SF COMMENTARY 78

February 2003

JOHN CROWLEY
JOHN ROMERIL
RUSSELL BLACKFORD
ELAINE COCHRANE
JENNY BLACKFORD
ROSLYN KOPEL GROSS
RICK KENNETT
DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN)
DAVID LANGFORD
STEVE JEFFERY
BRUCE GILLESPIE
and many others

Graphic by Ditmar

The cover: 'At Purgatory's Gates'

Almost always, whenever I sit in front of the computer and begin to generate a graphic, it's without any idea of what will eventually appear on the screen. It is doodling. Sometimes, though, there is an evanescent sense of purpose — to explore some facet of Bryce, or to try out a new model, or to see what strange combination of sky and cloud I can create — but this soon evaporates as a picture begins to emerge. Sometimes, after half an hour of so, if I'm lucky, and what bubbles forth from my automatic writing is not too ugly, I will start to *think* about what I'm doing, and to worry about colour and composition. If I'm *very* lucky, after some hours a graphic is in front of me with which I'm not too displeased.

I was happy with this issue's cover graphic, but, since I always wonder if others will like my doodles, I tend to show them to people I trust. And one such person is an old colleague of mine from the University, and who is most often brutally frank in his views of my pictures. So, when I had lunch with Dr Martyn (of the English Department) some days ago, I showed him *Purgatory* over coffee. Now Jim fancies himself as some sort of amateur psychologist, but I wasn't quite prepared for his opening words.

'Well, Dick — I didn't know that you were in analysis.'

'But I'm not'.

'There's no shame in it — many of my best friends are — but I didn't think that you'd be seeing a Jungian.'

I protested again, but Jim was inexorable. 'Look', he said, 'at the basic elements. You have earth, water, air and fire. But they are not totally separated — the fire associated with the lightning is burning on . . . is that water or ice . . . ice, and connects the celestial with the chthonic, while the floating island enjoys the same concatenation, but in the opposite sense. Then there's the eagle descending from the heavens to the ground, while the mist rises from the terrestrial to the sky. Clearly, the statement being made is that apparently antinomic elements are being reconciled, integrated — the rational and the non- rational, logical and non-logical, animus and anima. So don't tell me that your analyst isn't Jungian, and that this graphic doesn't stem from a dream.'

'Now look here . . .', but James was in full flight and unstoppable.

'Then again, there is the symbolic aspect to the objects in the picture. *Earth* and *Water* are — and I'm only going to use Jung's interpretation, which after all, seems to be especially relevant here — passive, while *Fire* and *Air* are active, so that the first two are feminine, receptive and submissive (it's Jung here, and before political correctness), while the latter pair are masculine and creative. Their interpenetration in the graphic mirrors — and no offence here, Dick — your attempts to reconcile the features of your inner being which are in conflict, and to integrate your personality . . . the ultimate goal of Jungian analysis.

'The *eagle* is a symbol of the spirit as sun (which, significantly, in the image is dulled and moribund), and of the spiritual principle in general. Since it is identified with the sun and the idea of male activity which fertilises female nature, it's also associated with the father. (But we'll not explore *that*).

'The *mist* is, of course, symbolic of things indeterminate (your integration is quite incomplete), but does fuse together air and water.

'*Lightning*, naturally, represents spiritual illumination, revelation, Truth cutting across time and space, and the fact, that in the picture it sets fire to the iced ocean, indicates purification and transformation of the gross waters of the earth (*ice* is rigidity, frigidity, brittleness, impermanence, while *water*, the melting of the ice, is the source of all potentialities in existence, and so you symbolically desire a metamorphosis of your cold nature into something which will be more accepting *of* that which is around you, and will be more acceptable *by* that which is around you).

'The *angel* represents invisible forces, powers ascending and descending between Source-of-Life and the world of phenomena (and so ties in with the lightning/ice aspects of the image). They are intermediaries between Heaven and this World, and have, as a chief concomitant, a flaming sword — here your dream (or subconscious) has that sword as lightning. But the fact that the angel seems to have bat-wings is curious.

'*Bats*, as an alchemic double nature of bird and mouse, can represent the androgyne, or, more traditionally, it can represent darkened understanding. In China it is emblematic of happiness and long life, but in the Christian west has an infernal attribute. So the *Bat-Angel*, once again, represents your internal struggle to unite the contraries of your nature.

'The *floating terrains* imply raising the Earthly to the Spiritual — your longing to partake of higher moral values than are at present in your life. *Flight* is related to space and light; psychologically it is a symbol of thought and imagination. Which also applies to the BatAngel.

'The *tree* on one of the terrains is a complex symbol. In a Christian sense, it is the vertical arm of the Cross and hence may be seen to be the 'World-axis' connecting successive planes of existence or spirituality. In its most general sense it denotes growth, generative and regenerative processes, and so is particularly apt here'.

At this stage, I had enough, and was becoming a trifle restive, if not irritated.

'Jim', I said, 'I made *no* attempt to incorporate such a plethora of symbols into my picture. Frankly, as far as I'm concerned, they simply are just *not* there, and you are reading them into what is, after all, just an illustration.'

'Exactly, Dick — an *illustration*! But what I see *is* there, because it illustrates your present psychic condition. You tell me that the picture arose as a consequence of your 'doodling', and so is essentially an expression of your subconscious desiring to communicate with your conscious self — to make you aware of the stage of your journey towards integration. And it's refreshing to see you willing to disclose that condition so publicly . . . I approve your temerity.'

'For goodness' sake, Jim. All I'm really interested in is your opinion of the picture as picture, and not as symbolic of whatever you think it's symbolic of. Do you like it?'

James seemed quite bemused.

'Look Dick, when a graphic is so stuffed with meaning, and esoteric symbolism at that, any aesthetic qualities it may have are entirely superfluous and irrelevant.'

I could hold back no longer, and said, somewhat sharply, I must admit, 'Jim, you are the one who sees what is just not there'.

'Nevertheless . . .' said Jim smugly, thereby closing the discussion in his usual manner, with the last word.

— Dick Jenssen

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I must be talking to my friends

I don't know a lot about death.

I scored the jackpot by being born in the luckiest country to exist on earth (Australia since World War II) at the most fortunate time in its history (1947, so that I was in the first, and last, generation to be guaranteed a good job when I left school). Apart from the fact that nobody has ever given me a vast wad of money in order to produce fanzines full time, everything's pretty much gone my way.

Yet in the next moment a plane might drop from the sky, or a stroke could finish me off, or that lurking asteroid could plop into Port Phillip Bay. Or I could visit the doctor, and leave there with a death sentence. Or, like Frank Lloyd Wright (an endlessly entertaining man, as I discovered when reading Brendan Gill's biography), my career might actually recommence, or even commence, when I hit 70. As John Updike writes: 'The reason people don't make too much of their minds is that they see how totally at the mercy of the material world the mind is — a brick drops on your head, your mind is extinguished no matter how indeterminate are the motions of the individual atoms composing the clay in the brick. Life, thought — these are no match for the planets, the tides, the physical laws. Every minute of every day, all the prayers and ardent wishing in the world can't budge a little blob of cancer, or the AIDS virus, or the bars of a prison, or the latch of a refrigerator a child accidentally locked himself into . . . there is no way around matter. It's implacable. It doesn't give a damn about us one way or another' (*Roger's Version*, pp. 169–70).

Whatever; it doesn't matter when I'm dead. Nothing will matter then. Not only do I go, but as Gore Vidal once said of himself, the whole universe winks out when I go. What scares me about dying is of *not being*, effectively *having never been*. (Philip Larkin expressed it best in his poem 'Aubade'.) Does nothing we do have value? I would think so, were it not for what I feel about some recently lost friends:

Dave Piper, 1939–2002

DAVE PIPER
7 Cranley Drive, Ruislip, Middlesex HA4 6BZ, UK

Sorry to be the bearer of crap news this morning . . . they say that things come in threes, but *this* is ridiculous!

After a very brief diagnostic period (a few weeks), on 24 May we were advised that I have lung cancer, secondary bone cancer and a large aneurysm in my aorta. (All I need is a case of dandruff and I've got the full 'ouse.)

For reasons too boring to relate, no surgery is possible and they are terminal and thus the prognosis is not good.

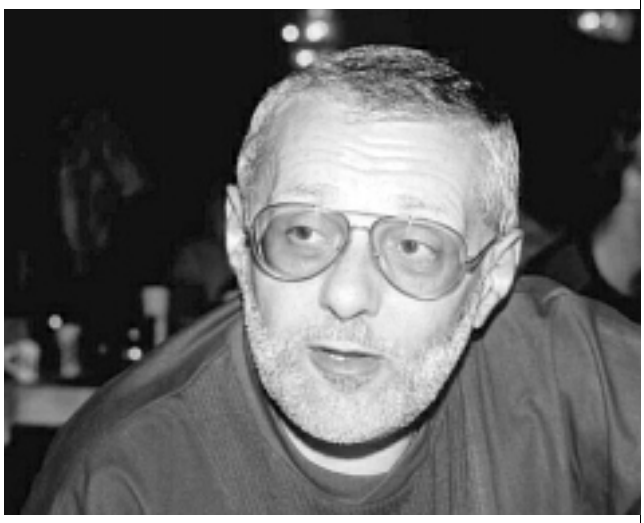
I suggested to my specialist that perhaps my life-long intention to read the complete works of Piers Anthony was now a dream turned to dust, to which she replied, with a slightly puzzled expression ('What's this loony on about?') . . . 'Possibly'.

I hope you will all forgive the nature of this round-robin-type-note but I just don't have the heart to do separate letters, and there is, really, very little else to say.

It's been great 'knowing' you all these years and I'm sorry, again, that this is not the usual DCP letter to grace your breakfast tables . . .

Very best wishes for the future, look after yourselves and keep healthy.

(5 July 2002)



Dave Piper (thanks to Irwin and Wendy Hirsh for this photo, taken at the 1987 World Convention, Britain).

On 3 August 2002, David C. Piper — our Dave Piper — died. In the few weeks between the letter above and his death, I wrote to him suggesting that if he wanted a good home for his fanzines, he might try **Mark Plummer** and **Claire Brialey** (who live a lot nearer to the Pipers than does Greg Pickersgill, Britain's most famous fanzine collector). Dave and his wife Cath rang Mark, but before Dave could send back a letter to me, he returned to hospital for the last time.

Mark had mentioned my name to **Erik Arthur**. I had never heard of Erik, Dave Piper's favourite bookseller, who arranged to place a wreath on behalf of Dave's Australian friends. Erik emailed me:

ERIK ARTHUR
Fantasy Centre, 157 Holloway Road,
London N7 8LX, UK

I duly went along to the cremation, which was so well attended that there was standing room only in the Parlour, or whatever it is called. I would say chapel, but . . . I was delighted, but not surprised, to learn that Dave was a committed atheist, and thus had a nice humanist lady doing the celebration of his life bit . . . in which she mentioned much about his extended family, consisting of two good and lifelong mates and their families (which probably accounts for the aforementioned full house).

Although he was said to be well and widely read, there was (surprise?) no mention of SF — are we condemned to the ghetto even unto death? — but a fair bit about jazz, his other abiding passion beyond his family, which would account for the coolest music I have ever heard in such surroundings: Nat King Cole singing 'Unforgettable', an instrumental of 'April in Paris' . . .

There was hardly a dry eye in the house at the end . . . a truly moving tribute to a great guy . . . and all I knew him for was acerbic comments about those SF authors he didn't like. Great discussions, we had here in the shop.

I said a brief word to Cathy afterward, but, given the large numbers of personal and work friends, most of whom seemed to be really well known to Cathy, I passed on the tea and buns, knowing I would be going over in due time to collect the fanzines and so on.

It did not rain for the duration, but as I was driving back the skies opened again (Bruce, we are getting almost Darwinian rain here these summer days) so there is some justice after all.

The wreath was as I arranged, that is, in Australian yellow and green, and quite tasteful, if your reporter may make so bold.

In due course I shall pick up Dave's fanzines and, in conjunction with Mark Plummer, arrange whatever in terms of disposal. I will, however, make sure that I read some of the Oz ones, for Dave's early texts.

Dave was only 63, and died of lung cancer, with other related complications. He first knew back in the springtime, so had little time to prepare himself as the news got worse. I don't think Cath was ready for it, such that when he went into hospital for what turned out to be the last time, she seemed sure he would be out again after a few more 'checks'. He died on Saturday, 3 August.

Dave was famous for his informality at work. Apparently he had some twenty people working for him at the New Zealand Department of Defence (or something like that) in an open plan office. It was common for him, having travelled to work in jeans and shirt, to be saying good morning to his staff as they arrived while he was in his underpants, putting on what was widely presumed to be his only suit.

(11 August 2002)

It's right that Dave should receive a send-off from his Australian friends (and, no doubt, from his American and Canadian friends), because he seemed to have little contact with British fandom. It's one of those contradictions in Dave's attitudes that I could never work out. His original link with Australia was with **John Bangsund**'s *Australian Science Fiction Review*. In early 1969, John gave me a copy of his mailing list as the basis for posting the copies of *SF Commentary* 1. Dave, one of John Bangsund's greatest admirers, was one of the very first people to respond to *SFC* 1.

He wrote in Dave Piperish: a combination of north London accent, self-deprecating jokes, news of doings of the Piper family, and explosions of wrath about the silly opinions of other *SFC* correspondents. Here are some portions of his first letter of comment to *SFC*:

DAVID C. PIPER

Thanks very much for *SFC* Number 1. I'm not at all sure why you sent *me* a copy . . . of one thing I've never been accused and that's of being a literate member of the SF reading fraternity, and I can't see myself ever being much of an asset to a fan-ed's sub. list.

Be that as it may, some extremely random comments:

(a) Repro is lousy . . . at least on my copy. I'm getting on a bit now and my eyesight ain't as good as it once was. Seems to be a lack of ink . . . the repro I mean, not my eyes . . . or badly cut stencils. No doubt it'll improve.

(b) Don't use illos inside the thing but I suggest you have a simple and uncluttered plate made for the cover. This cover is awful.

(c) Talking of first issues . . . I got this copy on Saturday and assume you sent it sometime in January. Ridiculous! You've probably published another couple already so I'd better keep mentioning the number. Numero One . . .

(e) I'm sick of reading about *2001*. I loved it. Wonderful film. Just not interested in reading any more about it, is all.

(f) I enjoyed your exhaustive Part I on Dick very much. Until I reached your 'Apology' on page 51, though, I was a leetle surprised at your conclusions on *High Castle*. It's one of the lamentably few cases where I reckon I got the point of a book without being told. I enjoy all Dick's books. Probably a masochistic streak . . . I enjoy being slightly baffled and intrigued and made to work hard at a book. Sometimes. My three favourites are *High Castle*, *Palmer Eldritch*, and *Martian Time-Slip*. That last one is, I think, a tremendous work. Brilliant . . .

(h) *New Worlds* . . . I sometimes buy it. I don't usually read it all. I enjoyed *Camp Concentration*. Only item I can remember enjoying recently is Delany's fragment a couple of months ago. I don't have strong feelings about the magazine now. It's there. Probably better to be there than not. It's very uneven. Good presentation. Too pretentious by half. Some of Ballard's bits of late have been in such bad taste that I find their publication incredible. Apart from Disch I don't reckon *any* of its New Writers are gonna amount to anything. Your comment, page 6, about Moorcock's 'New Writers' . . . surely Colvin *is* Moorcock, isn't he?

(i) Foyster's piece is crap. Quantity ain't Quality. Page 28: he loads his argument by mentioning MacApp and Saberhagen. Jeez . . . there's probably a million such from his supposed 'Golden Age'. It was always better years ago, wasn't it! Toffee apples just ain't the same as they were, are they?! Rubbish! Against his list I'd stack Delany, Zelazny, and Disch. It gets better all the time . . .

(k) Enough . . . enough. I enjoyed the thing very much. In the absence of Aussie cash herewith 10/- . . . hope that'll cover me for a couple. Assuming, of course, you'll accept feelthy money!

(21 April 1969)

The essence of Piper (and the state of science fiction in 1969), all in one letter! 10 shillings equalled one Australian dollar, which bought Dave three and a half issues of *SFC*. Subscriptions were 3 dollars. That's nostalgia for you.

My favourite Dave Piper letter, about ten years ago, was written late on a Saturday afternoon after a long drinking session. It was incoherent, very funny, a meditation on being drunk, and unreproducible without using a scanner.

Instead, here is his last letter of comment:

DAVE PIPER
7 Cranley Drive, Ruislip HA4 6BZ, UK

Great to see one of those dogvomityella envelopes alight on the mat and even better to see your (excellent) printing of the front.

As usual, letters and editorial most interesting . . . reviews somewhat less so, at least, for this clapped-out old SF reader! I've just had a (very) rough count, and during the past year my book-buying/reading count seems to run at circa 10 to 1, non-fiction to fiction, and the fiction side of the equation includes many non-SF titles anyway. The last SF item I can recall, immediately, getting was an old Chad Oliver novel (*Unearthly Neighbours*) that I had forgotten about.

Be honest, I dunno where this year's gone . . . I note it's been just about that long since *SFC* turned up and yet I

recall numero 76 arriving as if it were only yesterday!

Cath and I went to Bruges early on in the year . . . for a short stay and loved it. It's a very picturesque medieval town with lots of bridges and canals, and is very easy and quick to get around. There are remains of the old walls, and the really crap industrial parts are outside the main part of the town, leaving the interior relatively unspoilt and attractive. It was the first time we've travelled on Eurostar (the passenger train through the Tunnel), and for comfort (even taking into account the pathetic speed this side of the Channel) it beats bloody flying any day of the week. I've come to really hate flying these past few years . . . even given my not particularly massive height (5 ft 8 in . . . stretched!), the leg room and space in commercial flights is bleedin' disgraceful, I reckon. In future, if we can manage it, we're going to travel by train.

The son of a friend of ours got married in mid year in Ireland, to an Irish colleen of fair visage (!), and we went over for the wedding. We had a great time, and I stayed on in Ireland for a couple of weeks travelling around all the southern areas with the father of the bridegroom. Great time. The local people seem so nice and friendly and laid back, which surprised us a little, given the history we read in the couple of rough guides we had. You probably won't believe this (?), but neither of us, when at school, was taught *anything* relating to the 'troubles' and relations between England and Ireland. Disgraceful, really. F'rinstance, I didn't even know that Oliver Cromwell had gone over and beat the shit out of the locals . . . and, worse still, I had no idea that during the famine the English were still taking produce from the local people and sending it to England.

Sara's at home again. She was living with a coupla gay mates but it all went sour . . . so we've lost the guest room again (!) Ceramics are still going well, and in fact I'm getting a bit good at it (he said modestly), Clare moved into a bigger house with her bloke and seems to be getting on OK and happy, Cath's looking forward to early 2003 and retirement, and I'm not at all sure that the fight against 'international terrorism' is winnable.

But, then, I'm not sure of anything these days . . .

(17 November 2001)

Dave rang me several times from Ruislip (his late-night Friday, my early-morning Saturday); and I spent a wonderful day with him and the family near the end of my trip to England in early 1974. (**Chris Priest**, with whom I was staying, had never heard of Dave Piper, and neither had the other British fans I met at that time. Dave was my British secret correspondent.) **Irwin** and **Wendy Hirsh** met him at the 1987 British world convention, and Dave and Cath visited many of their friends in America in the early nineties.

As I wrote to Dave in the letter I hoped would reach him in time, his letters always cheered me up greatly during the seventies, when I was more down than up. His opinions about most things were often more sensible than mine. He was really enjoying his retirement — then was struck down.

Both **Cathy Piper** and their daughter **Clare** have sent me wonderful notes, and Cathy also sent me a copy of the funeral eulogy for Dave. As long as any of us is alive, Dave remains alive. If these pages outlast us all, he's still alive.

Linda Gillespie, 1909–2002

My Auntie Linda was born in 1909, but I always had the feeling that she would outlast me. She was already in her forties when I was small, so she seemed to stay the same age throughout most of my life. Her own mother had lived to a great age, and she and my Uncle Fred had taken care of her Aunt Lizzie until the age of 99. Finally, a few months ago, my aunt's body just gave out from under her.

My Auntie Linda was one of my favourite aunts, and something like a second mother to me and all her nephews and nieces. My sisters and I began visiting her Murrumbeena house at weekends when we were still at primary school — Auntie Linda and Uncle Fred had a television set, and we didn't. They were far more indulgent with us than our parents ever could afford to be. We watched lots of TV, ate too much, and got to know the local kids, who were friends of my aunt's. One weekend, the Hardhams (who lived next door) invited us next door while they set up a home puppet theatre. For months after, we made papier mâché puppets in the way the Hardhams had shown us.

During my early secondary school years, I stayed at Murrumbeena regularly. Each year, Auntie Linda put on a huge Christmas tea for the Gillespie side of her family. She was very fond of both my parents, and still talked to my mother by phone once a week until a couple of months ago.

In 1962, my family moved to Melton, then a small country town 50 km west of Melbourne, where my father was to manage the first bank branch in the town. (Melton is now a commuter suburb of 40,000 people.) I wanted to finish Form 4 (Year 10) at Oakleigh High School, so Auntie Linda and Uncle Fred offered to put me up for Term 3 of that year. During my second year of university (1966), my American History lectures were at 6 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, finishing too late to catch the last train to Bacchus Marsh (the town near Melton to which we had moved). Auntie Linda offered to put me up on those nights each week, and during the university vacations. For that reason, I was able to watch nearly all the episodes of the first Emma Peel series of *The Avengers*, plus most of the second series. No wonder it remains one of my few favourite TV programs. (My aunt and uncle always said that Honor Blackman was much better than Diana Rigg, but I still haven't seen any Honor Blackman episodes of *The Avengers*.)

Another clear memory of 1966: walking into McGill's, buying my first copy of *Australian Science Fiction Review*, and reading it, astonished, intoxicated with intellectual hooch, on the suburban train out to my aunt's place.

In early 1978, my Uncle Fred died, just a few weeks before Elaine and I got together, and my aunt's living space gradually became more constrained. When Elaine and I became a couple, Elaine became as fond of my aunt as I was. Since both were keen gardeners, Elaine could hold up her side of a conversation with Auntie Linda better than I could. Auntie Linda sold the house at Murrumbeena, including its large garden of roses tended by my uncle for many years, and moved into a unit just a few doors from the old house that had been her parents', nearly opposite the Churches of Christ's old people's home where she was to spend the last six years of her life. She tried to keep up the annual Christmas gatherings, but eventually she had to give up being a good host, as her back was beginning to cause her serious trouble. She maintained basic good health, despite a long period of recuperation in hospital after a bad fall in the 1980s and another hospital stay in the mid 1990s. She was always cheery, except if someone questioned her memory of an event during her life or yours. (It was best not to catch her out.)

In the end, I must have been a bit of a disappointment to her, as I did not keep up a connection with the Churches

of Christ. My Auntie Linda devoted much energy (and probably a fair bit of money) to the Oakleigh Church of Christ, although its numbers dwindled after the 1960s. Ever cheerful and benevolent, she was as much an advertisement for her beliefs as any person I've met.

My Auntie Linda died on 30 September. Her funeral service was at Oakleigh, where I met some of the people I knew from Oakleigh Church during the fifties and sixties, my aunt's niece (and her husband and son) on her side of the family, my mother (the last person left from her generation of the Gillespie side of the family), my sister Jeanette, and my cousins, who were also my aunt's nephews and nieces. Not a large crowd, as my aunt had outlived many of her closest friends. But, like most Churches of Christ funerals, it was a celebratory occasion, a send-off to the next life, rather than a miserable one.

It's difficult to think of her not being alive, because she had always kept every fact of our lives in her head!

Wynne N. Whiteford, 1915–2002

Wynne Whiteford had already lived a full life before I heard of him. In 1960, in Ted Carnell's *New Worlds*, one of the first SF magazines I bought, I read an author bio about this Australian author whose works I had never heard of (see box). So Australia had its own SF writers! Sure it did. The novella version of J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (*Science Fiction Adventures*, No. 24, 1962) was accompanied by a novella by Wynne Whiteford ('Bliss') and a short story by **Lee Harding** ('Pressure'). Wynne, who had published his first story in 1934, at the age of nineteen, was being published regularly by Carnell in Britain during the late fifties and early sixties, but fell silent after Carnell sold *New Worlds* to Mike Moorcock and co.

When I saw Wynne on a panel at my first convention, the Melbourne SF Conference, Easter 1968, I realised I was gazing at a legend. Wynne stood out in the crowd: not only because of his youthful way of carrying himself, although he was entering middle age, but because of the careful way he chose his words, his refusal to enter into the smart-arse banter that was then (and still is) the dialect of writers and fans on panels at conventions. Modest and good-humoured: that's how Wynne seemed, then and now.

I must have spoken to Wynne occasionally during the early seventies, but the first time I became aware of him as a friend was during the first day of Monoclave, the convention held at Monash University when Chris Priest and Vonda McIntyre were in town for the 1977 Writers Workshop. Wynne drew me aside and told me, almost apologising for having to tell me sad news, that his wife **Laurel** had just died. He was obviously in distress, and I did not know what to say. I had never met Laurel.

Wynne began attending Nova Mob regularly when John Foyster started it again in the late seventies. At what I remember as the first of the new series of Nova Mob meetings, a gala party in South Yarra, Wynne introduced us to his friend **Gwayne Naug**. We did not know what to make of her, and she did not know what to make of us. We found out only later that Wynne had met her at the Eastern Writers Group, an enthusiastic group of writers in the outer north-eastern suburbs. Gwayne herself was an enthusiastic writer, and gradually Elaine and I became her friend as well as Wynne's.

Wynne also became close friends with **Paul Collins** and **Rowena Cory**, who ran Cory & Collins, the small press that began in the same year as Norstrilia Press. Encouraged by

Wynne Whiteford, 1979. (Photo: George Turner.)

Paul and Rowena, Wynne returned to writing, and produced his first novel, *Breathing Space Only*, at the age of sixty-five. I typeset it, and Elaine pasted it up on the kitchen table. It appeared in 1980, and was followed by several more novels for Cory & Collins. **Cherry Weiner**, an Australian literary agent who had long since settled in New Jersey, made a flying trip to Australia in the late seventies. She signed up Wynne, George Turner, Keith Taylor, and quite a few other Australian writers. She sold Wynne's first few novels to Ace, which published them, plus two more. Altogether, Wynne published six novels during the eighties, but no publisher has yet collected his short fiction.

Wynne couldn't help being compared with **George Turner**, as both were the senior Australian writers of the late twentieth century. **Frank Bryning**, who died recently in his nineties, seemed a full writing generation older than both of them. Wynne was quiet and modest, and George at his worst could be a prima donna. Both were fond of the company and good talk provided by the Nova Mob. Both won the A. Bertram Chandler Award for lifetime contributions to Australian SF. George suddenly became old in the early nineties, and moved to Ballarat. When he died in 1997, we suddenly realised that not only was Wynne a year older than George, but at the age of eighty he could still seem startlingly young. **Terry Frost** tells of Wynne knocking around with fans a quarter his age at both the 1994 and 1995 national SF conventions. When Wynne was eighty, I saw him enter the room at the Nova Mob, notice that the only empty chair was a small stool, and sit straight down on it without any complaint. It was only in very recent years, after a series of falls, that he started to feel his age and look frail. Gwayne had to refit their house in Eltham so that Wynne could move around safely. Nevertheless, he and Gwayne attended a series of social events late last year, including the Nova Mob end-of-year gathering at Eastern Inn, a joint birthday party

NEW WORLDS

PROFILES

Wynne N. Whiteford

Melbourne, Australia

Born in Melbourne, Australia, Wynne Whiteford became interested in writing while in his teens, and had a few short stories and articles published. He then began to take writing seriously, produced some "literary" stories which failed to sell, then set the idea of a writing career aside to concentrate on engineering. For a few years he operated a display business.

He did not begin writing consistently until after his marriage in 1950, producing some suspense stories and short s-f which appeared in Australian magazines. At this time he was studying Commerce at the University of Melbourne, but he shelved it to concentrate more fully on writing. It's still on the shelf.

Through the mid nineteen-fifties he was Technical Editor of an Australian motoring magazine, specialising in road-testing of cars and covering motor-racing events.

He began writing novelette-length science fiction while living in Washington, D.C., in 1957. He arrived in New York the day Sputnik I was placed in orbit (pure coincidence!) and lived in Manhattan until the middle of the following year, writing sports-car articles and SF of various lengths which appeared in *Amazing, Fantastic Universe, If, Super Science Fiction,* and other magazines.

Since 1958 he has lived in London, using it as a base for exploring in various directions, but by the time this appears in print will be back in Australia again. He feels equally at home in Australia, America, and England, in Paris or in Honolulu.

His interests are travel, people, fast cars, chess, science fiction (!). He has been accused of reading anything from *War and Peace* to the labels on jam jars.

Author profile, New Worlds, No. 96, July 1960.

with **Helena Binns**, and the New Year's Eve party held at the home of **Paul Collins** and **Meredith Costain** in Clifton Hill.

The wake/celebration/garden party in Wynne's memory was also held at the home of Paul and Meredith on 12 October. Many of the members of the Eastern Writers' Group were there, and one of them read out the last chapter of Wynne's *Breathing Space Only*. It was fascinating to listen to Wynne's prose so many years after typesetting it. People who didn't like Wynne's writing said it was 'oldfashioned'. Maybe. He provided a few too many explanations, but he did not use clichés or waste words. His descriptions of the interactions between people are quite subtle, and he knew how to throw in a joke when appropriate, such as in the superb last line of the novel. **Russell Blackford**, one of two people to write at length about Wynne's work, summed up his achievements for us. The sun shone; it was a perfect Melbourne spring day. We were glad to be alive. We felt glad that Wynne had been alive — and we felt again the need to remember him properly. Nobody can explain the necessity for death except a biologist. It's up to writers to keep alive the memory of a well-spent life.

Theodore (1985–2001)
Oscar (1984–2002)

Given the above news, it seems almost perverse to say that no recent event has caused us more pain than the loss of a small ginger cat named **Theodore**. A cat of very little brain, Theodore, during his sixteen years of life, cost us more in vet's bills and anxiety than all the other cats put together. Until a few years ago, he was allowed to roam beyond the borders of our garden, and did. He enjoyed mousing and fighting, but usually lost his fights. In 1989, an assailant put a claw right across the centre of one of Theodore's eyes. Hauled off to a small-animal ophthalmologist half way across Melbourne, he spent the next week with the eye completely stitched shut and the pupil immobilised, and a plastic bucket over his head to stop him scratching at the stitches. Oscar, his best friend, was confused. One end of

Theodore embattled: fitted with a plastic radar dish with cardboard extensions, 1992. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)

Theodore smelt like Theodore, while the other end smelt of the vet's surgery.

In early 1992, Theodore crawled out from under the house after disappearing for near twenty-four hours. He was very very ill. It was a weekend. **Elaine** took Theodore to our vet, who in turn sent him to the only emergency veterinary hospital that was open. In the taxi, Theodore was convulsing, barely breathing, and growing cold. He was only a few minutes from death. At the hospital, he was put on life support, and survived. He returned to our vet, then came home. He was recovering, but was unable to pee. We took him back to our local vet, who discovered that at the

Extreme cuteness pose: Theodore (left) and his very good friend Oscar (right) when both were very young. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)

emergency hospital a faulty catheter had been inserted in Theodore's urethra. It had nicked the inside of the urethra, which as a result had become partially blocked. The vet put in another catheter and kept him there. When I visited, Theodore had not eaten for three days and looked completely miserable. I cried like a loon and asked what I could do. The vet told us about a company that hired out very large cages for convalescing pets. We hired one, put blankets in it, and brought Theodore home. For several weeks, he stayed mainly in the cage, with no control over his peeing, with a bucket over his head to stop him removing the catheter. (He succeeded several times.) General misery for all. The vet removed the catheter, and put Theodore on valium as a muscle relaxant, but his urethra was still partly blocked. The valium made Theodore into a very happy cat. Elaine was still working a regular job, so for several months I was taking care of Theodore and giving him all his pills. Therefore he was the only one of our cats who ever became attached to me rather than Elaine. After several months, we realised that the valium treatment was not working. Theodore still could not pee properly, so he was given a gender reassignment operation (his urethra was shortened, and other obstructing bits removed).

He still liked fighting and mousing, but his only other major adventure was becoming stuck in a factory nearly two blocks away. We knew he was there because he bellowed back to Elaine when she called through the window. He would not emerge during the day because the sound of the machines was deafening. Elaine asked the foreman if she could leave some food for Theodore. We called him at the end of each day, but he stayed hidden. After four days, we discovered where he was hiding. After the machines stopped, the last of the staff had two minutes to leave the building before the doors were locked. On the fourth day, during that two minutes, I reached as far as I could behind a stack of pallets, just managed to grasp Theodore by the scruff of the neck, dragged him out, and put him into the cat box.

Theodore was very glad to be home, but we knew that, given half a chance, he would do it all again. That's when Elaine worked out how to secure all the fences so that the cats could not go over or under them.

Over the years, Theodore failed so often at self-destruction that we thought he must be immortal. In August 2001, the vet pointed out that he was losing weight steadily, and almost certainly had cancer. When, on a Sunday morning, Theodore began bleeding from the mouth, we thought that his last day had come, so we took him to an emergency veterinary clinic to be 'put down'. That vet found that Theodore's remaining tooth had abscessed badly, so he was bleeding into the mouth. Tooth removed, and rehydration preparation pumped into him, Theodore seemed to have staged yet another miraculous resurrection. He still wouldn't eat. Our local vet changed his antibiotic, and for a few days Theodore ate normally. Then he stopped. He didn't look particularly miserable, but he couldn't eat. He was now so thin that our vet could feel a lump in his belly. During his last two days, he did look very miserable, and on his last morning he could not even drink. When we took him on his final ride to see the vet, Theodore did not even protest. After he had given the final injection, the vet had us feel a huge lump in Theodore's belly, a very fast-growing cancer that had been the basis of his health problems for the previous two months.

Theodore was a bit of a dill, even by cat standards, but he was beautiful and sweet, and the only one who was ever *my* cat. But he was also a friend to Oscar and Polly. The house seems empty without him.

Oscar was found by **Sally Yeoland** under the Brunswick house she and **John Bangsund** lived in during the early eighties. When Sally phoned saying that she had found a tiny kitten, all fleasy and hungry, and they couldn't possibly keep him, we bowed to the inevitable. We even had a name for him. The week before, I had dreamt about a grey fluffy cat, a music critic named Oscar Leitmotiv. So Oscar had a name immediately. He had obviously been separated from his mother too early, so for the rest of his life showed some feline psychological peculiarities, the worst of which was extreme timidity. All we had to do was hold an implement or plate in the hand when walking out the door, and Oscar would scurry off in fright. He lost this timidity only late in life, when he became deaf. Oscar was very affectionate to the other cats, and always welcomed new cats, especially kittens. When Theodore arrived two years later, Oscar fell in love with him immediately. He jumped towards Theodore, trying to put his paws around him. Theodore jumped back six feet. They were soon lifelong friends. When Theodore died, Oscar, who already had kidney problems, gave up the battle for life. He soon became distressed, stayed mainly in the kitchen, and stopped eating regularly. On the day when he could no longer drink water, in February 2002, we took him for his last trip to the vet's.

2002 wasn't all gloomy . . .

. . . but there have been periods when every week or so brought the name of another dead SF writer or fan, not always of the Ancient and Revered Generation (**Damon Knight**, **Poul Anderson**, and many others). **George Alec Effinger** was my age. I could wake at 5 a.m. worrying about imminent mortality, but instead I get up in the morning, read the death notices in *The Age*, and give a sigh of relief that I'm not there yet.

Severe illness has struck some of our most valued friends during 2002. **John Foyster**, diagnosed with a brain tumour in the first week of January 2002, has lived his life as cheerfully as possible, and has even published quite a few issues of his Webzine *eFNAC*. **Peter McNamara**, diagnosed with a malignant brain tumour in early 2002, is still hanging on, working on a new anthology. He is a year younger than I am. Recently **Damien Warman**, also from Adelaide but currently living in Austin, Texas, was operated on for bowel cancer. Damien is very much younger than I am. All reports are that the operation was successful. **Leigh Edmonds** is still suffering from the effects of being hit over the head by thugs more than two years ago.

Having said that, I feel guilty when writing that for Elaine and me 2002 has been satisfactory, and often satisfying. You can tell that from reading my ConVergence Report (posted with most copies of this *SFC*) — the Cheery Segment of 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends'. Two Ditmar Awards (thank you, everybody!), lots of good company, and lots of people met through the Internet (see box). The **Nova Mob** continues successful — perhaps too successful, with 30 people trying to crowd into the **Sussex–Warner** living room on 2 November. The ultimate accolade was being invited (by **Ian Mond**, who cannot be refused) to a few recent fan events at which Elaine and I have been by far the oldest people.

Thanks to the ever-enthusiastic **Dick Jenssen**, I've had a very good year of watching DVDs. Dick buys far more DVDs

ConVergence redux

These are some matters that were not cleared up when I published the ConVergence Report (**brg** 33/ *Great Cosmic Donut of Life* 34).

I was wrong, as usual

Dick Jenssen handed me a list of corrections to the Report. The item on p. 9 was one I picked up eventuallly.

- Page 3, line 3: 'she recovering' should be 'she was recovering'.
- Page 3, line 3: 'asn't' should be 'wasn't'.
- Page 6, line 5: 'Helen' should be 'Helena'.
- Page 8, line 8: 'Dimitrii' should be 'Dimitri'? (Maybe; I always spelt his name with four 'i's.)
- Page 9, line 36: 'Alan Dean Brown' should be 'Alan Dean Foster'.
- Page 15, line 13: 'Ditmar, and she gave' should be 'Ditmar, she gave'.
- 'Page 18' should be 'Page 16'. (**Jack Herman**, writing in ANZAPA, picked up that one.)
- The photos on the back page were made into a montage by **Dick Jenssen**, the photos themselves were taken by **Helena Binns**.

MSFC at Somerset Place: that elusive date

John Straede put his hand up during the ConVergence Panel on 'The Melbourne SF Club: The Lost Years', and reported on the dates in his life that pinned down the exact date when the Melbourne SF Club moved to its most famous quarters, 2 Somerset Place, Melbourne. I reported this conversation to **John Foyster**, whose place I took on the panel. A vigorous Internet exchange followed. John F. got in touch with John S., who wrote that I had reported him wrongly. Eventually John F. and John S. decided that they agreed on the date. Here's John Foyster's summary: 'John S. definitely remembers joining the club in 1960, rather than an earlier date, and I think my estimate for Somerset Place (previously given as 1961–62 — meaning late in '61/early '62) stands up (25 July 2002)'. Is that the last word, or does somebody out there own a copy of a publication that gives the exact date of moving from McKillop Street to Somerset Place?

One of my favourite photos from ConVergence (. to r.): Merv Binns, Helena Binns, and Bill Wright (taken by Dick Jenssen for Helena).

Above: **Justin Ackroyd** prepares to shave off the **Marc Ortlieb** beard for the sake of the DUFF, GUFF and FFANZ Funds. 'How much am I bid?' Only fifty dollars!

Right: Fifty dollars and a few minutes later: Marc Ortlieb as we've never seen him before (or since; he's already grown back the beard).

(Photos: **Cath Ortlieb**.)

I didn't have any clear photos of Janice, Claire or Mark from ConVergence. Fortunately, they called in on **John Foyster** and **Yvonne Rousseau** in Adelaide. Yvonne took the photos:

Left: **Janice Gelb** and **John Foyster**.

Below: **Mark Plummer**, **John Foyster**, and **Claire Brialey**.

than I do, and is willing to lend them. I've bought a few of my own DVDs. I've seen a few films at the cinema (*Gosford Park* and *Last Orders* at the local Westgarth, and *Enigma* at the Astor), but most films are now appearing on DVD shortly after they've been shown locally. (And often before; *Pollock* has just opened in cinemas here, but Dick showed it to me on DVD last summer.) When Dick bought himself a (gasp!) vast plasma screen, he let me have his (gasp!) 42 cm TV screen, which does almost everything with an image except throw it up in the air and twirl it around. Distribution of DVDs in Australia is still peculiar; some of the great musicals are still unavailable, but I found a Zone 1 copy of *The Pajama Game*, which has been unavailable on TV, cinema screen, tape or laser disk for more than 30 years. Carol Haney's performance is a revelation, as is the brilliance of Bob Fosse's choreography, even in 1957. Many of the great British and European films are still unreleased (especially films by Visconti), but Dick managed to buy John Frankenheimer's *The Gypsy Moths*, one of the greatest American films of all time. It's never been on tape or laser disk, and has not been shown on TV for more than 20 years. Not many Australian films have been released on DVD, but Nadia Tass's *Malcolm* has finally appeared. That's my favourite Australian film.

