holdstock — were too few to form a distinctive voice and were mostly seen in terms of continuing what had gone before.

At the same time, two events were set to change the nature and the perception of science fiction. The first, during the mid 1960s, was the appearance of *Star Trek*, which initially did so poorly that it was cancelled early, but which went on to be shown continually all around the world. Then, at the end of the 1970s, came *Star Wars*. Even as representatives of American science fiction at its most gung-ho, these two were clearly old-fashioned when they appeared, but they reached a massive audience normally resistant to sf, they were a formative taste of sf for many of the writers on both sides of the Atlantic who have appeared over the last couple of decades, and they were the first step in a homogenisation of science fiction that has continued ever since.

Perhaps if British science fiction had been more vibrant at this time, it might have found preserving its distinctive voice easier. But it wasn't vibrant at all; it was, at best, marking time. Even America wasn't immune to the malaise of the decade — the most distinctive new writer to emerge in America during this period was John Varley, whose early stories and novels resolutely turned the clock back

to Heinleinian days of yore. There was nothing to put against the defining image of science fiction presented by *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*.

Only in the 1980s did written sf on both sides of the Atlantic bestir itself from the inertia of the previous decade. In America we got cyberpunk which wasn't as new as some people have claimed, and those who proclaim it 'postmodern science fiction' tend to overlook the rather overt references to Alfred Bester, Philip K. Dick, John Brunner, J.G. Ballard and a host of other writers you will find throughout the movement. Nevertheless, it was innovative and it did stir new life into the genre. Of course, one of the ways its writers did this was by being noisy about it, especially Bruce Sterling in his Vincent Omnia-veritas guise. Quieter, but in their way almost as important, were — *are* — the writers who were briefly but unsatisfactorily called the humanists. Gene Wolfe begat Kim Stanley Robinson who begat Karen Joy Fowler, and so on. Where Gibson and Sterling and their ilk learned their science fiction from the flashy American past and their literature in equal measure from Dashiell Hammett and Thomas Pynchon, the 'humanists' (if I have to

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use the term) learned their science fiction from both British and American sources, and their literature from across the American mainstream. The growing homogenisation, the closure of the split I've talked about, wasn't all a movement from here to there; some of them, remember, were moving towards here.

As cyberpunk was stirring American sf, in Britain we got *Interzone* which, truth to tell, has made a pretty decent fist of doing the same thing over here. Though that isn't the same thing as establishing a distinctive British voice, as *New Worlds* had done. When it started, *Interzone* tried too hard to be a reincarnation of *New Worlds*, forgetting that the times and the mood had moved on. Thatcher's Britain was no place to recreate a literature of Labour government, social revolution, and student protest. By the time that false start had faded away, cyberpunk had become the way to tell science fiction, and what we got were far more American writers than had been usual in any previous British magazine, and far too many British writers producing pale imitations of what the Americans were doing. These were not necessarily bad stories, *Interzone* was not necessarily a bad magazine; but it could not in this way provide a focus for creating or sustaining a distinctively British science fiction.

Perhaps there was no need for such a focus. Certainly it has to be a good thing if we can point to Iain Banks and destroy the myth that British sf is depressing, if we can point to Stephen Baxter and destroy the myth that it is all about loss of Empire. But I, for one, would be a little regretful if British

science fiction entirely lost its distinctive character, if there was nothing about what we wrote here that marked it out as different from the science fiction written in New York or New Orleans, or Novo Sibersk come to that.

But it isn't all gone. In the last fifteen years or so, we have had a flowering of British science fiction that has been unprecedented. And the science fiction we see today still has something almost indefinably British about it. Iain Banks's fiction may be wide-screen baroque in a way that nobody used to do as well as the Americans, but there is an underlying political sensibility that would have stuck in the craw of just about every member of John W. Campbell's stable. Gwyneth Jones writes about alien invasion in a way that is informed by the British colonial experience; in her work science fiction and loss of Empire really do go together. We may not have the cosy catastrophe any more, but we do have writers who make use of the landscape as Wyndham and his confrères did, such as Jeff Noon playing with cyberpunk tropes in the rain-lashed streets of Manchester. In fact, the one consistent thing we do see, in Paul McAuley's *Fairyland* (1995) or Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships* (1995) or any of the prominent British science fiction novels of the last decade or so, is that the concern is still that very British concern with the after-effect, not the event, with the ordinary person not the hero. And when we see Ian McDonald, in *Chaga* (1995), following J.G. Ballard's footsteps into the heart of Africa, we can conclude:

Mistah Kurtz — he not quite dead! ◆

## essentials

*Book of the New Sun* — Gene Wolfe (1980-1983) Wolfe blurs all boundaries.

*Little, Big* — John Crowley (1981) All fantasy should aspire to it.

*VALIS* — Philip K. Dick (1981) It's Phil Dick, man. No other reason is needed.

*Neuromancer* — William Gibson (1984) Essential not just to sf but to the end years of the century.

*Fire Watch* — Connie Willis (1985) Wonderful, sometimes acid, sometimes very funny stories.

*Howard Who?* — Howard Waldrop (1986) Just bizarre.

*Mythago Wood* — Robert Holdstock (1986) Intelligent, dreamlike fantasy.

*War for the Oaks* — Emma Bull (1987) How to do entertaining fantasy set in a mundane city.

*Life during Wartime* — Lucius Shepard (1987) Reality goes over the top and SF gives it a boost.

*The Motion of Light in Water* — Samuel R. Delany (1988, 1990, 1993) Specifically how every experience Delany ever had led to the *Fall of the Towers*.

*The Child Garden* — Geoff Ryman (1989) How gender, work, class-structure and technology intertwine

and change together.

*The City, Not Long After* — Pat Murphy (1989) A great example of the 'California post-Breakdown saved by artists' story.

*Sarah Canary* — Karen Joy Fowler (1991) Is this SF? — the reader is forced to be the judge.

*China Mountain Zhang* — Maureen McHugh (1992) Homosexuality and the future of the People's Republic of China? Seems to work.

*Snow Crash* — Neal Stephenson (1992) Tore thousands of programmers from their screens.

*Red Mars* — Kim Stanley Robinson (1993) Stole Mars back from boredom and give it to SF again.

*Mother of Storms* — John Barnes (1994) Brilliant extrapolation, though the deaths seem overly graphic.

*Four Ways to Forgiveness* — Ursula K. Le Guin (1995) Essential in its intertwined studies of freedom, slavery and gender roles.

*Look at the Evidence* — John Clute (1995) Clute has more ideas about how sf works per page than any ten other critics.

*Starlight 1* — ed. Patrick Nielsen Hayden (1996) the best original anthology in twenty years.

Jerry Kaufman

## No Man Is An Island: The Enigma of *The Wasp Factory*

Maureen Kincaid Speller

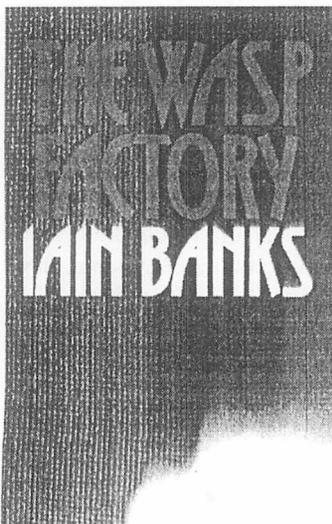
This article, which first appeared in *Acnestis* in May 1999, was written in response to an article by Andrew Butler, which subsequently appeared in *Foundation* 76.