Books? I've read a few, but am way behind in writing about them. I'm in one of those periods when most writers of fiction seem boring, but poets (including Stephen Dunn, this year's Pulitzer Prize winner for Poetry) and essayists (I finally read Gore Vidal's gigantic *United States* collection) still have sparkle.

Music? I've bought too many CDs, as usual, and am very far behind in listening to them.

The year has been dominated by Paying Work and social events. After being effectively unemployed for nearly three months at the end of last year, I've been taking every bit of work offered to me. As relief from staring at a computer screen, Elaine and I take any opportunity to meet with congenial people. **Andrew Macrae** and **Ian Mond** invited us to their Tuesday night get-together in Fitzroy. Elaine and I have discovered two more restaurants in the area (**Suko Thai** in Johnston Street, Fitzroy, and **Beelzebub** in Smith Street, Fitzroy, both highly recommended). 'Dinner at Ciao' has become a Friday night institution for the fans who meet at the Australia Food Hall basement each Friday night. (**Ciao** is in Hardware Lane, Melbourne, and is open at night only on Fridays.) **Dick Jenssen** has organised some wonderful occasions throughout the year, including a few dinners with 'Carnegie fandom', the group of well-known retired Melbourne fans who suddenly find themselves living close to each other in the eastern suburb of Carnegie. **Race and Iola Mathews**' monthly Film Night has been enjoyable, a way of keeping up with people we might not otherwise meet. **Eva Windisch**'s *Tirra Lirra* magazine launch events are always stimulating.

In August I shocked even my least shockable friends by travelling outside the state of Victoria. I had not left the state since 1981. Elaine and I were invited to my sister Robin's second marriage in Maroochydore, Queensland, about 60 km north of Brisbane, but Elaine decided to stay home and take care of the cats. My other sister Jeanette and my mother had taken a flat for the week before the wedding, and I joined them on the Friday. Jeanette hired a car, so we looked at a fair bit of the local area. Jeanette drove us to a sheltered beach, where I swam in sea water for the first time in ten years! Jeanette said that the locals do not swim until the water temperature reached 30°C. At the beginning of July in Queensland, the water temperature was about the same as it reaches at Port Phillip Bay beaches at the end of summer. Later, Jeanette drove us to the Mooloolaba port, where we went up a sightseeing tower. We could see the entire port, where the river meets the sea. Below were the moored yachts. On one of the yachts we saw a cat prancing along the spar: a cat who owned a boat. I decided that southern Queensland in 'winter' provides a lifestyle I could get used to.

And the wedding? It went, as John Bangsund used to say, without a hitch. A group of about fifty of us gathered on the beach at midday, the celebrant united the happy couple, and we climbed into the limo that Robin and Grant had hired for the day. We went to a restaurant, where we ate and drank all afternoon instead of enjoying more of that fabulous Queensland sunshine. We spent most of the next day travelling home, but not before I actually got to sit down and talk to my sister Robin properly for the first time in many years. I didn't get a chance to talk at length to Grant, her new husband, but I did have a good yarn with John, to whom she was married for nearly thirty years, and who was at both the wedding and the reception. Also present were my Queensland cousin, Ian, and his wife Bev, who I hadn't seen for twenty years. It was an eye-opener to see my mother in action at a large social event. Whoever imagines one's own mother as the life of the party? Just shows where Robin and Jeanette got their pizzazz.

I decided that I must find a way of persuading Elaine to take a holiday with me in Maroochydore. It's warmer than I like, but a constant breeze blows off the sea, so nobody needs worry about the weather. This seems odd to a Melbournite, who can spend hours each day trying to calculate the next turn in the weather.

Mooloolaba beach:
The SF Commentary free advertisement for a Queensland winter holiday
(photo by Jeanette Gillespie).

John Crowley is one of the world's most respected fantasy and science fiction writers; indeed, is now regarded as one of America's greatest writers, someone whose work is not limited by genre boundaries. His best-known novel is *Little, Big*. His most recent novel is *The Translator*.

When, in *SF Commentary* 77 I republished John Sladek's 1980 article about **Thomas M. Disch**'s science fiction novels, Tom thanked me, and pointed out that John Crowley had written the following major article about his later 'gothic' (or 'dark fantasy') novels. Thanks, Tom, for arranging contact with John Crowley, who consented to the republication of this article; and thanks, **Matthew Davis**, for help in finding the *Yale Review* version.

In 1999 appeared Disch's latest novel, *The Sub: A Study in Witchcraft* (Knopf; 285 pp.; US$24.00/$A43.95), to be reviewed at length in a later issue of *SFC*.

John Crowley

The gothic of Thomas M. Disch

[This article first appeared in the *Yale Review*, vol. 83, no. 2, April 1995.]

The list of Thomas M. Disch's published works just inside his latest novel is printed in small type, and even so threatens to run onto a second page: twelve novels, five collections of short fiction, several books of poetry, a classic children's story (*The Brave Little Toaster*) and its sequel, plays, including an adaptation of *Ben Hur*, opera libretti and a piece of interactive software called *Amnesia*. Coming last in the list of plays is *The Cardinal Detoxes*, a one-act play in blank verse, which got its author and producing company in trouble with the archdiocese of New York — the landlord, as it happened, of the theatre where the play was running. The archdiocese's efforts to evict the company no doubt brought Disch visions of the *Index librorum prohibitorum* and a thrilling whiff of the auto-da-fé.

The Archbishop of New York appears on the dedication page of the British edition of Disch's new novel, along with Father Bruce Ritter, Father James Porter, the Servants of the Paraclete in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, and His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, 'without whose ministry and conjoint power of example this novel could not have been written'. The novel is titled ***The Priest: A Gothic Romance***.

The most famous of all Gothic romances was called *The Monk* (1796), and enjoyed vast success in England and America in part because the Catholic Church, its fabled power, occult processes, dramatic accoutrements, big architecture and supposed implacable zeal were so vivid and shudder-starting to white-church Protestants and rationalists. Matthew Gregory Lewis, who came to be called 'Monk' Lewis for his most celebrated book, altered the milder Gothic-novel tradition of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, adding actual supernatural events to their imaginary ones, and loads of desperate compulsive sex, including an affair between a priest and a novice (a girl in disguise, but the point is taken).

The Priest comes at the end of the Lewis tradition; it is set in contemporary Minneapolis, amid declining congregations, multiplying sex scandals and anti-abortion demonstrations, but it offers most of the thrills of its great predecessor, along with the tang of contemporary relevance and a species of dreadful hilarity that the church and its doings can often inspire in its lost or banished children.

Disch also once wrote, under the imposing pseudonym of 'Leonie Hargreave', a Gothic of the other sort, the kind where all the fearful possibilities resolve themselves as mere human extravagance and wickedness; it was called *Clara Reeve*, its heroine named after another of the ancestral Gothic novelists. His opera libretti include adaptations of *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Frankenstein*. So the Gothic is a familiar metier, but there is hardly a narrative form Disch has not tried, and stretched, and reshaped. His early novels were science fiction, a form to which many questing and restless talents were drawn in the 1960s; the most unlikely books could in those years be published as science fiction and sell copies, and set a young writer out (perhaps over optimistically) on a career. (*Ice*, a heroin-induced rhapsody by the English recluse Anna Kavan, appeared in the United States in those years as an SF paperback.) The name 'science fiction' is actually a masking term for a whole range of fictions that can share certain superficial resemblances but that actually belong to different genres — Gothics, philosophical romances, utopian speculations, boys' adventure (pirate or cowboy), modern dread, postmodern whimsy. A couple of Disch's SF novels (*The Puppies of Terra*, *Camp Concentration)* are describable as philosophical romances, but the most characteristic of them — *334*, *On Wings of Song* — are unlike any others in the field. Most writing about the future is purposeful: it intends some sort of warning or promise or encouragement or discouragement — some sort of moral. These futures of Disch's have moral intensity but no single moral direction. They are permeated with a kind of melancholy reflection, possessing the randomness, the knowable and yet unsummable multiplicity, and the poignancy that we associate with the past, and writing about the past. These futures bring in hard things and new species of oppression; but they bring in new possibilities, too, which souls rise to or fail to rise to. They are like life, which is the one thing most SF is not like.

Ambition in genre writing is often a perilous thing. The undiscriminating taste of genre readers (actually a highly discriminating taste, but a taste that discriminates only its kind of book from all others, aesthetic quality aside) and the invisibility of genre writing to all other readers are only aspects of the problem. Central is the question of whether the forms and constraints of any of the modern genres — horror, say, or SF, romance, sword-and-sorcery, or the

Western — are worth struggling with, worth the effort of transforming. What readership will witness your labours or be able to understand what you have done?

Beginning with ***The Businessman*** (1984), Thomas M. Disch has been creating a series of novels that are at once comprehensible within a genre and have aesthetic and perhaps other ambitions well beyond the usual scope of such books. *The Businessman* is subtitled *A Tale of Terror*; *The M.D.* (1991), second in the series, is subtitled *A Horror Story*, and the latest, *The Priest*, as noted, is *A Gothic Romance*. None of these subtitles is exactly accurate, but the writer is playing fair with his most likely readers: these are not pastiches, parodies or postmodern japes. *The Priest* and *The M.D.* are published by the very literary house of Alfred A. Knopf, but *The M.D.* bears a blurb from Stephen King. The delicacy of Disch's literary problem, to say nothing of his complex career choice, are often present to the reader's mind: to this reader's, at any rate.

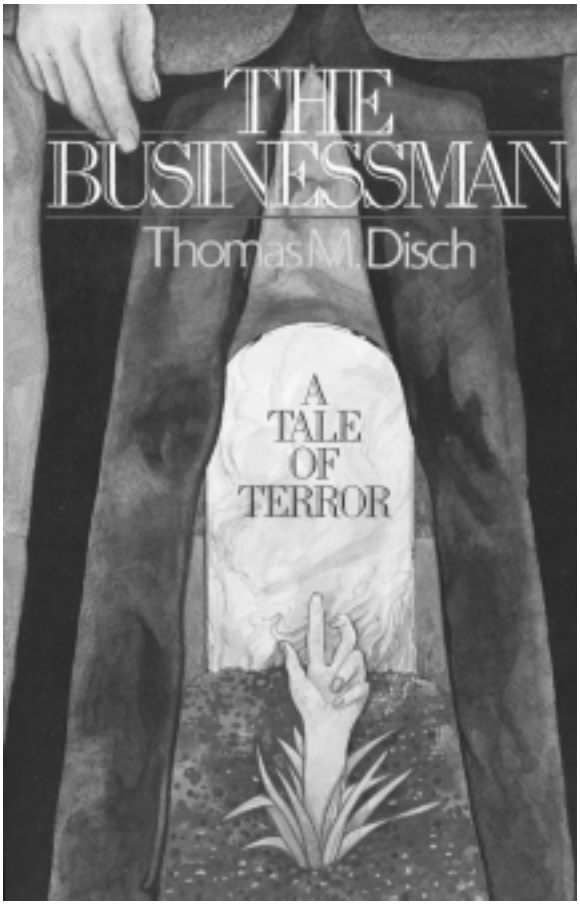
All three books are set in Minneapolis in approximately the present day (*The M.D.* reaches a few years into the future). A few characters play parts in more than one book, and there are places in the city important in all three, but they are unconnected in plot. More importantly, within each a different kind of spiritual or supernatural realm envelops the city, not mutually exclusive but particular to each book, a part of its individual *geist* as are the characters and the flavour of the language.

The Businessman is a ghost story. The central characters are mostly dead, and learning to live with it. Alive almost to the end is the marvellously named Bob Glandier, businessman and self-indulgent moral wreck, who has murdered his wife Giselle in a rage after discovering her in a Las Vegas motel room (Las Vegas is the distant capital city of Disch's world here), where she has fled from him. Her afterlife will consist for a time in the unpleasant job of haunting him, a thing she has no real say about. At first, in the grave, she knows nothing at all:

> Her body was here in the coffin *with* her, and in some way she was still linked to its disintegrating proteins, but it wasn't through her body's senses that she knew these things. There was only this suspended sphere of self-awareness beyond which she could discern certain dim essentials of the earth immuring her — a dense, moist, intricate mass pierced with constellations of forward-inching hungers, nodules of intensity against a milky radiance of calm bacterial transformation.
>
> *The worms crawl in* — she remembered the rhyme from childhood. *The worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle on your snout.*

Giselle, her dead mother Joy-Ann, and the spirits of Adah Isaacs Menken and the poet John Berryman (who committed suicide by jumping from a well-known bridge in Minneapolis, and whose ghost still resides unreleased beneath it, looking horribly shattered and bloody but in no pain except for needing a drink) combine not very purposefully but in the end effectively to fix Bob Glandier's wagon, and thus permit Giselle to move up a stage in the afterlife, which is a complex place but full of interest, its interaction with our lives on earth reasonable and explicable, though not predictable, even from the other side.

The Businessman resembles other ghost stories less than it does those rare and deeply gratifying Hollywood fantasies, films like *Here Comes Mr Jordan* or *It's a Wonderful Life*, where



the writers have worked out in detail wholly original but wonderfully supple and consistent spiritual worlds and their earthly consequences. In Disch's book, the glamour and repletion provided in the movies by the presence of star actors and the glow of masterly cinematography are supplied by the narrator's voice — a voice of marvellous grave gaiety, offering pleasures generously but modestly, making no judgments it has not already led the reader into making, and awarding to the characters joys and punishments that are equally gratifying to hear about. Only lengthy quotation could show how, sentence to sentence, this is accomplished; best to read the whole. The reader is reminded, strangely, of Disch's fellow Minnesotan Sinclair Lewis, and of *Babbitt* in particular: the joyful care with which Lewis describes the contents of George Babbitt's bathroom cabinet or the choosing of his suit; how while seeming to be engaged in excoriating provincial errors of taste and moral inadequacy he communicates such relish, such love even, for the details of the places and lives he displays, that the reader feels his smile and is warmed by it. It is a very odd tone to be taking in a horror novel, and the success of it adds to the exhilaration.

The M.D., next in the series, is a different matter — not only darker in colouration but different in how the supernatural interacts with life on earth. Billy Michaels, growing up in Minneapolis and attending Our Lady of Mercy School, has a vision of Santa Claus, and has a vivid if ambiguous conversation with him. Sister Symphorosa, his teacher, has told him that Santa is like a pagan god and doesn't exist; she is right in the first claim, wrong in the second. Santa — who has chosen to appear to Billy Michaels in exactly the arbitrary way that gods were once said to visit people — is in fact a manifestation of the god Mercury, patron of medicine,

and of liars. He has a gift for Billy and an exaction to make in return. The gift is a sort of caduceus, with which Billy will be able to both make certain people sick and make others well; the exaction is a lifelong bondage to the god. Billy will find that his caduceus retains its power to heal if it is periodically recharged by being used to do harm; he cannot imagine, at ten, all that this will mean — how much harm he will find himself capable of — and the working out of this awful destiny, as in a Greek tragedy (or a Senecan one), will issue at length in madness, degradation and parricide.

There is a difficulty here, and it has to do with the fantastic in fiction in it widest application. In realistic novels — the sort that makes up not only most of what fills the front of the bookstores but most crime, spy and mystery writing as well — the mythemes out of older literature are deployed as metaphor, to add a layer of meaning to the events and dilemmas of the story. Hints of damnation, magic and the selling of the soul for power are used in this way in Mann's *Dr Faustus*. In other genres, though (I almost wrote 'lesser genres'), the supernatural or magical dimension is simply there, posited, a problem and a possibility for the characters. Billy Michaels is visited by a god; in exchange for the power the god has in his favour to bestow, Billy gives him what all gods want: worship and commitment. Taking place as they do in a realistic, even hyper-realistic setting, in a novel that is in every other way in the familiar vein of common realism, these things may seem problematic; they are radically unproblematic. They do not *stand for* the corruptions of power or the temptations of imperial science or the end not justifying the means; they are what they are. We are in a fairy tale; Billy's wishes will come true, and we will see what a boy like this, in this world of ours, will do with them.

This genre effect permeates the book, shifting conversations, events and crises continuously away from what the same things would mean in a book of a different kind. Here is Billy talking to his beloved anoretic stepsister:

> 'So, have you ever *prayed* to be cured?'
>
> 'Prayer isn't like that, William,' she protested. 'It's not like going to the Santa at Dayton's and giving him a list of what you want for Christmas. It's a conversation, like we're having, only it's God we're talking with.'
>
> 'If you needed something from me that I could give you, you'd ask me for it, wouldn't you? . . .'

God, in Disch's world, may be unable to answer prayers; but her brother can, and will.

The M.D. is a fairy tale, but it is also a long, circumstantial, realistic novel. Minneapolis, a Catholic childhood and Billy's shifting family relations are gravely and fully drawn. Billy Michaels has an obdurate opacity even though we are allowed to understand him by most of the usual novelistic means; his absorption in his power, how he learns to understand and use it, seems to drain away his ordinariness without in any way enlarging him: it leaves, in the end, nothing behind, an awful vacuity. And perhaps such power would do just that.

This would be a fine novel even with a different sort of engine in it; the magical, or demonic — which grows in power and dreadfulness as the book reaches into the future — continually unbalances and challenges the reader, always forcing further attention, an exaction not every reader will be comfortable with. But the tension is wonderfully maintained, and it is not always easy to see how this is done; the narrative voice forgoes the obvious delight in people and things everywhere felt in *The Businessman*, and gives less guidance, though it is often equally fine in its effects. Billy's mother playing Frisbee with her son in a rare moment of easy connection with the doomed boy:

> It was wonderful all the different flight paths you could make it trace. She had no idea what twist of wrist or flick of the fingers made it follow one trajectory instead of another. It was all done unconsciously but with a strange precision. You'd almost think the plastic disk had a volition and intelligence of its own, as though it were some species of bird that had been fined down to this bare anatomical minimum, a living discus skimming the lowest branches of the maple, whirling toward the patio and then veering away, settling down on the mown grass with a whoosh of deceleration like a waterfowl coming to rest on a lake.

Eventually the book must cease to vary its forward rush with such moments; there is much bloody work to be done, and we know it, for we are, after all, reading a horror novel, and like pornographic novels, horror novels must make their particular effects keep coming slightly faster, each a little more replete than the last. Which makes the cool poignancy of this momentary aerial suspension the more gratifying. This is a profoundly original book, whose originality is all the more confounding to expectations in a genre where originality is rare.

The Priest is, again, a different kettle of fish. The reader may suppose — Disch gives some reason to think it — that *The M.D.* is an indictment of the corruptions of power; I think this is a minor aspect. But *The Priest* is an outright philippic on the subject, with immediate reference to the daily papers. Here is another new use of the horror genre, which is again likely to be unsettling to fans and nonconsumers alike.

The earthly world of *The Priest* can be triangulated on three churches: there is Our Lady of Mercy downtown, newer and sleeker St Bernardine's in the upscale suburb of Willowville, and the huge completed but unused shrine, Speer-like and granitic, of Blessed Konrad of Paderborn, built up north on the shores of Leech Lake near Etoile du Nord Seminary. (I assumed that Disch must be making up these names; a look at a map shows me they are quite real.) Blessed Konrad, star of a medieval antisemitic martyr legend, has had approval of his cult withdrawn by Rome in the wake of protests; but the shrine, overseen by fanatic Gerhardt Ober and his sister Hedwig, is being used for other purposes.

Pastor of St Bernardine's, late of OLM, is Father Pat Bryce, not a paedophile (as he learns) but an ephebophile, who has often begun the seduction of his lads while in the darkness of the confessional:

> There was nothing that so transfixed him as hearing the voice of a boy who had never come to confession to him before haltingly explaining that he had been guilty of sins of the flesh. What sins *exactly*, he would have to know, how many times, and where, and what acts had the boy *imagined* as he masturbated? . . . For Father Bryce the moment of release was the moment he could feel a boy's will yielding to his. It was not necessarily a carnal moment, though carnality might well be the end result.
>
> It was, however, always a *priestly* moment, for a priest is a bender and shaper of wills.

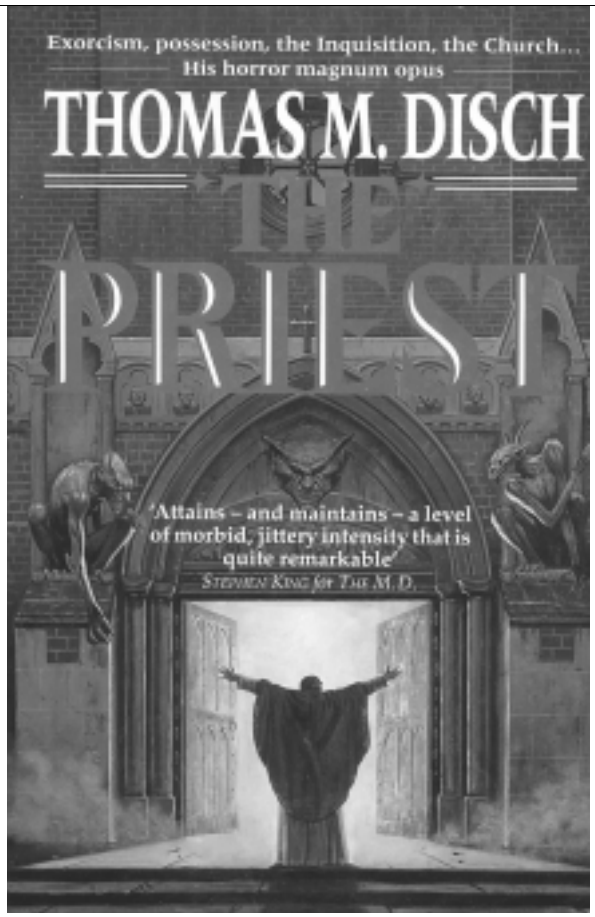
Father Pat, who is to be himself bent and shaped, is at St Bernardine's because of his tastes. When a boy lover in psychological trouble spills the beans, the scandal is hushed up; Father Pat is sent to a clinic in Arizona (where, like ordinary hoods and criminals, he learns lots of new tricks from fellow inmates) and then given a new assignment by the hierarchy, which he is in no position to refuse: from his new post at St. Bernardine's he is to be operator of a new and radical, as yet wholly secret, passing move in the Church's anti-abortion campaign. Parents of pregnant teenagers are to be convinced to sign their daughters to the church authorities, who by force if necessary will sequester them in the basements of the derelict shrine of Blessed Konrad of Paderborn (built to be nuclear bomb proof), cared for by the Obers until their children are born. The church will thus be able to communicate to its shock troops in the abortion wars that real action is being taken. Father Pat's distaste for this scheme is great but is as nothing compared to the debt he owes the church:

> The legal and medical costs that had been incurred in securing the Petroskys' silence exceeded $200,000, which the diocese had had to bear itself, since it was no longer possible, after the debacle of the Gaute case in Louisiana, to obtain liability insurance that would pay for legal claims brought against paedophile priests. ('As well try to get flood insurance in Bangladesh,' the bishop had quipped.)

The real-life Father Gaute, still serving his twenty-year sentence, is welcomed into the text, which is obviously designed to accommodate him, as it does the figures of Disch's dedication. Without such reminders of the actual scandals, evasions and legal difficulties into which the real church has been sunk in these several years, the reader might take Disch's tale to be an extravagance, an anti-Catholic diatribe in which the most unlikely mendacity, cynicism and vice are attributed to too many church figures to be believable.

His fervent opposition — not to say loathing — is, however, clear, and operates on many levels, from skilled fun-poking and hypocrisy-deflating to a horrid delight in retribution that he makes it hard for the reader not to share. Disch, as represented by these fictions, seems not really to believe in conscience; he believes in good and evil natures, the evil being more common, though the self-promptings of good natures have a real power for those who feel them. His wicked characters feel only the dangers of exposure; they attribute their cruelties and indulgences to a supposed frailty they can do nothing about, and rarely resist their impulses; they feel shame vividly but not guilt. This seems the most non-Christian thing about these books centrally concerned with Catholicism (as all three are, *The Priest* only the most obsessively).

Far worse things are in store for Father Pat than running Birth-Right, his tough-love maternity hospital. For there is a fourth church involved in his fate (his crucifixion, not quite metaphoric); a church existing in a different space-time than the other three. To reach it, we must return to the book's beginning; but the book's beginning is a brilliantly and masterfully managed series of deepening revelations and downward turns that chapter by short chapter lowers us (laughing helplessly) into Disch's frightful world, and I will not analyse it — this must be one of few books where the reader's pleasure will be seriously spoiled by a description of the beginning rather than the end.



Suffice it that, as in the other two novels, the hopes and errors and needs of the characters encounter and are entangled in a spiritual realm whose existence they largely do not suspect, and misunderstand when they glimpse it. Father Pat finds himself translated — 'transmentated', as he will come to find the process is called — into medieval France, where he is a Cathar-hunting cleric, Silvanus de Roquefort, Bishop of Rodez and Montpellier-le-Vieux. Changing places with the bishop leaves him his own personality, even his own body, though afflicted with thirteenth-century pains and premature aging, and an ability to understand Languedoc French, but no other of the bishop's memories. As in the well-known actor's dream, Father Pat has to fake it, keeping up as best he can and trying to satisfy a ferocious Dominican inquisitor just arrived from Rome, who suspects the bishop of being soft on Catharism, and who looks, to Father Pat's eye, just like Gerhardt Ober.

It's hard for Silvanus, too, though more interesting. He's found himself in Father Pat's world — more exactly, the underworld Father Pat has come to be involved in through those opening gambits — and naturally thinks he's died and gone to hell, a hell where desires are both punished and indulged. Silvanus on the loose in modern Minneapolis, getting messages from the demon TRINITRON and appearing as Father Pat to all, will deal roughly with more than one character, as what damnee would not?

The process of transmentation, and the precise node of this process that links Minneapolis and the now-ruined church of Montpellier-le-Vieux, is explained in the writings of A. D. Boscage, science fiction writer and cult leader, a mix of Philip K. Dick, L. Ron Hubbard and famed UFO abductee Whitley Streiber (with whom Disch has had public set-tos). Boscage claims to have been a character back in Silvanus's world, and his experiences there form part of his

UFO abduction theories: that a giant net of intelligences, alien or supernatural (the 'Alphanes'), surround our world and manipulate us for reasons of their own.

Father Pat — who is, as it happens, being blackmailed by Boscage's cult for reasons of *its* own, though without knowing why or how they are connected to Silvanus and the past — holds a priest's low opinion of such stuff:

> Boscage's book, *Prolegomenon to Receptivist Science*, was a virtual anthology of New Age absurdities and an obvious hoax by a rather unsophisticated hoaxer. To argue against it was as hopeless a task as bailing water out of a ruptured boat.
>
> The problem was that he was a passenger in the boat and the boat was in deep water.

The more interesting problem, which Father Pat will never be allowed to solve, is that Boscage's system reflects the play of supernatural power far more closely, in the universe of this book, than does Father Pat's theology. It is a common thing, in thrillers descending from the 'Monk' Lewis tradition, to use the church and its theurgies as special effects; *The Exorcist* may have been un-Catholic to its core, but within its world demonic possession followed the church's rules, and could be defeated by the church's means. Not here. In this book, the priests haven't a clue; the entire supernatural structure of their church is fake, their sacraments are inefficacious, and the whole rigmarole is only a means to power and pleasure for the hierophants. Most of them know it, too, or act as though it were indisputable, whatever they say out loud.

And meanwhile all around them are more things, in heaven and on earth, than are dreamt of in their theology. Transubstantiation doesn't work, but transmentation does. At the same time there is a constant reversibility to the frights and spooks of this tale; sometimes ordinary realities turn out to mask otherworldly depths, but at other times similar supernatural events turn out to be illusory, and mask only ordinary realities. The undecidability is a constant, without any irritable striving after fact and certainty. Unlike the elaborate and smooth-running stage machinery of the supernatural in *The Businessman*, the spiritual world of *The Priest* resembles the continuous astonishing improvisation of certain classic B movies, where new material is always superseding and partially cancelling out the unfolding complications of earlier premises, a process that picks up speed until the end becomes unimaginable.

The end of *The Priest* leaves the ground littered with the usual quota of corpses (including one kept for some time in a freezer, a theme, if that is the word, that also appears memorably in *The M.D.*, combined in that instance with a microwave.) Death in horror novels tends to visit a broad sampling of the characters, both good and bad; the nosy get it but so do innocent bystanders, and the guilty. This even-handedness of horror fiction I think impresses the young male readership of such novels as a delightful cynicism, as — in the current devalued use of the word — *ironic*. There must, though, be a core of good people who survive to the end and even profit, or the book would not be a romance. Readers of *The Businessman* will be sorry that the delightful Bing Anker, Giselle's brother and the victor of that book, is removed somewhat abruptly here, though his friend and sometime lover Father Mabbely survives, a rare decent and sympathetic cleric.

Disch brings his tale to a climax at the shrine of Blessed Konrad, which is for Father Mabbely the last straw; his occupation's gone:

> There ahead of them stood one of the Seven Wonders of the Totalitarian World . . . The Shrine was a perfect combination of cathedral and bunker, with a lead-gray dome of cast concrete that seemed to be sinking into the earth rather than soaring from it. Every detail was expressive of the whole, though detail, as such, had not been the architect's *forte*. It was One Big Idea, and that idea was Authority. Authority that had no use for the landscape around it, or for the people who might enter it, but only for its own swollen and ill-conceived *terribilità* . . . What a bliss it would be no longer to be implicated in what that building represented! To be a priest no more and a human being again!

The body count at the Shrine is added to the numbers already accumulated, some of them dispensed, it must be admitted, rather swiftly; Blessed Konrad's guard dogs maul one sickly pregnant escapee from Birth-Right to death almost unnoticed by the reader, or the writer. For Thomas M. Disch as for Father Mabbely it may have been a relief to cease being a priest, and become again a human being — the cruel opposition he has constructed here. Indeed, it is possible that this ambitious and extravagantly gifted writer is getting tired of the constraints of the horror genre. If that is so he has wrung from it more than could have been imagined, and it is to be hoped that the whole trilogy will reach, besides the usual consumers of this genre, those readers who will be able to grasp what an unlikely, what a large achievement it is.

'The issue always and at bottom is spiritual.' Thus Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the epigraph Disch has chosen for *The Businessman*. At the end of *The Priest*, the good characters, those who have avoided being slain, gather and talk, and an attempt is made to explain the events of the plot in mundane terms of multiple personality disorder and the hypnotic effect of Boscage's fantasies. But this scene (this is, of course, a common trick of the genre) is followed by another final scene, which calls into doubt all such simplifications of damnation. A similar endgame is worked to terrible effect in *The M.D.* In the world of these books, in this spiritual Minneapolis, we can hope not that we can avoid otherworldly threats and terrors, fates we may or may not deserve, but only that around us and beyond them lies the heaven pictured in *The Businessman*, whose hardworking spirits watch over us, and where our wounds will at last be dressed: if, that is, we are both good and lucky.

— John Crowley 1995

John Romeril has written for the theatre for three and half decades, first at La Mama, then the Pram Factory in Melbourne. He continues to work freelance, still concentrating on the theatre, but with some film and tv credits to his name. Recent gongs include receipt of the NSW Premier's Play Prize (see photo: NSW Premier Bob Carr (l), John Romeril (r)) — and the Gold Awgie 2001 for *One Night The Moon*, a musical drama for tv devised with Rachel Perkins, Mairead Hannan, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody.

John Romeril

The maker alive in the made

Discussed:
TRANSCENSION
by Damien Broderick
(2002; Tor Books 0-765-30369-8; 348 pp; US$25.95/A$49.95)

I want to pin a 'must-read genius at work' tail to Broderick and suggest an Austral comet is streaking across our southern sky. A bias comes with the hyperbole.

I shared a house with Broderick in the late sixties. Literary gonna-bes, we collaborated on a story or three (for *Man* magazine, if anyone remembers it). I've followed his career since, and borrowed his brains from time to time on projects of my own. He's a mate. And this is a mate's review.

The bond extends beyond friendship, into cultural kinship. His latest novel triggered in me a warm fuzzy rush of nationalist-cum-civic sentiment. That won't (it's an American hardback) happen to the citizens of New York, Austin and Anchorage. They'll reach the end flap expecting a puff on the author, a biog., past achievements listed, etc., and finding only that 'Damien Broderick lives in Coburg, Victoria, Australia', they'll have a so experience. For me, a boy from Moorabbin, there's no so about it. A reminder that an out-there talent like Broderick's lives here, in the flatlands of my home-town . . . weird how nearness to a national living treasure can make a nation feel worth living in.

Fact is I contend Broderick's stature as a public intellectual in our midst (and on the world stage) will grow. With it the reputation of a novel like *Transcension*. The latter claim I cling to despite the author's Afterword, where he labels it 'a frolic of a book'. I see some merit to his disclaimer. There's some clunky satire and adolescent humour, but a frolic, as in a trifle? That's a 'you know not what else you do' type statement.

From where I view the gallops, the stable Broderick's from, his bloodlines, betoken excellent form. It's probably been said (he may baulk at me saying it now), but his polymath forebears are hugely reliable steeds (Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, and before them H. G. Wells). They wore/wear, ask any farrier, big shoes that take some filling, but if modesty ever allows Cinderella Broderick to say 'mine tink it they fit' I'll find that merely just.

My bottom line? I'm mixing metaphors, but at least the sporting angle's intact: for years now, and with a vengeance through the nineties into the noughties, a mix of high calibre science fiction and science fact has streamed from Broderick like brain sweat from an athlete of the intellect — a Freeman of the fac-fic world.

Not essential background reading to have a go at *Transcension*, but grist to it; if you haven't sighted *The Spike* and *The Last Mortal Generation*, seek out these brave, thorough gems of factually fuelled science writing. Classics of Australian futurology, were the three tomes a boxed set they'd nail for you how across today's big ideas Broderick is, and what a gift he has for rendering them in ways Moorabbinites can digest.

So what's *Transcension* about, Alfie? Aleph, as it happens. This someone, or sum-thing, this he/she/it, this 'se' in the Broderick-speak of *White Abacus* (1996), intros the tale, and I'll quote it in full:

> **I sit on a hill.**
> **I {re-entrant selfaware identity operator}**
> **sit on {instantaneous location slice on search trajectory}**

a {existential pointer in exfoliating context sheaf} hill {local optimum in restricted search space}.

Call me Aleph.

I am a machine mentality. This in nowise distinguishes me from yourselves. My personhood, my self, is a process running as programs reflexively modulated in a net of nanocomputers in solar space. Most of my dispersed body remains for the moment on, in, above Earth. I am just like you humans, then.

I know the bite of the wind on a winter day, the silver light of the Moon, the warmth of the Sun, the laughter of children. I have loved Earth because it has been the root and home of my parental stock. Do you see? Do you understand? Do you feel?'

Tricky? What's a 're-entrant selfaware identity operator', for instance? I suggest a second read, aloud maybe. To yourself, or others. There's a voice there, yeah? And the writing's beguiling enough to go with the flow, isn't it?

Later, when bringing the book home, Broderick loops back to this 'opener'. Second time round in an expanded form, i's dotted t's crossed, the chilling/challenging majesty of it is awesome. It's better for being more thoroughly teased out, but the clues (Broderick's good at clue management) were all there in the beginning. The Aleph has 'a machine mentality' but also 'personhood', a 'self'. And has loved Earth, 'the root and home of my parental stock'.

Climax comes in this novel when a form of artificial intelligence approaches both godhead and the escape velocity required to transcend Earth. The engineering feat (exquisitely described) is the sculpting of the solar system. Broderick's feat is to put us inside a sensibility capable of that Promethean act. The rave (captions for a cataclysm) is my vote for far-out monologue of the year.

Indeed I long to be there in a rehearsal room at NIDA or the VCA, or any drama school in the country, when some enterprising would-be student uses this chunk of utterance for his or her audition piece. What play's this, the auditors will ask, where's this coming from? Out of Coburg's the answer — and the parenthood of AI is the hugely problematic issue addressed. Can we invent artificial forms of intelligence and not embed in them our own humanity? Is the carpenter's hand, and spirit, not present in the worked timbers of a chair? The maker alive in the made?

Broderick puts flesh on this concept, pumps blood through its veins, lards it (against our scorn — our fear?) with sentiment, with truth, with character. At the net, the baseline, and mid-court, he keeps hitting rhetorical (and oratorical) winners. A prime (because primal) example occuring some pages earlier is a truly moving recognition scene:

Late afternoon. A glorious day. A Bali-esque beach, though not a beggar in sight. The hero of the piece (certainly the character whose angst imbues the novel with its philosophical reach) wakes in a deckchair. Abdel-Malek, Magistrate in Metro. He's served a cool refreshing drink by a waiter who (didn't you die) shouldn't really be here. And Alice, wife of the Magistrate, who should be here but isn't, where's she? Their love — it seems to have spanned centuries, born when they were research partners in Silicon Valley — how long ago was that . . . ?

Alice does appear. I have something to show you, someone you need to meet. She guides her husband towards the water's edge. Out there bobbing in the deep is someone or something. And they swim towards a small pale figure.

'He's just, she's only a child of . . .' Abdel-Malek, as he swims, can't decide age or even gender. At one with sea sand sky, the Aleph floats in a young and humanoid form. 'Hello Father.' The patient deep brown eyes, the slow sweet smile. Click. The penny is dropping. Way way ago, as Century 21 hit its straps, Abdel-Malek's brain scan had been the seed of origin, the human core, the template. This is indeed his child.

To so gently orchestrate this arresting encounter is a class act. You don't buy the ideas in this novel, because Broderick joins the plot dots, and fills the areas with gaud. You do so because he seduces you with the brush strokes, lovingly paints the detail in. A rich resonant muscular prose is the musical underscore to a succession of action-driven, cinematically conceived scenes. It's an epic journey, especially across time, but not a cast of thousands, a mere five or six major characters steer the boat, each individual trajectory surefootedly mapped. How, not just what, they think feel say know, constantly laid bare, peeled back, revealed.

The overall effect seems that of a symphony, when really it's the work of several soloists performing a dance of (growing) consciousness, now this, now that, core figure's signature tune coming to the fore. In a way, that's the story. A handful of folk inhabiting remnant enclaves on a seemingly exhausted Earth that even the Aleph will soon enough forsake.

Here, though, I've raced ahead when I was, back on page one, a still-to-be-seduced reader. The grab of the Aleph I quote is printed there in bold, and this handsomely produced Tor book boasts a considerable amount of bold, of both the authorial and typographical kind. Swatches in a range of typefaces blossom; passages in italics crop up. Should, like me, you find a dip in the font box as enticing as a trip to a bad restaurant, be patient. Gutenberg overkill isn't on the menu.

Yes Broderick, á la Laurence Sterne of *Tristram Shandy* fame, proves (see his back list) as fond as ever of calligraphic hi-jinks. Because I come from the why-use-long-words school of writing and reading, and viewing those who 'play with the book as book' as onanists, *Transcension*, for a time, had me reaching for my gun. The surprise was how quickly I reholstered the weapon.

Point is, the 'print aids' Broderick employs do help. With the voicing. With the time shifts. They signpost whose sensibility is coming our way. They answer the who when where questions any reader asks. Given how slippery the subject and story are, *Transcension* is a deceptively complex novel — the triumph is it simply isn't a difficult one.

Big ticks go to the writing (sweet, deft, true, in craft terms); to the characters (whose consciousness and lack of it is winningly vulnerable); and even the layout, once you get how it hangs, stops seeming cute (or worse) and proves highly efficient. I don't know who should carry most can for the trade skills and discipline on show. The editor (David G. Hartwell) gets a credit, and the praises of two collaborators (Rory Barnes and Barbara Lamar) are also sung. Whatever the division of labour, TLC abounds (talented loving care), and if it isn't all Broderick's fault, it's sure coming from someone.

Still on typography, still back at the beginning, while the page one 'opener' is in bold, it's eek, page two, welcome to italics-land. Here Broderick wants to be sure we're across 'the argument', limning in the big ideas that lend sinew and backbone, not to mention relevance, to this tale: 'First let us postulate that the computer scientists succeed in devel-

oping intelligent machines that can do all things better than human beings can . . . the human race might easily permit itself to drift into a position of such dependence on the machines that it would have no practical choice but to accept all of the machines' decisions.'