IT'S STRANGE TO COME TO *THE WASP FACTORY* 'FRESH' AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, except of course, that I'm by no means unaware of its content. I've read one or two articles, I still recall the fuss on original publication. I suppose, in some ways, I've subconsciously avoided the book, understanding it to be riven with scenes of brutality towards animals and humans alike, but I can see now that this is very far from the truth. Yes, dreadful things happen to small furry animals, to insects, and to small humans, as well as to the sheep, but for the most part, the brutality is carried out off-stage; apart from an episode towards the end of the book, involving 'Eric's' signature incineration of animals, in this case a flock of sheep, we mostly rely on Frank's descriptions of things he has claimed to have done or seen; all we actually *see* is Frank torturing the occasional wasp. Who among us has not swatted the odd wasp: I quite candidly confess to having sat by when I was younger, watching someone invert glasses over drunken wasps and then inserting burning matches to deprive them of oxygen.

In fact, what I find fascinating, almost appalling, in the book is not the actual violence towards animals or humans, but the ritual nature of that violence, and indeed the ceremonial order of Frank's life on the island. One cannot help but be struck by the extraordinary complexity of Frank's religious duties. Almost every action of his day has some significant function; indeed, I think it's of the greatest significance that the actual Factory in part comprises a huge clock-face, a modern symbol of order (aren't we all slaves to the clock, though Frank, quite literally, seems to have all the time in the world) and from a bank, another potent symbol of order. It's as though he needs the ritual to keep his world, and his understanding of his world, under control. So, is this obsession with ritual simply a second-generation expression of the compulsive-obsessive disorder that appears to afflict Frank's parent, or an indication that parent and child both have far too much time on their hands? Or should we ask ourselves what it is that Frank fears and attempts to keep at bay through his maintenance of rituals (which in turn might lead us to ask what his parent is trying to keep at bay through the memorising of facts and figures about the house and its contents)?

And now may be a good a time to ask what Frank and his father might be; what they might actually be. Frank, we know, will become Frances, and as we recall, s/he suspects that Angus might actually be Agnes, mother rather than father. Significant, isn't it, that while Frank tries to recall whether he's ever seen his father without a top on, he nevertheless goes for the more difficult option of stripping off his father's trousers rather than simply opening his shirt - one might almost think that he doesn't want to find out the truth, if as Andrew Butler suggests, the male genitals he finds are anyway faked.

And if one follows this train of thought, one can't help but think less of doubleness so much as of reversal, if the father is the mother, if the son is the daughter. There's a confounding of gender rôles throughout the book, although Frank's understanding of it is, at best, hazy. Towards the end of the book, once the truth about her gender has been revealed, Frances speculates



on her life, on the murders she's committed, indeed on her own murder, and on why she has committed murder. She sees herself as having perhaps murdered for revenge, somehow dimly aware of what she's been deprived of, and yet this doesn't ring true, given that as Frank, she seems not to have been in any way aware that there were doubts over her gender, and to have been quite clear about she was doing. Or else, she decides, it was because she could never become a proper man. She would be therefore more man than the men around her.

What also struck me, when I read Andrew's piece, was his comment about Angus's damaged leg, which made me think immediately of the Fisher King of Arthurian legend, although the 'wound that will not heal' is a description more accurately applied to Frank's condition, as Angus's leg was broken in the motorbike accident (mind you, given that we've only Frank's word for this, and that his father is as unreliable a narrator as I suspect Frank probably is, who knows for sure). It's worth recalling, though, that the Fisher King's wound is variously interpreted as a wound to the thigh, and to the genitals, and that the wasteland which is his kingdom cannot be restored until the wound is cured. Frank indeed talks of himself as a eunuch, as 'a fierce but noble presence in my lands, a crippled warrior, fallen prince...'<sup>1</sup> but then suggests that he is in fact a fool. But isn't the holy fool a potent figure in such mythology, blessed with a clarity of vision, the ability to establish the truth in a situation, given permission by his supposed foolishness to speak the truth?

Paul Kincaid has pointed out that the Fisher King is a fertility symbol, the Winter King, which led me back to Frank's surname, Cauldhame - Cold Home. I'd been pondering its possible relevance, beyond the fact that the home is indeed cold, if we are to take a traditional view of the situation - two men making shift for themselves; a house lacking in emotional warmth, affection, a man who spends much of his time locked away in his study; a solitary boy who roams the island, committing atrocities on the local wildlife. The cold home, though, would indeed be the abode of the Winter King.

And therefore, it's worth considering the island on which the two Cauldhames live, a kingdom separate from the rest of the world. What his father thinks of it is not recorded, but to Frank it is a world in itself, a world he is creating and naming. Frank is unacknowledged monarch of this ravaged world, and also apart from our world in that he theoretically doesn't exist - if we are to believe him, his birth has

gone unregistered and the authorities are not aware of his existence, officially. In a curious way, he is not of this world at all. It's worth noting, too, that Frank says of himself, 'Often I've thought of myself as a state; a country or, at the very least, a city.'<sup>2</sup>

And the inevitable question, in the light of Kev McVeigh's suggestion, is whether Eric and Frank are one and the same. It's plausible, yes, although there are certain ambiguities to be resolved, most particularly that phone-call that comes when Frank is not in the house. It would be worth, too, taking a look at that mention of Eric, the older brother, being allowed to wear dresses as well as trousers when he was young. Suppose the two are one and the same. Why then, does Frank think that Eric is real? Has he somehow divorced his male self from his perceived eunuch self? The biggest problem, of course, is that we have only Frank's word for any of this. It's difficult

to characterise Frank as an unreliable narrator in the way we might, for example, characterise one of Edgar Allan Poe's clearly unreliable narrators. On the one hand, the story is so bizarre, one simply can't believe that it might be true; on the other, the story is so bizarre, how could it not be true?

The one thing that fascinates me about *The Wasp Factory* is this: just suppose that Frank's story is absolutely true. In that case, the really interesting story hasn't yet been told. Just what was it that motivated his father to conduct such experiments? After dressing Eric as a girl, assuming that the two are separate and existing entities, what possessed Angus to try to turn Frances into a boy? This is and remains the greatest enigma of *The Wasp Factory*. ♦

lutely true. In that case, the really interesting story hasn't yet been told. Just what was it that motivated his father to conduct such experiments? After dressing Eric as a girl, assuming that the two are separate and existing entities, what possessed Angus to try to turn Frances into a boy? This is and remains the greatest enigma of *The Wasp Factory*. ♦

Discussed:

*The Wasp Factory* by Iain Banks, London, Macmillan, 1984, 184pp

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*Just suppose that Frank's story is absolutely true. In that case, the really interesting story hasn't yet been told.*

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<sup>1</sup> Iain Banks *The Wasp Factory* (Macmillan, 1984) p183

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p62

## 'If You Do Not Love Words': The Pleasure of Reading R. A. Lafferty

Elaine Cochrane

ELAINE COCHRANE has been an active member of Melbourne fandom for many years now. Of this article she says: 'The following was written for presentation to the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group), 2 October 1996, and was not originally intended for publication. I don't even get around to listing my favourite Lafferty stories.'

AN ANTOURNEY PICTURE ORIGINAL SOURCE 836  
NINE HUNDRED GRANDMOTHERS  
by R. A. LAFFERTY



RAPHAEL ALOYSIUS LAFFERTY WAS BORN IN IOWA IN 1914, AND MOVED TO Oklahoma at the age of four. Apart from four and a half years army service he has lived there ever since, spending his working life as an electrical engineer. In the autobiography at the start of *Past Master* (Ace, 1968), he writes 'I was a heavy drinker till about eight years ago at which time I cut down on it, beginning my writing attempts at the same time to fill up a certain void.'

Lafferty, quoted in *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, (3rd ed., St James Press 1991), says of his work: 'My novels, which I wrote myself at great labor, have received more attention than my short stories, which wrote themselves. Nevertheless, the short stories are greatly superior to the novels.'

He is unclassifiable as to genre. His settings include other planets, and his stories sometimes feature spaceships and often the interactions between non-human species, but as Sandra Miesel says in *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, 'There is not a bit of science in Lafferty's SF'. He has technology co-existing with doubles and fetches and ghosts, but with the matter-of-fact flavour of magic realism and myth rather than the fantastic flavour of sword and sorcery. And he is often very funny. Miesel describes him as 'science fiction's most prodigious teller of tall tales.'

One thing that makes Lafferty special is his style. He loves language. In *Arrive at Easterwine* (Scribners, 1971) he has Epiktistes, the computer who is the putative author of the book, introduce the work:

*Oh, come along, reader of the High Journal; if you do not love words, how will you love the communication? How will you forgive me my tropes, communicate the love?*

and the entire novel is a joyful celebration of language.

He delights in the sounds of words: in 'Ginny Wrapped in the Sun' (1967, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*, Ace, 1970)

*'I'm going to read my paper tonight, Dismas' Dr Minden said, 'and they'll hoot me out of the hall. [...] Hauser honks like a gauder! That clattering laugh of Goldbeater! Snodden sniggers so loud that it echoes! Cooper's boom is like barrels rolling downstairs, and your own - it'll shrivel me, Dismas.'*

and in jokes:

*'It is no ignorant man who tells you this. I have read the booklets in your orderly tents: Physics without Mathematics, Cosmology without Chaos, Psychology without Brains' ('The Cliffs That Laughed', 1968, in *Strange Doings*, Scribners, 1972).*

Rhyme is used frequently, just for the fun of it and as a structural device (eg. the chapter openings in *Space Chantey*, all dreadful doggerel and deliberately painful rhymes), but more importantly as a story element. For example, the Pucas, the visiting aliens in *Reefs of Earth* (Berkley, 1968), use 'Bagarthach verses' to curse hostile humans: 'Old Crocker man, be belled and banged!/You hound-dog hunk, we'll have you hounded!/On else than gallows be you hanged! In else than water be you drownd-ed!' and in the delightful 'The Transcendent Tigers' (1964, in *Strange Doings*), the children shout rhymes as they jab a needle into a map:

'Peas and Beans —/New Orleans!' She jabbed the needle into New Orleans on the map, and the great shaft a hundred thousand miles long came down into the middle of the Crescent City. [then, several cities later]

'I know one,' said Eustace, and he clapped the red cap on his own head:

'Eggs and Batter —  
Cincinnati.'

He rhymed and jabbed, manfully but badly.

'That didn't rhyme very good,' said Carnadine. 'I bet you botched it.'

He did. It wasn't a clean-cut holocaust at all. It was a clumsy, bloody, grinding job — not what you'd like. [more good rhymes and destruction, then]

'Let me do one,' pleaded Peevee, and he snatched the red cap:

'Hopping Froggo —  
Chicago.'

'I do wish that you people would let me handle this,' said Carnadine. 'That was awful.'

It was. It was horrible. That giant needle didn't go in clean at all. It buckled great chunks of land and tore a ragged gap. Nothing pretty, nothing round about it. It was plain brutal destruction. [interlude and aside: get out quick! and then the story ends:]

Carnadine plunged ahead:

'What the hecktady —  
Schenectady.'

That was one of the roundest and cleanest holes of all.

'Flour and Crisco —  
San Francisco.'

That was a good one. It got all the people at once, and then set up tidal waves and earthquakes all over everywhere.

'Knife and Fork —

The delight in language extends to mythological and literary puns and allusions; here are a few I've spotted. The demon-like aliens in *The Reefs of Earth* are called Pucas; 'pwca' is the Welsh version of Puck, and I suspect that the Irish name is much the same: in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds* the demon is called 'the Pooka'. (Although in *The Devil is Dead* we are told that the Irish for Devil is Ifreann.) In *Not to Mention Camels* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), a character aspires to archetype status; and among the already existing archetypes listed there is Gyne Peribleene-ton-Helion (Woman-Wrapped-in-the-Sun) (p. 155) — compare the short-story title 'Ginny Wrapped in the Sun'. The author of 'a series of nineteen interlocked equations of cosmic shapeliness and simplicity', of which 'it was almost as though nothing else could ever be added on any subject whatsoever' is one Professor Aloys Foucault-Oeg. ('Aloys', *Strange Doings*.)

In 'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne' (1967, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*) members of the Institute of Impure Science have built a high-tech device they call an Avatar in order to tamper with the past:

'I hope the Avatar isn't expensive,' Willy McGilly said. 'When I was a boy we got by with a dart whittled out of slippery elm wood.'

'This is no place for humor,' Glasser protested. 'Who did you, as a boy, ever kill in time, Willy?'

'Lots of them. King Wu of the Manchu, Pope Adrian VII, President Hardy of our own country, King Marcel of Auvergne, the philosopher Gabriel Toeplitz. It's a good thing we got them. They were a bad lot.'

'But I never heard of any of them, Willy,' Glasser insisted.

'Of course not. We killed them when they were kids.'

Glasser may not have heard of any of them, but *Hadrian VII* is the biography of a fictitious pope written by Baron Corvo, the equally fictitious persona of the writer Frederick Rolfe. I wouldn't mind betting that the others come from similar sources that I haven't identified.

The short stories are very varied. They tend to be conventionally structured developments of an idea, often enlivened and sometimes burdened by expository lumps. For example, 'Narrow Valley' (1966, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*):

'It is a psychic nexus in the form of an elongated dome,' said the eminent scientist Dr Velikof Vonk.

'It is maintained subconsciously by the concatenation of at least two minds, the stronger of them belonging to a man dead for many years. It has apparently existed for a little less than a hundred years. [...] There is nothing meteorological about it. It is strictly psychological. I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to it or it would have worried me.'

'It is a continental fault coinciding with a noospheric fault,' said the eminent scientist Arpad Arkabaranan. 'The valley really is half a mile wide, and at the same time it is really only five feet wide. If we measured correctly we would get these dual measurements. Of course it is meteorological! Everything including dreams is meteorological [...] I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to this or it would have worried me.'

'I just don't understand how he worked it,' said the eminent scientist Willy McGilly. 'Cedar bark, jack-oak leaves, and the word 'Petahauerat'. The thing's impossible! When I was a boy and we wanted to make a hide-out, we used bark from the skunk-spruce tree, the leaves of a box elder, and the word was 'Boudicea'. All three elements are wrong here. I cannot find a scientific explanation for it, and it does worry me.'