I compress it here, but this is a sliver of Kaczynski's 'Unabomber Manifesto', the neo-Luddite position. The italics continue, as Broderick adds a slab from *Wired*, April 2000. I reduce what he filches to a question so you'll get the drift: 'Can we doubt that knowledge has become a weapon we wield against ourselves?'

The pinch is from Bill Joy's article, 'Why The Future Doesn't Need Us'; what price joy if it doesn't become Broderick's meta-theme? Part of the intelligentsia as early warning system, interpreting the future for the present, he takes his place among a brood of latter-day Hamlets insisting 'to be or not to be' is the question. Given the slew of spectres haunting our era, it's hard to disagree.

Are the germs gonna get us? AIDS, that grim reaper, marches hand in glove with the more mundane malaria and tuberculosis, nowhere down for the count. Landmines to September 11 — military mania remains rampant. Are aggression, savagery, revenge hardwired into the genome? Global warming, desertification, salination; when did eco-catastrophe become a jingle on every street singer's lips? Ar yes, from Blomberg to the dailies, the obscene spectacle of a world that can overproduce but underdistribute. And how wedded are we to developments in biotechnology, nano-technology, the quantum leaps in computing power that stock-feed artificial intelligence? Is that marriage for better or worse? AI goes hyper intelligent, and then . . . ?

Taking a dive into the future may be humanity's oldest party trick; something we've always done, are always doing. Did it ever rate a higher degree of difficulty? A sense of the species at the crossroads, cusping it at the portals of a strange new world, galvanises Broderick's pen. He looks forward, he looks back (the futurist ambience of the Metro's malls, the down-home hand-spun Amish world of The Valley). In a different font, one of the three scene-setting gambits on page two, he lifts a couplet from Andrew Marvell (1621–1678) and, with 'apologies', doctors it thus:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot changing gear

This ability to not just metaphysically but viscerally depict time's cog slips, the shift of paradigms; that's Broderick's great act. Cryonics, cellular repair, the life everlasting albeit in cyberspace holographically extended — we lean forward, bend back, pass through time into the interstellar depths, the breath of a new physics, a rewritten everything upon us.

A frolic? I don't think so, when the Afterword that tells us this also betrays deeper aims, not to say arcane sources:

> The revised physics I play with are a science fictional version of the late Allen Rothwarf's model proposed in 'An Aether Model of the Universe' . . . not meant literally except as a hint that everything important in physics we might not yet know.

Broderick (kindly) steers us to a learned journal (*Physics Essays* 11, 444-446, 1998), see the Drexel University Web site: http://cbis.ece.drexel.edu/ECE/fac_staff_pages/rothwarf_ etc. bradbury/MatrioshkaBrains/PlntDssmbly.html is how a second cite/site ends. And the topic being dilated on? 'As for disassembling the solar system, how feasible is that? Freeman Dyson showed as long ago as 1960 that just using available solar energy, Jupiter could be dismantled in 800 years. More recent updated analysis by Robert J. Bradbury shows that this is too cautious. Whole worlds could be vapourised and the escaping gases captured and sorted, but that's messy. Solar flux could be turned into electricity to power tiny self-replicating nanogadgets to chew up a planet or moon, sequester the materials conveniently . . .' — and so on, the gist being, capture some of the Sun's output, chart the gravitational binding energies of the planets and other relevant parameters, voilà: 'Mercury, closest to the Sun, can be pulled apart in five hours, Mars in 12 hours, the Moon in a mere 19 minutes'. A consolation, perhaps, Jupiter will still require 560 years.

This is the barely thinkable stuff on which Broderick hangs his dreams. Apocalypse possible, the disassembly of the solar system is the denouement of *Transcension*, related in a dramatically sprung way, unfolding in majestic technicolour, an IMAX-style grandeur to each slo-mo minute, seen through the eyes of several people (and one thing) who we've grown very fond of.

There's a bigness to the authorial sensibility here that you simply don't get in big airport novels, and 'frolicsome' isn't the blurb I'd slap on it. Sure, pleasures are myriad. This novel teems with wit, has satiric bite, a core set of beautifully observed characters, not least a Romeo and Juliet whose young love is imaged with an endearing degree of hormonally charged ardour. Above all, there's a narrative architecture to die for, and pulsing deep within it the torque of the plot, the churn of an engine that will bring you (it did me) home on a wet sail in an elated awestruck state.

Engine *and* sail? Paradox, or just a bit of piggy-backing? Old and new technology mixed and matched? That's kind of this book: the out-there frontiers of Science (new technology) hyper-linked to capital L (old technology) Literature.

Anyway, there I was, at the end-flap — 'Damien Broderick lives in Coburg, Victoria, Australia' — with memories of primary school flooding my lobes, recalling the way kids inscribed their pencil cases, listing their name and the school, their house number, the street suburb and city they lived in, adding stuff like 'the Southern Hemisphere, planet Earth, the Solar System, the Universe'. Does a Piaget-like turning point infect us? We don't necessarily leave the neighbourhood, but learn to see beyond it? Some kids turn looking out into a habit. They grow up astronomers and do the night shift at Parkes or Mt Stromlo. Others produce, like Broderick, a dread SF-inflected reggae, the wail reaching Coburg to New York.

— John Romeril, August 2002

Russell Blackford is Melbourne-based writer and critic. With Van Ikin and Sean McMullen, he is co-author of *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999). Since then he has contributed many articles, on a wide range of subjects, to such magazines as *Quadrant*, *Nova Express* and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. He and his wife Jenny Blackford edited *Foundation* 78, the special Aussiecon III edition, and he is at present writing a commissioned trilogy of novels.

Russell Blackford

Posthuman futures

Discussed:
TRANSCENSION
by Damien Broderick
(2002; Tor Books 0-765-30369-8; 348 pp; US$25.95/A$49.95 hardback)

SCHILD'S LADDER
by Greg Egan
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07123-0; 249 pp; £10.99/$A35.00 trade paperback)

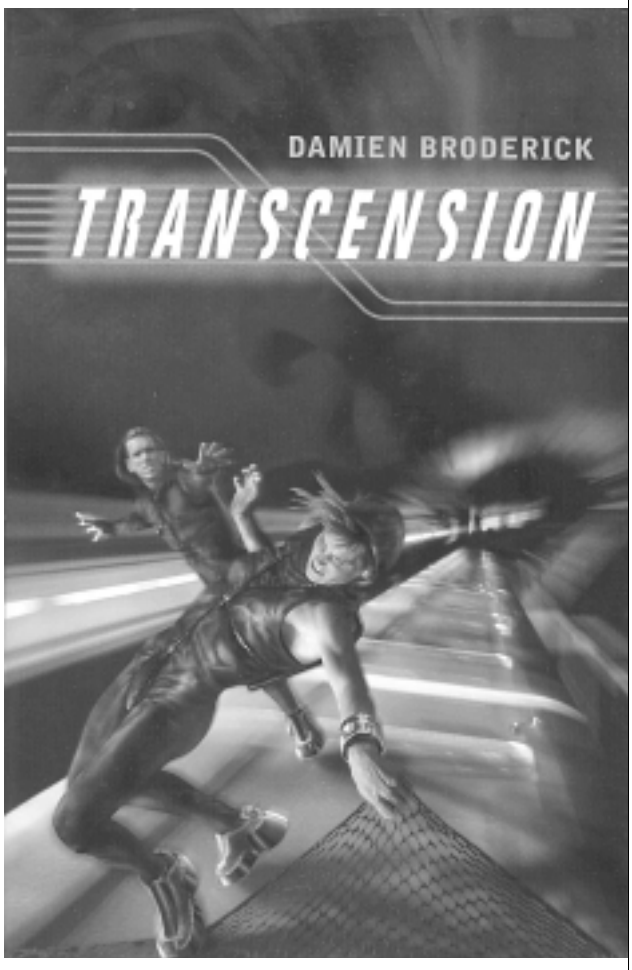
[First published in *Australian Book Review*, September 2002.]

Over the past 12 years, Australian science fiction has undergone an extraordinary renaissance. Before 1990, only a small number of writers, notably Damien Broderick, George Turner, and A. Bertram Chandler, had achieved regular success in the major overseas markets of the US and UK. Local publication of SF was largely restricted to the offerings of small presses, such as Norstrilia Press and Cory & Collins, with sporadic support from mainstream and genre magazines.

During the 1990s Broderick went from strength to strength, becoming a leading international critic and theorist of the genre, as well as a respected novelist. Greg Egan, who had published some short stories and one small-press novel during the 1980s, had a meteoric rise to prominence, winning international awards and building a huge reputation as a novelist of ideas. He is now established as one of the foremost writers of 'hard', strongly science-based SF. Many other Australian writers have made their mark overseas, while mass market publishers in Australia now produce work by a wide range of SF authors, covering most of the field's variety.

The new books by Broderick and Egan, *Transcension* and *Schild's Ladder*, are at the genre's cutting edge. Both writer attempt to imagine worlds that have undergone truly radical change, as a result of which humanity itself has been superseded or deeply altered. Such posthuman scenarios are now debated intensely within the genre, as its practitioners reflect upon the contemporary technological trajectory. Once the possibilities for powerful new technologies, such as nanotechnology and artificial intelligence ('AI'), become clearer, the debate will increasingly spill over into the intellectual mainstream, a process that is already beginning. Today's themes in serious sf are tomorrow's mainstream social and political issues, as shown by the recent controversies over reproductive technology.

In Broderick's *Transcension*, the Earth has fallen under the benevolent control of a powerful AI known as 'the Aleph', and it becomes clear that human beings, as we know them, are now found only in relatively small enclaves that the Aleph has willingly set aside. Here live societies that, to greatly varying extents, have relinquished the future's rapidly advancing technology. Broderick shows us how the Aleph came to be, and depicts a sequence of astonishing events as the AI chafes at its remaining limitations, seeking



to move to an even higher level of freedom and power.

Egan's *Schild's Ladder* explores the themes of love, identity and the pursuit of knowledge. It is set twenty millennia from now, when the galaxy has been extensively colonised by our descendants, whose minds run on quantum level computational devices called 'Qusps' ('quantum singleton processors'). In this strange, distant future, people can live in a disembodied, virtual form or move between different bodies as necessary. Love remains, and sex can be arranged, but the biological division of the sexes has been engineered out, leaving gender distinctions as no more than a linguistic fossil.

Then an experiment in fundamental physics goes wrong, creating a region of 'novo-vacuum' in outer space. Here, different physical laws operate, and nothing living can survive. The novo-vacuum immediately begins expanding outwards at half the speed of light, engulfing star systems and planets, which have to be evacuated before its edge can reach them. This unprecedented disaster triggers two main political responses. The 'Preservationists' want to save the existing colonised worlds, which means stopping the expansion of the novo-vacuum, or preferably destroying it, whereas the 'Yielders' want to preserve and study it, or even adapt to it. They see the novo- vacuum as a new universe, flowering within the old, offering a much-needed stimulus to their stagnating interstellar civilisation. As studies of the phenomenon continue, it becomes apparent that the novo-vacuum is not so empty, after all — it has developed its own rich structure, including a form of life.

Both novelists are confronted by the same artistic problems: how to make such radical visions of the future transparent to their readers; how to involve us with their characters. If beings such as Broderick's Aleph and Egan's distant descendants of current humans are advanced so far beyond us, how can we understand them and care about them? Broderick's main tactic is to keep us, as far as possible, within the consciousness of a group of human characters, who are given turns to narrate the story. Of these, the most important is Amanda Kolby-McAllister, a bored 'pender' (i.e., she is going through a kind of biomedically extended adolescence) whose idea of fun is train surfing on supersonic maglev freighters, using high-tech safety gear. Amanda speaks and writes in a kind of futuristic teen slang that crushes out many words:

> Feet touched curved metal, shoes gripped. Hangar still dim, empty. Stood there few beautiful seconds. Solid bulk freighter beneath feet didn't vibrate, hum. Right now quiet as tomb — but could feel supersonic power of thing.

While this is off-putting at first, it is easy to get used to, and Amanda is a very engaging character, as are the other narrators, whose contrasting personalities provide much of the book's pleasure. Amanda and her friend Vikram become involved with a community that has renounced machine technology as the work of the devil — though even here there are some twists. The interactions between characters from very different societies are amusing and gentle, though tragedy strikes at one point.

Broderick makes important use of another character, Mohammed Kasim Abdel-Malek, who has survived from approximately our own time. In one thread of the book, we follow what happens to him after he is murdered by a

juvenile street gang, preserved cryonically through the Aleph's rise, then returned to Amanda's society. In this narrative thread, we are introduced to the back story, while we follow events in the book's present through the adventures of Amanda and the people she meets.

Schild's Ladder is far more daunting, requiring considerable concentration and effort from the reader to penetrate its extensive tracts of scientific discourse. Yet it is also notable for its mastery of technique, for Egan has a refined ability to clarify everything, so that the only remaining difficulties are those arising from the subject matter itself. The style and structure of the book are simplified to the maximum, and the prose contains no unwanted distractions. Egan enables us to understand events through the eyes of truly strange characters, and to feel their passions.

For a mainstream audience, these are not the most accessible books by either writer. In particular, Egan's *Teranesia* (1999) is a far better place to begin for anyone who is not already familiar with his work. At the same time, *Transcension* and *Schild's Ladder* are quite remote in tone and intention from media 'sci-fi', the sort of action/adventure SF that dominates on television and in the cinema. Instead, they are carefully worked out thought experiments, as rich and moving in their way as high quality novels from the literary mainstream. They may not extend the audience of either writer, but they should receive much attention from the international sf readership, and they confirm the current richness of the sf field in Australia.

— Russell Blackford, September 2002

Elaine Cochrane says she should wear a badge 'Spouse of BNF' at conventions, because she has to put up with the *SF Commentary* editor as a husband. She is, of course, a fan in her own right, having been a member of the Melbourne University SF Association during the 1970s, and later a participant at many conventions and fannish gatherings. She has delivered to Nova Mob meetings several papers, one of which, 'If You Do Not Love Words' (on the works of R. A. Lafferty), appeared in *Steam Engine Time* 1. Elaine is a freelance book editor specialising in science and mathematics.

Elaine Cochrane

Egan's new universe

Discussed:
SCHILD'S LADDER
by Greg Egan
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07123-0; 248 pp plus 2 pages of Greg Egan's notes on sources for the maths/physics; £10.99/$A35.00 trade paperback)

As cosmologists attempt to describe the universe in mathematical terms — of which general relativity, quantum mechanics, the Big Bang model and inflation are just part — the search for the underlying pattern poses a different question. These mathematical descriptions are very good at describing the universe as it is, but are they the only descriptions possible? Is our type of universe the only possibility?

Greg Egan is fascinated and excited by cosmological theory, and he wants to share that excitement. In *Schild's Ladder*, he proposes a future physics, based on geometry, that has dotted almost all the '*i*'s and crossed almost all the '*t*'s of current cosmology. In that world, a physicist brings into existence a universe that is described by a different geometry, of which our own is just a simpler special case. The universe or 'novo-vacuum' described by the new geometry is expected to have only a fleeting existence, but instead it grows and threatens the existence of our own. Egan's far-future cosmologists are excited and frustrated by the challenge of understanding this new and strange space–time. They are also faced with the decision of what, if anything, can or should be done to stop its expansion, and if it can, or should be, destroyed. It is Egan's triumph that we share their wonder and frustration.

One reason for his success is that his science is rigorous. As Cass, the physicist who triggers the events, points out, general relativity and quantum mechanics are so successful at describing our space–time that they can't be far wrong, and Egan is careful not to transgress either. Thus the novo-vacuum expands at half light-speed, making observation possible. He is also careful to exploit many of the peculiarities of both, including relativistic time dilation and superposition of quantum states, to achieve some of the more mind-stretching action.

Another reason is his characters. Almost all are AIs, but they are AIs with human ancestry, with curiosity, a moral sense, values and doubts, and a diversity of cultures. Many inhabit bodies; many do not. Those who do inhabit bodies do so in a variety of forms, and for a variety of reasons. All have the potential to transmit themselves as packages of information, to inhabit a new body at the receiving end, or suitable computer hardware—and to leave their old selves behind as backups. Thus Cass, again: 'When the means existed to transform yourself, instantly and effortlessly, into anything at all, the only way to maintain an identity was to draw your own boundaries. But once you lost the urge to keep asking whether or not you'd drawn them in the right place, you might as well have been born *Homo sapiens*, with no real choices at all (p. 6).'

A strong secondary theme of the novel concerns the different types of social structures and social interactions such forms of existence make possible. Egan's care, and a certain sly humour, give even his most bizarre inventions a plausibility and a sense of rightness.

The characters may be AIs, and thus potentially immortal, but they share a deep reverence for life, particularly biological — mortal — life. Much of the tension of the novel arises from their differing interpretations of what this means, and their attempts to reconcile this reverence with their desire to understand the new phenomenon of the novo-vacuum. Resolution does not depend only on heroics, although many of his characters do display courage. (It's all very well having a backup a few light-years away; that backup is not the current *you*, and it can know nothing of the circumstances since its creation that lead to its activation.) Those AIs studying the novo-vacuum do so rationally and intelligently. Their analysis is guided by logic, but their decisions and actions are also guided by their values and beliefs. It is this interplay that gives the novel so much of its strength.

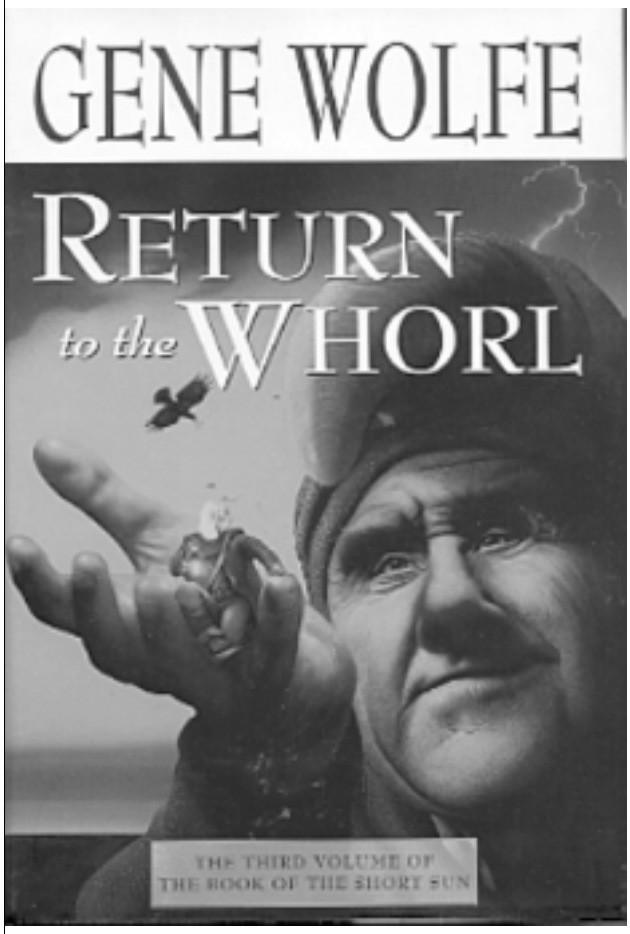
— Elaine Cochrane, June 2002

Jenny Blackford is a freelance writer and critic, and performs manuscript assessments of both fiction and non-fiction for Driftwood Manuscripts. In a previous life, she was an expert in computer communications. She lives in Albert Park, Victoria.

Jenny Blackford

Unreliable narrators

Discussed:
RETURN TO THE WHORL
by Gene Wolfe
(2002, first publication 2001; Tor 0-312-87364-6; 412 pp.; $US15.95/$A28.00 trade paperback)



Cover: thanks to Tor Books and Gordon Van Gelder.

Return to the Whorl is not a novel in its own right, and it would be little use for me to review it as if it were. It is the third and apparently final volume of *The Book of the Short Sun*, and therefore the culmination of three separate series of books. The three volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun* were preceded by the five volumes of *The Book of the New Sun* and the four volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun*. The 12 books effectively comprise a single, very long novel, or, perhaps, if we take the three series titles *The Book of* seriously, a long trilogy. They are all beautifully written, and rich and complex, almost to a fault.

To appreciate *Return to the Whorl* at all, it is very important to have read *The Book of the Long Sun*, plus the preceding two volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun*, that is, *On Blue's Waters* and *In Green's Jungles*. You are more likely to enjoy *Return to the Whorl* if you have read or, preferably, reread these six books very recently. You will be vastly better off if, before rereading those books, you also reread *The Book of the New Sun*, including the extra (fifth) book, *Urth of the New Sun*.

Return to the Whorl is not an easy read. Do not pick this one up in an idle moment. You need an idle day (or a month, if possible, for the homework) and a clear head. After I finished the rereading the three series, culminating in reading *Return to the Whorl* twice, much of the complex setup had gradually fallen into place in my head, but I was still baffled about many things. Did the inhumi, for example, really fly through hard vacuum between the planets Blue and Green? Could the secret of the inhumi really be as trivial as it seemed? What *did* Horn do to Chenille on Green? How does the astral travel stuff really work?

I did what one does these days: I searched the net. There is an online community of terrifyingly intelligent and literate people who discuss Wolfe with obsessive tenacity. The archives of the list are at www.urth.net/urth/achives, and are searchable. To my profound relief, the archives showed a general experience not wholly dissimilar from mine. On my questions above, for example, some thought one thing, some thought another, and others were violently undecided.

How can I summarise what has happened so far in this long and complex work? Wolfe's familiar preoccupations with self, spirit and personhood, with truth, lies and self-deception, with death, life and resurrection, permeate the books. Unreliable narrators tell us long tales, during which they encounter the dead and, often, also die themselves; identity is lost, merged or changed; shape-shifters imitate and prey on human beings; and the apparent writer within the stories (Wolfe, of course, is the 'real' writer) is often revealed as a mere mouthpiece for others.

The five novels of *The Book of the New Sun* are the story of journeyman torturer Severian on some very peculiar travels. He meets strange people (huge sea-dwelling alien women, a monstrous giant and his doctor, man-apes who live in a mine, time-travelling aliens sent to guide Urthlings), and has many long conversations — long conversations are a feature of all of these books — and rather more sexual encounters than one might have expected. After he is made

Autarch, he comes to understand that his life task is to try to bring the New Sun, that is, to bring a White Fountain to renew the dying Sun, which is being eaten up by a Black Pit. To get the White Fountain and bring the New Sun, he has to travel to the higher universe, Yesod, and plead with an entity closer to God ('the Increate') than the men of Urth. In doing so, Severian becomes the Conciliator of centuries earlier, whose sacred memory he once revered.

One huge advantage of rereading all these books in one fell swoop is that many of Wolfe's little puzzles become satisfyingly clear. What was murky when one read each of the books year by year as they came out is relatively simple when they are read all together. The answers to questions such as the identity of Severian's mother, father and grandparents are relatively easy. (The question of Severian's sister, however, remains murkier.)

Next comes *The Book of the Long Sun*. The eponymous Long Sun is the heating and illuminating structure in the centre of the *Whorl*, a generation starship made from a hollowed-out asteroid. Pas, the chief god of the *Whorl*, is an upload of the thoroughly unpleasant tyrant Typhon, who lived long before Severian's birth. Severian meets Typhon twice in *The Book of the New Sun*: Severian apparently brings the long-desiccated Typhon back to life during Severian's journey north in *The Sword of the Lictor*; and Severian as Conciliator, gone back in time in *Urth of the New Sun* to Typhon's own time, is persecuted by him, but escapes by a (quite literal) miracle. We do not encounter Severian again until *Return to the Whorl*.

The basis of the Long Sun books is that Typhon created the *Whorl*, around the time when Severian met him in Typhon's first lifetime. He loaded it with a Cargo of live human people ('bios'), preserved people ('sleepers' — few of whom appear to have entered the *Whorl* voluntarily), androids ('chems') and embryos (human and animal), plus seeds to stock the future colony. The personalities of Typhon and his family and friends were uploaded into Mainframe on the *Whorl*, where they gave themselves divine attributes and Greek-inspired names. Pas, for example, is Greek for 'All'. In the Long Sun series, the 'gods' communicate with the people of the *Whorl* through the Sacred Windows (big video monitors), and can possess people, by downloading part of their personalities into their worshippers through the Windows, or, indeed, any monitor. They are as bloodthirsty as Pas was when he was alive, wanting frequent blood sacrifice, preferably human.

By the time of the action of *The Book of the Long Sun*, the Cargo living and breeding in the *Whorl* have lost most of their memories of Urth. They are unaware of their Cargo status, and take the *Whorl* for granted as the world. The *Whorl* arrived long ago at a star system with two apparently suitable planets, Blue and Green, but none of the Cargo knows that there is an Outside, and the few Crew have little power. Pas wants the Cargo to leave the *Whorl* for Green or Blue, but his family has rebelled against him, and 'killed' him in Mainframe. Pas in these books seems less evil than Typhon was; this may be a result of his 'death'. Like so many Wolfe characters, Pas is resurrected, but some personality components may have been lost in the process.

The main character of the Long Sun books is Patera (that is, Father) Silk, a priest whose goodness and humility is as charming in its way as Severian's simple acceptance of life as a torturer. Silk is 'illuminated' by the Outsider — a god who exists outside the *Whorl*, not one of Pas's family and friends (yes, he seems to be the real God — atheists beware). Silk has long conversations with strange people as he battles criminals and the corrupt government of his native city-state Viron, in complicated subplots. Finally, he struggles with the rundown systems of the *Whorl*, trying to get the people of Viron safely transported to Green or Blue. One major problem is that the people of the *Whorl* have cannibalised the ship, including its landers, during the long journey, so few of the landers are operational.

The Book of the Long Sun appears to be written by Silk himself. One of the minor characters in *The Book of the Long Sun* is Silk's pupil Horn, who is chastised at one point for his excellent imitations of Silk. Horn admits at the end of *The Book of the Long Sun* that he and his wife Nettle, rather than Silk, wrote the whole account. Horn appears to be the writer of *The Book of the Short Sun*, but appearances are often deceptive. At the beginning of the action of *The Book of the Short Sun*, in *On Blue's Waters*, Horn and Nettle are living on Green near New Viron, a settlement founded by the people of Viron. With their oldest son Sinew and their twins Hoof and Hide (the naming conventions of Viron are stern), the couple run a paper mill on a small island, the Lizard.

The frontier civilisation of Blue is becoming increasingly uncontrolled and violent — for example, slavery is arising. The problems on Blue are compounded by the inhumi, a race of shape-shifting alien blood-suckers native to Green. They are reminiscent of, but generally agreed to be different from, the shape-shifting alien blood-suckers of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Blood confers something close to identity: the inhumi drink human blood because they want to be human.

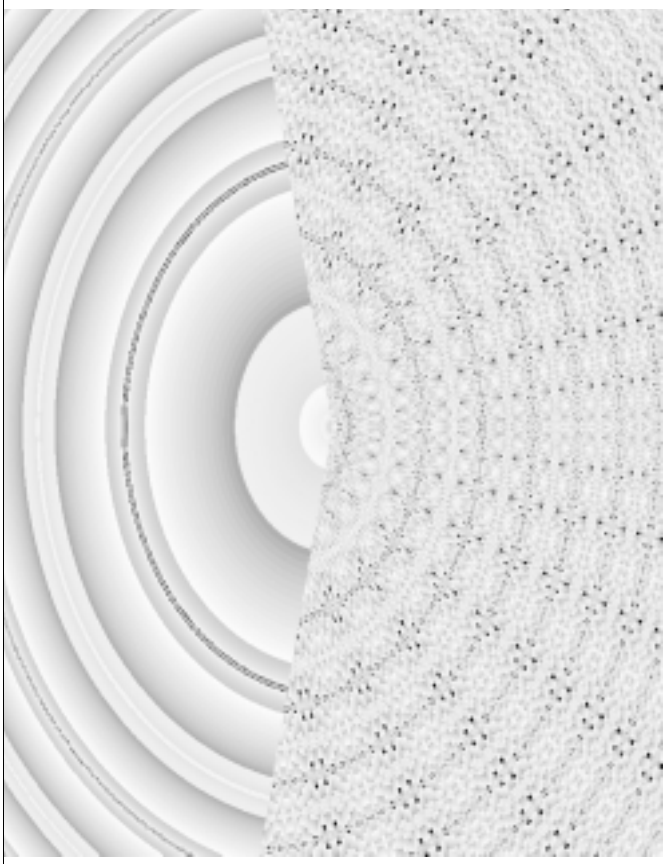
A delegation from New Viron asks Horn to go back to the *Whorl*, to find Silk and bring him to Blue, to restore order. However, apart from any difficulties in finding Silk and persuading him to travel to Blue, even the task of getting back up to the *Whorl* is difficult. Any landers sent from the Whorl automatically return to it, unless they are hopelessly damaged, but it is claimed that there is a lander in the mysterious town of Pajarocu, which is rumored to be on a continent far from new Viron.

In the first Short Sun book, *On Blue's Waters*, the narrator, who calls himself Horn, writes of Horn's strange adventures in his journey, mostly by sea, to Pajarocu. These adventures conspicuously include Horn's infatuation with a beautiful, one-armed siren, Seawrack, who joins him in his boat; his (probable) death in a concealed pit on an island on the way, and subsequent (probable) resurrection; and his developing relationship with the former inhabitants of Blue, the Vanished People or Neighbours, who have many arms and legs and are difficult to see. In Pajarocu, he boards a decrepit lander run by inhumi and men who turn out to be their slaves. It is obvious to Horn that the inhumi plan to take the lander not to the *Whorl*, but to their native Green, where slavery and death await the humans on board.

The narrator, who claims to be Horn, intersperses his first person account of Horn's travels from the Lizard to Pajarocu with the narrator's 'present' situation as Rajan of an Indian-like state at war with a Chinese-like state. It is clear that everyone around the narrator in 'present' time believes that he is Silk, not Horn, though he denies it persistently.

In Green's Jungles has rather less of the jungle than *In Blue's Waters* has of the sea. Back on Blue, the narrator in 'present' time is involved in a power struggle between small Italian-like states. The story of Horn's time on Green comes in small doses, mostly in reported conversation and reported story-telling. In this book, the narrator reports something like astral travel happening to him and those around him, in 'present' time. Their bodies remain where they are

Graphic: Elaine Cochrane, using DJFractals



on Blue, apparently asleep, but their spirits find themselves in other places (on Green, and even on Severian's Urth).

In part of the action reported in *In Green's Jungles* Horn certainly dies, killed in a battle with the inhumi on Green, and his 'spirit' is transferred by the Neighbours to a body whose 'spirit is dying'. It seems obvious to the reader that the body is Silk's, and that Silk's spirit is dying because his beloved Hyacinth is dead. The narrator does not wish to acknowledge this. The reader cannot, of course, be sure of *anything*, because this is Gene Wolfe.

At the beginning of *Return to the Whorl*, in the 'present' time the narrator is returning home to New Viron and Nettle, accompanied by Hide and the inhuma Jahlee whom he has 'adopted', and later by Hide's twin, Hoof, as well. The 'present' narrative is written in first person, as were the whole of the previous two books.

The account of past events in *Return to the Whorl*— mostly the narrator's travels in the *Whorl*, looking for Silk — is written in the third person, interspersed chapter by chapter with 'present' events. (The shift to third person for this narrative is significant; the explanation comes late in the book.) This narrative starts with the narrator's finding himself on the *Whorl*, bleeding, next to the corpse of a middle-aged woman. He travels to and through Viron, often literally as well as figuratively in the dark, dealing with the usual very strange people, who clearly believe him to be Silk.

The narrator maintains to them all, against all probability, that he is in fact Horn (and he does have Horn's memories, though Silk's memories also intrude). The narrator acknowledges that he looks different now; he is taller, his hair is white and he has a long white beard. However, he refuses to deal with the possibility that his body is Silk's, and that he has changed very considerably, in many ways, from Horn the paper-mill owner.

The astral travel in *Return to the Whorl* includes several visits to the young apprentice torturer Severian in the Matachin Tower. Severian as an earnest child is terribly appealing. The narrator is even introduced to Severian's dog Triskele. These are the closest thing to a romp in the book.

Horn, sadly, is not as likeable a character as either the peculiarly gentle torturer Severian, or the virtuous, guilt-ravaged Silk. He is much more of a rough diamond: he hates his son, Sinew, passionately, carefully misinterpreting (the doubtless surly) Sinew's affectionate acts; and he rapes the young siren Seawrack whom the Mother 'gives' him (though there are arguments as to how far the siren's song is to blame for this).

This description has merely scratched the surface of a hugely complex work. I have avoided, for example, any mention of possession by the gods in the *Short Sun* books, but the Whorl list mentioned above is full of speculation as to how far Silk was merged into Pas on the *Whorl*, and therefore how much of Pas is in the narrator.

As the series progresses, Wolfe is writing more and more through indirection. Conversations and stories increasingly make up the bulk of the books. In *Return to the Whorl*, the narrator teases the reader with promises to relate important events, which he never actually gets around to. The reader is forced, even more than in most Wolfe books, to piece together much of the actual story from hints. While this is interesting, it may be less pleasurable as a reading experience than more traditional narrative.

Do not expect a dazzling sense of satisfying closure at the end of *Return to the Whorl*, or even as much closure as there was at the end of the previous two series. The book may well leave the reader more puzzled than sated, and the ending came as at least an initial disappointment, not only to me, but to some on the Whorl list. Few loose ends were tied up, or conflicts resolved. Most people posting on the list report finding that thinking about the book and re-reading it helps; I certainly found the ending more satisfying on my second reading.

Religion alert: the religious symbolism and references which contribute some of the intense textural richness to the *New*, *Long* and *Short Sun* books become even thicker in *Return to the Whorl*. Less religious readers may have felt a little uncomfortable while reading *Urth of the New Sun*, as Severian became a full-blown Christ figure (though he is merely an *echo* of Christ, not an allegory). The narrator of *The Book of the New Sun*, like Silk in *The Book of the Long Sun*, feels the presence of the Outsider. The narrator, in *Return to the Whorl*, actually celebrates 'sacrifice' with bread and wine. On one of these occasions, he says 'This is my body' of the bread, and 'This is my blood' of the wine. Admittedly, the religious solemnity is a little undercut by his companion Olivine's interesting status as an incompletely built chem, and the fact that the literal body and blood that the narrator is referring to is Horn's body, then dead for a few days on Green, but all the same . . .

This is neither a short read nor an easy one. It is, however, profoundly interesting. Few readers could regret the experience.

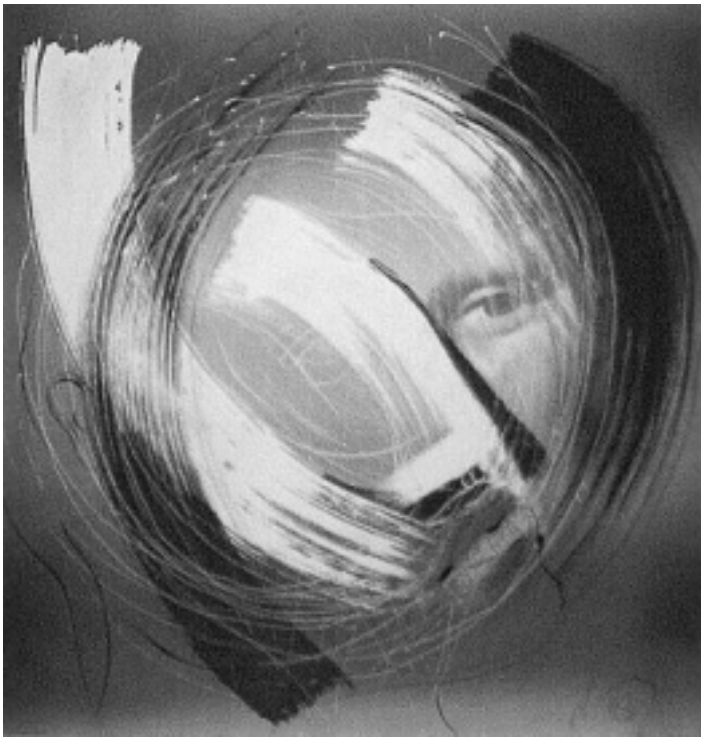
— Jenny Blackford, June 2002

Roslyn Kopel Gross is a writer who lives in Melbourne, Australia with her husband, two children and a dog, works as an emergency teacher, writes book reviews and stories, and is an incorrigible reader. She reads in the car at stop signs, in queues, anywhere she has to wait. She is asked some interesting questions.

Roslyn Kopel Gross

How best can we live?

Discussed:
THE FRESCO
by Sheri Tepper (Gollancz, 2000, 406pp.)
THE TELLING
by Ursula K. le Guin (Gollancz, 2001, 264pp.)



Painting: Guy Browning.

Having heard much about the strong ideological/pedagogical nature of Sheri Tepper's writing, and having been somewhat disappointed in one of Tepper's novels, *Beauty*, I thought there was a reasonable chance I would dislike her latest novel, *The Fresco*. However, not only did I find *The Fresco* to be thought-provoking and exciting intellectually, but I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.

Essentially, ***The Fresco*** is both an alien contact story and a commentary on our life and times. In fact, one of its interesting features is that it is set virtually in the present time, or, more accurately, slightly in our past, as two of its characters appear to be President Clinton and his wife Hilary, although they are never mentioned by name.

When two aliens of the Pistach race arrive on earth they promptly choose an ordinary woman, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, as their liaison with the American government. The aliens, Chiddy and Vess, have the unenviable task of readying Earth to join their galactic federation; in order to do so, Earth needs to become 'neighbourly'. As part of this process, the two aliens, in hilariously simple ways, are able to solve such insurmountable problems as environmental degradation, the oppression of women in Afghanistan (the novel was written before the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath in Afghanistan), the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and our drug and alcohol problems. Of course, they have resources and powers unavailable to us, but Tepper has a way of making clear solutions feel possible, almost obvious.

As in much anthropological/sociological science fiction, description of the alien culture is employed in order to make observations about our own. Tepper describes Pistach society, with the evident intention of being provocative and highlighting the obtuseness of human society. Chiddy explains, 'One should not want to be anything but what one is, because it creates unhappiness. If one cannot dance, one should not be a dancer . . . One should not be sexual if one cannot enjoy both the process and the product, and if there is no place for the product, one should stop being sexual.' In Pistach society, each individual is born 'undifferentiated' until he or she is selected, by suitability, into one of several occupations, which essentially constitute castes. Even 'receptors' (mothers) and 'inceptors' (fathers) are actually selected for this role, and are further altered physically and emotionally in order to be suited at this task. This is contrasted with the undifferentiated nature of humans socially and sexually, and the 'breeding madness' of some of Earth's men, which causes needless social and personal harm. Obviously, Tepper is not suggesting we follow the Pistach example in dealing with sexuality and procreation, but she nevertheless makes some trenchant observations about the harm our approach to sexuality wreaks in human societies. This is critique of a powerful, passionate order.

Although, in describing how the Pistach choose to handle Earth's problems, Tepper is not suggesting actual solutions or policies (the problems are solved using techniques not available to humans, anyway), she is certainly not afraid of pointing out how misguided and useless our

present policies are. Nor is Tepper reluctant to take sides in some other controversial issues in this novel. She is scathing, for instance, about the rigid anti-abortion position, and this is the basis of a very amusing subplot in the novel, in which a group of anti-woman, male 'right-to-lifers' get their comeuppance. Her strong opinions may annoy some readers, but the sharp and funny social commentary she employs to illustrate them are witty and clever.

In a subplot that turns out to be an essential part of the story, the Pistach philosophy is threatened, back on the home world, by political forces attempting to meddle with the Fresco, a giant wall painting depicting the origins of their moral code — their equivalent of religious scripture. If this happens, not only will the fabric of their society be destroyed, but the Pistach will not be able to help Earth, leaving it open for predatory aliens, whose arrival on Earth at the same time as the Pistach forms another subplot . . .