Often, the expository lump is given in the form of

a quotation from some reference, such as 'The Back Door of History' by Arpad Arutinov, or the writings of Diogenes Pontifex or Audifax O'Hanlon, two worthies excluded from the Institute of Impure Science by the minimum decency rule.

The novels, too, tend to be idea- rather than plot-driven, and this is not always enough to tie them together. In the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (ed. Nicholls, 1979) John Clute describes the novels *The Devil is Dead* and *Arrive at Easterwine* as tangled; in the new edition (ed. Clute and Nicholls, 1993) he describes *Arrive at Easterwine* as beginning 'to evince a tangledness that comes, at times, close to incoherence'. Miesel says of the same novels that Lafferty 'mistakes the accumulation of vignettes for the construction of a novel.'

I've enjoyed *Arrive at Easterwine* both times I've read it, as I've been carried along by the exuberance of the writing. Of the others I've read, *Past Master* comes closest to a conventional plot, although I was disappointed when I first read it some 15 years ago because I was looking for the same mad inventiveness that characterises the short stories. On re-reading it a couple of weeks ago, I did find wonderful flashes of pure Lafferty humour, but like most of the novels it is essentially serious in intent and dark in mood. *Space Chantey* (Ace, 1968), which purports to be a retelling of the *Odyssey*, and *Annals of Klepsis* (Ace, 1983) are exceptions to this, and they do fit the description 'a series of vignettes'. There is the wonderful Lafferty humour in them, but not much else. At the other extreme, *Not to Mention Camels* (1976) and *Where Have You Been, Sandaliotics* (one of the two novels published in *Apocalypses*, Pinnacle, 1977), are typically quirky but are short on redeeming humour. *Not to Mention Camels* is almost embarrassingly gruesome. Miesel says, 'So closely do Lafferty's novels resemble each other, they might as well be alternate drafts of the same story.'

A recurrent theme, particularly in the novels, is the battle between Good and Evil, but Lafferty has his own ideas of what these words mean. In 'Horns on their Heads' (Pendragon Press, 1976, collected in *Iron Tears*, Edgewood Press, 1992), he writes:

*The 'odor of sanctity' is not all lilacs and roses, nor is sanctity (the sacred, the sacer) a thing that stays within straited limits. It is too stark and rank for those limits. It pertains to holiness and sacredness; but also to awfulness; and further, to cursedness, to wickedness, execrability; to devotion; and again, to seizure and epilepsy.*

*Now the 'odor of sanctity', the smell of the thing (stay with us; strong smells and stench are the vitality itself), is compounded of the deepest and*

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*Arrive at Easterwine begins 'to evince a tangledness that comes, at times, close to incoherence'.*

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*most eroding of sweating, the sweating of blood and blood-serum; of nervous and speaking [a typo? I think it should be sweating] muck of adrenal rivers; of the excited fever of bodies and the quaking deliriums of minds; of the sharp sanity of igneous; and the bruised rankness of desert bush. Oh, it is a strong and lively stench. It's the smell of adoration, of passion seized in rigid aestivation.*

Clute refers to Lafferty's conservative Catholicism. I don't know enough about Catholicism to pick up references, but Lafferty is strenuously life-affirming. Those fighting on the side of 'good' are fallible and sinners, and the battles are bloody and often joyful; Lafferty rejects sterility and austerity and compromise and 'moderation in all things.' Equally he rejects the attempts to popularise and modernise the Church.

In *Past Master*, Sir Thomas More, being shown around the planet Astrobe, asks his guide to find him a church because he wants to hear mass:

*'... While the mass itself cannot be found in any of them here, the replica can be played on demand.'*

*'Let us go to one of them.'*

*After groping about in some rather obscure streets that Paul knew imperfectly, they found one. It was quite small and tucked away in a corner. They entered. There was the*

*sense of total emptiness. There was no Presence.*

*'I wonder what time is the next mass.' Thomas said. 'Or the mass that is not quite a mass. I'm not sure that I understand you on it.'*

*'Oh, put in a stoimenof d'or in the slot, and push the button. Then the mass will begin.'*

*Thomas did. And it did.*

*The priest came up out of the floor. He was not human, unless he was a zombie human. He was probably not even a programmed person. He may have been a mechanical device. He wore a pearl-gray derby hat, swish-boy sideburns, and common green shorts or breechcloth. His depilated torso was her- maphroditic. He or it smoked a long weedjy-weed cigarette in a period holder. He began to jerk and to intone with dreadful dissonance.*

*Then a number of other contrivances arrived from somewhere, intoning in mock chorus to the priest, and twanging instruments ...*

*Well, the replica mass ran its short course to the jerking and bawling of the ancient ritual guitar. At sermon time was given a straight news-broadcast, so that one should not be out of contact with the world for the entire fifteen minutes.*

*At the Consecration, a sign lit up:*

*'Brought to you Courtesy of Grailo Grape-Ape, the Finest of the Bogus Wines.'*

*The bread was ancient-style hot-dog rolls. The*

puppets or mechanisms danced up orgasmically and used the old vein-needle before taking the rolls.

'How do you stop the dirty little thing?' Thomas asked.

'Push the Stop button,' Paul said. 'Here, I'll do it.' And he stopped it. (p. 68).

Unusually for Lafferty, in *Past Master* the evil itself is given a name and a voice: it is Ouden, which means nothingness:

*But the Paul-Thomas host knew who Ouden was. They shriveled together in his presence, and their bones grew hollow.*

*'You are like ghosts,' said the Paul-Thomas. 'Are you here only because we see you here? Which was first, you, or the belief in you?'*

*'I was always, and the belief in me comes and goes,' Ouden said. 'Ask the ansel: was I not of the Ocean from the beginning?'*

*'What have you done to Rimrock?' the Paul-Thomas asked. 'He diminishes.'*

*'Yes, he turns back into an animal in my presence,' said Ouden. 'So will you, and all your kind. You will turn further back, and further. I will annihilate you.'*

*'I deny you completely,' said the Paul-Thomas. 'You are nothing at all.'*

*'Yes, I am that. But all who encounter me make the mistake of misunderstanding my nothingness. It is a vortex. There is no quiet or static aspect to it. Consider me topologically. Do I not envelop all the universes? Consider them as turned inside out. Now everything is on the inside of my nothingness. Many consider the Nothing a mere negative, and they consider it so to their death and obliteration.'*

*'We laugh you off the scene,' said Paul-Thomas. 'You lose.'*

*'No. I am winning easily on Astrobe,' Ouden said. 'I have my own creatures going for me. Your own mind and its imagery weakens; it is myself putting out the flame. Every dull thing you do, every cliché you utter, you come closer to me. Every lie you tell, I win. But it is in the tired lies you tell that I win most toweringly.'*

*'Old nothingness who sucks out the flames, I have known flames to be lighted again,' said the Paul-Thomas.*

*'It will not kindle,' said the Ouden. 'I eat you up. I devour your substance. There was only one kindling. I was overwhelmed only once. But I gain on it. I have put it out almost everywhere. It will be put out forever here.' ...*

*'Never will I leave. Not ever in your life will you*

*sit down that I do not sit down with you. And finally it will happen that only one of us is left to get up, and that will be myself. I suck you dry.'*

*'I have one juice left that you do not know,' said the Paul-Thomas.*

*'You have it less than you believe.'* (pp. 44-6)

Usually, however, Lafferty's evil is not some disembodied essence, but is manifest through the actions of people who have chosen to commit evil. Their acts are typically cruel, brutal and degraded, and recounted in gory detail. They are also often unconvincing. More convincing is Lafferty's depiction of the desire of those who have chosen evil to destroy the good:

*'We'll hound him, we'll rend him, we'll tear him to pieces,' Pilgrim cried out with real excitement. 'We'll ruin him, we'll destroy him, we'll kill him and dismember him, and then we'll befool his nest and his ashes.'*

*'Why, Mr Dusmano, why?' the curator asked in shocked puzzlement. 'I could never understand the avidity of a whole nation for the destruction of a Consul. The Consul does fill the highest and most worrisome of jobs, without pay, without thanks, and in total anonymity. And he must be a good person and be certified as such. Why should a populace want to murder and destroy him?'*

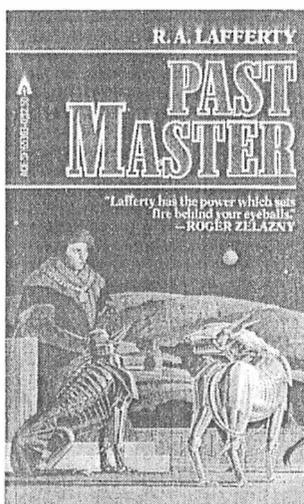
*'It's the devil-revel, curator,' Pilgrim howled. 'It's the pleasure that comes hardly twice in a generation. It's the murder that a whole nation can take part in and enjoy and remember. It becomes a main part of our national heritage, of our world heritage. Curator, we kill him*

*because he is Consul. And because he is a known man now and is vulnerable to be destroyed. And because it is almost the most burning pleasure of them all to destroy a marked person utterly. The ritual hounds must be set to howling and baying. And it is particularly a pleasure to destroy a high person if he is good. 'It is more pleasure to destroy one good man than a hundred indifferent men' – is that not what the Loudon Devil said? This is folk-knitting to form red history.'* (Not to Mention Camels, pp. 66-7)

This leads to assassination by tabloid journalism:

*'What, old Transcendent Muscles Himself is one of the masked men? Old Strength-in-Serenity? Oh, the public will rend him! There has to be something to get him for. Something, many things.'*

*And the young Lords swarmed out like a crowd of gnats. Somewhere they would find or fake or manufacture the gnat of evidence against the great strong man, Strength-in-Serenity, Strength-in-Purity, Satterfield, who was now revealed as the*



man behind the code-mask, Mut. Always the Lords could find a gnat's-weight of evidence against any man, and always that gnat's-weight would be enough to declare ruination.

Were they Lords of the Gnats for nothing? Many of these young Lords Spiritual had already scattered to hunt down and hamstringing this great strong man.

For a people, even a good people, do not pass gnats easily, once they have gotten inside them. They will huff and puff and strain and turn purple, all over one adolescent gnat. And the gnat must be dissected, minutely dissected before it can be passed. It would never go out all in one piece. This selective passing is an oddity about even good people. They can pass out easily many very large objects, not to mention camels. (Not to Mention Camels, pp. 74-5)

A couple of short stories (such as 'Or Little Ducks Each Day', in *Iron Tears*) feature patches or territories that belong to neither God nor the Devil, and in many ways this sums up Lafferty's universe. Typically neither good nor evil triumphs; instead a sort of balance is restored with heavy casualties on both sides.

Lafferty's characters also have recurring types and themes. Children as the agents of gleeful chaos feature in a number of short stories. For example, seven-year-old Carnadine Thompson in 'The Transcendent Tigers' is given her powers because 'on that whole world I found only one person with perfect assurance — one impervious to doubt of any kind and totally impervious to self-doubt.' In 'All the People' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*), we read 'Anthony had always had a healthy hatred for children and dogs, those twin harassers of the unfortunate and the maladjusted.' In 'Through Other Eyes' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*) 'He learned ... the untarnished evil of small children, the diabolic possession of adolescents.' In 'Primary Education of the Camiroi', 'small children are not yet entirely human'. *Arrive at Easterwine* has: 'Now then, tell me whether you have ever known an innocent child? Innocent, innocens, not-nocens, not noxious, not harming or threatening, not weaponed. Older persons may sometimes fall into a state of innocence (after they have lost their teeth and their claws), but children are never innocent if they are real. These four were real and not at all innocent.' (p. 188)

His stories often feature outsiders — Gypsies, Native Americans, drunken Irish — who see the world in non-standard ways. There are often not-quite-humans living on the edges of or hidden within normal society.

'There used to be a bunch of them on the edge of

my home town,' Willy McGilly said. 'Come to think of it, there used to be a bunch of them on the edge of every hometown. Now they're more likely to be found right in the middle of every town. They're the scrubs, you know, for the bottoming of the breed.' ('Boomer Flats', *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add*, 1974).

There are other remnants of older races, such as the predatory six-fingered pre-Babylonians in 'The Six Fingers of Time' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*). I like the variant in 'Adam Had Three Brothers' (*Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?*):

Adam had three brothers: Etienne, Yancy, and Rreq. Etienne and Yancy were bachelors. Rreq had a small family and all his issue have had small families; until now there are about two hundred of them in all, the most who have ever been in the world at one time. They have never intermarried with the children of Adam except once.

And not being of the same recension they are not under the same curse to work for a living.

So they do not.

Instead they batten on the children of Adam by clever devices that are known in police court as swindles.

Neanderthals recur many times, again sometimes but not always benign. For two benign examples,

in *Not to Mention Camels* (pp. 4-5) Doctor Wilcove Funk is described in terms similar to those used to describe Dr Velikof Vonk in 'Boomer Flats'. Given the way Lafferty plays with names and swaps characters from story to story, the similarity of names and descriptions would be deliberate, although I can't guess to what purpose.

In *The Devil is Dead* (Avon, 1971), there is a battle taking place within the ranks of these pre-humans:

'The thing is biologically and genetically impossible. Was Mendel wrong? Were Morgan and Galton and Painter? Was even the great Asimov wrong? How is it possible to throw an angry primordial after a thousand generations? How is it possible to do it again and again?

'Where did we primordial aliens vanish when we were defeated and harried from the face of the earth? Into deep caves and swamps, into forests or inaccessible mountains, to distant sea islands like Tasmania? Some of us did, for a few thousand years. But many hid cannily in the bloodstream of the victors. They became the Aliens Within, and they had vowed a vengeance. And now and again, at intervals of centuries, they erupt in numbers, establish centers, and carry on the war to near death ...

Le Marin was with him there, reading a magazine with a gaudy cover. It was full of stories of monstrous aliens from the stars, written by Van

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Children as the agents of gleeful chaos feature in a number of short stories ... small children are not yet entirely human.

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Vogt and Leinster and such.

'Le Marin, you read about aliens from the stars who invade,' Finnegan said. 'Did you not know that there are nearer monsters and aliens?'