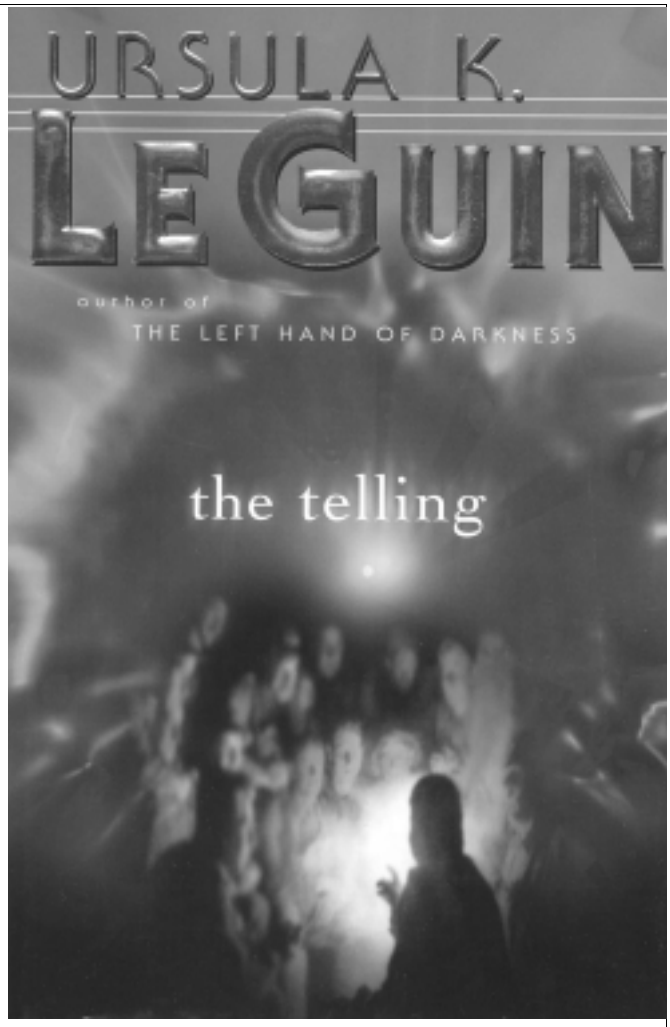
The resolution of this problem leads to some interesting questions. Is something true only because people believe it to be so? Does it matter if belief has been brought about through duplicity? Through this theme, Tepper makes some astute observations about the role of belief in shaping societies and the world views with which they are imbued. Such questions, which run throughout the novel, seem to me to be deeper and more fundamental than Tepper's views on abortion, drugs, homelessness or any other issue.

As in many novels that contain strong sociopolitical opinions, there are some elements that can only be described as stereotypical and clichéd. Benita herself, for instance, is very much the downtrodden woman who comes to realise how strong, intelligent and capable she really is, while her hapless husband Bert is a totally stupid and woefully prejudiced man with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. The fact that Bert refers to Benita as 'moocow' is an example of how painfully caricatured this character is at times.

Fortunately, such clumsy handling is the exception rather than the rule in *The Fresco*, and is balanced by the book's sense of humour and its deft touches, such as the wonderfully apt and ironic ways in which the Pistach do manage to change Earth's society. For example, their methods of dealing with the treatment of women in Afghanistan (again, obviously pre-11 September) is hilarious and ingenious, and one I cannot describe without revealing too much.

I tend to dislike pedagogical and didactic novels on principle, and, it seems to me, that in practice they often end up being highly unreadable as well. Having found *The Fresco* not only intelligent and funny, but highly entertaining and enjoyable, I will now leave it up to readers to decide whether this is a pedagogical novel that actually works, or not really a pedagogical work at all.

Perhaps the Le Guin novel to which *The Fresco* could best be compared is *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). It, too, employs an alien culture in order to examine and comment on human culture, and human sexuality in particular, although, while sexuality and its social expression is pivotal in le Guin's novel, the sexual structure of the Pistach, as part of their whole social division, is only a very small feature in Tepper's book. However, there is also an important difference of purpose: while *The Fresco* posits a society that chooses to structure sexuality in a particular way, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is something of a thought experiment: what would sexuality be like for hermaphrodites? What kind of society and culture would result from that? This difference in approach is evident also when comparing *The Fresco* with *The Telling*, although the latter is hardly interested in sexuality at all, and is a less detailed book than *The Left Hand of Darkness*.



I have read few books by Tepper, but Ursula K. Le Guin is a writer whose work with which I am much more familiar. Having read some lukewarm reviews that found *The Telling* somewhat dry and 'didactic', I was almost surprised to find a thoroughly absorbing and moving novel, showing Le Guin's trademark qualities of clarity of prose, complexity of vision and sheer ability to tell a story.

Like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, ***The Telling*** is set in the universe of Le Guin's Hainish civilisation, in which it is the task of the Ekumen to visit worlds and study the culture of its sentient beings. In this novel, Earth has experienced two revolutions: a fundamentalist one, in which only one religion and one way is recognised, and all others are persecuted; and, later, a revolution of liberation from this system. The viewpoint character, Sutty, has grown up on Earth during the totalitarian religious revolution, and experienced the second revolution of liberation as well. She was trained as an Ekumen Observer and sent to the planet Aka. Sutty's own personality, her earnest search for truth in the complex situation in which she has been placed, and her own deep personal losses not only make her an intriguing character in her own right but make her central to the unfolding of the story. On Aka, a totalitarian revolution both similar and different from the one Sutty had experienced on Earth has occurred: the native philosophy/religion/way of life has been outlawed in favour of a

state-sponsored 'scientific' regime. A rich, multilayered culture has been replaced by a dictated, sterile one. When Sutty is asked to investigate an area of the planet where the old way of life is still maintained, the government, surprisingly, allows her journey to go ahead.

As in many of Le Guin's novels, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the protagonist's journey turns out to be not merely physical, but profoundly psychological and spiritual as well. Through Sutty's eyes — her personal history, her feelings, her intellect — we are gradually shown this philosophy/way of life, which, in many ways, is reminiscent of some other Taoist-like cultures that Le Guin has created, such as that of the Kesh in *Always Coming Home*, though it is not examined in the same detail here. There is the emphasis on balance, on wholeness, on common sense, an idealism rooted in a deep practicality that we often see in Le Guin's created cultures. The term of address, 'yoz', for instance, a word the new regime has attempted to root out, meaning 'fellow person', reveals much about this world-view.

Aka's traditional Taoist-like culture, all but wiped out by its Maoist-like revolution in which books were burned, language rooted out and changed, and culture stunted, is summed up by Sutty as 'the telling' — naming, giving account, or telling stories forms the basis of its whole way of thinking and living. And of course, it is Sutty's own personal story that helps her to grasp these truths, and try to comprehend why such a drastic cultural turnaround has occurred on Aka.

Unlike some reviewers, I feel that the telling of Le Guin's story is economically and masterfully blended with both Sutty's own story and her gradual discovery of 'the telling' itself. As in so much of le Guin's work, the big story cannot be understood without understanding the little story, the experience of each individual. This proves to be true of both Sutty's and the reader's deepening understanding of 'the telling'. Le Guin might have written a much longer work examining the culture and its interaction with Sutty along the lines of *The Left Hand of Darkness*; for myself, the restraint and economy of le Guin's own telling in this novel makes it all the more moving.

Sutty's own personal story illustrates this economy. The deep, inconsolable pain Sutty has experienced at the loss of her lover is neither overdramatised nor ameliorated: it is simply part of Sutty's inner experience, part of her personality that enables her to comprehend on a profound level the truths of 'the telling', leading to Sutty finally being able to tell her own story and become part of the great flow of 'the telling' herself. 'Her throat ached, but it always did. It always did.' The spareness of such sentences carries powerful emotion, and the acceptance of pain as simply part of life implicit in the sentence is reflected in the culture of 'the telling' itself.

Interestingly, there is some similarity between Le Guin's Ekumen, whose reprentatives are pledged to gather information about native cultures, and Tepper's Pistach philosophy, which is summarised thus:

'Where you see an unfruitful tree, make it bear.
'Do as little as possible.
'Do it as painlessly as possible.
'Be responsible for having done it.'

However, while the Pistach are determined to intervene in cultures that are not 'neighbourly' according to what they see as wise and sensible principles, Ekumen Observers endeavour not to interfere in alien cultures, but simply to observe and record. While the Pistach are very active and specific about effecting change on Earth from the beginning, Sutty is able to be the catalyst for bringing about a more balanced attitude on Aka. Ultimately, Le Guin is interested in something more indefinable than implementing ideas or ideals. Indeed, both Tepper and Le Guin have written novels about ideas, and novels that are ideological, in very different ways. Both are concerned with the ideology of culture, with the large moral questions of how best to live, but the titles of the two novels suggests one of the important differences between them. In effect, Le Guin's novel is about 'telling' itself, the vital importance of each individual's story in making up the culture's larger story. On one level, then, it is a 'meta' work, examining the nature of story telling itself. Tepper's novel satirises our own social and cultural mores, and suggests more effective ones, by contrasting them with other possibilities. Its title, *The Fresco*, also refers to a 'telling' of a sort — in this case, a religious story that has informed a whole culture — but Tepper's tale is much less concerned with the individual's role in this process, and is also much more linear in nature, less personal and contemplative, and more specific in suggesting what is wrong with our society and how it can be fixed.

Le Guin has Sutty realise: 'she had learned how to listen. To listen, hear . . . To carry the words away and listen to them.' This quote illustrates the difference, for me, in the styles of these two novels. *The Telling* is about this task of listening and telling, a profoundly personal human task that must take place within the individual as well as in a culture. *The Telling* is self-exploratory and introspective, and offers no easy solutions. It is Taoist in feel, recommending the need for balance between the individual and society, between action and inaction, interference and non-interference. *The Fresco* is bright and glittering, certain of its own opinions, not so much introspective as ingenious and fervent. The *Telling* is more a work *about* ideology than *containing* ideology; it is an examination of belief and dogma and freedom, in depth, with compassion and intricacy. Both novels, one gently and with awareness of complexity and the other with more stridency, but bucketfuls of humour, suggest that that there are wiser ways to live than those of present day Western society. *The Telling* has in subtlety and wisdom what *The Fresco* has in sheer ideas, opinions and inventiveness. I highly recommend them both.

— Roslyn Kopel Gross, June 2002

Rick Kennett was born in 1956, and has lived in Melbourne all his life. His work has been published in magazines and anthologies both in Australia and overseas. In 2001, Jacobyte Books brought out *13*, his collection of ghost stories. He shares his home with a manic whippet, and includes naval history and visiting cemeteries (necrotourism) as interests.

Rick Kennett

Finding Carnacki the Ghost-finder

Discussed:
NO. 472 CHEYNE WALK:
CARNACKI: THE UNTOLD STORIES
by A. F. Kidd and Rick Kennett
(2002; Ash-Tree Press 1-55310-037-9; 236 pp.; hb)

Thinking back, I couldn't remember either the story title or its author.

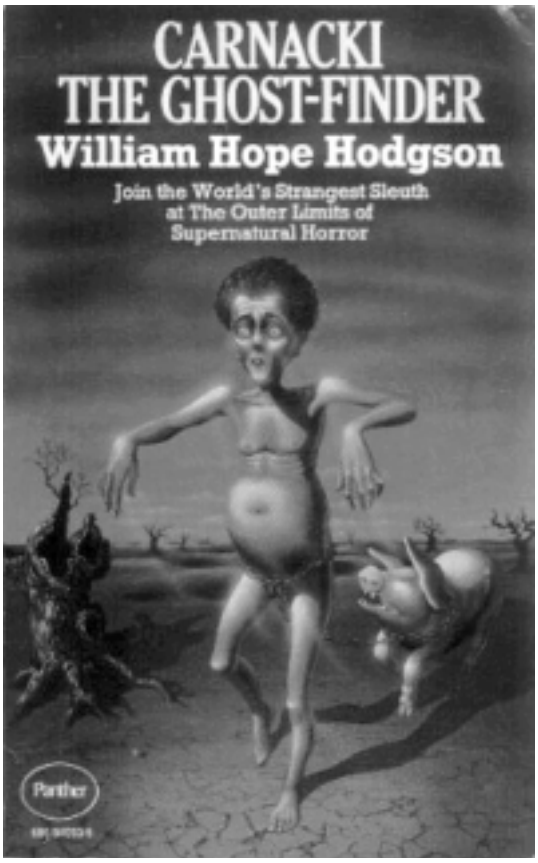
In fact I had only the vaguest memory of having read it in one of those scaled-down-for-juniors Alfred Hitchcock anthologies borrowed from the school library, circa 1969, and had only the scratchiest recollection of what the story had been about. What I did remember — vividly — was the illustration: a man's face pressed against a window, peering in at a stone floor bulging up in two enormous lips.

This exact same first contact with an unremembered author's forgotten story in a vaguely recalled book had already happened a few years earlier on the other side of the world. But it would be more than twenty years before I learned of it.

Move along a couple of years. I'm sitting my final English exams. The paper said to write about your hobby. So I wrote a little essay about ghost hunting. Not that I'd done any, but even at that tender age I'd been reading up on the subject, immersed in the books of British spook chaser Elliot O'Donnell, who I first encountered with *Screaming Skulls* in a ship's library in the middle of the Pacific. So I waxed knowledgeable about dusting floors for footprints and trip wires and thermometers and recording devices and cameras and it occurred to me then that I was not only drawing upon O'Donnell, but also dredging up things read in that long-ago story with the face at the window and the lips in the floor. Obviously it had had something to do with ghost hunting. But I still didn't remember its title or author. (I have sometimes wondered what the examiners made of my essay. At any rate, I passed my English exams.)

Move along to January 1975. I'm on my first ever holiday alone, flying off to Canberra to visit the War Memorial. Canberra is an oddity among the world's cities, purpose built as a national capital rather than developing from early settlements. Parked out in the middle of New South Wales and embedded within its own Australian Capital Territory, Canberra is like a country town with gigantism. And me. I'm a total innocent abroad with no idea of the city's excellent bus system. Despite the heat of that Canberra summer I walk everywhere, equipped with fly repellent and map. I walk down broad avenues and broader main roads, I walk across half the city from my motel to the War Memorial, and around and around in circles because that's the way the city is. Then one morning, hot like all the others, I walk out of the motel and just strike out in a direction I'd not previously taken. Half an hour wandering suburban streets brings me to a small shopping centre. For no particular reason I stroll into a newsagent, where my eye is caught by the lurid red cover of a Panther paperback. The illustration is totally weird: a wiry-haired child sporting the thin legs and swollen belly of a starvation victim, is jogging through a red-lit landscape of cracked earth and stunted trees. Trotting behind him, connected by a length of chain, is a pig. The title reads *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* and the author is William Hope Hodgson.

If the cover alone isn't enough to make me shell out the required $1.20, the clincher's the blurb quoting H. P. Lovecraft: 'The work of William Hope Hodgson is of vast



power in its suggestion of lurking worlds and beings behind the ordinary surface of life', at which point I actually look about the shop, wondering what was lurking beneath the surface of this particular bit of ordinary life.

> William Hope Hodgson [I read on the flyleaf of the book] was born in 1877 in Essex, England. He ran away to sea at age thirteen and spent eight years in the Merchant Marine before settling down to a writing career. He produced several outstanding works of weird fantasy, and is perhaps best remembered for two novels, *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*. He joined the Royal Artillery at the outbreak of the First World War and was killed in action in 1918.

Over the next couple of days I dip into the book, going from one promising title to another: 'The Thing Invisible', 'The Gateway of the Monster', 'The House Among the Laurels', 'The Haunted *Jarvee*', 'The Whistling Room', 'The Horse of the Invisible', 'The Find', 'The Searcher of the End House'. I read the longest story, the novelette 'The Hog', while waiting in Canberra Airport for the plane back to Melbourne, occasionally looking up as RAAF Hercules transports take off for Darwin, devastated the month before by Cyclone Tracey.

Hodgson tells his nine stories within a framing device. The narrator Dodgson and three others, having received 'curt and quaintly worded' cards of invitation from Carnacki, gather at their friend's home at 472 Cheyne Walk in the London suburb of Chelsea. There, after a 'sensible little dinner' that is covered in the first page, if not the first paragraph (Hodgson worked in the Edwardian equivalent of the pulps and knew how to move a story along), they pull up their chairs to the fire, cigars and port are handed round, and Carnacki, puffing on his pipe, tells them about his latest ghost hunt. The classic 'club story' form.

Carnacki the Ghost-Finder is a hybrid of the detective story, the horror tale and the scientific romance. Until then, most ghost-hunter stories had been a mixture of the first two (and sometime scorned by both genres because of it), but now Hodgson was throwing in technology as well. Carnacki turns up to his investigations armed literally with a box of tricks. Although these include the accoutrements of traditional magic and the obligatory book of arcane knowledge — in this case *The Sigsand Manuscript* — there is also the Electric Pentacle, a defence of glass vacuum tubes that glow a pale blue when connected to a battery, thus keeping all but the biggest and hairiest bogles at bay during a vigil in a haunted room. Likewise there's an apparatus that throws out 'repellent vibrations', a modified gramophone that records dreams on graph paper, barriers of concentric rings of glass tubing that glow with a mixture of defensive colours, and something with a passing semblance to a CD WalkMan. (In 1910?)

The novelette 'The Hog', with its Lovecraftian (actually pre-Lovecraftian) theme of the Outside reaching into our world, I had to read more than once to get a hold of what was happening. Others, such as 'The Haunted *Jarvee*' and 'The Searcher of the End House', read like a series of special effects with no real answers at the end, a breed of story that can leave the reader either infuriated or agreeably tantalised. Most disappointing (for me at least) were the stories that had no supernatural aspect, but turned out to be human trickery — a form of story whose only reason for existing appears to be to jump up at the end and shout: 'Tricked ya!' Others had sham hauntings running parallel to the real thing. This can be pure cliché in clumsy hands, but Hodgson pulls it off well. A particularly good example is in the final pages of 'The Horse of the Invisible', where the unmasked trickster and his captors realise that what's coming *clungk clunk* down the dark passage towards them has no human hand behind it.

And then there was 'The Whistling Room' — a story of a uniquely haunted Irish castle, a story that proved to be that long forgotten school-library-Alfred-Hitchcock-anthology story — with its face at the window and huge lips erupting from the floor.

At about the same time, this same recognition of this same story in the same book was being enacted on the other side of the world. But it would be 15 years before I learned of it.

Over the years I sought out other work by William Hope Hodgson. During another hot summer I sat down in front of an electric fan switched to 'high' and read *The House on the Borderland*. Later I read Hodgson's sea-going novels *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* and *The Ghost Pirates* — the latter so intensely written that I could feel the swaying deck beneath me. I never attempted his massive apocalyptic novel *The Night Land* because of its pseudo-eighteenth-century narrative voice. Many who have braved this awkward writing style (while shaking their heads and muttering 'Why? Why? Why?') nevertheless declare Hodgson's genius at the book's concepts and inventions. I'll just take their word for it.

Back in the good old days, it was easier to make a living as a short story writer than as a novelist. It was the heyday of the fiction magazine, each of them hungry for material. Hodgson — amazingly prolific during the 14 years of his writing career — was a regular contributor to the publications of the day: horror, science fiction, straight adventure,

romance and even westerns. Yet, apart from the Carnacki stories, which have been seldom out of print since 1972, there has been only one mass market paperback collection of Hodgson's short fiction: *Masters of Terror: Volume 1: William Hope Hodgson,* Corgi, 1977. (It was just as well Hodgson appeared in volume one, as the publicised *Masters of Terror Volume 2: Joseph Sherridan Le Fanu* never eventuated.) Hodgson's short fiction survives today only in horror anthologies and in limited edition collections from specialty presses such as Donald M. Grant and Arkham House.

One Hodgson book I searched for in vain was a second volume of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder.* I didn't find it because it didn't exist. I'd been tricked into believing there were further stories because of a habit prevalent among detective story writers of the Victorian and Edwardian period: in the middle of a story they would make reference to some other case, the details of which they would subsequently tell you nothing. Some find this annoying (Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories is perhaps the most famous offender), though it does lend a certain veracity or false history to a series of connected stories. So it is with Carnacki: 'It is most extraordinary and different from anything that I have had to do with, though the Buzzing Case was very queer too'; 'Do you remember what I told you about that "Silent Garden" business? Well this room had just the same *malevolent* silence'; 'I gave him some particulars about the Black Veil case, when young Aster died. You remember, he said it was a piece of silly superstition and stayed outside. Poor devil!' We hear nothing more of these cases, nor of the others mentioned in passing: the Noving Fur, the Steeple Monster, the Nodding Door, the Grey Dog, the Dark Light, the Yellow Finger Experiment and 'that case of Harford's where the hand of the child kept materialising within the pentacle and patting the floor: a hideous business'.

It left me hungry.

So one day in 1990, with utter presumption, I started writing a Carnacki story of my own with the title 'The Silent Garden'. It was my first attempt at pastiche, but I'd read and re-read most of the Carnacki stories, and had a liking for Edwardian and Victorian ghost stories to begin with, so I felt sure I could get away with this impersonation. Yet the project was accompanied by a twinge of audaciousness. Here I was picking up an idea discarded by a famous writer of the golden long ago, and daring to borrow his characters and writing style. Who'd a thunk?

Who? The answer was on the other side of the planet, and pure blind chance — a six billion to one shot — was about to lead me straight to it.

There was a time when I thought the answer was August Derleth.

The first edition of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* was published by Eveleigh Nash in 1913. It contained six stories — all that had so far appeared in magazine form. The full nine-story edition did not appear until 1947, when it was reprinted by Mycroft & Morant, the sister imprint of Arkham House, in the United States. Of the new additions, 'The Haunted *Jarvee*', had been submitted by Hodgson's widow, Bessie, to *The Premier Magazine* and appeared in 1929, 11 years after her husband had been annihilated by a German shell while manning a forward observation post near Ypres, Belgium. The other two were 'The Find' and 'The Hog', neither previously published. The sudden appearance of these two, 29 years after their author's death, at times aroused suspicions that they were not genuine Hodgson at all but pastiche perpetrated by August Derleth. Derleth was not only the owner of Arkham House and Mycroft & Morant, but also a well-known writer of weird fiction himself, who often worked in the field of literary pastiche: Lovecraft, Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) and, once, even Sherridan Le Fanu. The perfect suspect.

However, the truth lay in mundane commercial reasons. Though both stories are indeed genuine Hodgson, neither had ever sold despite aggressive marketing by Bessie Hodgson of all her husband's works between the time of his death in 1918 and her own in 1943. There's no mystery as to why this was. 'The Find' is a weak piece involving an ordinary fraud, the story line having strong echoes of Poe's 'The Purloined Letter': that is, hide the sought-after object in plain sight. As such, it jars badly with the other stories of supernatural detection. 'The Hog', though, had a different problem. This is a powerful novelette of intruding cosmic entities — similar to and anticipating by many years the Cthulhu Mythos tales of H. P. Lovecraft. However, at more than 13,000 words, it would've been too big for what most magazines of the time considered the proper length for short fiction.

So I had not been beaten to the punch by August Derleth. But I would soon find I was not alone in my curious notion to fill in the gaps in the Carnacki canon.

In November 1990, I sent my pastiche 'The Silent Garden' to *Dark Dreams,* a small press magazine in the U.K specialising in supernatural fiction. It accepted it a month later. In fact, on the day its acceptance arrived I had started a second Carnacki pastiche, based on a line from 'The House Among the Laurels': 'He had heard of me in connection with the Steeple Monster case.' This was a fateful choice, as it turned out. Because what was about to happen would never have done so had I picked on some other untold case to make a story.

Steeple . . . a church . . . a bell-tower . . . a monster in a bell-tower . . . church bells effecting the monster . . . 'Whoa, wait a minute,' I thought. It'd suddenly hit me that this story line was straying too close to one I'd recently read, 'Immortal, Invisible' by A. F. Kidd (a well-known writer in the British supernatural small press), where a church bell was used to exorcise a spirit. 'Hmmm, don't want to look like I'm plagiarising . . . and come to think of it, what do I really know about bell-towers anyway? A. F. Kidd writes about 'em, is in fact a bell-ringer herself, according to her magazine bios. A collaboration would solve both problems.' So I wrote to her, outlining my difficulties. 'Would you like to help me write this?'

Somewhere behind me, unheard, the shade of William Hope Hodgson chuckled.

A. F. Kidd proved to be the pen name of Chico Kidd. I discovered this when her reply came with the first post of 1991: 'Dear Rick, This has got to be the longest the proverbial long arm of coincidence has ever reached (between Australia and England?). I had my battered copy of "Carnacki" down from the shelf not two days ago to look for a chapter heading quote for the book I'm working on, and it reminded me that *I have some pastiches somewhere*' (my italics). Circumstances had dictated that I write to the only other person on this planet to have written Carnacki pastiche. I should have such luck in lotteries!

When the initial shock had worn off, we set about our project, and after six months of to-ing and fro-ing in the international mails, 'The Steeple Monster' was born. During this correspondence, I found that Chico had like-

wise first discovered Hodgson and his ghost-finding creation in 'The Whistling Room', likewise read in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology borrowed from a library. The 'battered copy of Carnacki' she'd mentioned in her letter was the same Panther edition as mine, bought at about the same time that I'd wandered innocently and unsuspectingly into that Canberra newsagency in January 1975. Chico's stories had been written some years before mine, but without any thoughts of publication, and so left to gather dust in a drawer.

'The Steeple Monster' was sent to the then new Australian SF/F zine *Aurealis*, where it was published in the seventh issue.

Meanwhile back in England, plans were going ahead to publish all our Carnacki stories in booklet form via the Ghost Story Society in Liverpool, of which Chico and I were members, and to which *Dark Dreams* had relinquished its claim to 'The Silent Garden'. 'The Steeple Monster' was accepted as a reprint, and Chico's 'The Darkness' (The Black Veil) and 'Matherson's Inheritance' (The Noving Fur) were brought out of their drawer and dusted off. The resulting 32-page booklet, *472 Cheyne Walk — Carnacki: The Untold Stories*, appeared in 1992, was distributed free to members of the Ghost Story Society and sold to anyone else for about one pound fifty. The small print run quickly disappeared. (Since then I have only seen one copy for sale. Found in England via the ABE web site in late 2001, it was going for around 20 pounds. Within two weeks it had gone.)

Over the years, Chico and I went our separate literary ways while our copies of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* and *472 Cheyne Walk* sat quietly on our shelves. During this time Chico published two more Carnacki stories in the British small press: 'The Witch's Room' (1994) and 'The Case of the Grey Dog' (1995), both of them resurrected manuscripts from the long ago, found too late to go into the booklet. Chico then suggested I try writing a story set in Australia during Carnacki's early days as a sailor. It has been noted that Hodgson based a great deal of the Carnacki character on himself. In 'The Haunted *Jarvée*', for instance, he demonstrates a familiarity with ships and the sea: Hodgson had spent eight years — from 1891 until 1899 — in the Merchant Marine and had visited Australia at least once. Unfortunately I couldn't get the story to work, and it soon bogged down. It was eventually finished in collaboration with Bryce Stevens as the stand-alone gaslight Gothic 'Rookwood', which, like 'The Steeple Monster' collaboration before it, also found a home at *Aurealis*.

Despite this setback, the idea of writing more Carnacki stories wouldn't go away. In addition, the Ghost Story Society, which had moved from England to Canada in the mid nineties, had sprouted a book publishing arm: Ash-Tree Press. Here were distinct possibilities. By coincidence — a word that had been our constant companion throughout our work together — Chico and I got the same idea at the same time: write more stories, put 'em in a book.

Ash Tree was contacted. They indicated interest in the project.

Thus encouraged, we began another collaboration, based on almost the last line of the last Carnacki story Hodgson ever wrote: 'Some evening I want to tell you about

William Hope Hodgson

the tremendous mystery of the Psychic Doorways.' After a page or two, I left Chico to finish 'The Psychic Doorway' under her own name, while I had another crack at Young Carnacki in the Colonies, ending up with a story called 'The Roaring Paddocks'. Having now worked up momentum, Chico penned 'The Sigsand Codex', detailing Carnacki's initial discovery of his oft-quoted book of arcane knowledge; and I sent him out to sea in the service of the Royal Navy to encounter 'The Gnarly Ship', an omen of the coming war, which would engulf the original author of these tales. Finally, in a break with format, Chico allowed one of the visitors to Cheyne Walk to take the floor in 'Arkright's Tale', while I, seizing one of Chico's stand-alone ghost stories by the plot line and inserting Carnacki as the protagonist, reinvented it as the novella 'The Keeper of the Minter Light'.

And so there we were, slumped over our respective keyboards, vaguely aware that coincidence, striking once again, had arranged for our contributions to this 99,000-word collection to be almost exactly equal.

In May 2002, Ash-Tree sent us the final drafts for corrections. At the end of June, *472 Cheyne Walk — Carnacki: the Untold Stories* appeared as a 242-page hardback in a print run of 500 copies.

Such are the consequences of walking into a Canberra newsagency in 1975 and finding a Panther paperback. Such are the consequences of blindly writing to the only other person in the world working along similar lines. Such are the workings of synchronicity and coincidence.

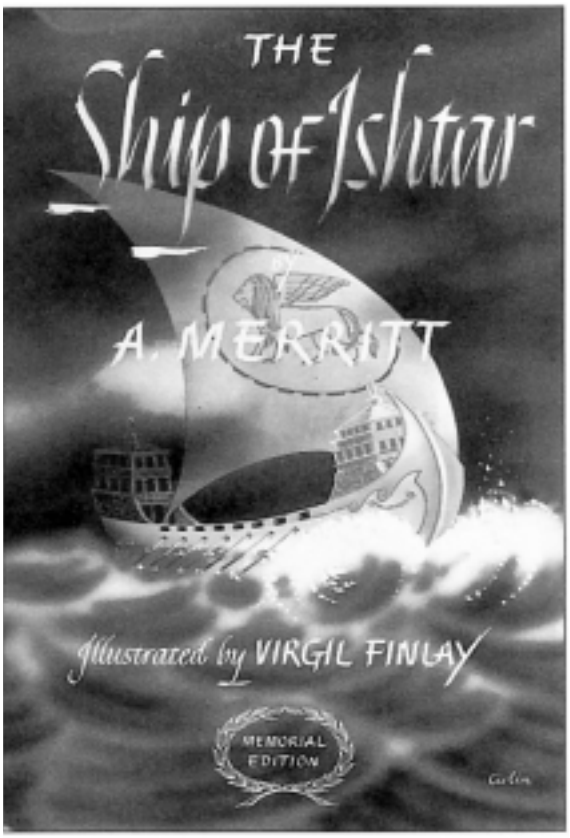
— Rick Kennett, June 2002

Dick Jenssen retired more than ten years ago as Head of Meteorology at the University of Melbourne. Since then he has spent much time reacquainting himself with Melbourne fandom, developing his computer graphics skills, developing programs such as DJFractals, and playing Scrabble against his computer (often winning). At ConVergence in June 2002 he won the award named after him, the Ditmar Award (for Best Fan Artist). The following article appeared first in Michael Waite's *Trial and Air*.

Dick Jenssen

The approach to Abraham Merritt:

A personal journey on 'The Ship of Ishtar'



The cover of the original hardback edition scanned by Michael Waite.

The argument

The approach to Merritt and *The Ship of Ishtar* is best managed, in my opinion, by finding a way through a garden of forking paths — the labyrinth reflecting the contours of my mind — paths which may be variously labelled, even if they conflate.

Quality/enjoyment

I enjoy reading lists, but am not quite so fond of generating my own, if only because the elements therein will shift, disappear or mutate with my well-being on any one day. Nevertheless, I sometimes like to organise those books which have given me great pleasure into two groups — those whose worth resides in their quality, and those of pure enjoyment. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but I know that some novels whose joy is acute would not be regarded, even by me, as gems of prose. I make this distinction primarily because if I consider a novel to be canonical then it must be possible to justify that judgement by rigorous, logical and well-argued critical means. On the other hand, the pleasure given me by a novel that I know is not 'of quality', must be quite, quite personal and so apart from logical criticism — though not, perhaps, entirely. Any discussion, therefore, of the merits of Merritt will inevitably be largely eisegetical and will reflect what is often pityingly referred to as my personal taste.

To digress, in an attempt to clarify my position on the difference between (justifiable) quality and (personal) liking, if I were, at this moment, asked to list the 'best', and the 'most enjoyable', five novels I have read, that list would be:

Best
Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*
Jane Austen: *Emma*
Ford Madox Ford: *The Good Soldier*

Enjoyable
Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Abraham Merritt: *The Ship of Ishtar*
Henry Kuttner: *Fury*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Henryk Sienkiewicz: *Quo Vadis*

All the novels in the first list are, of course, 'enjoyable', but not all in the other list are 'of quality'. What is interesting is that as far as quality is concerned, Proust is head and shoulders and half-torso above any other novel I have read, but Merritt and Kuttner are only a half-head below him in enjoyment.

Milieu

I am sure that my fondness, perhaps I should say my unreasoning love, of *The Ship of Ishtar* stems from the fact that it was the first real adult pulp fantasy I ever read, and read at the highly impressionable age of sixteen. One has many loves in one's life, but first love never dies and remains to colour all subsequent amours, even if a later passion is seen as the one true love.

I read *The Ship of Ishtar* roughly every two years or so, and

each time it enshrouds me in wonder and charm — a wonder and charm which likely reside only partially in the novel itself, and which are almost certainly extraneous to it and which are engendered by the remembered emotions the book releases, as inadvertently as the taste of a petite madelaine dipped in tisane renewed the past for Proust. At sixteen I was beginning to question the world, to want to know more, to find beauty for myself and not only where teachers and adults claimed it resided. And the prose, the images, the characters, the themes, and above all the *romance* of Merritt's novel all fuelled my burgeoning desires. I cannot, even now — and probably never shall — escape that time of transformation.

The prose

It may seem inappropriate, even ludicrous, to claim that Merritt's prose, his style, is worthy of attention, but I find the following, from *The Metal Monster*, to be immensely effective in its evocation of the mystery, the *natural* mystery, of the world around us.

> In this great crucible of life we call the world — in the vaster one we call the universe — the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic, the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder.

Then there is this early passage from *The Ship of Ishtar*:

> And now Kenton became aware of a fragrance stealing about him; a fragrance vague and caressing, wistful and wandering — like entwined souls of flowers that had lost their way. Sweet was that fragrance and alluring; wholly strange and within it something that changed the rhythm of his life to its own alien pulse. He leaned over the block — the scented swirls drew round him, clinging like little hands; scented spirals of fragrance that supplicated, that pleaded — softly, passionately.
>
> Pleaded — for release!
>
> A wave of impatience swept him; he drew himself up. The fragrance was nothing but perfumes mixed with the substance of the block and now sending forth their breath through the heated room. What nonsense was this that he was dreaming? He struck the block sharply with closed hand.
>
> The block answered the blow!
>
> It murmured. The murmuring grew louder. Louder still, with muffled bell tones like muted carillons of jade deep within. They grew stronger, more vibrant. The murmuring ceased; now there were only the high, sweet chimings. Clearer and ever more clear they sounded, drawing closer, ringing up and on through endless tunnels of time.
>
> There was a sharp crackling. It splintered the chimings; shattered and stilled them. The block split. Pulsed from the break a radiance as of rosy pearls, and throbbing in its wake came wave after wave of the fragrance. But no longer questing, no longer wistful nor supplicating.
>
> Jubilant now! Triumphant!

Now to many — even to myself when I attempt a divorcement from the remembrance of my first reading of *The Ship*, and to adopt a more rational attitude — these passages, particularly the latter, are paradigms of the purple prose of the pulps. And yet I wonder. Not purple, nor even violet, but far, far into the largely unseen realms of the remote ultra-violet is this writing, coruscating through endless passages of words and then returning, joyfully, to astonish us. I have always felt that one of the true tests of a unique style is how well it may resist being parodied. As Max Beerbohm wrote, in one of his Jamesian skits, 'We had come whole, so to speak, hog into the heart of the matter'. The heart, in Merritt's case, though, is that I have never come across a successful parody of his *Ishtar* style. A cynic might say that this is because the style is already a self-parody, but I prefer to believe in the uniqueness, and so the legitimacy, of the writing.

The images

I do not know why, but I have always had a fondness for the names of some jewels and semi-precious stones: cinnabar, chrysoprase, malachite, lapis-lazuli — especially lapis-lazuli. (One of my prized possessions is a pair of lapis-lazuli cuff links given me by a good friend who knew of my passion for the stone. Strangely enough, though, it is the *name*, the *word* itself, which I cherish more than the tangible object.) So when Merritt describes the Ship, very early in the novel, as 'a jeweled craft of enchantment . . . made for elfin princesses to sail ensorcelled seas . . . turquoise . . . milky crystal . . . ivory . . . jet . . . ebon . . . peacock iridescence . . . opal . . . gold . . . azure . . .' I was totally lost, ensorcelled, in its enchantment. The Ship, though, as described, falls into two disparate sections — the ebony of Klaneth, and the ivory of Sharane — a trite, but to my mind (already bemused by the jewelled visions conjured by the prose), enormously effective metaphor for the struggle that Kenton will initiate, and resolve, between Good and Evil.

There are also the descriptions of the seaports and cities that the Ship will encounter, the regal chamber at Emakhtila, the tower of Bel, and the final resolution in the Hall of the Gods.

Perhaps the evocative strength of these images resides more in my mind and imagination than on the pages of the novel, but their potential must be in the words, otherwise their entelechy, even if largely of my own doing, would not be so powerful. Which raises the question, posed often by Borges, of how involved is the *reader* in the writing of a novel, how much does the *reader* contribute, how different is the novel for different *readers*?

The characters

The protagonists are largely split into two ciphers — the evil of Klaneth, the priest of Nergal, and the good of Sharane, priestess of Ishtar. The dwarf Gigi, and the Viking Sigurd, represent the 'good' qualities of friendship, loyalty, bravery and trust, though Gigi has a disturbing underside. Kenton, however, can move from ebony deck to ivory deck on the Ship, and the implication is that he embodies both good and evil — an implication strengthened when the priest of Bel is revealed to be an avatar of Kenton himself, but with the frailities, the timidity, the vague cowardice largely absent from Kenton's personality.

The most memorable character is the King of Emakhtila, again a yin-yang symbol concatenating the good and evil aspects of humanity.

> The lord of Emakhtila, king of the two deaths, sat legs crooked on a high divan. He was very like Old King Cole

of the nursery rhyme, even to that monarch's rubicund jollity, his apple round, pippin red cheeks. Merriment shone in his somewhat watery blue eyes. He wore one loose robe of scarlet. His long, white beard, stained here and there with drops of red and purple and yellow wine, wagged roguishly.

Should the king be pleased with anyone, he grants them the *Right-Hand Death* — a dwarf, hideous to look at, whose form and visage fills the viewer with the knowledge that life is pain and evil, and that death is good and surcease of pain, a knowledge inducing such revulsion for life that to throw oneself in an instant upon the poniard which the dwarf holds, and so to die, is joy indeed. For those who displease the King, he grants them the *Left-Hand Death* — a beautiful maiden holding a razor-sharp rake. To gaze on her, the victim knows that life is good and to be held at all costs, so that when she lovingly caresses their body with her implement and the flesh flays, they still, in their agony, clutch existence. For those who incur his mild wrath, dozens of archers in niches engirdling the throne-room will dispense swift death.

The King appears jovial and affectionate, yet spews death with abandon. His ambiguous character is given more substance when Kenton, under threat of being given to Klaneth and death, finishes a verse which the drunken King is quoting.

'What!' the king cried. 'You know Maldronah! You —'

Old King Cole again, he shook with laughter.

'Go on!' he ordered. Kenton felt the bulk of Klaneth beside him tremble with wrath, impatience. And Kenton laughed, too — meeting the twinkling eyes with eyes as merry; and as the King of the Two Deaths beat time with cup and flagon he finished Maldronah's verse with its curious jigging lilt entangled in slow measure of marche funerale:

Yet it pleases to play with the snare,
To skirt the pit, and the peril dare,
And lightly the gains to spend;
There's a door that has opened, he said,
A space where ye may tread — But the things ye have
seen and the things ye have done,
What are these things when the race is run
And ye pause at the farthest door?
As though they never had been, he said — Utterly
passed as the pulse of the dead!
Then tread on lightly with nothing to mourn!
Shall he who has nothing fear for the score?
Ah — better be dead than alive, he said — But best is
ne'er to be born!

Themes

The King and his poem lies at the centre of a *major concern* of the novel — the antagonism between Life and Death, Good and Evil, Beauty and Ugliness — in short, between the antinomies of existence.

But they also highlight a minor, almost invisible motif — the importance of the seemingly trivial. Poetry is not regarded by many as serving any utilitarian purpose whatsoever. Even the beauty of a poem is unappreciated by the majority of humans, and those who can perceive it, like as not, would find it difficult to give an example of its usefulness. But Merritt does. Knowing the imagined poet, Maldronah, and his poetry, saves Kenton's life, frees him from Klaneth, befriends him to the King, and, ultimately, allows him to defeat Klaneth and find happiness with Sharane.