'I know it, Monster, and you know it,' said Le Marin, 'but we do not want everyone to know it.' (pp. 163-4)

As well as these there are the doubles and fetches, of planets as well as people, there is the taking over of minds and bodies, there are parallel universes, and playing around with the philosophic problems of perception, reality and illusion. Often simultaneously. From *Annals of Klepsis* (1983):

*'The humanly inhabited universe, according to the best - or at least the newest - mathematical theory, does have a tertiary focus, and it is there that it is vulnerable. The humanly inhabited universe, with its four suns and its seventeen planets, is an unstable closed system of human orientation and precarious balance, a kinetic three-dimensional ellipse in form, with its third focus always approaching extinction. As with any similar unstable premise-system, the entire construct must follow its third focus into extinction. This is known as the 'Doomsday Equation' ...*

*'The third focus of the humanly inhabited universe has been determined to be both a point and a person on the Planet Klepsis, on the surface of the planet, which is extraordinary in itself. Of the person, the human element of the anthropo-mathematical function, little is known except the code name the 'Horseshoe Nail', and the fact that the person is more than two hundred years old. This is an added precarious element. Actuary figures show that only one in a hundred billion humans will reach the age of two hundred years, and none will go far beyond it. (Prologue)*

*The tall tale ... was that Christopher Begorra*

*Brannagan, one of the earliest explorers of the Trader Planets, had been acted against because he had a wooden leg (and explorers are supposed to be physically perfect, how would it look else?), and because he was Irish (and explorers are supposed to be of the superior races, how would a person of an inferior race impress an alien?), and Brannagan resented his ill-treatment.*

*Having been treated unfairly, Brannagan swore that, as soon as he had acquired a billion thalers, he would set up a fund whereby any one-legged Irishman anywhere in the universe could receive free transportation to Klepsis and could also receive any help he needed after arriving at that blessed place.*

*'How will we define "Irish"?' the first administrator of the fund had asked Brannagan.*

*'If they have Irish names they are Irish altogether,' Brannagan laid it down. 'Few of the other breeds would be caught dead with an Irish name.' (p. 3)*

Brannagan's ghost is a major character in the novel and still a power on Klepsis. It is, of course, peg-legged. But Brannagan's body is not.

Does the tiny trickle of Lafferty material still being published reflect his output, or is it desk-drawer material, or is he simply unpublishable these days?

I suspect the answer is yes to all three questions. Lafferty's strength is the short story. The magazines that published much of his early work no longer exist, and the broad-based original fiction anthologies are largely replaced by invitation-only themed anthologies. And although it is possible to trace common threads and themes through much of Lafferty's work, he is difficult to categorise, and I cannot see him writing commissioned pieces for collections such as *Off Limits: Tales of alien sex* or *Lovecraft's Legacy*, and only just in *Fires of the Past: Thirteen contemporary fantasies about hometowns*. ♦

## essentials

A work is 'essential' if it has added to my knowledge and appreciation of the genre to such an extent that I feel that both I and the genre would be the poorer without it.

*The Book Of The New Sun* (1980-83) - Gene Wolfe

*Little Big* (1981) - John Crowley

*Lanark* (1981) - Alasdair Gray

*The Affirmation* (1981) - Christopher Priest

*Neuromancer* (1984) - William Gibson

*Mythago Wood* (1984) - Robert Holdstock

*The Unconquered Country* (1986) - Geoff Ryman

*Loving Little Egypt* (1987) - Thomas McMahon

*Life During Wartime* (1987) - Lucius Shepard

*Sarah Canary* (1991) - Karen Joy Fowler

*The Course Of The Heart* (1992) - M. John Harrison

*Red Mars* (1992) - Kim Stanley Robinson

*A Fire Upon The Deep* (1992) - Vernor Vinge

*Doomsday Book* (1992) - Connie Willis

*The Encyclopedia Of Science Fiction* (1993) - Edited by

John Clute and Peter Nicholls

*Vurt* (1993) - Jeff Noon

*The Time Ships* (1995) - Stephen Baxter

*The Prestige* (1995) - Christopher Priest

*Northern Lights* (1995) - Philip Pullman

*The Knife Thrower* (1999) - Steven Millhauser

Paul Kincaid

## Bookmutterings

Bruce Gillespie

I RECEIVE VASTLY MORE REVIEW COPIES THAN ANY SANE PERSON COULD EVER read, let alone review. Increasingly, the most interesting new books are also the best-remembered old books. Let's test the memory awhile.

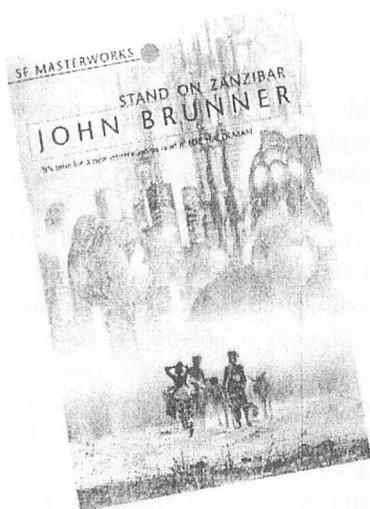
The most exciting sf project in the world at the moment is the SF Masterworks series of paperbacks. Malcolm Edwards, recently returned as CEO of Millennium/Orion/Gollancz after some years away from Gollancz, has revived the Gollancz Classics list. In some cases, he's reprinted the same books.

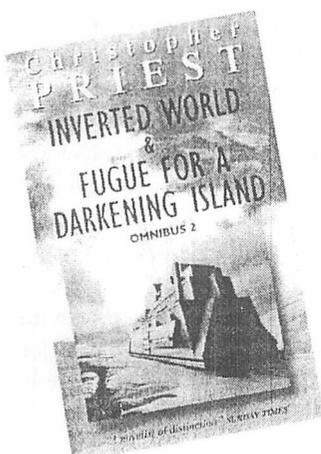
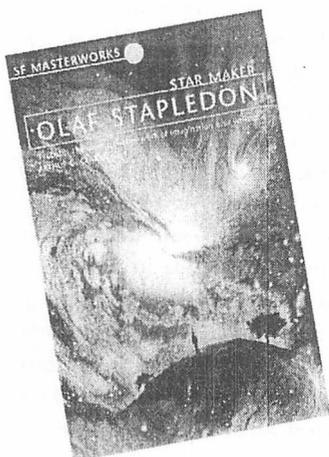
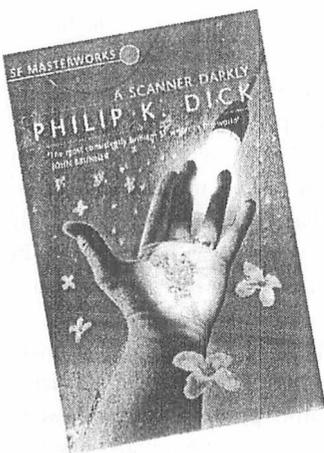
These are the 'best of the best' — but generally a particular category of best: the best from the 1960s and early 1970s. The era of the New Wave and its undercurrents. The era when Malcolm and I began publishing fanzines and had something to celebrate. Ah, sweet nostalgia!