This theme, that what may seem to be nugatory often has a significance overlooked by the majority, surfaces again when one realises that Kenton is, in our world, an archaeologist, a researcher into forgotten languages, vanished worlds, lost empires and peoples, an almost supreme paradigm of the dabbler in uselessness and irrelevancy. And yet it is this exemplar of the seemingly superficial who brings peace and resolution to an entire world — admittedly a fantastical world divorced from ours, but a world, a universe, nonetheless.

But the poem holds a very personal charm for me in its last line. At sixteen I read not only Merritt, but Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Camus says that the only true philosophical problem is the question of suicide. And there — in a *pulp* novel, in a line of *poetry* — is the expression of the same thought: 'better be dead than alive'. The next words, however, sent a shiver up my spine: 'But best is ne'er to be born!' Here non-existence was preferable to being. If one never was, then the pain of existence, the struggle to understand, to cope, to fit in, also would never be. But the paradox inherent in those words — and this is what caused the frisson of dubiety — is that only one who existed could utter them. For some reason I find myself attracted to paradoxes like this.

There are other themes — the fairly stock ones of a bonding against disasters, struggle against the oppressors, the belief in rectitude, the quest to rescue beauty . . . — but, stock though they may be, they are invested by Merritt with a magic of their own. The death of Zubran, for example, who sacrifices himself so that his friends may escape the tower of Bel:

'A clean death!' smiled the Persian. 'At the last — like all men — I go back to the — gods of my fathers! A clean death! O Fire Immortal — take me!'

As though in answer to that prayer a high and fragrant flame shot up beside him. It shot up, hovered, then bent over the Persian. The tip of the flame broadened. It became a cup of fire filled with a wine of flames!

And into that flaming cup the Persian dipped his face; drank of its wine of fire; breathed in its fire as though it had been incense!

His head fell back, unmarred; the dead face smiling. His head dropped upon the soft breast of the dancer.

The flames made a canopy over them; they licked them with their little, clean, red tongues; ate them with their clean, crimson teeth!

Romance

And finally there is the *romance* of the novel. I am an unashamed romantic, I need romance, I crave it.

The Ship of Ishtar may be over the top, it may be ludicrous to some, perhaps to many, but the journey of Kenton, his love for Sharane, their defiance of the Gods, and their ultimate triumph, make Merritt's novel a perennial favourite of mine. And my most often read book. But my delight in each new reading must inevitably remain personal, for I know that this novel is not 'of quality', but only of 'pleasure' — and pleasure is idiosyncratic, a concomitant of each unique personality, and apart from logic. And as far as my choices are concerned, for those who know me are and are so fond of telling me, they are apparently divorced from any reality whatsoever.

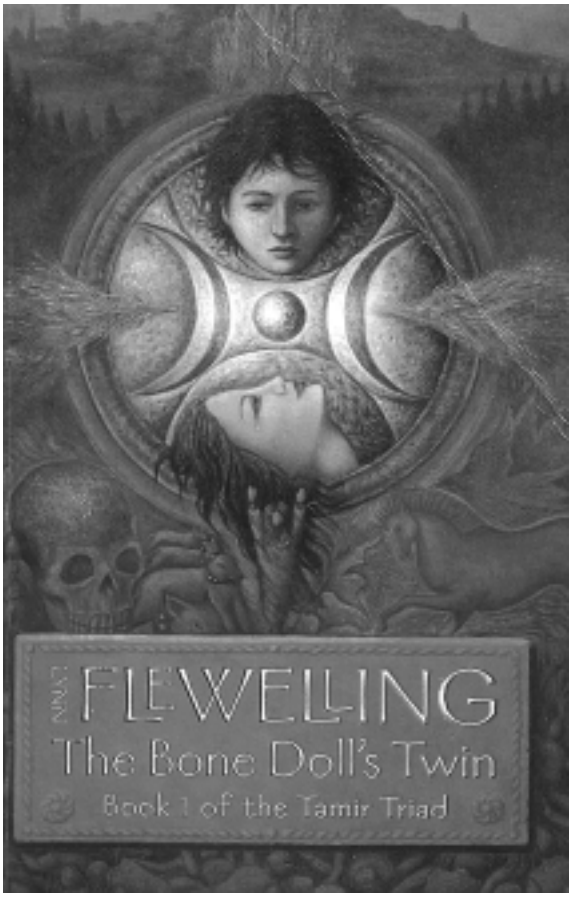
— Dick Jenssen, September 2002

Roslyn Kopel Gross

Generic or not?

Discussed:
THE BONE DOLL'S TWIN (Book 1 of the Tamir Triad)
by Lynn Flewelling (HarperCollins Voyager, 2001, 438 pp.)
RHAPSODY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Tor, 1999, 656 pp.)
PROPHECY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Gollancz, 2001, 465 pp.)
DESTINY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Gollancz, 2002, 558pp.)
THE MAGICIANS' GUILD (The Black Magician Trilogy: Book 1)
by Trudi Canavan (HarperCollins Voyager, 2001, 520 pp).

For some time now, I have been fond of saying that I don't like 'generic' fantasy. What I mean by 'generic' is fantasy that is usually set in a medieval-type world and is often epic in scale, covering many volumes (often the dreaded trilogy), and containing stock, often-used characters and ingredients, such as magicians or wizards, priests, demons, witches, singers, oracles, prophecies and the like. Often, as in Tolkien, the plot is based on a cosmic battle between good and evil. I tend to avoid endless series that seem to be no more than clones of Tolkien and other classical epic fantasies. However, it would be a huge mistake to lump all books that use some of the conventions of generic fantasy in the same basket. The books in this review all appear to be nothing but common-garden-variety generic fantasy, until one takes a closer look.



Had I not known of Lynn Flewelling and enjoyed her previous books, I might well have avoided ***The Bone Doll's Twin***, because it gives every outward sign of being a generic medieval-type fantasy. The first book in a trilogy, there is the ever-present map and a page outlining the seasons of its world, and a cursory glance through the book reveals the presence of kings and queens, dukes, priests and wizards.

Flewelling's previous books, a loose trilogy called the 'Nightrunner' series, consist of *Luck in the Shadows*, *Stalking Darkness* and *Traitor's Moon*. These books are far from your average generic fantasy. They are not a real trilogy at all, for a start, but three stand-alone books set in the same world with the same characters. Apart from containing a detailed and interesting world and wonderful characters, the series happens to feature a gay love story that seems to have appealed to readers who aren't gay. There are also very dark undertones to the book's magic that give an added depth to a series that would otherwise be light reading.

The Bone Doll's Twin is far from being the generic fantasy it appears to be. The dark feel of the earlier books has been enriched and taken much further here; it would be accurate to describe *The Bone Doll's Twin* as a dark fantasy. The characters are vivid people whose interests we immediately take to heart. In fact, this book is not really epic fantasy. To a large extent, it is an account of the inner life of its child protagonist, Tobin, and also the tale of Tobin's relationship with his father and with his friend, Ki. In the same world in which the 'Nightrunner' books take place, but centuries earlier, Skala has been ruled by queens, rather than kings, until a tyrant takes matters until his own hands. Then, to the rightful succession, twins are born, a girl and a boy. To say much more than this would be to give away far too much. The novel becomes an exploration of gender and identity, as well as a story about characters the reader comes to care about very much. The novel, only Book One in the trilogy, ends on a heart-wringing and emotion-filled cliffhanger.

The Bone Doll's Twin is written with maturity and confidence, and with elegance and insight. Yes, there is a witch

in it; but the witch is a fully developed character who, at some cost to herself, attempts to protect the lives of characters the reader cares about. There is a king, and an oracle, and a duke, and of course, magic, but in this book, these are very far from the stereotypes in some fantasy. Tobin's situation (about which he himself knows little until the very end) seems utterly unique, and it is this that sets the novel apart from generic fantasy: it stretches the bounds of imagination, rather than simply repeating the clichés of a genre. If generic fantasy uses stock characters and themes in a fairly predictable manner, *The Bone Doll's Twin* cannot be considered generic fantasy, even though it may appear so on the surface. Because the book's concern is centred within Tobin's soul, his inner life, the ubiquitous good-versus-evil theme is neither obvious nor trite. The darkness in the book comes not from some cosmic evil but from magic gone wrong as a result of human error and human pain, which we examine 'close up and personal'. Even if one considers the novel to be in the same basic tradition as generic fantasy, it far transcends the bounds of that subgenre. While it may not be quite in the same league (though in my opinion, Flewelling is rapidly getting close), it is reminiscent of Guy Gavriel Kay's 'Fionavar' books in its use of generic fantasy forms to do so much more and go so much deeper than standard generic fantasy does.

When Elizabeth Haydon's ***Rhapsody*** was published in 1999, it was marketed as the new masterpiece to hit fantasy shelves. Reading reviews and opinions from various mailing lists on the Internet, I noticed that people were heavily divided about *Rhapsody*; as that old cliché says, they either loved or hated it. On the one hand, some claimed that it was poorly written, the worst kind of rehashed fantasy with a silly plot and stock characters; on the other, and according to the blurb, that it is a 'landmark fantasy epic'.

On this scale of opinion, although I don't regard the series as a radical departure in the epic fantasy field, I veer more towards the second end of the scale. I think that this series shows that there is still room in the apparently tired epic fantasy field for a well-written, absorbing, intelligent book. While it may not be achieving something really different, as Guy Gavriel Kay did in the same field with his 'Fionavar' books, and, as I feel Flewelling is getting close to doing in *The Bone Doll's Twin*, *Rhapsody*, *Prophecy* and *Destiny* are a huge cut above most other books marketed as epic/saga fantasy.

In the first book, the three central characters, Rhapsody, Achmed and Grunthor, find themselves fleeing beneath the earth on an enormous tree root. In this way, they traverse not only half the earth, but many centuries as well. This part of the story has deeply mythological undertones; the gigantic root of the Tree on which they journey is reminiscent of the World Trees of various mythologies. During this journey, Rhapsody undergoes a transformation that may lead some readers to find her irritating and difficult to relate to as a character, but which is essential to the developing plot. In the second book, ***Prophecy***, the main characters must continue to discover what is really going on in their new home. It seems that one of the evil beings, known as the F'dor, whom the characters were fleeing in the old world, has found a way to pass into this world centuries later, and is disguised as a person the companions know. The story broadens to become both a love story and a tale of cosmic proportions, as the reader discovers that it is up to the three friends to save the world from the F'dor. In the final volume, ***Destiny***, far too many words are taken up in gratuitous subplots, but the story does come together in a satisfying way.

From the beginning, Haydon has employed an intriguing and original framing device, and it is this device that brings a sharp and original twist to the ending, a twist that is far more interesting than the otherwise rather predictable plot developments.

The trilogy is an odd mixture of the original and the hackneyed. On the one hand, the patchwork of races, nations and religions has a certain breadth of vision, and is certainly presented with precise thoroughness. On the other, Haydon presents what appears to be a derivative mishmash of patriarchal and nature religions; the Lirin races seem very much like elves, with a nature religion and culture; the religions of humans seems like a mixture of several Western faiths; the Bolg are monsters; and the F'dor are evil demons. There is the obligatory magical sword, called Daystar Clarion, and of course the whole story is based on the good-versus-evil model. Rhapsody and another character also become involved in a love relationship that becomes an important part of the book; readers who dislike romance may find this tiresome. Others may consider the romantic angle unusual and refreshing in the epic fantasy context; indeed, Haydon manages to keep the lovers apart in a particularly creative way, then bring them together satisfactorily by the end of the trilogy.

I feel similarly ambivalent about the characterisation. On the one hand, it may seem — and some critics have definitely taken this view — that the characters are nothing more than the stereotypes of generic fantasy. For instance, Rhapsody is a 'Namer' and 'Singer'. How many more Namers and Singers can the genre support, you might well wonder? But because the whole system of magic Rhapsody has been taught is dependent on music and on names, and because of the vivid way this is portrayed, as well as the strong characterisation of Rhapsody herself, she is actually far from being a stock character. (The importance of music in the trilogy is emphasied by the fact that each chapter has been given a musically related title.)

Rhapsody is a strong woman, without being yet another 'feisty' heroine. Not that I have anything against feisty women; the trouble is that they have become something of a cliché in fantasy literature. In fact, the definition of what constitutes 'feistiness' has itself been stereotyped. Rhapsody is determined and strongminded, but an idealist and a 'do-gooder', whom some readers may find insufferably perfect. Grunthor, as another example, appears to be the clichéd giant with a soft heart, and Achmed is the tough guy, an assassin, with a secret soft spot for Rhapsody. To some extent, these two evoke stock emotions; but what ultimately saves these characters from being nothing but stereotypes is the verve with which they are written. Both come alive as more than the clichéd characters they might be if written by a lesser writer. For instance, the trilogy is peppered by the many very funny songs Grunthor sings, which reflect both his fierceness and sense of humour.

There are some marked awkwardnesses in the writing of this trilogy. For example, sometimes Haydon has Rhapsody make inappropriately modern utterances, such as, 'I guess I'm not cut out for diplomacy or its facilitation'. This feels extraordinarily out of place in this book. On occasion the writing descends to banality, as in, 'I command you, slow your pace and egress carefully' and 'He focused his gaze on his glowing wife'. Some of the names of people and places are confusingly similar (as well as relentlessly Celtic): Gwylliam, Gwydion and Gwynwood, for instance, and

Anwyn and Anborn. There is little question in my mind that the trilogy is far too wordy, with too many unnecessary subplots and not a few 'info-dumps'. And, while their history, recounted at length, is intricate and fascinating, the F'dor, elemental forces of cosmic evil through the centuries, do present a stereotypical picture of an evil that must be defeated. In these respects, the trilogy is indeed predictably epic, generic fantasy.

However uncomplicated evil might appear to be, the same cannot be said of the 'good' characters or their decisions; and the verve and vigour of the writing, which overpowers the occasional triteness, also prevents an easy dismissal of the trilogy as 'just another generic fantasy'.

By a new Australian writer, Trudi Canavan, ***The Magicians' Guild*** is, like Flewelling's novel, the first in a projected trilogy. Although not seeming (so far) to be epic fantasy, this book has many outward features common to generic fantasy. It has a series of maps at the beginning of the book: not only a map of the land of Kyralia, but maps of the city of Imardin, and of the grounds of the Magicians' Guild of Kyralia, both central to the action that takes place. At the end of the book there is 'Lord Dannyl's guide to slum slang' and a Glossary, which defines various terms and vocabulary used in the book, including the names of plants and animals in this world. What sets these features apart from the usual generic fare is that the maps have been beautifully rendered and the other information thoroughly and charmingly presented. The slum guide, in particular, is a fascinating and unusual touch that I found beguiling.

The world depicted in the novel is not exotic, and thus far includes no non-human inhabitants. It is, however, a detailed and carefully thought-out world. Half of the novel takes place in the slums and secret tunnels of the city of Imardin, where the Thieves have their own gangs and laws, and in which a young slum girl, Sonea, is suddenly found to have the powers of an untrained Magician. Magical talent is almost exclusively in the hands of the upper class in this world. Believing the Magician's Guild would harm, or at the very least, never accept her, she tries to hide from them in the tunnels of the Thieves, with the help of her friend Ceri. I found this part of the book to be the less interesting, concerned as it is with the mechanics of escape and politics among the Thieves and Magicians respectively. However, the slang invented for the slums, and the vocabulary used for this world in general, do help to bring the first part of the book alive.

I did find the second part, in which Sonea finds herself in the school of the Magician's Guild, and in which the nature of magic and the individual personalities of some of the Magicians are explored, to be more intriguing. Magic is presented not as a vague talent; the school consists of several magical disciplines, each requiring specific skills and disciplines. Because she is untrained, what Sonea must learn is control, but she must decide whether to study to become a Magician or return to Imardin.

There is the requisite villain, Fergun, a Magician who is trying to manipulate Sonea to attain power; and it appears, also, that a head Magician may be a traitor. It does seem, so far, to follow a fairly predicatable good-versus-evil pattern. These features do add to the generic feel of the book, though Fergun's character and motives are well presented, as are other characters, such as Ceri, and Dannyl, the Magician who befriends Sonea, as well as Sonea herself, who is satisfyingly complex and interesting. By the end of the book, the intricacies of magic, the development of Sonea and the prospect of larger, intriguing issues about to open up in the second volume left me not only anticipating the next instalment but prepared to consider the first volume a success.

It can be only too easy and tempting to make sweeping statements about the state of genre writing today. It seems to me that all is not necessarily the way it appears. I am aware that the books reviewed here are only a tiny sample of what is available in the bookshops, and that, while there is so much out there that I would not consider wasting my time on, there are also books, not touched on in this review, that would be considered superior generic fantasy. By most accounts, for instance, George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' trilogy seems to be original and wonderfully plotted, with vivid characters and tight writing, and these books must certainly come under the general category of epic generic fantasy. Of the books reviewed here, it seems to me that *The Bone Doll's Twin* (and, I hope, the second and third volumes) is truly original, and either transcends the boundaries of generic fantasy, or else can be said to use of the themes of generic fantasy in exciting, different ways; Elizabeth Haydon's trilogy sits firmly in the realm of epic, generic fantasy, but she writes so skilfully and with enough originality as to make it excellent generic fantasy; and Trudi Canavan's *The Magician's Guild*, while clearly employing generic fantasy elements in less original ways than the other two writers, also promises to be the first book of a competently written, intriguing generic fantasy. None of the other novels comes close to the imaginative and emotional power of *The Bone Doll's Twin*, which, whether or not it can be classified as generic, undoubtedly uses several of the conventions of generic fantasy. It certainly looks as though solid, entertaining epic/generic fantasy is still being written. What these books show is that there is still life left, and plenty of potential, in this much-maligned form of fantasy writing. Sometimes you really just can't tell a book by its cover.

— Roslyn Kopel Gross, August 2002

David Langford is a figure so covered in glory (when he isn't covered in Hugo Awards, which pile up around his house) that he scarcely needs an introduction. He somehow makes a living as a freelance writer, and also contributes greatly to fandom. Editor of SF fandom's newszine, the monthly *Ansible* (which wins him many of those Hugo Awards), he writes delightful and knowledgeable articles for fanzines and pre- and after-dinner speeches, and runs a computer software firm in partnership with Chris Priest. David and his wife Hazel live in a large book-filled house in Reading, England.

David Langford

The genial Mr White

[***Alien Emergencies*** is the second US Tor/Orb omnibus of James White's 'Sector General' stories, edited by Teresa Nielsen Hayden and published in April 2002. It comprises two collections, *Ambulance Ship* (1979/1980) and *Sector General* (1983), and one novel, *Star Healer* (1985). This is the introduction.]

Sector Twelve General Hospital is one of the most charming and intelligently wish-fulfilling conceptions in science fiction, and its Irish creator James White — tall, bespectacled, balding, soft-spoken and eternally self-deprecating — was himself something of a charmer. Not merely a nice man, he was the cause of niceness in others. No one in the SF community could ever dream of being horrid to James.

While others joined literary or fan factions and entangled themselves in heated feuding, James could be found at British SF conventions solemnly inducting qualified attendees — those who like himself were several inches over six feet — into the SOPOAH or Society Of Persons Of Average Height. A luckily short-sighted few had the further credentials required for admission to the inner circle, the SOPOAH (WG) (With Glasses). Naturally James continued to treat the inner circle, the outer circle and the great unwashed masses beyond with identical benevolence, which somehow lent all those other embattled in-groups the same aura of gentle silliness.

James was and is much loved as a science fiction writer. I fondly remember scouring British bookshops in the 1960s for instalments of his Sector General space-hospital saga, which in those days was appearing in maddeningly brief instalments in E. John Carnell's original anthology *New Writings in SF*, later edited by Kenneth Bulmer. The last to feature there was the first story in this volume, 'Spacebird', from Bulmer's *New Writings in SF 22*, published in 1973. British fans of Sector General had a long wait for this xenobiological extravaganza's inclusion in the 1980 *Ambulance Ship*. Americans had to wait longer still — until now, in fact — since the 1979 US version of *Ambulance Ship* omitted 'Spacebird'.

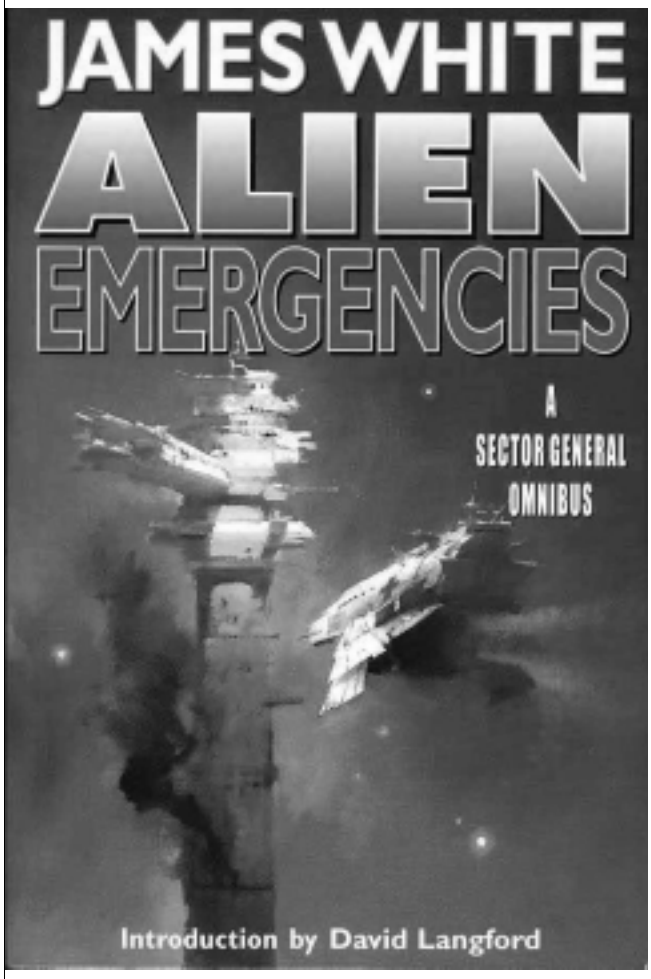
As every SF reader should know, Sector Twelve General Hospital is a huge interstellar construction built in a spirit of glorious idealism by many cooperating galactic races, with its 384 levels equipped to simulate the home environment of any conceivable alien patient. Conceivable, that is, to the builders' imaginations. From the outset James gleefully harassed his Sector General medics with a steady stream of inconceivables and seeming-impossibles, ranging in size from an intelligent virus and spacefaring barnacles, via beasties without hearts who must keep rolling forever to prevent their circulation from halting, and a levitating brontosaur called Emily, to 'macro' life-forms, such as the miles-long Midgard Serpent which is discovered scattered through space in dismantled form and must be painstakingly reassembled, or the continent-sized inhabitant of planet Meatball, whose treatment in *Major Operation* requires not so much surgery as military action.

In short, Sector General is the definitive medical SF series. Its precursors include L. Ron Hubbard's moderately dire *Ole Doc Methuselah* stories and the competent hackwork of Murray Leinster's Med Service tales. It may perhaps have helped inspire Piers Anthony's amusing exploits of an interstellar dentist in *Prostho Plus*. Nothing else in the genre is at all comparable.

To call these stories' repeated pattern of medical mystery and elucidation a formula is far from being a put-down. As with detective fiction, the basic pattern offers scope for endless variations limited only by ingenuity and narrative sleight, with James's lifelong fascination with medical techniques clearly visible throughout. There's even room in Sector General for G. K. Chesterton's favourite mystery trope of the Happy Surprise, whereby suitable illumination causes sinister and misleading clues to reverse themselves or cancel out, revealing that, despite all appearances, there has been no crime (or serious threat to health) at all.

Several well-loved props run through the sequence. The most famous is the species classification system, which sums up a creature's shape and physiology in four terse letters. Theoretically this coding can extend to many further 'decimal places', but the first four suffice for practical and narrative purposes. Earth-humans are DBDG, and 'similar' warm-blooded oxygen-breathers have similar codes, with teddy-bear Nidians and Orligians also being DBDG, while the furry, caterpillar-shaped Kelgians are DBLF. Weirder creatures include chlorine-breathing PVSJs and psi-talented V-codes. One buried joke concerns the unfortunate Gogleskan species of *Star Healer*, classification FOKT, who are almost unable to prevent themselves from forming mindlessly destructive mobs. This, by intention, greatly tickled the local SF fan group in the traditionally tough city of Glasgow, Scotland: the Friends Of Kilgore Trout.

The classification scheme began as homage to E. E. 'Doc' Smith's perhaps unworkably human-centred version from *Grey Lensman* and *Children of the Lens*, in which true *Homo Sapiens* is classed AAAAAA, while the most alien monstrosities imaginable — the horrid Ploorans in their cryogenic winter metamorphosis — register as 'straight Z's



to ten or twelve places'. It is a happy coincidence that James's firstever published words, in his and Walt Willis's fanzine *Slant 4*, were firmly inserted into a contribution that was being horrid to Doc Smith: '[These opinions of the great Smith are not those of the typesetter, J. White.]'

Nearly half a century later he was honoured with the 1998 Skylark Award, presented by the New England SF Association in memory of Doc Smith and his Lensmen, and so consisting of an absolutely enormous magnifying lens. James found this practical as well as decorative, since by then his sight was failing to the stage where he needed such a glass to read even large type on the computer screen.

Besides demoting humans from AAAAAA to the modest DBDG, James distanced himself in other little ways from the traditional SF anthropocentrism of an era when John W. Campbell still stalked the earth. (It should be remembered that the first Sector General story appeared in 1957.) Smart and sympathetic aliens are foregrounded from the very beginning. Virtually all the hospital's top medical consultants, the eccentric Diagnosticians, are nonhuman. When a roving ambulance ship is introduced, it's named *Rhabwar* after a great doctor from the history of its Tralthan FGLI builders. When *Rhabwar*'s first mission appears to be a simple rescue of boring old humans and someone remarks, 'There will be no juicy extra-terrestrial cases on *this* trip', he is crushingly answered by a Kelgian nurse: 'To us, Earth-human DBDG's *are* juicy extra-terrestrials.' In three later novels, beginning with *Code Blue — Emergency* (1987), the viewpoint characters are aliens who are not only as likeable as the human medics but every bit as accident prone. Real equality includes the equal right to make blazing mistakes.

Another notable and fruitful series prop is Sector General's system of Educator tapes, which help prepare doctors for other-species surgery by uploading the skills of an expert from the relevant world. The dark side of this piece of narrative convenience is that a complete and often cantankerous e-t personality is loose in your head, objecting to your vile choice of food (a regular Sector General canteen sight is a Senior Physician eating 'visually noncontroversial' sandwiches of uncertain content, with his eyes tight shut) and possibly imposing strange glandular urges. In the short 'Countercharm', series hero Senior Physician Conway uses a tape recorded from a randy Melfan ELNT, and finds himself distracted from vital operations by an uncontrollable case of the hots for his gorgeous Melfan pupil — who happens to be a giant crab.

The regular human cast includes wisecracking, problem-solving Conway (who for ages appeared to have no first name — very late in the series it's revealed to be Peter); his busty girlfriend and eventual wife Nurse (later Pathologist) Murchison, whose forename I have yet to detect; and the irascible Chief Psychologist O'Mara, wielder of deadly sarcasm and — at his worst — a feared politeness. Reasons for O'Mara's peculiarly blunt, abrasive nature and multi-species insight lie at the heart of the penultimate Sector General novel, the elegiac *Mind Changer*, which allows us inside this thorny character's head for only the second time in the entire sequence.

Meanwhile Conway's closest friend is the universally popular Dr Prilicla, a fragile GLNO e-t who resembles a giant and beautiful dragonfly, carries diplomacy to the point of fibbing since its empathic talent makes it cringe from hostile emotion, and likes to weave its canteen spaghetti into an edible cable to be chomped while hovering in mid-air. Sector General's staff and wards contain countless further aliens, each with their own quirky charm — engaging stock characters in a comedy of humours shaped by exotic racial traits. It's a running joke that the hottest hospital gossip concerns sexual antics in the methane level, whose ethereal, crystalline SNLU patients live at 120–140 degrees below zero.

Thus the sequence offers copious fun and a warm feeling of extended community in addition to its xenobiological cleverness. 'Almost wilfully upbeat,' wrote John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of SF*. What it also contains — showing clearly through transparent storytelling that puts on no literary airs — is the compassion and rare anger of a good man. From that first novella in 1957 to *Double Contact* 42 years later, it is repeatedly stressed that xenophobia in all its forms is a loathsome disease requiring salutary treatment. The Monitor Corps, this loose interstellar Federation's tough but kindly police force, hates war and stamps it out ruthlessly with nonlethal weapons like intimidation and sleepy gas. At Sector General's bleakest hour in *Star Surgeon*, when the hospital is besieged by a space fleet and under missile attack, the defending Monitors grit their teeth and accept that 'fanatically tolerant' medical staff will — must — give enemy casualties the same degree of care as their own wounded.

It's impossible not to see these gentle stories' deep horror of war as fuelled by the author's revulsion at events in his home town of Belfast. Generally he downplayed these feelings, but the shades of melancholy emerged in his 1975 fanzine contribution 'The Exorcists of IF', which miraculously preserved a light touch while mourning the ghosts of an older IF (Irish Fandom), then partly sundered by the

Troubles, and which has with some justice been called the finest piece of fan fiction ever written. It is collected in *The White Papers* (1996).

On a related note, I have a vivid memory of James at the 1992 British national SF convention, Illumination, held in a Blackpool seafront hotel and featuring a hugely noisy fireworks display on the adjacent beach. Thunderous detonations of mortar shells could be felt as visceral jolts; the vibrations set off car alarms all around the hotel. Amid these terrific bangs and flashes and siren-wailings, James's plaintive Irish voice murmured into my ear: 'They're trying to make me feel at home.'

A later Sector General volume makes a deadpan gesture to the death-or-glory school of military SF, with war and violence being presented as a sick, enfeebled species's last remaining means of sexual stimulation. The Marquis de Sade might recognise his own face in that mirror. One early story spoke wistfully of 'the diagnosis and treatment of a diseased interstellar culture, entailing the surgical removal of deeply rooted prejudice and unsane moral values . . .' If only.

It's worth noting that in the James White universe outright villains are extraordinarily few. Even that 'diseased culture' which despicably attacks the hospital (via armed forces duped into believing it a prison and torture chamber) is rotten only at the top, and reforms itself in the light of sweet reason. The most murderous-seeming threats within Sector General all prove to be confused innocents: examples include a traumatised, out-of-control pet, a presentient saurian, and frightened alien children with odd biological defences.

One of the few characters ever to have engaged in deliberate killing is Monitor Fleet Commander (later Sector Marshal) Dermod, who has spent his life expiating his role in the small but bloody conflict of 'Occupation: Warrior' (1959), a story whose Sector General links were removed by an editor who thought it too grim for the series. Now Dermod's colossal Emperor-class battleship *Vespasian* is chiefly called on for shows of force or vast rescue manoeuvres — as in *Major Operation*, where it literally has to hold a giant tourniquet, and the present volume's 'Combined Operation'.

That underlying moral sense illuminates such later and slightly darker segments as *Star Healer*, where after all the fireworks of his brilliant diagnoses and miracle cures, Conway is kicked upstairs to try his hand at the full responsibilities of a Diagnostician and to tackle cases that can't be solved with a single dazzling intuition. Instead he must brace himself for tougher tussles: with the grim evolutionary dilemmas of the Gogleskans, who daren't approach each other, and the reflexively violent Protectors, who cannot be approached, with terminal injuries and recognition of the need for triage after major accidents, with normally cheerful and ultra-tough Hudlar FROB space roustabouts, who have been reduced to a pitiable state by post-transplant shock or crippling senility.

Before this chance of promotion, though, the lighter-hearted *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* take Conway far away from the massive presence of the hospital and its permanent staff, to investigate medical enigmas with no immediate resources but the tiny *Rhabwar* team. This makes for a pleasant series of shorter adventures revisiting favourite auctorial themes.

Without too overtly giving away surprises, it can be said that most of *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* see our man working his way thoughtfully around two pet concepts which crop up elsewhere in the sequence. One is best phrased as a question: is there any inherent biological or physical handicap to space travel that sufficient intelligence and ingenuity cannot overcome? Series readers will remember that a certain immodest alien in *Major Operation*, whose deeply weird physiology should have trapped him for life on the sea bed, is first encountered as an orbiting astronaut.

Stories building on this question in *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* confront the baffled but eventually insightful Conway with five even more extreme cases. How can the dream of space possibly apply to e-t species who are blind, or limbless, or utterly devoid of mechanical technology, or helpless prisoners within insensately violent host-bodies, or larger than the greatest monsters of Earth's deep seas? Aha.

The stories' other repeated issue is the cheeky challenging of a Sector General axiom: that cross-species infection is as a rule impossible and that Conway and friends therefore need never fear catching something awful from their patients. Three clever exceptions are presented, though not of the kind that disprove the rule. Gulfs of time, a common chemistry, and the established (through Prilicla) premise of psychic empathy all sneak around the apparent constraints. A fourth and particularly far-out possibility – already planted in the early *Star Surgeon* – becomes the heart of the medical mystery in the later novel *Final Diagnosis*.

Among this volume's shorts, the odd man out is 'Accident', set before the building of Sector General and linking it to James's moving war or antiwar story 'Tableau', which can be found in his 1970 collection *The Aliens Among Us*. An all too credible accident in a multi-species spaceport facility, and the resulting nightmare struggle with intractable wreckage in an increasingly toxic atmosphere, crystallise the need for medical and paramedical expertise that extends over many different physiologies and biochemistries. This plants the seed of Sector General, and of the recurring notion — found also in James's non-series stories — that being able to give medical assistance to a distressed alien brings a priceless bonus of goodwill to the ever-tricky SF situation of First Contact.

As already indicated, James White was a highly popular SF author and convention guest whom everyone liked and whose kindliness extended even to such loathed creatures ('straight Z's to ten or twelve places') as parodists and critics. I happen to know this, because in my wickedness I wrote both a Sector General parody and a critical essay on the series, and each time James replied with a letter too embarrassingly generous for even such an egotist as David Langford to quote.

His death from a stroke in 1999 came too soon — he was 71 — but was mercifully quick. A lot of us miss him badly. Reading the Sector General books yet again brings back so many happy memories. It's hackneyed but entirely true to say that I envy readers who are meeting them for the first time.

— David Langford, 2002

I don't know a lot about **Steve Jeffery** except that he lives in Kidlington, Oxford, with Vicki Lee France, has been involved in almost every aspect of British SF activity over the years, is currently a member of Acnestis, the British apa of which I'm also a member, and reviews SF books for the British SF Association's *Vector* and other British journals. Now, I'm pleased to say, he writes reviews for *SF Commentary*.

Steve Jeffery

Worlds shifted sideways

Discussed:
THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRD
by Patrick O'Leary (Tor 0-765-30337-X; 2002; 356 pp. $US25.95/$A59.95)

[A version of this review appeared in 'Diary of a World Cup Widower', a contribution to *Acnestis* mailing 113, June 2002, combined with the version that appeared in *Vector* 224, July/August 2002.]

I'm missing something. Several reviews have hailed Patrick O'Leary's ***The Impossible Bird*** as 'deeply moving', a 'mature work' of 'profound wisdom', the sort of uncommonly effusive comment usually reserved for works by writers like Crowley, Carroll, Le Guin and Gaiman.

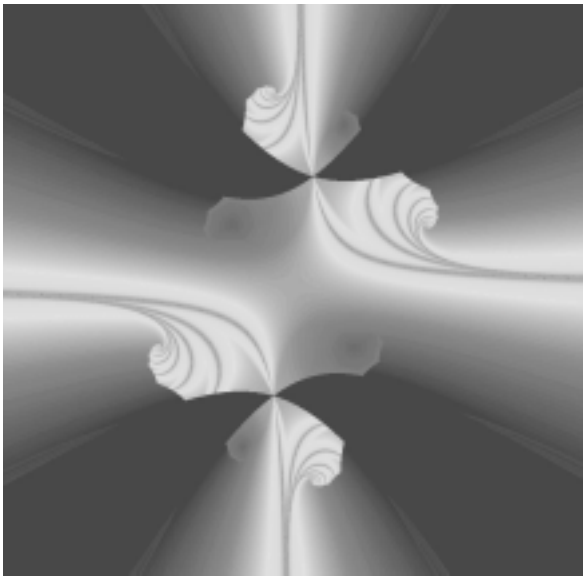
So I picked up O'Leary's book (his third) from where it had been languishing on the reviews pile, and found myself almost immediately puzzled by it.

It starts with brothers Mike and Danny Glynn, lying in a Michigan cornfield, discussing favourite SF movies ('Klaatu Barada Nikto!'), when a silvery something passes overhead.

> For an infinite moment they were treated to a bird's-eye view of two boys lying in a golden field. Two tiny stick-figures side-by-side. Abandoned. The picture would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

And somewhat beyond. By chapter two, we are told, both Danny and Mike, now in adulthood (Danny a father and a professor of literature, Mike a successful but rootless advertising director) are dead, although they are yet unaware of the fact. *The Impossible Bird* then moves into conspiracy thriller territory, when both Mike and Danny are (separately) raided by armed gangs, each apparently under the apprehension that the brother is the other one, and in possession of some mysterious 'code'. Mike ends up killing the woman who leads one gang, and then, when he goes on the run, following a lead to a run-down diner, even stranger things happen. A young woman kills her brother in cold blood (the prospect inspires both with joy rather than hate or fear). From then on, it all gets very strange, and the book becomes populated with more walking and talking dead people than in an episode of *Buffy*.

By this point *The Impossible Bird* appears to be moving into the supernatural horror of Jonathan Carroll territory. However, it is also the point at which the book seems to take an abrupt left turn (echoing back to the first opening chapter) into a crazy skiffy plot where everyone who has died recently has been 'stored' in a neural network (this has become one of those SF handwaving concepts bandied around by people who have little or no understanding of what they or how they actually work) running on — and this

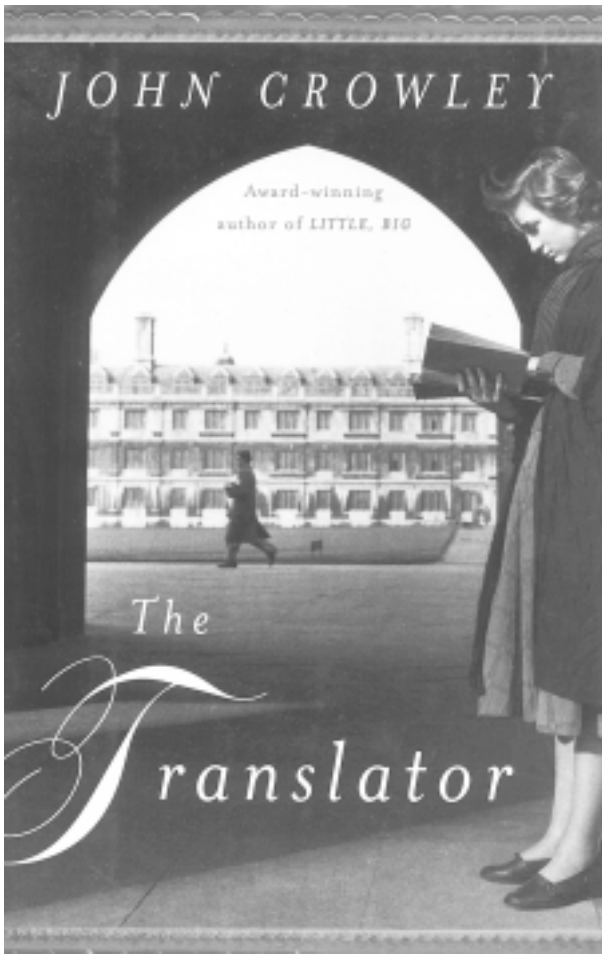


GraphicbyElaineCochrane,usingDJFractals.

is where it starts to shade into silliness — the brains of hummingbirds. The recipients of this unexpected virtual afterlife have split into two warring groups: the Crossovers, who wish to preserve their new immortality, and the Correctors, who have discovered a 'three strikes and you're out' loophole; that you can be 'erased' forever by killing three people: a stranger, someone you like, and someone you love.

The Impossible Bird is an odd-cross-genre blend that sometimes teeters dangerously , but never quite falls apart into a mishmash of styles. It starts as a conspiracy thriller, then moves into something resembling the dark fantasy territory of Jonathan Carroll, and finally resolves though a science-fictional solipsistic nightmare out of Philip K. Dick or Patricia Anthony, while never losing, through its often sudden and disconcerting turns, its central uniting thread as an exploration of family relationships lost, then regained. It is this that grounds *The Impossible Bird* from flying off into the complete silliness that a brief plot synopsis implies. At the end, though, it remains one of those books that I'm still trying to puzzle out a few of weeks after reading it, which is (given the number of books I read and retain no real memory of after I've finished) something to its credit.