But it's nearly thirty years since the crest of the New Wave broke, and some of these books that have been out of print for much too long. The most piquant example is John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* (No. 15 in the series; Millennium, 1999). First published in 1968, it won a Hugo Award in 1969, sold well, and was seen immediately as an sf classic. John Brunner did cause some amusement at the time by boasting in a fanzine that it had taken a whole seven months to write it; perhaps that was a record time for him. The writing style is frenetic, often laboured or hysterical, but as a feat of sociological prophecy, it has a strength unmatched by any other sf novel apart from Thomas Disch's *334* (and where is *that* in the SF Masterworks list?). Brunner's year 2000 is chaotic, dangerous, subject to shifting patterns, full of lunatic betrayal and justifiable paranoia — just the way things have turned out. Particularly memorable is the terrorist who's willing to blow up New York just for the fun of it.

The SF Masterworks list is rich with fine books that have been difficult to obtain during the 1990s. Another is Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (No. 16; Millennium, 1999). Praised and analysed when it appeared in 1974 by such critics as George Turner (whose long review is possibly his best essay about sf), Joanna Russ and Samuel Delany, it has acquired a luminous reputation as an exemplar of political sf, a reputation that has always hidden its strength as a love story. Le Guin's analysis of the difference between the systems on two planets, Urras and Anarres, seemed a bit too measured and essayistic at the time; it's the bond between Takver and Shevek that keeps this novel alive.

The only false step in the program is republishing the short version of Cordwainer Smith's *The Rediscovery of Man* (No. 10; Millennium, 1999). The publisher should have taken the opportunity to release the first paperback edition of the long version: the complete stories, also called *The Rediscovery of Man*. The Masterworks edition has John J. Pierce's useful 1975 Introduction, but is reprinted from a poor scan of the 1970s edition, and carries only twelve of Cordwainer Smith's miraculous stories. If you have never read Smith, read the first lines of each of the stories (my favourite is 'You already know the end . . .' at the start of 'The Dead Lady of Clown Town'). Then read these stories. Then order from NESFA Press the





hardback edition of the complete stories.

The SF Masterworks reflect many of my own enthusiasms, which is why I suggest you place a batch order for the series. Philip K. Dick is represented so far by *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (No. 4), *Martian Time-Slip* (No. 13; Millennium, 1999) and *A Scanner Darkly* (No. 20; Millennium, 1999). It's an odd selection, probably decided as much by availability of rights as any statement about the 'best' of Dick's work.

*Martian Time-Slip* is among my favourite Philip Dick novels, with its realistic characters and overwhelming personal problems caught up in a surrealistic landscape (a Mars that could never have been) and frightening transcendental visions (mainly seen by the 'time-autistic' Manfred Bohlen and the Bleekmen, the original inhabitants of Mars). This is the only novel I have read five times. As Brian Aldiss writes in his famous essay on *Martian Time-Slip*: 'The favoured character . . . is Jack Bohlen, whom we last see reunited with his wife, out in the dark garden, flashing a torch and looking for someone. His voice is business-like, competent, and patient; these are high ranking virtues in the Dickian theology' ('Dick's Maledictory Web', *This Word and Nearer Ones*, p. 56).

By the end of *A Scanner Darkly*, there seems no hope for its characters. That's how I remember it. I might be wrong; I've never had the courage to reread it. Undercover narcotics agent, Bob Arctor, poses as a Substance D addict in order to find the source of supply. Guess what happens to him. Dick's 'Author's Note' acknowledges that much of the action is based on events in California at the end of the 1960s. It could be downtown Melbourne, 2000. In his note, Dick provides a roll-call of the dead: the people upon whom the characters are based. As with many of Dick's books, *A Scanner Darkly* becomes more darkly urgent each time it is reprinted.

I don't have room to talk about the Masterworks books that I have read, let alone those I've never got around to. Unreservedly recommended — or more correctly, remembered with great affection — are Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* (No. 1), Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (No. 8), Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (No. 11) and *Star Maker* (No. 21), George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (No. 12), J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (No. 17), Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* (No. 18), and last and best, H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* in one handy volume (No. 24).

It's not long since we in Melbourne were complaining that 'there are no dead authors left on the sf shelves of bookshops'. At last report, Christopher Priest remains triumphantly undead, but he must have felt that some of his books have been mouldering in their graves for much too long. Fortunately, Millennium/Gollancz is not the only British publisher who realises that the sf readers depend on access to the classics of the field. Simon & Schuster has recently issued the *Christopher Priest Omnibuses 1* and *2*, chunky paperbacks that feature (in No. 1) *The Space Machine* and *A Dream of Wessex* (Earthlight, 1999), and (in No. 2) *Inverted World* and *Fugue for a Darkening Island* (Earthlight, 1999). It's difficult to express how important these books were when they first appeared, because of their combination of ironic, elegant prose, surrealistic visions and unputdownable narratives. With Priest's work in the early seventies, British sf shrugged off the more eccentric aspects of the New Wave. Although declaring himself free from the sf rules, Priest helped to bring British sf in from the cold, most notably with *Inverted World's* combination of mind-boggling physics ('a planet of infinite size in a finite universe', as the blurb says correctly) and its tale of growing up in a closed environment. The same combination of dazzling ideas and difficult characters (and a fair amount of humour) can be found in *A Dream of Wessex*. An earlier novel, *Fugue for a Darkening Island*, remains fascinating, but I've never been able to raise much interest in *The Space Machine*. A tribute to H. G. Wells, it lacks the most attractive feature of Wells's style: brevity.

More classics — genuine classics, the sort of fiction that made us sf readers

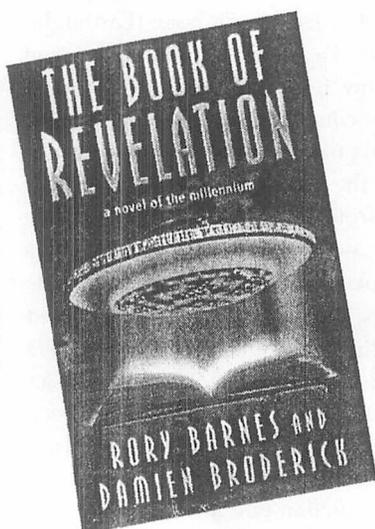
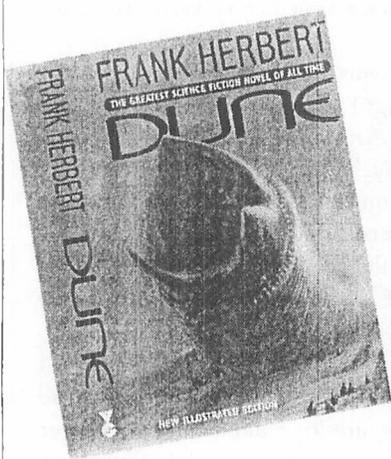
in the first place – from Millennium, although only three of the six volumes of the Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick have appeared so far. If you missed the Gollancz hardbacks of some years ago, do not fail to collect the new paperback editions. Vol. 1 is *Beyond Lies the Wub* (Millennium, 1999); Vol. 2 is *Second Variety* (Millennium, 1999); and Vol. 3 is *The Father-Thing* (Millennium, 1999). Here are the complete stories, published as far as possible in the order of composition, from August 1952 until August 1954. They are not merely ferociously funny, paranoid and satirical, as were so many of the best stories of the 1950s, what makes them compulsory reading, now that Dick has been placed up there in the sf pantheon beside Heinlein and Asimov, is that they prefigure most of Dick's later obsessions and inventions. When the ideas reappeared in novels, sometimes twenty years later, they could hardly be recognised, but that hardly lessens the enjoyment of seeking out the seeds.

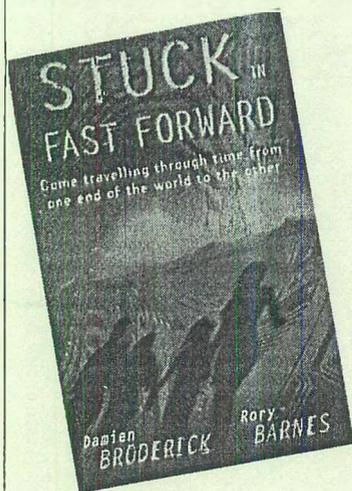
The sf evergreens I've noted so far have been works containing prose that has ranged from competent to brilliant. Frank Herbert's *Dune* (Victor Gollancz, 1999) is a modern masterpiece of clunky prose ('Paul ... had seen the tension wrinkles at the corner of his father's jaw. One walked softly when the Duke was in a rage.' – example picked right this minute when opening the book at random). *Locus* readers chose *Dune* as the best sf novel of the century. It's the book readers have romped through for more than thirty years, gritting their teeth and clenching their jaws as they trip over every cliché. Gollancz's New Illustrated Edition is worth having on the shelf, as it contains the one element that makes *Dune* come alive: the John Schoenherr illustrations. Used originally in the *Analog* serialisations during the mid 1960s, these paintings express Frank Herbert's vision of the desert planet and its sandworms better than the prose itself.

If you are reading my stuff for the first time, you probably expect me to do my Patriotic Bit for Australian SF Writing and rave on about McMullen, Egan, Turner, Routley, Dedman, Jacoby, Sussex, Dowling, etc. The truth is that British and American readers probably find it easier to buy books by Australian authors than we do. Our authors need to sell their books overseas, but Australian distributors don't import them. Case in point: Pan Macmillan, local distributor of Tor Books, had at last report not picked up the option to import the paperback edition of Sean McMullen's most recent novel. If Sean is steaming, so are Australian readers who couldn't afford the hardback editions and expected as a matter of course to be able to buy the paperbacks. Many other books by top American and British firms can be found only in the specialist bookshops (especially Slow Glass Books, GPO Box 2708X, Melbourne, VIC 3001, Australia).

But – takes deep breath – some Australian novels and collections have not yet appeared in overseas editions. They are the books I will mention in this column. Two that I've bought since Aussiecon 3 (where you all made Slow Glass Books' Justin Ackroyd very happy by buying vast quantities of Aussie books) are Rory Barnes' and Damien Broderick's *The Book of Revelation* (HarperCollins Voyager, 1999) and *Stuck in Fast Forward* (HarperCollins Voyager, 1999). The two novels look very similar: dark covers, with a glowing flying saucer on the cover of *Revelation* and glowing distorted computer graphics on the cover of *Fast Forward*. However, *The Book of Revelation* is a major new literary novel about the strange shadows that the 1970s have cast over more recent beliefs and mores, while *Stuck in Fast Forward* is a fast-paced young adult novel about several characters ripping forward through time, observing the mighty forces of human and universal destiny.

Because HarperCollins has published both books at the same time with similar covers, *Revelation* has little hope of picking up any of the major literary prizes for which it should have been entered. At the same time, teenagers who buy it and *Fast Forward* will be more than a bit puzzled.





In *The Book of Revelation*, most of the action takes place offstage. Deems Keith's life has been overshadowed by his lifelong belief that in childhood he was kidnapped by aliens and tortured. His relationships are dysfunctional, but even after Deems disappears in 2010, the other people in his life can never quite guess the forces that have twisted his and all their lives. This makes it a very funny book, perhaps even more humorous than *Stuck in Fast Forward*, which is also a romp. *Fast Forward*, however, does not quite sustain the breathless pace of its first half, because it revels too luxuriantly in its gosh-wow premises. *Revelation*, with its feeling that perhaps gosh-wow things *might* be happening to its main character, has far more solidity to it. Perhaps it's actually the Barnes and Broderick book all those young adults should be reading.

I haven't worked out which author did which bit. My feeling is that Barnes and Broderick, working 800 km apart, have been pretty good for each other, since *Zones*, their 1997 collaboration, is also highly recommended. ♦

## essentials

### 20 Books For 20 Years

Trying to describe what books are most critical to the sf and fantasy fields over the last twenty years is clearly impossible. Trying to see what will influence sf over the next 20 years without mentioning (to name a few) *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or the works of Terry Gilliam and Hayao Miyazaki would be like trying to look at the influences of the twenty years before without mentioning *Star Trek* or *2001*. It's possible, but incredibly skewed.

That said, here's a list of twenty titles that seem to have some claim to importance. I haven't read all of them; I won't stand up and proclaim the literary merit of all the ones I have read. What makes me think these twenty titles have some claim to importance is the fact that they all created a real sense of excitement in a broad variety of readers who bought many of them at *The Other Change of Hobbit*. In no particular order:

*War for the Oaks* — Emma Bull. This defined the new urban fantasy, and it's been a hard book to equal.

*The Sparrow* — Mary Doria Russell. Made many people sit up and think — I've heard non-sf readers claim it can't be sf, it's too good.

*The Reality Dysfunction* — Peter Hamilton. Proved that serious space opera can still be well done.

*The Book of the New Sun* (4 vols) — Gene Wolfe. Proved that fantasy can appeal to the highest common denominator and be a commercial success.

*Encyclopedia of SF & Encyclopedia of Fantasy* — ed. John Clute et al. Two works which will affect the way all future historians approach sf and fantasy.

*Kindred* — Octavia Butler.

*Snow Crash* — Neal Stephenson. Redefined cyberpunk, and likely to bring new people in to reading our little field.

*Neuromancer* — William Gibson. Defined cyberpunk.

*Sandman* — Neil Gaiman and various artists. Absolutely seminal to any discussion of modern graphic fantasy.

*Watchmen* — Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons. First graphic novel nominated for a Hugo, and important for bringing many people into our field from comics.

*The Mists of Avalon* — Marion Zimmer Bradley. Critical to the rise of neopagan fiction and the Arthurian revival.

*Little, Big* — John Crowley. What more needs to be said?

*Startide Rising* — David Brin. Many people try to use Brin's large canvas in sf, few succeed as well.

*The Use of Weapons* — Iain M. Banks. Gets people started, keeps them coming back.

*The Books of Blood* — Clive Barker. Proved horror didn't end with Stephen King, that short stories can sell, and that there is a lot of life in death.

*The Snow Queen* — Joan Vinge. A superb book on the uses of power.

*Speaker for the Dead* — Orson Scott Card. Important in the same way *Dune* was.

*The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* — ed Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling

*The Year's Best Science Fiction* — ed Gardner Dozois. Any one of these two series is vital for seeing the best short fiction of its year.

*Circler Press* — The last slot is a publisher. Almost unnoticed, Circler Press has changed the debate about erotic content in sf and fantasy, and is shaping a new way for people to look at the place of erotica in our lives. Their books are nicely produced, very sexy without being crude (in most cases) and subtly important to what will happen over the next twenty years.

Tom Whitmore