Discussed:
THE TRANSLATOR
by John Crowley (William Morrow 0-380-97862- 8; 2002; 295 pp.; $US24.95/$A57.95)



The fantasy element of ***The Translator*** is so subtly understated as to almost slip by unnoticed. As we have come to expect from Crowley, it is beautifully written and with great attention to evoking period detail. In many ways, this reminds me of Chris Priest's novels, especially *The Prestige*, or some of Jonathan Carroll's, in which the world of the novel lies almost imperceptibly shifted sideways across the one we know, so that you have to look hard for the transition point.

Innokenti Falin is an exiled Russian poet, teaching at a Midwestern university in the early sixties. Christa (Kit) Malone comes there on a scholarship, still traumatised by the death of her adored older brother, Ben, reported killed in a freak munitions accident while on Peace Corps duty in the Philippines. A friendship develops between the two, and Falin eventually asks Kit to help him translate some of his poems from Russian to English (but, he stresses, they will no longer be the same poems, his poems, but different, however good the translation.) Meanwhile, Kit becomes involved in a group of left-wing activists, Peace Protesters, who half jokingly refer to themselves as a little 'commie cell'. But this is 1962, and America and the USSR are tottering on the paranoid MAD brink of war over the Cuban missile crisis. Kit's involvement with both the peace groups and Falin starts to bring unwelcome and threatening attention from the authorities. Kit agrees, under pressure, to report on Falin. One of Falin's poems or stories tells of the greater and lesser angels of nations, and that in times of crisis, the lesser angels (who are all that the greater angels are not) can prevail against the madness of the greater angels by an act of love and sacrifice. And, shortly after this, as the crisis deepens, Falin disappears, his empty convertible found in a lake as Kit watches a TV newsflash.

The Translator is framed, many years alter, after *glasnost* and the fall of the Berlin Wall, by Kit's visit to Russia, to meet with Falin's old friends and colleagues, apprehensive as to how they will regard her. (She has published some of the translations in a collection of her own poems). She brings with her a last surviving poem in Russian by Falin, the one that tells of the greater and lesser angels of nations, the rest of Falin's work having been lost, his briefcase recovered empty from the sunken car, disappeared along with the writer.

So who or what is Falin? An exiled poet who is the victim of two paranoid pogroms on each side of the Iron Curtain? A Soviet spy or even double agent (there is some question about his exile), and thus a threat or sudden embarrassment to the authorities? Or an angel who takes the road of sacrifice to save the world from the madness of the greater angels? And if Falin is that of one side, who is that of the other, and is an equal and balancing sacrifice required? It may be important here to remember that Crowley was raised (as is Kit) a Roman Catholic, and the events in Dallas a year later, 1963. To me, neither American or Catholic, this is the perhaps the most problematic aspect of the novel, as to whether Kennedy's attitude in ordering the blockade and ultimatum marks him as one of the lesser angels (if they exist), or greater.

Discussed:
CASTLES MADE OF SAND
by Gwyneth Jones (Gollancz 0-575-07033-1; 2002; 356 pp.; £10.99/$A29.95)

Short review: 'Gosh.'

Accurate as far as it goes, but perhaps not entirely helpful.

Continuing her run through a back catalogue of Hendrix titles (British readers might have been rather taken with that psychedelic car advert on TV that uses Hendrix's 'Third Stone From the Sun'), ***Castles Made of Sand*** follows more or less sequentially from *Bold As Love* and will continue into the next volume *Burning of the Midnight Lamp*. Hendrix was always a sf buff — I remember a few years ago a library display board that showed Jimi engrossed in one of the early paperback anthologies of *Year's Best SF*

edited by Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss. There's a lot of SF imagery in Hendrix's songs, much of it a cross between Clarke's *Childhood's End* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. It would make an interesting article sometime.

Meanwhile, back in the Post-Dissolution England of *Bold As Love*, the first in this series, the three-way relationship of the Triumvirate (Ax , Sage and Firorinda, *de facto* leaders of the Countercultural Revolution, with Ax taking the deliberately ironic and pointed title of Dictator) is showing signs of strain. They are rock and roll children, after all, not politicians and soldiers, despite that circumstances have forced them into such roles. That complex relationship, one of the most touching aspects of *Bold As Love*, is more fully explored in this second volume. Ax and Sage, both in love with Fee, complicate matters further by taking a drug, oxytocsin, that effectively dissolves any remaining heterosexual hangups about their feelings for each other, and then, flushed with chemical love, jointly propose to Fee.

It's not going to happen. This is the Matter of Britain (or rather England, the other parts of the British Isles having broken away as independent nations after the Act of Dissolution) after all, an Arthurian Mythos for the Rock and Roll Reich. Almost immediately Sage leaves, having found the he 'can't do the threesome thing'. Both Ax and Sage are bewildered and hurt.

In the meantime Ax gets a tip-off from Irish expatriate, Feargal, that the nominal official prime minister, David Sale, is being set up in a staged ritual sacrifice by the reactionary neo-Celtic fringe. The ritual is busted in a covert operation and Sale bundled quietly back to Westminster.

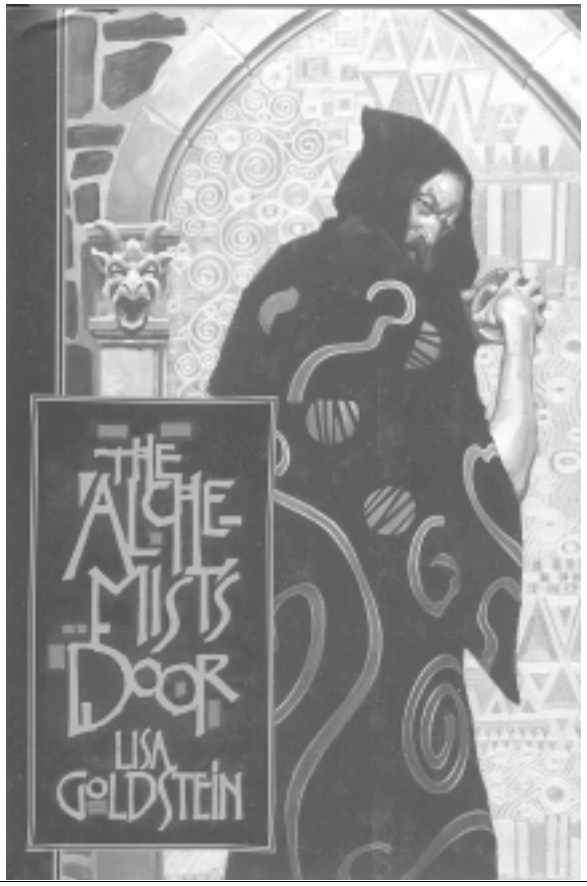
Ax leaves, as an ambassador for England in the Crisis Europe conference in Amsterdam, and gets caught up in the fractious internal politics of the various countercultural movements, while Sage gets caught up in his own odyssey in pursuit of the consciousness-expanding Zen Self experiments. Fiorinda, feeling abandoned (England's data quarantine means that she has no way of communicating with Ax directly), is left to hold things together. Ax is offered a chance to go to America to try and lift the data embargo imposed on England. If normal communications weren't difficult enough, Ax gets kidnapped by extremists, which puts him completely out of the picture.

It's that this point, with Ax as the Wounded Knight (his kidnappers have crudely removed his 'warehouse chip' from his skull and sent it back as proof) and Sage on a personal Grail Quest, and with Fiorinda at her most alone and vulnerable that the trap is sprung, and Fiorinda is confronted with a demon from her past.

Fee (as Guinevere, or even Rebecca in Ivanhoe) is overthrown in another factional coup as the Celtics take control, then accused of witchcraft, for which the new rulers have reinstated the lynch law of death by burning. Unfortunately, Fee, frightened of her powers, has kept it a secret from both of her closest friends and allies.

This also where the undercurrent of magic suddenly comes to the fore, and pivots *Castles Made of Sand* from the realm of techno-green science fiction (similar in mood and tone, in many ways, to Storm Constantine's *Hermetech*) into fantasy as *Castles Made of Sand* moves to its dramatic conclusion.

Discussed:
THE ALCHEMIST'S DOOR
by Lisa Goldstein (Tor 0-765-30150; 2002; 286 pp.; $US23.95/$A54.95)



This book features Dr John Dee and Edward Kelley and their flight to Prague and the Court of Rudolph, Holy Roman Emperor and alchemist manqué. Goldstein builds on the coincidence that this was also the time when Rabbi Loew animated a man of clay, the golem of legend, by placing a parchment bearing the name of God under it its tongue (taking care to remove it before the Sabbath lest his creature profane the holy day). As Goldstein admits — as does Crowley in regard to another fictional meeting between Dee and Giordano Bruno — there is no evidence these two scholars ever met in real life (let alone Dee helping in the construction and animation of the golem, which is entirely a Goldstein intervention), but the coincidence is too good to pass up.

On the face of it, this book could have written for me: Dee and Kelley, angelic conversations and scrying, Loew and his golem, the Kabballah, the mad Emperor Rudolph. And yet . . .

It doesn't ring true (a strange word in this context, I admit). Partly it's the language. Goldstein makes no attempt to emulate sixteenth-century speech. Her character sound contemporary, as if they had stepped, improbably clad in doublet and hose, from twentieth- or twenty-first-century London or New York. Possibly she thinks it wiser not to attempt a reproduction of archaic speech — especially as Dee, of necessity, is constantly switching between a number of European languages, including German, Polish and Czech — than to risk stumbling and spoil the effect. But the main problem is that these character do sound, to

paraphrase Le Guin, more as if they come from modern Poughkeepsie than sixteenth-century Prague. The cadences and contractions (don't, won't, shan't) sound too modern. Even without resort to thees and thous, I suspect dropping these for a more formal approach might have avoided the problem, by giving a little more distance between then and now.

Then there is the Jewish question, in an age notorious for religious hate, ghettos and pogroms and the blood libel. Goldstein sidesteps this by supposing that Dee's thirst for knowledge of all branches of the mystical arts is sufficient to overcome, with a few mild reservations, the deep social division between Jew and Gentile, for him to strike up a close friendship with Loew, even to be able to freely enter the Jewish Quarter (albeit under Loew's protection). Somehow I don't think so.

But what of the story? Yes, it's fascinating, and (as you'd expect) well written. Kelley is cast as the villain of the piece (but was he? This is one of the most fascinating aspects of this whole period of Dee's life, whether Kelley was just a con man and a charlatan, and possibly a counterfeiter and forger, or something more enigmatic, even self deluded) sent spiralling down a path of opportunism, avarice, paranoia and madness. Goldstein even hints that Kelley's forgery extended to sections of Dee's diary, leading Dee to write in code. Fascinating, but — if Goldstein had had more confidence to truly tackle the language and mindset of sixteenth century Europe, as Crowley and Ackroyd before her – what might this have been?

Discussed:
STONE
by Adam Roberts (Gollancz 0-575-07064-1; 2002; 261 pp.; £9.99/$A29.95)

Adam Roberts is a most frustrating and provocative writer, one almost thinks deliberately so. This is his third novel, following his debut *Salt* and the equally bleak and strange (and to me misjudged) collision of SF and fantasy of *On*.

There's a sense that Roberts is engaged in some sort of personal argument with SF, and perhaps specifically British SF. It's not a new argument, and neither is his approach. In fact he seems to be rerunning a riff that ran through a lot of Ian McDonald's early work, from *Hearts Hands and Voices* to *Sacrifice of Fools*, that of taking ideas, motifs from another writer and twisting them around to present his own take on them. The game is sort of given away by the title of his collection, *Speaking in Tongues*. (It's not a new thing by any means. Delany subtitled *Triton* 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia' as a response that of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, 'An Ambiguous Utopia'). Thus *Hearts, Hands and Voices* has at its core an alternative take on Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*, and *Sacrifice of Fools* leaned rather heavily towards the ideas in Gwyneth Jone's Aleutian trilogy, started with *White Queen*.

But whatever it was, certainly with *Desolation Road* and *Hearts, Hands and Voices*, it has to be said that McDonald did it with a certain amount of style, wit and verve.

With Roberts I can only detect a wish to provoke. His books have been, so far, unremittingly bleak and dark, his characters either unsympathetic or, like Tighe in *On*, put through an appalling mill of misery and abuse that almost lost this reader at the midpoint of the book.

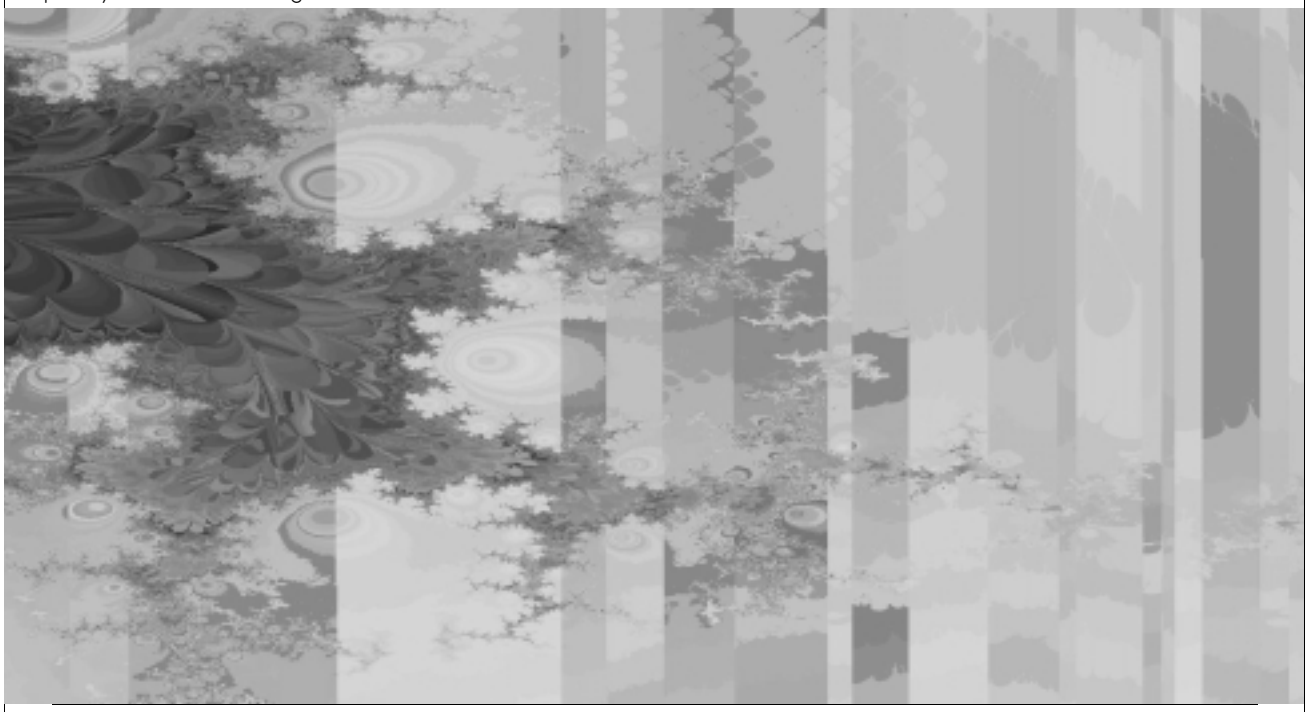
So what of *Stone*? Again, it's a dark novel. Its protagonist is a serial killer in a hedonistic and crime-free utopia (the clunkily-named t'T) that seems one part Banks's Culture and one part Wells's childish Eloi. His/her name (internal nanotech, the dotTech, make the t'T practically immortal and allows them to modify bodily appearance, even gender, as a matter of choice) is the equally brief Ae. (Roberts says this is arbitrarily chosen as the first two letters of the t'T alphabet, but it both echoes Esthaven's remark on the name of the envoy Genly Ai ('like a cry of pain') in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and perhaps as a reaction against Banks's penchant for giving his characters long and complex names in his Culture novels.) At the beginning and end of the book, Ae is imprisoned in a jailstar, a hollowed-out world dropped into a sun, and the book is cast as a confessional journal, dictated to a stone (there are no other prisoners) he has picked up and placed on his writing table. Ae is jailed initially for murder, a crime almost unheard of in the t'T, and is stripped of dotTech before incarceration. His first escape is as the result of becoming infected with an AI seed, which grows inside him to take up a quasi-symbiotic (can an AI be 'biotic'?) relationship with his body and mind.

The AI presents him with a bargain. It will help him spring himself from the jailstar in return for one job. The job is that he must kill the entire population of a planet, although he is not told which, or given any reason why. As Ae travels, erratically and waywardly, towards his goal we see the t'T through his critical eyes. It is a culture in eternal adolescence, of overgrown children without, damningly, children's sense of wonder or curiosity of the universe around them, even though, at the heart of their civilisation is an object that defies science, the light-years-long Gravity Trench, a discontinuous crease in spacetime and gravitational physics. One of apparent effects of the Trench is to allow many times FTL travel, although only on bodies not much bigger, conveniently, than a human being. (There's some rather dodgy 'quantum' handwaving on this invoking the collapse of local wave function, a discussion that, a decade on from Egan's *Quarantine*, is getting about as original as entropy as a metaphor for social breakdown.) Outside this region that the t'T happily, if mindlessly inhabit, the FTL effect falls off erratically into slowspace (yet another genre tic, one feels, this time to Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep*.)

Stone is, I think, more a frustrating book than a bad one. Its genre reflexiveness and lack of sympathy start to irritate more than they serve, as if Roberts is caught between wanting to write a critique of sf tropes and a novel.

— Steve Jeffery, October 2002

Graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals



Pinlighters

Please accept my customary apology: I've tried to mention everybody who has sent a letter of comment, or an email or letter that might be interpreted as a letter of comment. Emails get mislaid, and so do letters.

I won't list traded fanzines.

Do fanzines posted on the eFanzines.com Web site count as 'trades', or do I merely post a .PDF file of *SFC* to the same site and hope you read it?

Thanks very much to those people who subscribed or donated.

Chris receives the little invisible prize for sending the first letter of comment to *SFC* 77:

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
32 Elphinstone Road, Hastings,
East Sussex TN34 2EQ, UK

Many thanks for *SFC* 77. Glad the Sladek article was of use to you, and it was no problem to give permission. Perhaps you've heard that Big Engine will be publishing *Maps*, a selection of John's previously uncollected stories, edited by Dave Langford. Sure to be a collector's item.

The problem with big, late copies of fanzines, as you no doubt know, is that all sense of continuity between one and the next is lost. The result is maybe something that you don't plan and wouldn't much want if you knew it was going to happen: the material acquires a certain quality of isolation. Difficult to define too closely, but it's the sort of feeling I used to get from George Turner's material that you used to publish: that he was talking to himself rather than to an audience. This is the feeling I get from the latest *SFC*. And on this subject, whatever happened to *Steam Engine Time*? I thought the first issue was pretty good and you made me want to see the one after and the one after that. But another Gillespie evolutionary aeon appears to have descended. Maybe if you did shorter editions more often?

(11 November 2001)

The length of this letter column, and the difficulty of chopping it to less than 40,000 words, shows that people are out there listening.

The 'Gillespie evolutionary aeon'? Here's my description of the last twelve months: publish *SF Commentary* in October 2001 — blip — catch up on publishing some apazines — blip — endure Christmas — blip — return to Paying Work in January — blip — it's October again! That's not an aeon, or even a year; it feels like a couple of weeks.

Since Paul and Maureen are effectively the editors of *Steam Engine Time*, and you live down the road from them, wax enthusiastic about *SET* to them. At the moment, Paul and Maureen seem to be too busy to breathe, let alone publish fanzines.

FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER
Marchittigasse 9/17, A-1060, Wien, Austria

I have decided to drop *Quarber Merkur* because of the difficulty of getting the stencils, etc., and all the work involved with cranking an old Gestetner, but I received an offer from the First German Fantasy Club, which wanted to produce my magazine, and so it continues as a printed magazine in a smaller format (half that of the old one). I'll put you back on the mailing list.

I was saddened to hear of George Turner's death. We had our quarrels, but I was rather fond of his later SF novels, which I found intellectually stimulating. I hope that your being now his literary executor means some money for you, and I am sorry that I am now not in a position to do anything further for his work. You may know that I published

The Sea and Summer in Germany in Suhrkamp paperback series, but it didn't do very well. I failed to get it in hardback. I got *Brain Child* into hardback, but unfortunately that novel did even more poorly, and when Suhrkamp put it in paperback they priced it out of the market, I fear. And of course they did nothing for the book. If the publisher I worked with for some 16 years hadn't left, I am sure that I would finally have managed to get George's books into print again, but now it is impossible. I spoke up especially for *Genetic Soldier*. But I am looking forward to George's last novel.

I am not loath to speak about the Lem problem, and some day I'll surely write down what I know about that man, who was surely the biggest mistake of my life. My greatest error was perhaps that I thought it a good idea for him to come to Austria, even when he didn't want to live in Poland after the state of war was declared there in 1982. I don't really know why he left, since he never was in any danger, while the best Polish minds and writers were incarcerated in the camps. He had always taken great care not to run afoul of the authorities, and he often said to me that he didn't want to become a martyr, although he detested the Communist system — from which he profited. I think that he just thought he could do better business if he were in a German-speaking country, since then he was at the height of his popularity in Germany. But when I got to know the man better, and to experience him in an everyday environment, I became disillusioned about the author of 'SF: A Hopeless Case', which I had taken at face value when I published it. But I came to see that all that talk about literature was just hot air where money was involved, and I also began to have my doubts about the quality of much of his work. Mr Lem appears to be a man disappointed from life; he never seemed content with his achievements, which were considerable, and seemed always to ask for more, and a good deal of his criticism seems to me know to be the result of a lack of information, envy, and vanity.

For instance, he is inordinately proud of his reading several popular science magazines, such as *Scientific American*, claiming that the 'science fictioneers', as he quaintly calls them, are not interested in such information. In a German interview, he denied Gregory Benford the qualification to speak about cosmology, one of Lem's pet subjects. This is grotesque, since I could name without checking at least a dozen American SF writers who can consult genuine scientific sources and need not rely on the popular science magazines — sources that would be closed to Mr Lem, since he is, mathematically speaking, illiterate. He simply lacks the mathematical tools to evaluate any physical theory, and yet he is arrogant enough to deny a practising physicist the qualification to speak on matters of cosmology, in which he himself is an absolute layman.

He is embittered by his lack of success in the world (or relative lack), and has been hit hard economically by the demise of Communism. In Communist Poland he created in a protected environment, with almost no competition, and books were cheap, so a Lem edition of 100,000 copies was no rarity. Now, of course, he sells only a few thousand copies (with the exception of those books that are forced upon pupils, since they are required reading in schools), and he is just one writer among hundreds, many of which sell much better . . .

I now understand Philip K. Dick's allegation that Mr Lem considers others to be his servants. Lem's main problems seem to be that he doesn't have the feeling that something is done for him, but that he feels like a feudal lord who is granting favours to his subjects by allowing them to handle his precious copyrights, although in the international markets Mr Lem is a very minor player, who has had many translations, but whose books do not sell. They sold only in Germany, but even there Mr Lem is now a writer of the past, no longer accepted by younger readers, who prefer William Gibson.

The law suit that Mr Lem brought against me had its origins in a trick that he pulled upon me . . . The whole thing has been going on for four years, and in all this time Lem's new agent apparently has not been able to sell further Lem books in the USA (at least, none has appeared or been announced), and since Lem has meanwhile also broken with Harcourt Brace, I wonder how many Lem books American readers will see in the future. Lem's English language editions have always sold very poorly, and most American publishers would have pulped his books long ago. Harcourt has kept his trade paperbacks in print, although it cannot have made any money from them, but since it controls English language rights in his most interesting books, Harcourt will decide their fate, so it wasn't very intelligent of Mr Lem to annoy the company, for the books still untranslated will be of very little interest for English-language readers. But perhaps Mr Lem doesn't care whether his books are in print and read, now he is convinced that Steven Spielberg will film him.

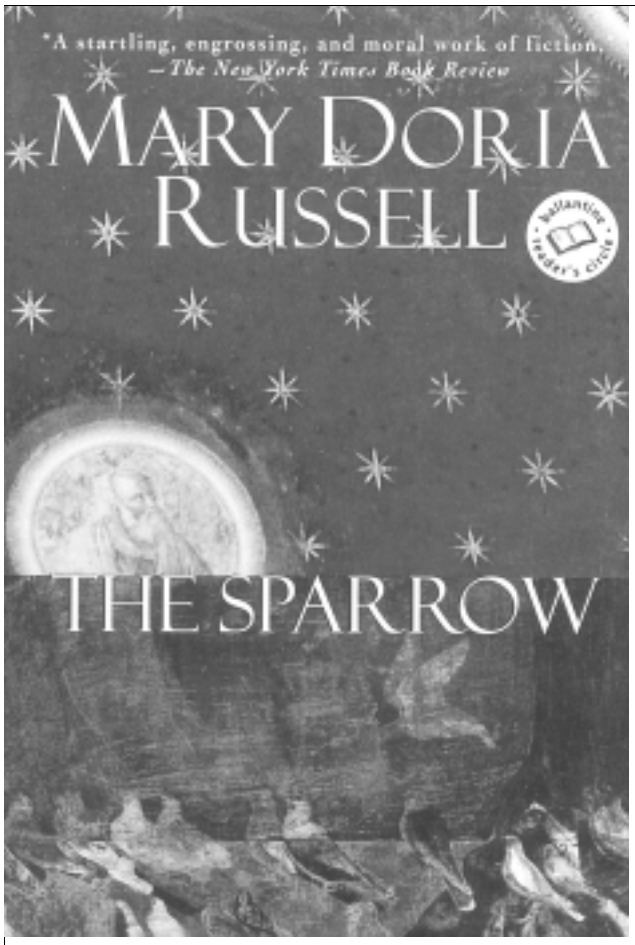
(12 August 1998)

To say that I 'survived' a potentially very expensive lawsuit brought against me by Stanislaw Lem is not quite exact. I won the lawsuit on all points. If I had lost, I would have been out of some $US25,000, but it would not have affected my survival in any way. It might be of interest to note here that Stanislaw Lem has meanwhile, in violation of his contracts, ordered his publishers (mostly with success, including Harcourt Brace) to make all payments and accountings for the books sold by me only to him, and that he is pocketing my commissions. He also sold *Microworlds*, a collection of his critical writings put together by me for Harcourt Brace, without my permission to Japan. Now this is a book that was conceived, selected by me, and whose title was my idea. I leave it to your readers to give Mr Lem's actions their proper name.

As I know him, and as readers of Orwell can guess, he will have purged any mention of my name from the book. For people who don't allow Mr Lem to do to them what he intends to do don't exist for him any more.

Surely there's no non-English-language author who owes more to an agent or literary champion than Stanislaw Lem does to Franz Rottensteiner? In the late sixties, Franz sent John Foyster some translations of sections from Lem's *SF and Futurology* (the book itself is still untranslated into English) and articles from *Quarber Merkur*. In turn, John and Franz allowed me to reprint these articles in *SF Commentary*, and Franz began translating a wide variety of material especially for *SFC*. For several years, this magazine was almost the only way of reading Lem's non-fiction in English translation, which boosted the reputation of *SFC* and helped it gain three Hugo nominations.

Now I'm trapped because of this falling out between author and agent/translator. Franz won't let me republish his translations of Lem's articles (not only for personal reasons; it's likely that Lem would charge reprint fees whose translation component would not reach Franz). If I wanted to publish a *Best of SF Commentary*, I could hardly do so



without including at least three or four Lem articles. Liverpool University Press asked for such a *Best of* (because of Brian Aldiss's recommendation), but nothing has come of it because I never hear from LUP. Deleting the Lem articles would have knocked the concept of the book on its head anyway. I suppose I could publish a *Selection from SF Commentary*, but that's not the same as a *Best of*.

One project that badly needs doing is a second edition of *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*. The centre of the first edition was Lem's article 'SF: A Hopeless Case: With Exceptions' (Dick being the exception). Translated by Werner Koopmann, the article would be the centre of the second edition as well. However, Franz sold this to Harcourt, to be part of the *Microworlds* collection, and I suspect it would cost me a small fortune to buy back rights to the article.

Meanwhile, many English-language authors will have a bit of a laugh when they read the above letter, having been told for 30 years by Franz Rottensteiner (and Stanislaw Lem himself) how much superior Lem's work is to anybody else's. Not that Lem's fiction, as translated by Michael Kandel, has been diminished in my eyes because of the split with Franz. Our heroes not only have feet of clay, but often they prove to be made of clay throughout. Even writers made of clay often write very well.

It's Steven Soderbergh, not Spielberg, who is making a new film of *Solaris*. (With George Clooney as Kris Kelvin. The mind boggles.) Might the novel finally receive a new translation from the Polish?

What I found most interesting in *SF Commentary* 77 was David Lake's remarks about Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*.

This is exactly my own view, and I think that Russell's melodramatic and sentimental tale has more in common with *The Thorn Birds* than with James Blish's *A Case of Conscience*, which, for all its faults, poses some intriguing and valid questions. My main objection to Blish is that a community of highly intelligent beings that has no concept of God is highly improbable, indeed impossible. It is another thing to reject the idea of God, but never to have had it? All truly intelligent beings must have some sort of philosophy, ponder the question why there is something and not nothing, and ask about the origins of the world. And to this there are only two answers: immanence and transcendence, or some sort of creator, prime cause or movens. Not to have arrived at this obvious answer would be a logical impossibility, a sign of stupidity. I found Blish always a writer who came up with interesting ideas, but wasn't able to explore their logical consequences to the full.

While Blish was well aware of the theological problem, Russell ignores it completely. Her Jesuit hero (and the Jesuits were very astute and tricky theologians; it is not mere chance that Blish made his hero a Jesuit) wastes not a thought on the beliefs of the aliens, and their theological consequences, which is highly unlikely. And the general problem of why God allows evil in the world is reduced to the sentimentalised, personalised problem of why God allows one of his servants to be raped and humiliated.

Now, worse has happened to believers all the time — one just has to read up the lives of the saints — and thus Emilio's reaction to his plight appears to be philosophically a bit naïve: and you do not need an alien planet and Jana'ata to have a priest buggered; similiar things must have happened on Earth often enough.

I also agree with your short review of Aldiss's *The Secret of This Book*; when I read this collection for a German publisher, I was so impressed (unlike some other Aldiss collections) that I bought the British hardback for my own collection, something that I normally do only with books by J. G. Ballard.

(26 November 2001)

I like *The Sparrow* because it's one of the few SF books whose characters are interesting in their own right. By contrast, many SF novels are boring because their authors manufacture them (out of very good ideas sometimes) as if they were ticking mechanisms.

GREG BENFORD,
Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Irvine CA 92697-4575, USA

I was much taken with David Lake's reading of Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*, and heartily concur that it has huge holes in both logic and style. Blish did it better! — and far truer to the Jesuit thought pattern. The entire opening, with Jesuits inventing the first space ship, is very poor. And then, as Lake so dryly notes, the Alpha Centauri system is totally wrong! These, like Jesuit theology, she could have just looked up, and didn't bother. Laziness, I deduce, from speaking extensively with her (Mary Russell) at the Templeton Conference in London 2000. She just doesn't care about authenticity, and says she hadn't read any of the earlier work; didn't know C. S. Lewis, Walter Miller Jr or Blish!

(16 November 2001)

TERRY JEEVES

56 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorks YO12 5RQ, UK

The Mountains of Books you mention struck a chord as I, too, have walls completely covered with bookshelves. All of these books and magazines (including *ASF/Analog* 1935–1995) I am trying to sell in preparation for a move at some indeterminate point in the future. I wrote to the publishers who had been sending review copies to *Erg* and told them to drop me from their lists. Apart from there being too many titles, a very large percentage of them were sword and sorcery, which I can't abide — especially those trilogies and tetralogies full of princesses with supernatural powers opposed by evil magicians.

I enjoyed the David Lake letters, and go along with his suggestion that 'religion' is the root of much of the world's troubles. I became an atheist as the age of fifteen and since then have had no reason to change that view. It amuses me that both sides in a war will pray to some deity to aid their side. As for those who pray for some sort of succour, how many actual concrete responses can be recorded?

SFC 77 disproves my idea that you had gafiated. Welcome back to the fanzine fold, and I can now mail *Erg* to you once again.

(15 November 2001)

Terry, surely you know by now that I never gafiate; I merely have long intervals between issues of my fanzines. Please continue trading all-for-all.

DAVID LAKE
7 Eighth Avenue, St Lucia QLD 4067

I've been writing a 38,000-word novella on the love life of St Augustine, which I have called *Lusts and Loves*. That took me just over a month — two drafts — and during that time I was really almost shut off from the world.

Almost, but not quite. I've been following the progress of World War III with interest. I am quite clear in my own mind that this *is* WW3 — not quite as we imagined it, but it is clearly going to escalate into a war of extermination between the West and Islam. It's the same war that has been going on with little truces for nearly 1400 years. The enmity between the Christian and post-Christian West and Islam is the most basic rift on the whole planet — much more serious than 'Capitalism' versus 'Communism' — because Islam is essentially dedicated to slavery on all levels, whereas the West, for about 500 years at least, has been following a project whose essential idea is freedom — freedom to think, to explore new ways, to work out the logic of freedom as far as it will take us — including the recent liberation of women, whom Islam fiercely retains as slaves.

This does not mean I like America. Americans have been so pig ignorant, so insular, that they have brought this on themselves. I loathe much of what America (on the pop level) stands for; but I hate Islam much worse.

I agree that Philip Dick's *Valis* is not a good *novel*, but the book gave me enormous pleasure, because I was amused by his (thinly disguised) life style and the weird religion. I think books are not good absolutely, but good for certain people at certain times. (I enjoyed *The Left Hand of Darkness* more than *The Lathe of Heaven*, again because of the religious angles — I was much into Zen when I first read the book.) When we say that Shakespeare is Good, we mean he has pleased and impressed an enormous number of people in the Western nations (and even some Japanese, not to mention Indians, who love him). I feel the same way about Mozart — absolutely central to Western civilisation — but the Muslims ought to hate him, because all his operas deal favourably with good sex, the free pairing of men and women as lovers.

I have been feeling a bit more cheerful lately, as my poetry classes have made me a few good friends; I have been overwhelmed by their liking for me and what I am doing. This is much better than a good deal of my career before I retired in 1994.

I read very little fiction of any kind these days; perhaps the last novel was Atwood's *Alias Grace*, which I loved. At present I am reading Ariel Dorfman — amazing man — he was in Santiago de Chile on the other 11 September — 1973 — when the coup killed Allende and nearly killed Dorfman too. His play *Death and the Maiden* is terrible and wonderful. How do you forgive people who have raped and tortured you?

(12 December 2001)

E. D. WEBBER
21 Eyre Crescent, San Remo NSW 2262

Thanks for the comment in *SF Commentary* 77: 'Where did the fiction finish and the actuality begin?' I, too, had difficulty at first seeing the events of 11 September 2001 as real rather than a fantasy produced for our viewing pleasure by the American Military–Entertainment Complex. Even now, I'm sure that said complex was green with envy while watching such an encroachment of market share. Perchance had Orson Welles come back to haunt his detractors? Had *Wag the Dog* taken a more sinister twist than even its writers had imagined?

Having adjusted to reality mode, however, to me the attacks did not come straight out of the proverbial blue. Mega, as opposed to fine tuning says so anyway — and not just because of the proven infallibility of the third law of physics. It's been noted, for instance, that any mention of American foreign policy in general and in the Middle East in particular having had anything to do with it has either been rebuffed or suppressed.

I'm being cynical, I know, but it comes from having lived through more than a bit of what we used to call Sam's War when I was a soldier with at least once eye open. As a matter of fact, there's an article of mine called 'Sam's War', which predicts the big battle to come to be between Sam and Islam. Monotheism and its discontents aside — which Bush, Blair and Howard are managing to do — there is also the matter of oil and other opiates to which the American Empire — another essay called 'Notes for an Off-Shore Island' — are hopelessly addicted. For that matter, there's another called 'The View from Beaufort Castle', written during the Gulf War, and about when I ran contact patrols from a Crusader castle 30 years before. Needless to say, our leading critical journals don't publish that sort of thing, though I can lay claim to being a member of the patient class published by a medical journal. Trying to tell the doctor class what's wrong with them is not easy. Harder than taking the mickey out of the Drug War by far.

No, like Pete Beagle's character, who has difficulty with the difference between fact and fantasy, there's not much I don't find believable. Palatable is another matter entirely. Which is another way of saying that the election is still causing me indigestion.

(20 November 2001)

Ed Webber is an American who now lives in Sydney. The election to which he refers is the Australian election of late 2001, won by John Howard's conservative coalition in the

shadow of the 11 September events in America and coincidental unsavoury events on the high seas to the north of Australia.

GERALD MURNANE
2 Falcon Street, Macleod VIC 3085

A passage from a letter by David Lake in *SFC* 77 has stayed in my mind for several days since I first read it. 'I think I already know as much of the world as I want to . . .' (p. 43).

David, of course, is still mourning for his wife. I haven't lost anyone recently, but I can understand a person's declaring at a certain point in his or her life that he or she has learned enough about the mass of abstractions and generalities and vague imaginings that goes by the name of 'the world' for most of us.

For much of my life, I thought I was obliged to learn about the world, to keep abreast with the world. I'm somewhat embarrassed even to type these expressions, so little do they mean to me now. I fulfilled my self-imposed obligation mostly by reading newspapers and such weekly publications as *Time* and the *Bulletin*, whatever. (I have never owned a television set or listened much to radio — except for broadcasts of horse-races — or discovered what the Internet is.) Just now, for whatever reason, I remembered a sunny morning in either 1958 or 1959 when I was annoyed with myself because my tram had arrived at its destination and I still had not fully understood from my reading of the *Age* why Walter Lippmann predicted the eventual collapse of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland as a result of the ineffectual policies of its Prime Minister, Sir Roy Welensky. Walter Who? Sir Roy Who? The Federation of What?

It's all too easy to scoff at your younger self and to take pride in knowing what that poor, ignorant bastard was ignorant of. I don't scoff. I pity poor young Gerald, trying to keep himself informed but reading about things that were never going to mean doodly squat to him. He would have done better to have spent his time on the tram reading about medieval Arabic philosophy or the breeding behaviour of Australian arachnids.

More and more, nowadays, I remember the saying attributed to Blaise Pascal. All our troubles arise from our being unable to keep to our room. He must have used a sort of royal plural. Or, in my typical unscholarly fashion, I've mucked up the quotation. But you get the point. I get it, anyway. I keep to my room. I try to spend no more than ten minutes looking through the newspapers. I still don't own a television set. I still don't listen to radio (except for the occasional broadcast of a horse-race), and I still don't know what the Internet is.

I suppose it wouldn't be fair to leave it at that. Anyone reading these boastful statements would surely want to ask, 'What the hell do you *do* in your precious room?' Well, Bruce, as you know, I've been studying the Hungarian language these last few years. Much of my day is taken up with reading and writing in Hungarian. I've also written two pieces of short fiction this year. One of them was published in *Southerly* early in the year. But I don't expect to write much more fiction. I don't even read much fiction nowadays, unless it's in Hungarian.

(17 November 2001)

The 'world', to me, is the brick out of the blue that clots you over the head when you're least expecting it. News of some of these bricks (such as the detestable GST) can be found in newspapers. Other items in newspapers seem to be bricks, but in the long run they prove to be soap bubbles. I read newspapers and magazines because I like to keep up with the story of the world, even if much of that story is fiction, and much fiction tells the real story of the world.

SKEL
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Already a major decision. Do I write this in Word or do I do it directly as an email? I decided on the former, because it's so long since I used it for pleasure. I use it regularly at work, where it annoys the hell out of me by deciding it knows better than I how I want to lay out my documents, in some cases being so intractable that I am forced to give in because I don't know enough to make it stop what it's doing and do what I originally intended.

Oddly I never have any problems when using it for fannish purposes, though some of the things it does are baffling. Why, for instance, is there a squiggly green line under the 'an e' near the beginning of the second line? It has also put the same squiggly green line under the entire rambling last sentence of the first paragraph. Is this some mild form of literary criticism? As well as a Spell-checker, does it have a Style-checker? Oh boy, am I in trouble!

Another reason I chose Word is historical. I rarely remember to save things as I go (unless reminded of the tendency by writing about it), and in my early use of emails for longer missives I would invariably hit the wrong key somewhere along the line and find, usually towards the end, that the damn thing had disappeared, and I would be faced with typing it all again.

The third and final reason for choosing to go the Word route is that I tidied up my den on Friday. Hence this letter, and my choice of software. I will explain (even though it is *very* boring). But where to start?

Relatively recent Skelhistory first. I've been busy at work, taking on a new project that has involved me working away from home two or three days almost every week for much of the past 12–18 months. Keeping my normal responsibilities going has resulted in much overtime (I think, for instance, I have worked most Sundays this year) and a tendency to come home brain-dead. Most fanzines that have arrived over this period have merely been glanced at and placed on a pile, a singularly small pile, given the time it has had to grow. Even the few that have been read have not been LoCed (which habit has not been restricted to the last year or so, and which goes a long way to explaining why the pile was not larger).

Anyway, with no warning everything was put on 'hold' for three weeks. Three glorious weeks of not being sent to Coventry. As the overtime has enabled me to stay on top of my other work, I am taking advantage by booking the Fridays of each week as holiday, for three consecutive weeks of long weekends, the first Friday of which was ***Tidy-up-Time***.

Among the zines and correspondence of course, as you'll obviously have realised, was *SF Commentary* 77, and also coincidentally a letter from David Russell, who claimed he was moved to write me a letter of appreciation because of my 'wonderful' letters which have appeared from time to time in *TMR*. When I wrote back to tell him what a nice discerning chap he appeared to be (you should always humour the apparently insane), that was the last occasion I'd used Word in private correspondence, so it seemed only appropriate to use it again here. Your zine and his letter of course reminded me how right Robert Lichtman was (in this *SFC*), because the

last *TMR* was so overwhelming that I never did respond (and of course I am quick to seize upon his observation as proof that my failure to do so is actually *your fault* for sending out such awesomely magnificent fanzines and not my fault (no, never that) for being a snivelling, good-for-nothing, lousy, idle ingrate). That's all right then.

It's a glorious day today, so short interlude whilst we take 'The Boys' out for a squiggle. That's the current nonsense word for 'walk'. We are down to nonsense words. You wouldn't believe how quickly two Yorkshire terriers can learn the words 'perambulate' and 'peregrination'. We 'squiggle' at least once a day, and sometimes twice, but from their reaction you'd think they only went out for a walk every ten years or so. Once they realise, they go bananas! They bark like crazy, they run around in circles, they jump up and down from the furniture. It's the barking-like-crazy that drives me mad. We tried spelling. 'Get their El-Ee-Ay-Dee-Esses', Cas would say. I swear the damn dogs learned to spell in three days flat. Taking them for a 'doubleyou' (Walk) or 'doing the 'doubleyou' thing, lasted about the same length of time. So, having run out of words for 'walk', we're down to nonsense. When 'squiggle' loses its impenetrability, in your honour, we will 'bruce'. The trouble is they are so quick to pick up cues. The moment you decide that it'd be a good time to 'squiggle' you suddenly find that, even though you have not yet mentioned this to Cas, you are suddenly never more than three inches away from something small and furry, with pricked-up ears, which refuses to take its eyes off you for a second. End of segue, back to letter.

Still on the relatively recent Skelhistory: Running in parallel with the above was another thread in my personal tapestry. I don't have your problem with books. I used to have, but unlike you I was never a 'collector' but rather an 'accretor'.

Short interruption for a correction. I've never been a 'collector', in the sense of a person who collects books for some purpose other than reading. Like you, I am an 'accretor', for exactly the reason you describe below. Every book I've bought I've meant to read one day.

I would buy books and magazines, on the assumption I would one day read them, but like you hope outstripped the deed. By many, many laps. But one day I called a halt. Except it wasn't one day, it was several days. The first time I suddenly decided to 'clear the decks' was after a fannish weekend at our place, many years ago. I suddenly decided 'everything must go', and proceeded to sell all my books and magazines at 10p a time. Mark Bennet wrote me out a cheque for over £200, representing in excess of 2000 books. As we carried them out to the car one fell, and Mike Glicksohn, picking it up, remarked, 'You're selling a first edition of Heinlein's *Puppet Masters* for 10p?'

'Damn right!' I replied, feeling more free than stupid. Of course, I still had all my US *Astounding*s, and a lot of other stuff.

On the next occasion, a few years later I contacted my good friend Mike Meara and told him to bring his indexes the next time he and Pat came to visit, because anything I'd got that he wanted, he could have. That took care of most of the good stuff. Nothing was said at the time, but I just kind of assumed that he would reciprocate if he ever decided he'd no more interest in his fanzine collection. Free again!

Except there was still a huge volume of stuff, and it continued to grow. Eventually I snapped again, and everything (above the 'core' stuff I had to keep) went to the local Oxfam shop. Free again!

All this time, my fanzines were growing beyond my means to shelve or access them. I had over a dozen large cartons of them confined to the loft. Then came a seismic event. My friend Brian Robinson died. One side effect of his death was that Cas and I had a few short days to go into his home and clear out all the SF material to give to TAFF. TAFF at the time was in dire straits, as Abi Frost had just rendered it insolvent. We salvaged a phenomenal amount of material, which I felt should have realised a couple of thousand pounds, but because of both the volume and TAFF's then current problems, it was essential to move it quickly to a dealer for a thousand quid. One thing we didn't get was any useful fanzines, because Brian, in his psychological mire, had taken every fanzine (and he had some good stuff) and ripped it in half and binned it.

But I realised that, although TAFF was taking away all Brian's SF, it could also take away my surplus fanzines. So I did a cull, and ruthlessly chopped my collection right back to the absolute minimum. And boy, was I ever ruthless! I think I started out with 20 boxes of fanzines and ended up with four.

Fast forward to about April 2000. Mike Meara wrote me that he was wanting to dispose of his fanzine collection, and could I help him (for a commission)? I wrote back that I had no idea how to do such a thing, offered to put him in touch with Dave Langford, who could presumably help and, very boldly for me, expressed my disappointment that he hadn't chosen to gift me with his fanzines in the same way I had gifted him with my SF mags. He obviously appreciated the correctness of this approach, because he subsequently wrote that when they came to visit, over Christmas 2001, I should be prepared to receive an inordinate number of boxes of fanzines that he proposed to leave with me, free and gratis. Sometimes it pays not to let things fester.

Anyway, my excitement at this was because Mike used to go to auctions and buy fanzines. I didn't. To me a fanzine was something you didn't have to buy. I paid for *Warhoon 28*, and at a convention auction for three issues of *Richard E. Geis*, and for a couple of TAFF trip reports, but other than that, all my zines were free. Anything decent in my own collection was probably a duplicate of something Mike had passed on, or basically I just got lucky.

Anyway, suddenly I had 27 boxes of fanzines. Again I was brutal in my selections, and managed to get the 'keeps' down to about 12 boxes. This time, though, I carefully indexed everything. I heard that they were offering Bill Bowers a 'deferred' TAFF trip, and offered him all the stuff I didn't want, so he could auction it for that. Bill replied that he was pretty much sure his ever-worsening health problems would prevent him making the trip, but that he'd love some of the stuff for his own collection, and that yeah or nay on that, he'd still be happy to auction the rest off for me. This struck me as a fabulous idea as we were (and indeed still are) intending to visit the USA and Canada in the summer of 2003 and any dollars raised would make the trip more affordable, especially as we already have enough BA Miles to get us there and back for free. Bill took about 7.5 kg of the best stuff off the top. At the time Mike Glicksohn said that without all that good stuff I'd be lucky to make any significant return and shouldn't get my hopes up. But I wasn't unduly concerned, as my main aim was simply to get rid of the damn things, and any financial return would just be a bonus. At least, with an auction I knew that any zines sold would be going to fans who'd really appreciate them. There was still some good material left, and I told Cas, 'With

any luck we'll maybe make £1000/$1500. That would really help towards the trip costs.'

Bill put in a phenomenal amount of effort on that auction, running it for over a year and greatly exceeding my financial expectations. Also greatly exceeding my 'getting rid' expectations as, now it is concluded, I have less than three cartons of surplus fanzines, and I hope to reduce this even further by offering what's left on a 'free-to-good-homes' (i.e. P&P only) basis to the UK auction participants (for whom the cost of postage would be relatively insignificant). After the auction I gave Bill another 7.5 kilos of material he'd subsequently discovered an interest in.

Bill wrote that he'd generally enjoyed the process, but I do know that it was a lot of work by him, and that during certain health 'troughs' it became an onerous obligation. At the start he'd been running my auction in parallel with one of his own, but he'd had to put that on hold, as the sheer volume of stuff he was shifting for me was overwhelming. No *Outworlds*, either, you'll notice, though I don't think I'm entirely to blame for that. In comparison, I had it easy humping boxes up and down from the loft whenever we had visitors, keeping up with Bill's regular updates, going through the boxes, picking out the zines that had been sold, and putting them into plastic carrier bags with the winning bidder's name on, and whenever anyone's 'winnings' looked to be approaching the 5 kg international weight limit, making up and posting off a shipment. So that's what all my fannish energies have been devoted to for the past 18 months. I'll miss it.

'What'll you do now it's over?' Cas asked.

'Read some fanzines again. Maybe send out some long-overdue LoCs.'

Starting with this one. One of the runs of fanzines that sold was some old *SFC*s, various issues from 4 through 66, for $100. That seemed a lot at the time, but for 31 zines (43 issue numbers) that's probably pretty cheap. Particularly since a batch of twenty-plus 1960s *Vectors* went for $650. Of course we all thought that was ludicrous, but the guy that lost out in the bidding on that is making noises that he wished he'd held out another couple of rounds. What would the *SFC*s have fetched if only there had been two guys who wanted them?

That paragraph makes me groan with frustration. I would have been a bidder, since I have only one complete collection of my fanzines, and, thanks to Derek Kew, another near-complete collection. But I desperately need another complete collection, which I could perhaps store off the premises.

You see my attitude to 'sercon' matches that of Jerry Kaufman's, and when you switched from sending me *TMR* to sending *SFC* I was distraught. I don't want to read about SF. I want to read about you, but because you've transferred 'I Must Be Talking To My Friends' successfully to the new zine, then I don't see as how it matters.

But you are going to have to stop sending me your fanzine. I cannot believe I read 'Four Reasons for Reading Thomas M. Disch'. This is a writer I cannot bring myself to read, ever since reading *The Genocides* and being depressed beyond reclamation. Yet here is an article that makes sense, yet I will never read the guy for pleasure.

But wait. Your zines have not changed, but I obviously have. I no longer need a week-long holiday to respond (I noticed that earlier LoCs always used to be written during long Xmas holidays). Now a three-day weekend will suffice. In fact, even the final day will do. Please do not take this as a failure on your part, but rather as a triumph on mine.

(12 May 2002)

You cannot escape from my fanzines as easily as that. Who said that I had stopped sending you *The Metaphysical Review*, just because I haven't time and money to publish an issue since 1998? I have about 100,000 words of material for the next issue, including some superb articles and at least 50,000 words of letters of comment. Meanwhile, *SF Commentary* is still just another Gillespie fanzine — it includes lots of personal stuff as well as articles about SF and fantasy.

Skel, like Dave Piper you are one of those people for whom I publish my magazines. Now he's gone, I have no choice but to keep sending you my fanzines.

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I can't remember how long ago *SFC* 76 arrived, but I do know that it had languished unread until *SFC* 77 turned up — not from lack of interest, but straightforward lack of time. (Which means, having gone downstairs to check the date of publication — I've filed it in with the rest of our small collection of litcrit — that it must have languished unread for at least a year. Bloody hell!) And the same has been responsible for my failure to open *SFC* 77 until very recently. Not until the past week, in fact — although I have to confess that I skipped over most of the book reviews, because I know that I'm never likely to read any of the titles reviewed. Again, not because of lack of interest, but lack of time — in theory, I'm still interested in science fiction, and still like to know what's going on in 'the field'; but in practice, such SF-related news as I imbibe is confined to *Ansible* and the BSFA's *Matrix* (I stopped reading *Locus* at least a decade ago). It must be over a year since I last opened an SF novel.

At least, I suppose so — I can't remember what SF title I last read, or when! These days, I find it difficult to make room to read fiction of any kind. I'm slowly working my way through the late Patrick O'Brian's series of novels about Jack Aubrey and Stephen Maturin (one constant pleasure of this on-again, off-again summer has been to open a bottle of wine of an evening, slip a baroque concerto into the CD player, and read a chapter or two of O'Brian); I've discovered Iain Pears's series about art detective Jonathan Argyll and the Italian Art Squad (oddly inessential works, but satisfyingly convoluted and clever); I've read all four of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels (manufactured nostalgia for a lost England that never was, but plotwise getting darker all the time); I've got Lemony Snicket's *Series of Unfortunate Events* awaiting my attention (the blurbs alone are an absolute hoot); and there's a pile, 30 to 40 books strong, of SF paperbacks from the last five or six years still to be read (but the pull they might once have exerted — science fiction! urgent visions of the next five minutes! — is conspicuous by its absence). Never mind the 30 to 40 non-fiction history and archaeology texts still to be absorbed (carefully sorted, like the shelves of history and archaeology which have been read, by geography and period — a classification that baffles everyone but myself) — all reasons why, apart from occasional lapses (Pears and Snicket), I've largely given up buying books. (So has Judith, for that matter.) Oh, there are times when, as we say, we find that a book or two has followed us home, but we manage to avoid

'book accidents' of the kind you describe by the simple expedient of very rarely going into bookshops, and then only shops selling new titles; never secondhand bookshops. (This avoidance strategy is greatly helped by there not being any secondhand bookshops in Tottenham and Wood Green, and only one new bookshop, a branch of Ottakar's, in Wood Green High Street. There are, of course, bookshops in central London, where I work, and Peterborough, to which Judith commutes most days, but — paradoxically — they seem to require more effort to get to. I have no idea why this should be so, unless it's mere inertia that keeps me at my desk at lunchtimes. Besides, it's easier to read the newspaper there: no breeze to keep blowing the thing about.)

The consequence is that I'm largely ignorant of what happened in science fiction during the 1990s, and most of the writers I still follow were those I was reading in the eighties (although even then I'm a book or two behind their actual output). Innumerable new writers have emerged and flourished without my ever having read a word of theirs — anything by Paul McAuley, for example (I suppose I must have read his early short stories in the early issues of *Interzone*, but have no memory of doing so), or Ian McDonald, for another. I've read a couple of novels by Stephen Baxter, a couple by Ken MacLeod (and intend to read more, since I like his politics), have heard of China Miéville (someone who I think I ought to read, again because of his politics), but beyond that . . . (Jon Courtenay Grimwood? interesting name, but who he?)

None of this was deliberate: the product of conscious choice, several years ago, to pursue other paths; it's just the way life has turned out. I remember (with affection!) my years as an active fan, in the late seventies and early eighties; but the chance of my ever being as active again is remote. Indeed, beyond occasional socialisation at parties and the like, we seem not, now, to have much contact with other fans. I don't even go to the monthly London pub meetings any more, and haven't for three years. (Three years ago this very month was in fact the last. Three years ago next month, BBC2 began broadcasting the second series of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* on Thursday evenings, with the first series of *The Sopranos* following later on Channel 4, and I stayed home to watch them in real time rather than record them for later. And once you've stepped off the regular first-Thursday cycle, it's hard to resume the habit.) But in those three years, fandom as I knew it seems to have undergone some fairly profound changes — the inexorable and continuing rise of online fandom, which scarcely existed even four years ago, and in particular the emergence of interactive online weblogs and diaries, most featuring a slew of people virtually unknown to me. (Live Journal? Webbing the Surf? How does anyone have time? Are they all unemployed and rich, or have incredibly indulgent employers who don't care what their employees get up to?) Print fanzines seem almost to have been extinguished.

But don't stop sending us your fanzines (however infrequently they're published)! We're not really gafiating, really! Like all fans who burned brightly for the first few years (you were undoubtedly one of them), we've just dropped back to a less intensive level of activity, putting our energies into other things (as I dare say you have too). For example, I edit the newsletter for our local museum's support group, and Judith does stuff for Haringey's Local Agenda 21 from time to time. We both have fairly demanding fulltime jobs. There's also the garden (last weekend, I replaced the plastic arch installed during our first summer here with a sturdier wooden one of bespoke design and construction) and the allotment (a bucketload of strawberries to turn into jam; so many onions that we won't need to buy any until next spring; the few platefuls of what looks to be our largest potato crop to date). And we spent the first week of July in Orkney, where it rained several times and where the wind blew strongly when it didn't, but where we saw lots of archaeology and wildlife and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. In September we're going to Tallinn for a few days, simply because it's there and looks interesting.

(Mind you, we're also going to Tallinn because we saw an advert for the trip in *The Guardian*. By contrast, the Orkney holiday was something we organised for ourselves via the web, email and the telephone. It was also the holiday we've taken in the past decade for which I have felt least prepared, because I hadn't had time to do more than glance through the relevant guidebook (Caroline Wickham-Jones's *Historical Orkney*) and map out a detailed itinerary in advance. (I had so wanted to read the Orkney chapters in Barry Cunliffe's *Facing the Ocean: A New History of the Atlantic and its Peoples* in advance, too.) But once we got there, time seemed to slow tremendously (we didn't watch the television news, didn't buy a paper, didn't care what was happening in the outside world), and I read Wickham-Jones's book on the ferry to and from Mainland to Papa Westray on our second full day in Orkney, in effect mapping out our program for the rest of the week. We returned, I suppose I should be sorry to say, with another 10–15 cm of historical material to slot into our history and archaeology shelves — mostly booklets rather books, but interesting all the same.)

But I'm conscious that after all these paragraphs I still haven't said much about the fanzines.

And after a long pause in which I went off to reacquaint myself with their contents — re-read some of George Turner's reviews, for example — I'm not quite sure that I can. I admire the rigour with which George sets out his stall (why he is saying what he says), but I'm not sure that I agree with all of his conclusions. As someone who's written a hell of a lot of reviews himself (most of them when I was editing the BSFA's *Paperback Inferno* (which no longer exists) in the first half of the 1980s), I can readily sympathise with his argument that there's too much crap out there and that fans ought to be discerning in their choices; but on the other hand, why suggest that bad writers should be given the benefit of the doubt for their first couple of novels? Bad writers should be stamped on immediately — recall, for example, Brian Aldiss's assault on Chris Boyce in the first (or was it the second?) issue of *SF Horizons*, in response to which Boyce promptly abandoned fiction. When he resumed, ten years later, he was still no fucking good, and the reviewers told him so. (I was one of those reviewers, although I didn't catch up with him until 1980.) He has since wisely remained silent.

I should undoubtedly say more. But unlike Alan Sandercock et al. (I shared a room with him once at a British convention in the late seventies), I shall not promise to write more in a few days' time, because I know I won't — once I've spoken, that's it. Not because I don't care, but because there simply isn't the time.

(3 August 2002)

ALAN SANDERCOCK
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We got back to Atlanta last Sunday evening at 6.30. Interestingly enough we actually left Adelaide at 6 a.m. on the same day, so Sunday was a very long day for us.

I have to say that I had an absolutely wonderful time in

Australia, spending it almost strictly as a tourist from America. Sydney was a real eye-opener for me this time around. I'd never actually taken the time (since about 1968) to look at the so-called tourist attractions, and even in 1968 I missed out on places like the Blue Mountains and the Rocks.

After Sydney, we hired a car and drove north to stay with Joy Window and her partner Andrew. Once again we had an interesting time, since Joy took us into a rainforest and showed us Byron Bay and other beach destinations. These people live out on a one-time farm in the middle of nowhere.

The final third of our trip was spent in Adelaide. This is the week where I saw Jeff Harris, Paul Anderson, John Foyster and my old friend John Hewitt. Of course, I had a few cousins to meet as well.

While in Adelaide we went to see *Dirty Deeds*. I thought it was a very interesting and exciting film, and Jane and Maria both thoroughly enjoyed the film for slightly different reasons. They identified with the two Americans coming to Australia and being confused by the local customs — especially the anti-tipping rule. And once again I was amazed by Toni Collette's versatility.

(11 August 2002)

One day we'll meet again, Alan. As I said to you when you announced that you would be visiting Australia but not Melbourne, Melbourne is where the fans are. It's obvious that I will never have the money to visit you in Georgia.

JOHN BROSNAN
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Many thanks for *SF Commentary* 77. Once again it's like being on a starship and receiving mail that was sent from Earth years before. Lots of good stuff as usual. Particularly liked the Thomas M. Disch piece written by the sadly missed John T. Sladek. And, of course, I appreciated the reviews of my books, some of which I don't remember writing.

Odd experience reading my letter of February 1994. I note with amusement that back then I was desperately trying to find good things to say about the movie *Beyond Bedlam*, based on my book — or rather Harry Adam Knight's book — *Bedlam*. I even said that it was fairly faithful to the novel which, in retrospect, is pretty funny. There are some scenes from the book that are reproduced in the film, but the basic premise of the novel, which was inspired by Jerome Bixby's story 'It's a Good Life', is entirely absent from the movie. The idea that the characters are trapped in a separate world created by an omnipotent psychopath is never introduced, with the result that the events in the movie make no sense at all. It's now regarded as one of Elizabeth Hurley's all-time worst films, which is saying something, and her then boyfriend at the time, Hugh Grant, described it as a 'chancre'. But it's a better movie than *Proteus*, made by the same producer, which was based on HAK's first novel, *Slimer*. I get sole scriptwriting credit, unfortunately, but everyone and their dog obviously contributed to the screenplay (the dogs wrote the better lines). My screenwriting career fizzled out after that for some strange reason.

Last week I received a letter from a producer who said he wanted to film all three of the 'Sky Lords' novels, but no mention of any option money. I'm not holding my breath.

(7 May 2002)

It's a coincidence you mentioning the possibility of Ortygia House finally being done up. The builders have been in for months now. The house is not only being rewired but the empty flat next to mine is being entirely refurbished. (Colin Greenland used to live there.) The noise has been driving me crazy. But Ortygia House went upmarket some time ago. I'm the last of the old guard, and my flat does resemble the Bates Motel, but the rest of the house is full of people who drive BMWs and pay a fortune for their flats. I suspect that when the owner, the ancient Mrs Smith, died some years ago, she left instructions that any of the tenants who moved in when she was alive should have their rents frozen; my rent has stayed the same for years. You couldn't afford to rent a room in Harrow for what I pay monthly for this flat.

I've been in a financial crisis for over a year now and have been on income support (that is, the dole) during that time. The last book I had published was *Scream*, which, as the title suggests, was about the 'Scream' movies. Hack writing at its worst. Didn't help that I hadn't seen the third movie in the series by the time I had to deliver the book.

Then I wrote a book about Hannibal Lecter that got dropped by the publishers for copyright reasons. However, I have sold an idea for a big SF novel to Gollancz/Orion. It's called *Mothership*, a cross between a generation ship saga and *War of the Worlds*. Already written 30,000 words . . .

No, I can't claim to be the matchmaker between Liz Hurley and Hugh the Hair. They were an item long before *Beyond Bedlam*. Ironically, the movie came and went in cinemas just three weeks before Liz wore That Dress at the premiere of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and became instantly famous.

At John Baxter's suggestion, I wrote an outline last year for a book about Liz (I was that desperate) but the agent I sent it to said she was yesterday's news. This was before the Liz's Baby saga began. But even so, I heard nothing more about my outline. Probably a good thing. She sues at the drop of a Versace pin.

Baxter has been keeping me up to date about John Foyster. How is Peter Nicholls doing?

You've probably heard that John Murray aka Richard Cowper died a couple of weeks ago, just three weeks after the death of his wife. And Joan Harrison, wife of Harry, has also recently died.

I've been thinking of returning to Australia, but somehow I don't think that's a good idea.

(8 May 2002)

I had no idea that George Effinger was dead until I got your email. I then checked the latest *Ansible* on the net and saw that Cherry Wilder had also died. Bloody hell. You, Effinger and I are (were, in Effinger's case) the same age. Talk about intimations of mortality. I hadn't even heard about Bangsund's heart attack. My health is okay apart from high blood pressure and alcoholism. I also smoke heavily, so it will be a toss up as to what will kill me first. Probably the alcoholism. A close friend of mine who used to run my drinking club, died of liver failure at the end of 2000. Alcohol gets you one way or the other.

I was in detox twice in 1998, but I'm still drinking. It goes in cycles. I can control it for a few weeks at a time, then something sets me off on a binge and I end up in hospital. Needless to say, my local hospital is getting pretty fed up with me. No, don't suggest I join AA. I abhor the whole organisation for various reasons.

You're probably right about me moving back to Australia would be professional suicide. It's just that I have a pressing need to escape somewhere.

(9 May 2002)

I told John that Peter Nicholls seemed quite chipper at the recent launch of a film all about him. *The What If Man* is a film about Peter and science fiction, but he doesn't exactly hide his warts and all. He speaks in the film about contracting Parkinson's disease, which does not seem to have proceeded as quickly as he had feared. During 2002, John Foyster returned to publishing his electronic fanzine *eFNAC*. Peter McNamara and Barbara Winch are editing a sequel to the collection *Alien Shores*.

I'm sure you'd be welcome back in Australia, John, but there's much less writing work here than in Britain.

PATRICK McGUIRE
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Columbia MD 21046, USA

SFC 77 arrived in the mail on 10 November. It was a pleasant surprise, both intrinsically, and because it arrived at a moment when I was happy for a change in reading matter, since I had been housebound for four days with a severe cold, and had been going through a lot of books. (It's now going on five days of houseboundness, and the symptoms were coming on for several days before landing me at home, but the thing does seem to be easing off gradually. And the symptoms do not seem to be those of flu, so it's presumably not anthrax either!)

I caught the cold at a convention, which I seem to have a habit of doing in recent years. I got back from the Philadelphia Worldcon unscathed in September, but the Bouchercon (the mystery-fiction worldcon) happened to be in the Virginia suburbs of Washington DC this year in early November, and it seemed worth attending. (I had been vaguely meaning for years to go to a Bouchercon, and this one was conveniently close.) The onset symptoms of the cold seemed remarkably similar to those I experienced after Chicon last year.

I said convention above. Actually, even though the Bouchercons were founded by SF fans on the model of SF convention fandom, there has been a degree of differentiation over the years, notably in terminology, perhaps as the mystery fans feel a need to distinguish themselves and assert their independence, or perhaps just through random drift. Thus 'con' tends to be expanded as 'conference' rather than 'convention'. The con suite becomes the hospitality lounge. The con members become conference participants.

Sure and it nivver entered me poor head that 'I must be talking to my friends' was in the Irish style of English (page 18), with the extended Irish use of the present progressive tense. Thus it means something like it is time for me to talk to my friends — not it must be the case that at the moment I am talking to my friends, which was how I had always read it. The latter seemed to raise the question of just what were the symptoms by which it could be discerned that Bruce was talking to his friends, as distinct from talking to other people. A relaxed attitude? Openness on which topics he was willing to address? But now all the mystery and nuance evaporates, and it's just Irish dialect! On the other hand, according to the Primary Source, there *are* symptoms (when the people see me quiet) whereby it can be discerned that the Old Woman is talking to her friends, so perhaps we recover by literary allusion what is lost in direct implication.

These days the SF community has become the fantasy/SF community, and the whole thing has gotten so bloated and diluted that it is often hard to detect important new SF writers. Greg Egan (page 29), as local talent, got a fair amount of publicity at Aussiecon Three, which caused me to pick up a book of his, which then sat around for a long time even after the books I had mailed myself arrived, but which I finally got read about a year ago — at which point I starting rounding up as many of other Egan books as I could find. I very much enjoyed *Diaspora* and *Permutation City*, although aspects of them did remind me of the thought variant story in the Tremaine-era *Astounding*: they put forward a Mind-Bogglingly Big Idea, but one that, on reflection, the reader is likely to reject in the Real World as implausible. Since this is a matter of subjective plausibility rather than of logical flaws, this could be taken as merely a sign of the reader's lack of Cosmic Mindedness, but on the other hand, I can't think of any of the thought variant ideas that has much currency today, and many of them have been refuted. (For instance, atoms are not solar systems, galaxies are not atoms.)

I seem to be bogged down in Egan's *Distress*, but I'll probably get it finished sooner or later. I'm not sure of the reason, and it could be just me — I sometimes bog down partway through a book for no strong reason, and what with all the other books around, it may take me a while to pick it up again.

I have had nothing directly to do with Sisters in Crime, and I share a degree of unease with their official genderedness, but they do have male members and even have a 'Misters in Sisters' subgroup, so it's not like they're radical man-haters. If they were running the only mystery convention on my continent (or even my city), I expect I would give them the benefit of the doubt and see if they had anything interesting to offer. Bouchercon was at least two-thirds female anyhow, and the local mystery convention here, Malice Domestic, which focuses on the 'cozy', may be as much as 90 per cent female among fans, about 75 per cent among attending authors. So one is going to be rubbing shoulders with a disproportionate number of women at any mystery con — the flip side of what was true in SF until perhaps the 1980s. (The local SF group I belong to is at least 70 per cent male, for that matter, although US conventions now seem to be about 50-50, in part thanks to fantasy, I think.)

(12 November 2001)

From time to time I've thought about the possibility of organising mystery fandom here as a complement to SF fandom. Sisters in Crime is the closest equivalent, but whether its members mean to or not, it sends the message that it doesn't want me, a mere male. When a lot of Australian academics began writing crime novels during the nineties, the mystery field picked up the whiff of respectability. Thank ghod there's still nothing respectable about SF fandom. But there's also no Australian mystery fanzine in whose letter column one could natter about the latest book by one's favourite mystery writer.

RICHARD E. GEIS
PO Box 11408, Portland OR 97211, USA

This latest *SF Commentary* is beautiful and impressive and depressing, because my eyes have gotten so bad I can't read it much, and that produces guilt and that produces anger: 'How dare you send this thing to me to cause me anguish and pain?' You see how the mind works. I've just given up my book review column in *SF Chronicle* because of the eye problems, and now this.

Seriously . . . I'd prefer you to not send any more *SFC*s and thus save a lot of money and postage. I know we have a looong tradition of sending all for all, but I'm 74 now and I think I've given my all. So, again, stop sending these fine magazines. My ego can only stand so much abuse, you sadist! See how I twist things around! Think of me as a politician.

(12 November 2001)

Richard E. Geis, all four issues of it in 1971 and early 1972, was one of the greatest influences on my fanzines. (Others include John Bangsund, in *ASFR*, John Foyster, in all his fanzines, Pete Weston, in *Speculation*, Richard Bergeron, in *Warhoon*, and Bill Bowers, in those crackling early issues of *Outworlds*.) There's always been a Richard E. Geis. And now he writes to say he can't read what I'm sending.

Later, he sent a general email that he was going into hospital from some fairly drastic back surgery, and nobody heard from him for a long time. I note in the latest *Ansible* that he has made contact with Dave Langford. I did receive one final message from Dick Geis:

My eyes tire very quickly and lose focus. As of now, freed of most reading, I'm beginning to write a bit of fiction again; sporadic spurts is a good Geisian description of the process. Essentially I write until the big type on the screen is blurry, and then quit for an hour. Thank Ghod for adjustable type fonts.

LEIGH EDMONDS
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Your comments on all the recent deaths in the family (if you know what I mean) reminds me that Valma and I missed the departure of some of the people you mentioned. We welcomed the arrival of the new year in the hope that, even though it may be no better than 2001 in most ways, it will not be filled from first day to last with the awful drabness of overcoming what happened to us in October 2000. Only recently have we begun to notice what is happening in the rest of the world, and it seems that, in general, most people would have been more than happy to go straight from 2000 to 2002, giving the intervening 365 days the big miss.

One of the things that I have achieved in the past couple of months is to get our books back into order. In Perth they were all organised nicely in the numerous bookcases we had around the house, but when we arrived here I just emptied books into the nearest bookcase to get rid of the boxes (which was better than when we arrived in Perth, where all the books sat in a huge pile for a couple of years until I made new cases for them all). So now all the fiction is in the lounge room and spills into the hall, where it is joined by the stuff on literature, poetry, drama, etc, etc. In the dining room is all the Australiana (history, sociology, politics, etc.), various other forms of history, historiography, books about cricket and music and lots of books about cooking (right by the kitchen door where, in theory at least, they are readily available). Upstairs, just outside the door to my room, is the history of technology and aviation history as well as all those computer manuals that you can never quite bring yourself to throw out just in case you might want to use Windows 3.1 again. Inside my room is the 40 or so folders of material that I collected for my PhD that I must mine again one of these days. Now, finally, I can lay my hands on that Sladek novel I was thinking about, that monograph on Swedish iron bridges that I need to borrow a thought from or that Cabinet Agenda from September 1938 that says something interesting. Goshwowboyohboy.

After all the books were lined up I discovered that somehow (and I have no idea how it happened, but it is the honest truth, do books shrivel up as they get older?) I have about two metres of empty shelf space. This is likely to remain empty for some time to come because Valma and I have more or less taken the pledge and don't buy books — more or less. We got given three books for Christmas and I bought one book last year (Harold Poulton's *Law, History and Politics of the Australian Two Airline System* that I picked up in a secondhand shop in Daylesford, since you asked). At some time we came to the realisation that we had a house full of books, many of which remained unread decades after they were bought. Of course, for books that are tools of the trade, such as monographs on Swedish iron bridges, this is no problem, but for other books, the process of buying is more about consumption than about the pleasure of reading, and the hope that one will live forever to enjoy them all. The problem with taking the pledge is that you can tell when we stopped acquiring fiction (in about 1988) and general texts (around 1997) by the gaping holes in what we have on the shelves. It is a pity, to be sure, but at least there is space on the wall for some paintings (not that we have got around to putting them up yet).

What did I enjoy in this issue? I liked Colin Steele's reviews, which I used to enjoy reading in the *Canberra Times* when we lived there. If I thought I might live to be 120, there are some books written about here that I would like to indulge myself in — Chris Priest's *The Prestige* sounds particularly juicy.

It is.

As usual, the letter column is full of all kinds of oddities that deserve some comment. I cannot resist the urge to tell you that you should read more history after reading your comments to Michael Hailstone that nothing much happened to ordinary people in Australia until 1970. You do preface that comment with 'My own experience . . .', and all of us with long memories will dredge through them to recall that neither of us was too much in touch with the real world in that period. Or perhaps it is that change did not become obvious until around 1970, though it had been occurring beneath the surface from the early 1960s. Let me recommend Stuart Macintyre's *A Concise History of Australia* (1999), which has most of the problems of a one-volume history, but is still a very enjoyable read. (That's the kind of thing that I've been reading these past few years, along with lots of what we call 'evidence' in the trade. At the moment I'm trawling through old issues of *Australian Aviation* (well, I'm not; I'm avoiding it by reading *SFC* and writing this at the moment) for a major project, and after a day of doing that, the last thing that is likely to appeal to me is to spend the evening reading too. So instead I indulge in my other hobby.

Remember, Leigh, that I spent two fulcrum years, 1969 and 1970, in sleepy old Ararat. I was attempting to teach, and I published 18 issues of *SF Commentary* during those two years. I saw little of Melbourne. I couldn't even pick up most Melbourne radio stations. The 1969 election, immortalised in David Williamson's play and film *Don's Party*, had little impact up country. The Coalition won again in 1969, just as they had always done. I had no idea that many people expected Labor to win that year, rather than have to wait until 1972. The first sign of something changing were Adrian Deamer's editorship of *The Australian*, and, much

more radically, the copies of Barton's Sunday newspapers that my flatmate brought back from his weekend trips to Melbourne. Censorship was breaking down; journalists were starting to make fun of politicians instead of covering up for them; and the great political cartoonists were strutting their stuff. It was on; whatever It eventually turned out to be, and despite the fact it lasted only a few years.

I enjoyed reading the David Lake letters. At the conclusion he seems to be looking towards the kind of future that Wells depicted in *The Time Machine* (because our books are now in order I could check my recollection that Lake had dealt with the topic at some time, and indeed there is a book of his titled *The Man Who Loved Morlocks* that I don't recall reading) with everything gradually running down — good old entropy. But the one thing that historians and science fiction writers should both know (those who look to the past and those who look to the future) is that the future will be nothing like we imagine it to be, and the past wasn't either. My guess is that people will make it into space on a permanent basis, and that eventually millions or billions of people will be living there, but that the earth will also go the way Lake suggests.

I also liked Lake's previous paragraph about how there has to be an objective truth. When I was doing my PhD, most historians around me were discovering postmodern thought and wandering off into all kinds of relativities. This led to a very interesting confrontation between me and another person at a symposium, where he pulled out his theorist to support his postmodern view and I pulled out mine to support my less imaginative view. In the end, I commented, it came down to whose theorists were bigger, and while everyone in the room had read the obligatory Baudrillard, Derrida, and Habermas (does anyone still read them?), nobody had read Hughes, Pinch, or Leo Marx, and so I was on my own. This led me to write in the subsequent issue of *Studies in Western Australian History* (vol. 17), if you will allow me the indulgence to quote myself:

> A real world apart from human desires does appear to exist, at least to those whose job is to make things work in the world, such as engineers and medical practitioners. They have to proceed on the assumption that the world imposes non-negotiable constraints on what people can and cannot do such as gravity, electricity, chemical bonds and entropy. (To express this simply, the laws of nature mean we cannot socially construct the ability to leap tall buildings in a single bound; the best we can do is negotiate the meaning of the word 'tall'.)

(2 January 2002)

STEPHEN CAMPBELL
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Warrnambool VIC 3280

SFC arrived when I was feeling low, and it cheered me up to hear from you. Many memories were stirred in me of good times and vivid life. I have been living a slowed-down existence here in Warrnambool for nearly three years now, and have been immersed in introspection (not necessarily a good thing). I have been reading quite a lot of books, many of which are science fiction. Greg Bear I particularly like, and Doris Lessing I always enjoy. Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* and *Green Mars* were a good read, but at times a bit heavy going. Lately I've gone back to rereading early Asimov, which is fun, especially as I see more of the man in the writing. Philip Dick or D. G. Compton are not available at the library here. Probably considered too controversial in this very staid (but often wild) town.

I have been virtually out of contact with any intellectual life, and the only conversation I get is almost exclusively in pubs. Many recent years of my life have been like living in a stimulus vacuum — not really an ideal life for an artist — but I'm certainly getting experience of a large cross-section of people. I attempted to assimilate as expanded a view of the world I now occupy as I can, but horror of much of it overwhelms me. I am sickened by the extent of lies and propaganda that the media try and force us to swallow, and I tend to take it as a personal affront. The real horror is that the vile misinformation is working on many people, and anything other than regurgitation is frowned upon or argued with. I should have been told when I was young and choosing the path of the artist that freedom of thought and expression are not necessarily socially acceptable behaviour (but my eternal stubbornness would have rejected this anyway).

I would like to have a decent conversation with you when next I come to Melbourne. I do want to discuss science fiction literature and its perceived effects with you, because I do see it having extensive social consequences. Witness especially the ideas of Gibson on cybertechnology. I've closely watched developments since reading *Neuromancer*. Some of his original ideas and expressions are now in everyday use. The artist as self-fulfilling prophet? Heady stuff. And scary.

When we met that day in Acland Street in 1997 I was saddened to hear of George Turner's death. Apart from enjoying his writing, I met George in his working environment (for our work coincided once) and on social occasions, and I came to like and admire the man himself. His sharp pen was needed to deflate some writers' swollen egos, and let's face it, some science fiction is unreadable.

Thanks also for Gene Wolfe's address. I will write to him, and ask if he still has and enjoys the painting that I gave him at the 1985 Aussiecon. They were good days with Rowena (Cory Daniells) and Chris (Johnston) and the graphic arts business going well. I read the 'Long Sun' trilogy recently and, as usual, was stimulated by Gene's worlds. I've also read *334* by Tom Disch, *Vacuum Flowers* by Michael Swanwick, *Pacific Edge* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *What's Bred in the Bone* by Robertson Davies, *Nostromo* and *Victory* by Joseph Conrad, and many other old publications of SF and the classics, and enjoying most. Cordwainer Smith is always worth rereading.

Please give my warm regards to Elaine, and best wishes to all of those people I haven't seen for so long. You are not forgotten.

(2 December 2001)

Stephen Campbell was my sidekick in Ararat during *SFC*'s first two years. I lost track of him for a couple of years. He then lived in St Kilda for a long time, had a bad accident in the late eighties, then disappeared from everybody's sight. As Elaine, Judy Buckrich, John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland and I were walking from George Turner's funeral in St Kilda to Sheherezade Restaurant on that freezing day in June 1997, suddenly there on the footpath in front of me was Stephen Campbell, looking very little different from when I had seen him last! I was so astonished that I said all the usual non-sayings, and didn't think to invite him to lunch with us. (Sudden surprises bring out the worst in me.) He

disappeared along Acland Street. I had no idea where he had gone until I met Rowena Lindquist at Aussiecon III. She gave me the address of Stephen's mother in Warrnambool, and an *SFC* sent to that address finally reached Stephen. But he hasn't visited Melbourne since then, and I haven't visited Warrnambool (although I now know several Warrnambool SF people, who don't seem to know each other).

MARK L. OLSON
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I really regret that I never had a chance to meet Sladek at Minicon. (I'm not sure the local fan community even knew he lived near by!)

I grew up in the Mississippi River valley on the southeast edge of Minnesota, which is hilly and wooded, so that's my image of the state. The north is heavily wooded also, mostly with pine and dotted everywhere with lakes, big and small. As you go west and south, the land becomes rolling prairie (all farmed, of course), which is hardly flat by Nebraska standards, but flat enough by most peoples'.

The open sky is one of the things I most miss living in New England — during the middle of October, Priscilla and I went to Ditto in Bloomington, Illinois (about 100 miles south of Chicago), and driving back to Chicago to catch our plane we were treated to thunderstorms off in the distance. In New England, a storm is upon you with little warning because the pervasive trees and hills make the horizon close. Out there we could watch storms ten or twenty miles off. Lovely!

(15 November 2001)

One of the most memorable trips of my life was the drive from Chicago directly south to where Bob Tucker was living in 1973. The sky was dark by 4 p.m. The ground was absolutely flat. The sky became a vast bowl, and we were crawling along its floor. I still would like to explore the midwest US states properly, but doubt I ever will.

JAN HOWARD FINDER
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In *SFC* 77 I found Sladek's article on Disch interesting and misdirected in many areas. Minnesota has no need for pyramids. Actually, it does have the Mall of America, which is pretty close to being a pyramid. The Midwest is dull only to folk like Sladek. The interesting thing is that maybe the so-called dullness is a great cause for inspiration. It is just possible that a writer needs just such an environment in order to dream and imagine. This is something found to be lacking in folk living with pyramids. Boring folk mistake plains and the like for dullness.

I don't seem to recall folk like Banjo Patterson, Henry Lawson or Arthur Upfield living in the Big Smoke, or on hilly interesting (?) countryside. Actually, I found my travels through the Australian Bush quite interesting. Of course, while I was raised in Chicago, it was in the middle of the Great Plains.

I went to a grad school which was listed as being 300 out of 300 as a party school among major universities. Funny, I had no problem finding parties or delightfully interesting young women to give backrubs to.

Sladek and Disch mistake militarism for the military. The media is a great font for misinformation. Oh yes, Hitler and British kings and religions and the like would force folk into the military for dubious reasons. Belike I'm looking at it from too short a perspective. Military schools are to the military as schools are to concentration camps. They sometimes seem to be great places for folk who like to abuse little boys. Funny that so many military schools are run by religious orders.

For the most part, in a non-draft situation the military in a few countries such as Australia, the UK, the States, Canada and New Zealand is *not* the place you get your first pair of shoes. Almost all military personnel in these countries' military are devoutly anti-war. They know how well a war could ruin one's whole day. They have to fight when the civilian yahoos have thoroughly screwed up and the military is called on to save their bacon.

Yes, assholes exist in the military. Of course, they exist in business and politics as well. Y'all have blessed us with Murdoch. Gee, thanks! Is it true that everyone in the Australian military is an automaton? They live to follow the wonderful rules laid down from on high?

I think Sladek and Disch paint interesting portraits of futility. Maybe that is why I never really cared for Disch's work. It is relatively easy to ask what is the purpose of our actions. You can then get into interesting, maybe, discussions about the purpose of life and the afterlife. If one looks at their impact on the world/universe, it is really a downer to realise that one makes no impact on life and the universe. However, some folk can and sometimes do make an impact.

Of course, one must remember that there are two purposes to the universe: (1) partying and (2) shopping. Everything else is just details.

On other matters I enjoyed your ramblings. Mike Levy is a very good person. Too bad you didn't drop me a line on the awards. I could have given you Mike's eddress. He was a big help as I chaired the Science Fiction Research Association conference in 2001. For persons who are interested in SF, be they academics or not, the SFRA is a good organisation.

As to reviving my fanzine *The Spang Blah*, I keep thinking about it. I'm a little bit daunted by the material, some of it decades old, I would have to scan in.

Who knows?

I have seen *The Fellowship of the Ring* twice now. I'll probably see it a few more times. I really enjoyed it. It is not the book, but it is one damn fine movie. It brought back memories of when I was much involved with Tolkien fandom in the sixties and early seventies. I wrote a tribute to Tolkien which Ernest Lilley was willing to print in his eZine, *SFRevu*, http://www.sfrevu.com/2001/9795%20December%20Cover/index.html.

If you are interested, you can find a summary of my travels in Australia from 16 August 1999 to 4 February 2000 at http://www.lastsfa.org/finder/wombats_wanderings.html.

(10 February 2002)

Jan Howard Finder, who answers to the name of Wombat, was at Aussiecon III, but I can't remember meeting him there! Which is strange, because I remember meeting him at Aussiecon I. He was one of the first American fans to join ANZAPA, kept in touch through *Spang Blah* for quite a few years, then disappeared from my sight. When Michael Levy emailed me last year to say that I had been awarded a citation in the Pioneer Award (see *SFC* 77), I later discovered that Wombat was chairman of the SFRA Conference at which the award was going to be presented. Which is how I got back in touch with him after all these years.

Also, it turned out that he had custody of the Aussiefan films that were passed from one convention to another during the early 1970s, and then in the early 1980s, and were a major factor in winning the right to hold Aussiecon I and Aussiecon II. Wombat made copies of the films, then arranged to send the films to Australian fandom, via Mark Loney. The films now reside in the National Film Archive, and VCR copies have been made for those interested.

As for Tom Disch: I read his works because he is one of our field's most skilled practitioners of the fine art of pasting words on the page in the right order. It's a rare skill in any field of writing, let alone SF and fantasy.

Disch's opinions about SF are another thing. His *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* has impelled two friends of mine, quite separately, to hurl the book across the room. I accepted the Hugo Award for this book at Aussiecon III on behalf of Tom, and I didn't feel at all tempted to hurl the Hugo across the stage. (I should have written my review of *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* three years ago. I'm way behind in my reviewing schedule.)

BOB SMITH
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I am enjoying hot ham and pea soup and *SF Commentary* 77 propped up in front of me. Between slurps, and trying not to spill any on that striking cover (and believe me, at 71, and recovering from a kidney op and heart damage, spills are not unusual), and some stimulating music on ABC FM, again I marvel at the Gillespie handiwork.

I have never read any Thomas M. Disch, which, I guess, is a shameful thing for an ancient SF fan to admit, but then again, when I look at all the SF authors paraded across the coffee-table visuals I realise that — up through the years — I have missed quite a few. Bit late now, since catching up is not my game any more. However, Sladek's article makes absorbing reading in its own right. 'Military life' certainly fascinates grownups, but I suspect Sladek and Disch never struck an army other than the more-often-than-not gunghoism of the USA. It may saturate our TV screens at times, but ex-service people from other countries smile with amusement.

Your point taken with regard to the September 11 events; and not being on the Net means I probably avoided all the clichés you mention. Radio and TV were (and still are) bad enough. As one who was brought up in England on the problems and tragedies of going into Afghanistan (in a recent book, the writer said that the bones of old British regiments could still be found where massacres had taken place during three Afghan wars), I suppose I imagined a clandestine operation would have achieved better results.

That bit of garden shown in your last issue looks lovely, but that book room looks absolutely shocking. It's with smug satisfaction I can declare that the only books lying around in our house are the ones I am reading. (Currently by my comfy chair are two by Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* and *Seven Days in New Crete*, and the hefty *Oxford Classical Dictionary* is within reach). Quite a few of the science fiction titles you mention are, of course, on my shelves, for instant delectation. The very top shelf of your photograph shows what appear to be prozines lying flat . . . ?

One section of the fanzine collection is lying flat on the top shelf in that photo. (Other large sections are scattered throughout the house.) The shelf of books below it contains a few of my favourite writers: Philip Dick fills almost one half of the shelf, and Brian Aldiss almost the other, with some space for some of the many Le Guin and Disch books I own.

The prozines I own are hidden behind the other books of those shelves. Since I began collecting prozines only in 1960, most of my prozines are digest sized. I've never had the opportunity to buy pulps.

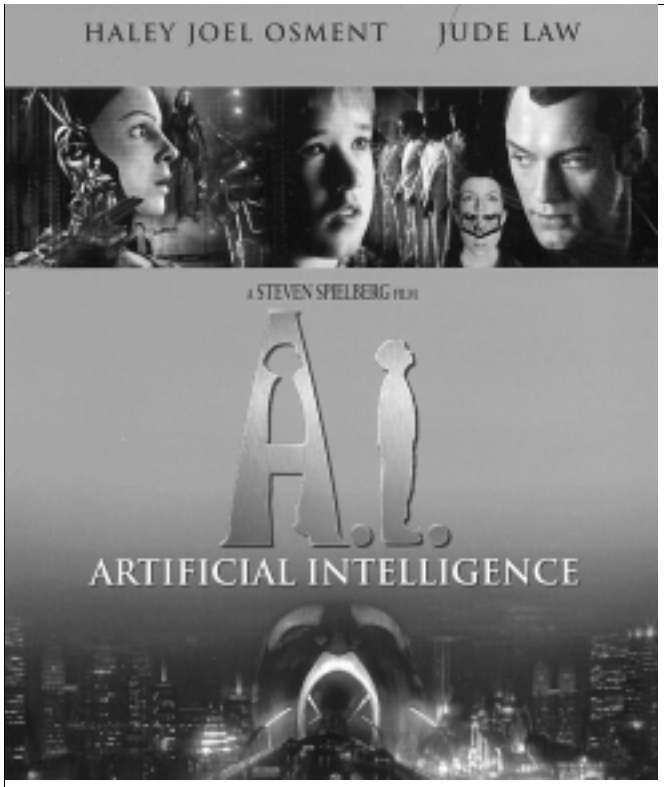
I thoroughly enjoyed browsing through all the books reviewed, and particularly appreciated the way you split them into their subgenres. I am surprised that Frank M. Robinson's *Science Fiction of the 20th Century: An Illustrated History* wasn't mentioned.

The email conversation with Robert Lichtman was most enlightening. I suppose the question I would ask both of you (remembering my own feeble attempts at fanzine publishing long ago): is it still *fun*?

David Lake, in particular, gave much food for thought, although much of his letter(s) was steeped in a sadness. I don't know what his age is, but mentally I was trying to grab him by the scruff and yell 'Wake up!' Hasn't anything *nice* happened to this fellow over the intervening years? Why nitpick the finer astronomical details of what is nothing but a work of fiction? Perhaps he would like to tidy up the spelling, grammar and punctuation of the poems of his hero William Blake!

(20 November 2001)

BRIAN W. ALDISS



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SF Commentary 77 is a tremendously interesting issue, beating all such journals as *SF Studies* and *Extrapolation* by a mile. This is the tradition of good amateur talk about SF such as we thought used to exist.

On the subject of *A.I.*, opinions seem to vary. But certainly it is an attractive and intelligent movie, raising many interesting questions — for which we are not likely to find the answers yet awhile. Have you thought what the response of the Muslim world would be if we in 'The West' ever produced androids that were effigies of human beings? Well, it's my boast that I'm the only guy on the planet to sell a story to Kubrick and Spielberg. And, of course, when I did that I expected my written words to be translated completely for the screen. Nevertheless, it's curious to see the Swinton household in the first hour of the film rendered more or less as described in a story I wrote back in 1968!

My belief is that Kubrick left much material on the film behind him when he died and that Spielberg tried to work within Stanley's parameters. Certainly the photography is beautiful, and some scenes very haunting.

(6 December 2001)

When I wrote a review of the *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* collection for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, I mentioned that a great deal had been used in the film *A.I.* from all three 'Supertoys' stories. Elements left out of the stories when the film was made — for example, that the father of the household is also the inventor of the boy android (played by William Hurt) — would have helped the film if they had been included. Most people I know hated the last section of the film, and regard it as 'Spielberg's bit'. Which means that the rest still looks and plays as a Kubrick film, especially the scenes at the beginning. Play *A.I.* on DVD, and one can always stop the film at its greatest moment, at the bottom of the sea. I see *A.I.* as both the essence of romanticism (that is, the search for the unattainable) and a critique of it. Almost all the current aims of hyper-technological society are self-contradictory, and romantic in the most fragile sense. If eventually you get what you really want, by manufacturing it, you might receive it for only one day. *A.I.* is one of the most beautiful films I've ever seen, one of the very few I can watch over and over again. So thanks to the technological ghods for DVD!

Brian also sent me a superb self-produced collection of meditative, rueful, heartfelt and often funny poems, *I Went to the House of the Sun*; and the fiction collection *A Cluster of Small Stories, including 'Never'*. Thanks.

ULRICH SPIEGEL
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Thank you very very much for sending me *SF Commentary* 77. It provided useful information not only about my favourite Australian author George Turner but also:

- For the first time I could see a quality photo of Franz Rottensteiner (I have only some photos, of much worse quality, in some German magazines.) By the way, Mr Rottensteiner told me that a review of mine of *Down There in Darkness* will appear in the next *Quarber Merkur*.
- I read about Engh's *Arslan*, which seems to be prophetic about the incidents of 11 September 2001.
- I read about one of the highlights of the days when I first began reading SF: *The City and the Stars*, which is in my memory the most popular novel by Olaf Stapledon not written by Stapledon.

Students of this year's Abitur course of mine had to deal with the beginning of Turner's 'The Fittest'. I like the short story and the novel version, *Drowning Towers*. German teachers tend to think that *Brave New World* is the only SF novel worth knowing.

(11 November 2001)

You complain that many people shy away from telling you their Top 10 lists.

That's to balance people, such as Chris Priest, who've begged me to drop the Top 10 lists.

Here is mine:

1 Jules Verne: *Journey to the Moon/Around the Moon*: maybe the most influential SF book, as it influenced engineers such as Werner von Braun and Herman Oberth, who set standards in rocket launching.
2 Arthur C. Clarke: *The City and the Stars*.
3 Stanislaw Lem: *Solaris*.
4 Stanislaw Lem: *The Star Diaries*. The German translations of both Lem books are direct translations from the Polish. I read some of Michael Kandel's English translations. They are quite good.
5 Olaf Stapledon: all his books.
6 Franz Rottensteiner: *Polaris Almanac*: only available in German; provided substantial criticism as well as fine (and not well-known) stories.
7 Strugatski Brothers: *Roadside Picnic*. An American writer would have made a 700-page book out of this material; but *Roadside Picnic* leaves out more than it says.
8 George Turner: *Drowning Towers*: Turner is the Dostoevski among SF writers, not Lem.
9 Ursula Le Guin's novels, especially *The Left Hand of Darkness*.
10 Kurt Lasswitz: *Auf der Scifenblase* [sp?]

Some German writers deserve wider recognition, not only the forefather, Kurt Lasswitz (*Auf Zwei Planeten*):

- Alfred Doblin provided a good example of a writer of great variety. He wrote *Berge, Meer and Giganten* (*Mountains, Oceans and Giants*), which became a model for Gunther Grass. It's difficult reading, even for German readers. I don't know if it has ever been translated into English.
- Gisbert Haefs wrote seven 'Barracuda' books, later compressed to a trilogy. They are set on a Hainish-type world corrupted by three different feminist/fundamentalist/fanatical groups. In some ways he describes the present world situation. The hero, Barracuda, is very human, described fully. Haefs himself regards Jack Vance as a model.
- Andreas Eschbach's *Haarteppisrhuipfer*: also due for translation into English. This book is set in a distant future on a different world, and tells about the efforts of people to make their life worthwhile by weaving a carpet from the hair of their children. The narrative technique is a pattern of short stories (carpet-like). The solution leaves some readers perplexed. Other Eschbach books provide more action.

But why should English or American publishing houses print any of the current German writers? It is much cheaper to publish a third- or fourth-rate American writers. That's what German publishers think, too.

MATS LINDER
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It is always fun to read other people's lists of favourite works in one aspect or another. I started thinking and came up with I would really, really want to *re*read. (For instance, I want to reread *Crime and Punishment* but not *The Idiot*.)

Here, then, in no particular order, is a list of SF and fantasy novels that may not be among the 'best' or 'most important' ones that I have read — but that I am looking forward to reading again. (And which, in some cases, may turn out to be a disappointment . . .)

- High Rise: J. G. Ballard. Will not disappoint me; I've read it twice already. A fascinating counterpart to *Lord of the Flies*, but this time with adults; riveting and disquieting. (Just read the first paragraph!)
- Echo Round His Bones and *Mankind Under the Leash*: Thomas M. Disch. The only thing I really remember about these books is that I found them very interesting. And well-written, of course.
- The Owl Service: Alan Garner. A beautiful, sad and moving little book.
- Skallagrigg: William Horwood. Bought on a whim many years ago, it proved to be an original and gripping story about people affected by cerebral palsy; contains a slight fantasy element; should be well known in the SF/fantasy world.
- Hard to Be a God and *The Second Martian Invasion*: A. and B. Strugatsky. Masterpieces by the masters of stories with a moral content (but without a boring moment); will keep you thinking for a long time afterwards.
- Some of Your Blood: Theodore Sturgeon. I remember very little of it, apart from how very good I thought it was.
- Pillar of the Sky: Cecelia Holland. Another underrated masterpiece; one of the best stories about political power (although set in Stonehenge times) I have ever read.
- The Man in the Maze: Robert Silverberg. A 'minor' work from his golden age, probably, but such an original story.
- Untouched by Human Hands, *Citizen in Space*, *Pilgrimage to Earth*, *Notions: Unlimited*, *Store of Infinity*, and *Shards of Space*: Robert Sheckley. Short stories that are fun to read.
- Gloriana: Michael Moorcock. Simply marvellous; this is what 'historically inspired' fantasy is all about.
- Nature's End: Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka. I have a soft spot for environmental-disaster stories; this is one of the best. (Two other fine ones, Wylie's *The End of the Dream* and Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up*, I have already reread enough.)
- The Prometheus Crisis: Thomas N. Scortia and Frank M. Robinson. Another disaster novel; this time about nuclear power. Very realistic and insightful, as I remember it.
- Last and First Men: Olaf Stapledon. How could I not include it?
- The Once and Future King: T. H. White. Such a masterful combination of fairy tale and real people, anachronisms and realism (at least so it seemed to me).
- Dune: Frank Herbert. I would like to see if it is still as exciting as when I first read it more than 30 years ago.
- 1984: George Orwell. Such good writing; such an *interesting* story.
- Castle Crispin: Allen Andrews. A moving, adult sequel to the more YA-oriented (but still fine) *The Pig Plantagenet*. Why is it not better known?
- The Food of the Gods and *The Island of Dr Moreau*: H. G. Wells. I have already reread *The Time Machine* and *The First Men in the Moon*.
- The Lord of the Rings: J. R. R. Tolkien. Have not read it in 30 years — will I still enjoy it as much?
- Glimpses: Lewis Shiner. A fascinating story, in particular for those of us who were young at the time of Hendrix, Doors, Beatles and Beach Boys, by yet another underrated fine sf writer.
- Jack of Shadows: Roger Zelazny. Great fun 25 years ago.
- Zodiac: Neal Stephenson. Another story about environmental problems, written with such vitality and humour as to make it still my Stephenson favourite, even above *Snow Crash*.

Most of the books I most want to reread are not SF or fantasy books. I tend to reread SF and fantasy favourites anyway, when I write articles for magazines like this. But nobody has ever commissioned me to write about Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, or Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* (the greatest Australian novel), or Patrick White's *Voss*, or Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, all of which bubble away in the mind, begging me to return to them.

I last reread Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* in 1976, and that was a startling experience. In 1965, when I read it first, none of the events in that book had happened to me. By 1976, a few of them had. This made it a different book. So how different a book would, say, *Voss* be in 2002, thirty-two years after I first read it, or *Richard Mahoney*, twenty-eight years after I first read it?

JOHN HERTZ

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It's no use my putting down what you put up. You already know what I think of Disch, and *Bring the Jubilee*, and you can guess what I think of *The Prestige*. You also know I think *The City and the Stars*, which I have indeed reread recently, is an enduring classic; I could put up what you put down, although you kindly printed Colin Steele's praise. I quite agree with you that 'Flowers for Algernon', which was masterly, should never have been bloated into *Flowers for Algernon*.

In your Recommended Nineties list, I don't know what to make of, for example, *The Adventures of Doctor Eszterhazy*, which, like the Davidson *Treasury*, was resplendent but written before the decade began.

The ***Adventures*** *of Doctor Eszterhazy* volume, containing the 'young Doctor Eszterhazy' stories, was published in the nineties, quite a bit later than the *Investigations*, the paperback version of the first series of stories.

You say gaps stand where you haven't read. I can't tire of calling R. Zabor, *The Bear Comes Home*, best fantasy novel of 1999; it came from without our community, and has been ignored by us, though it's done well enough, all told, to appear in paperback. I think Tim Powers' *Expiration Date* the best fantasy of 1996, and I commend Damon Knight's *Why Do Birds* (1992). Where is Niven? *Destiny Road* (1997), *The Ringworld Throne* (1996), *The Gripping Hand* (1993) and *Fallen Angels* (1991) all deserve applause.

Steele, in his scannings, deftly skewered an academic who bleated that SF is 'narrative manipulations in the interests of imaginative gratification'. Roscoe! It had better not be! This backlit your restatement from Sue Thomason a few pages earlier, 'Fiction about a viable, imaginable future should show how that future will benefit people who are not like me and don't share my assumptions'.

(11 November 2001)

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Talking of friends: Phil Harbottle tells me that Peter Hamilton, who edited *Nebula* back in the fifties, is now seriously ill, and at the last vintage book fair, I met Philip High for the first time.

A few recent recommended books:

- The Prestige by Christopher Priest.
- Any of the 'Cat Who' books by Lilian Jackson Braun.
- The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes by a Tibetan, and first published in India. It concerns the missing years in Holmes's life, when he visited India and Tibet. A fascinating adventure yarn of the Victorian age, with a Kipling character acting the role of Dr Watson.
- The Amsterdam Cops: Collected Stories by Jan Willem de Wetering: Dutch police in action.

(2 December 2001)

No sooner had I typed in your recommendation of *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* than Dennis Callegari walked into the usual Friday night Melbourne gathering with a copy under his arm. He had found one copy in a book discount store and thought it looked interesting.

BERND FISCHER
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Though I rarely read SF these days, I enjoyed *SFC* 77. There is always something in it reminding me of the old days (sixties, seventies) and the authors I used to read (Disch, Wolfe, Dick, Aldiss . . .) back then.

I would like to read the details of the Lem–Rottensteiner dispute. In one of the most recent issues of Rottensteiner's *Quarber Merkur* (the other SF magazine I subscribe to) I read, to my astonishment, a harsh dismissal of Lem's literary qualities made by Franz Rottensteiner. I couldn't make any sense of it, since FR was the one person who made Lem popular (at least in Germany and Austria), starting in the sixties in his own magazine, and in numerous others.

I trust you've already read Franz's letter at the beginning of 'Pinlighters', Bernd.

I read much crime fiction these days: Swedish authors, such as Mankell, Nesser and Erickson; and Andrea Camilleri, from Italy, with his Commissario Montalban (four of his novels have been successfully adapted for TV). Mankell is a big name in Germany. His last three novels have reached No. 1. His latest, *Firewall*, the final Wallander novel, will do the same, no doubt.

Some recent albums I liked include *Love and Theft* (Dylan), *Ten New Songs* (Cohen; I'm a long-time admirer of his works, and www.leonardcohenfiles.com is my favourite web site), *Heretics and Prophecies* (John Kay, of Steppenwolf fame; I just learned that his three brilliant solo albums from the seventies are available as CDs from www.steppenwolf.com).

I remember a letter you sent me some nine years ago where you wrote about songs you don't have on vinyl or CD but would like to have. Internet was not available to us then; these days you could try to search for these songs on such sites as Gnutella, Audiogalaxy, Morpheus and WinMX. I found many songs, mainly from the sixties, that were only available on vinyl as mp3 files.

(12 November 2001)

Not even my favourite CD pusher, Steve Smith from Readings, has ever been able to track down the two old 45s I would most like to own and hear again: Jerry Byrd's 'Memories of Maria', an instrumental (Hawaiian steel guitar solo and orchestral backing), written by Roy Orbison and Joe Melson, issued on Monument in 1962; and Floyd Cramer's 'Heartless Heart', a C&W version of a Chopin prelude, released in 1962 on RCA. Maybe some German collector has them and would be willing to sell them. (My third must-have, David Box's 'I've Had My Moments', also written by Roy Orbison and Joe Melson, turned up in a collection of old 45s sitting on the desk at The Last Record Store, just down Smith Street, a few hundred metres south of our place.)

ANDREW WEINER
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George Turner in *SFC* 76: quite a fearless critic. And rather hard on Bester. I suspect that if I reread *The Demolished Man*, I might well agree with some of Turner's complaints, which is why I have no plans to do so. *The Stars My Destination*, on the other hand, remains the one true masterpiece of American SF, although I probably shouldn't reread that one either.

Indeed, who has time to reread anything? I was quite alarmed at that photo of your to-read pile. I break my books-to-be-read down into smaller piles and scatter them around, but there are still an awful lot of them.

The Sladek piece in *SFC* 77 made me want to reread a lot of early Disch (although I probably won't), and also made me wonder why I never did read *334*, despite owning it for more than two decades. Or more accurately, why I never got past page 39, where I last turned over the corner of the page, all those years ago. But that's more than I ever read of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, a book I've been carting around since around 1969.

I look forward to the next *SFC* and/or *TMR* to find out what you've been listening to lately. Bob Dylan's *Love and Theft* has been getting a lot of airplay around here, once I finally tore myself away from CNN. Otherwise I've been playing a lot of gloomy alt-country (Walkabouts, Handsome Family, Gillian Welch) and 60s psychedelia.

PS: I'm thrilled to squeak on to a Gillespie best-of list, but the title of the book is actually *This Is the Year Zero*.

(30 November 2001)

I must have read *The Stars My Destination* too late in my life, because when I finally got around to it at the age of 27, it seemed to me merely an extended comic strip, without any interesting ideas about the future. I still like many of Bester's short stories, but I've sold both his novels.

When I read Disch's *334* in the same year I read *The Stars My Destination*, it seemed to have the most interesting characters I'd ever encountered in a science fiction novel. It also had that just-off-the-present-day feeling that I like so much in SF novels.

I could give you long lists of CDs I've bought recently, but I don't seem to have listened to many recent purchases. CDs that stay in the ear include Warren Zevon's *My Ride's Here* (although his prescient *Life'll Kill Ya* (2000) is a lot better); Solomon Burke's *Don't Give Up on Me*; an anthology of Australian female singers titled *The Women at the Well: The Songs of Paul Kelly*; the Blasters' *Complete Slash Recordings* (two CDs); Cassandra Wilson's *Belly of the Sun*; the 4-CD version of the Band's *Last Waltz* film soundtrack; Jay Farrar's *Sebastopol*; Kevin Welch's *Millionaire*; and Blind Boys of Alabama's *Spirit of the Century*.

I loved the music in *O Brother Where Art Thou*, although it sounds less interesting on CD than when used in the film. But it's great background music all the same.

I actually saw Bob performing in Toronto a few weeks ago. He was in full arena mode, a little too heavy on the 60s classics for my liking, but he did a great 'Sugar Baby' and one of the best versions of 'Just Like a Woman' I've ever heard, and I've heard quite a few on tapes and bootleg CDs. He also did a bunch of his (anti?) war songs, including 'John Brown', which I've always found painfully simplistic, and 'Hard Rain'.

My writing career? Actually I don't do journalism any more, not in years. I mostly I work with my wife on her consulting business: we sell career planning materials and seminars for organisations (details, if you're interested, at www.bbmcareerdev.com). In theory, this leaves me enough time to write fiction part of the time. In practice, I'm very good at wasting time. I did recently finish a new novel that is starting to make the rounds of publishers. My last novel ended up being published only in French! — SF publishers said it was too mainstream, and vice versa. I do have an idea for another, plus I'd like to write some more short stories, but once you stop writing for awhile, it's hard to get going again. Any day now, maybe . . .

At the recent Australian national convention, there were lots and lots of bright, young, earnest wannabe writers. I'm sure they all feel they have fabulous careers ahead of them. What will happen to their bright happy smiles as they slowly realise, during the next few years, that *no matter how good they are as writers* and *no matter how much effort they put into their writing*, almost nobody Out There is interested in publishing high-quality novels and short stories? I'm thinking of the recent experience of Chris Priest, as outlined in his Acnestis fanzine. He had great trouble negotiating the sale of his latest novel, *The Separation*, despite the quality of the book and his status as a major British novelist.

MEREDITH McARDLE
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I found *SFC* 77 on my doorstep when I staggered in after midnight, and intended just to have a very quick flick through before continuing the stagger towards bed. I resurfaced about an hour later having been quite unable to resist the temptation to read the articles properly.

Apart from making me realise that I don't know nearly enough about George Turner and Thomas Disch, *SF Commentary* has also brought home to me how much excellent Australian SF and fantasy there is, although I have never before heard of it.

I recently read and enjoyed *The Resurrectionists*, by Kim Wilkins, who is Australian. The blurb on the front of the book from the *Herald Sun* says; 'Move over Poppy Z. Brite — Australia has its own madam of horror.' I'll be looking out for more of her stuff. Also, I believe Garth Nix is to be published in Britain soon, so at least there's a bit of cross-culturisation.

I'm told that Kim Wilkins is doing well in Britain, and Garth Nix's *Sabrael* and *Lirael* are selling large quantities in America.

I'm a sucker for short reviews/comments. They either confirm my own views, give an interesting insight into alternative views, offer ideas on authors and titles I might want to look at myself, or put me off books for life. So I loved your Best of the Years lists and the Scanners columns. In return, I'm going to tell you about the best books I have read recently. They're in no particular order, but all count as brilliant in my view:

Fantasy

Tim Powers: ***Declare***
You never know what to expect in a Tim Powers book, apart from the fact that magic and mystery are going to wander into our world in the most fantastical and weird way possible. At the same time, Powers can make it seem perfectly normal and acceptable, which is part of his own magic. This book is set in the mundane world of spies, but the hero soon finds out that there are other forces affecting his progress in the 'great game'. The book skips about in time and place, but Powers never lets you lose track of what's going on. The only disappointment I found is that the book ended too soon. It has a deep and brooding atmosphere, and while there isn't an awful lot of action, what there is is exciting and intense.

Steve Cockayne: ***Wanderers and Islanders***
A fantasy, more magic realism than dragons and unicorns, set in an alternative world that is in some ways like ours of about 100 years ago. There are gas lamps and electricity, but there is also a science of magic used to predict future outcomes, and normal children don't know how to stand on their heads. There are three central characters — an impoverished, genteel ex-soldier, the king's counsellor in magic, and a young boy, whose stories eventually intertwine in a gentle and unassuming way. Although I was completely baffled by the ending and, in fact, by the meaning of it all, it draws you in so thoroughly that I really didn't care that I didn't understand it.

Lois McMaster Bujold: ***The Curse of Chalion***
Although it is set in a sort of post-medieval, pre-industrialish kingdom, this is another totally unusual fantasy book, showing that there is still originality in the field. Bujold's great strength is in creating characters that the reader becomes interested in. She lets them develop in front of us so that we empathise with their feelings and motivations, and begin to care about them. Here, the focus is on Cazaril, traumatised by his experiences on a slave galley, who is trying to ease himself into a quiet, unassuming life when he finally returns to his home country. Instead, he finds himself thrown into the centre of a political and supernatural maelstrom. As the backdrop to this world, Bujold has created a religion that is logical and believable.

Dave Duncan: ***The Gilded Chain***
Young boys devote themselves to an order of swordsmen to become 'king's blades' — warriors magically bonded to their king or one of his favourite courtiers. This concept could have degenerated into Conan-style swashbuckling, but instead Duncan is concerned with personal honour and commitment to a cause. The actual fighting takes very much second place to the interplay of personalities and an exploration of the ethics of loyalty. In that, it reminded me quite a lot of Bujold's *Curse of Chalion*.

Kevin Crossley-Holland: ***Arthur: The Seeing Stone***
This is told as short diary entries by Arthur, a young boy living in 1199 in the Welsh Marches, a dangerous 'between place' separating England from Wales. He belongs to the feudal aristocracy of the time, but his sharp and sweet observations are shared between his family, the villagers, the priest and the strange 'between man', Merlin. When Merlin gives the boy a 'seeing stone', he begins to glimpse in the stone the story of a long-ago king with his own name. So two stories entwine in the book, but for those of us who know the Arthurian legends already, the medieval Arthur, with all his problems, sorrows and joys, is far more absorbing. The first in a trilogy.

Diana Wynne Jones: ***Year of the Griffin***
I can't mention great recent fantasy books without including my favourite author's most recent book, even though it came out ages ago now, in 2000. This is a sequel to the well-received *Dark Lord of Derkholm*, and is best enjoyed if that book is read first. The world of the Dark Lord has thrown off the yoke of Chesney's Magical Tours, which has turned it into a fantasyland for off-world tourists. Now people are trying to settle down and look to a normal future. The university of magic, in particular, has plans to beg extra funds from the parents of all the year's new students. Unfortunately for the university, a whole bunch of students desperately don't want their families to know where they are. With good reason, as assassins, regiments of soldiers, grasping dwarf chiefs and bandits are just some of the people who then descend upon the university head. And all he wants to do is research for a trip to the moon. This is great fun, hugely enjoyable and light-hearted, yet including serious points about responsibility and growing up.

Science fiction

Neal Stephenson: ***Snow Crash***
A friend persuaded me that I'd given up on cyberpunk too soon, and that I should try reading *Snow Crash*. Was I grateful! Like all cyperbunk books, it's fast paced, and there are plenty of future technologies, a virtual world, gangsters and street-smart youths of all sorts. There are also plenty of absurdities that seem like side-tracks, such as an android dog and the section devoted to whether the pizza-delivery man will make the delivery in time. However, everything ties up neatly, and the plot actually works. I may not return to cyberpunk, but I'll certainly read anything by Neal Stephenson.

Neal Stephenson: ***The Diamond Age***
Stephenson is certainly versatile. *The Diamond Age* is completely different from *Snow Crash*, or from anything else for that matter. Here we have a future where our world has redivided itself into autonomous enclaves, but not necessarily along racial boundaries. There can be corporate countries, or ones based on historical cultures. In the Victorian enclave, its residents try to reproduce the manners and order of Britain's Victorian era, without, however, the associated hypocrisy and social horrors. Its ruling hierarchy sits physically next to an overcrowded, mainly ethnic Chinese area, and threaded throughout the world are underground, non-geographical groupings, such as the Drummers. When a Victorian engineer is hired to create an intelligent guidance manual for young ladies, he doesn't realise how much he has exceeded his commission. But when he loses his own illicit copy and it falls into the hands of a waif, individuals and nations are going to learn just how powerful the teaching aid can be.

Vernor Vinge: ***A Deepness in the Sky***
Although one of the same characters appears in Vinge's awesomely good *A Fire upon the Deep*, this space epic can happily stand alone. Vinge goes to a lot of trouble to create realistic aliens with a full, logical and truly alien world, as well as varying humans and sciences. Although *Deepness* is a book of alien contact, most of its conflict comes from the clash of different human societies. On several levels, it is a tense adventure story, but I enjoyed it mostly for the development of the characters — both human and alien — for the twists and turns in the plot, and for the thought-provoking use and misuse of technologies.

There are probably more items that should go in my own hall of fame, but these are the ones that suddenly sprang to mind.

(15 February 2002)

I 'met' Meredith over the Internet because Ros Gross suggested I get in touch with her, and that's because Meredith, Ros and I are all admirers of the great Diana Wynne Jones. Ros gave a very enjoyable Nova Mob talk about Diana Wynne Jones at the end of 2001.

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On page 32 in issue 77 of *SF Commentary*, you quote from a column in *The Washington Post* by Michael Dirda that quotes from the letter I wrote Dirda about my list of favorite science fiction and fantasy novels. I thought you might be interested in seeing my lists. These aren't quite identical to the ones I sent Michael Dirda back in 1994, since I periodically rethink my list of favourites.

My 20 Favorite Science Fiction Long Works (longer than 25,000 words)

1 Olaf Stapledon: *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*
2 Philip Jose Farmer: The 'Riverworld' series
3 Frank Herbert: *Dune* (and maybe its sequels)
4 Walter Miller Jr: *A Canticle for Leibowitz*
5 Alfred Bester: *The Stars My Destination*
6 Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness*
7 H. G. Wells: *The Time Machine*
8 Philip K. Dick: *The Man in the High Castle*
9 Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth: *The Space Merchants*
10 Theodore Sturgeon: *More than Human*
11 Roger Zelazny: *Lord of Light*
12 Arthur C. Clarke: *Against the Fall of Night*
13 Stanislaw Lem: *Solaris*
14 Ken Grimwood: *Replay*
15 Joe Haldeman: *The Forever War*
16 Michael Frayn: *The Tin Men*
17 Larry Niven: *Ringworld*
18 Robert Heinlein: *Stranger in a Strange Land*
19 Clifford Simak: *City*
20 Isaac Asimov: *The End of Eternity*

My 20 Favorite Fantasy Long Works (longer than 25,000 words)

1 Lewis Carroll: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*
2 J. R. R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*
3 Peter Beagle: *The Last Unicorn*
4 Mervyn Peake: The 'Gormenghast' trilogy
5 C. S. Lewis: *Till We Have Faces*
6 Ursula K. Le Guin: The 'Earthsea' books
7 G. K. Chesterton: *The Man Who Was Thursday*
8 Madeleine L'Engle: The 'Time' quartet (*A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Wind in the Door*, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, *Many Waters*)
9 Ray Bradbury: *Dandelion Wine*
10 John Fowles: *The Magus*
11 T. H. White: *The Once and Future King*
12 Patricia McKillip: *Stepping from the Shadows*
13 C. S. Lewis: The 'Ransom' trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength*)
14 R. A. McAvoy: *Tea with the Black Dragon*
15 H. P. Lovecraft: *The Dreamquest of Unknown Kadath*
16 John Myers Myers: *Silverlock*
17 Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman: *Good Omens*
18 L. Frank Baum: *The Wizard of Oz*
19 Daniel Pinkwater: *Borgel*
20 Mark Twain: *The Mysterious Stranger*

You mention Nick Hornby in regard to the making of lists. When I saw the movie *High Fidelity*, my reaction was 'Hey, this is about my life'. I live in an apartment full of my collections and I make lists of my favourites.

(24 February 2002)

I suppose every Gillespiezine reader knows that I've been making lists since 1959, when I was twelve years old, starting with pop music hit parades. I added a book list in 1962, a film list in 1965, and various others since. In the 1970s, I built a retrospective list of favourite short stories.

I first started concocting an LP list (later CD list) for a Foyster fanzine in the early eighties, but this list poses some problems. Should I list CDs bought during a particular year? But that means waiting for several years until I've listened to everything I've bought in any year. CDs heard for the first time during a particular year? I could do that, but that's not how I list my incoming CDs. Perhaps I'll go back to 1985, the first year we owned a CD player, and start all over again.

TERENCE GREEN
154 Randolph Road,
Toronto ONT M4G 3S4, Canada

In one of those bits of synchronicity that makes no sense, this morning I mailed out a copy of my latest novel (*St Patrick's Bed*) to you, and this afternoon, *SFC* 77 dropped through the mail slot. Life continues to amaze.

A quick browse flatters, in that I see *Shadow of Ashland* and *A Witness to Life* both in the number 3 spot in your Recommended lists for 1996 and 1999 respectively. Many thanks for the kindness. Too bad most in Australia are unlikely to see copies.

The new one, *St Patrick's Bed*, is the sequel to *Ashland*, set 11 years later. Forge Books once again did a fine job of packaging it, and they make a splendid threesome.

Shadow of Ashland will be broadcast on CBC Radio, on the show *Between the Covers*, as a single-voice reading, in fifteen 15-minute episodes, spanning three weeks, sometime after Christmas. Short wave, anyone?

(14 November 2001)

I've still never written a good long review of your recent trilogy. That's a potential subject for a Nova Mob talk. I just hope I've conveyed how much pleasure your books have given me over recent years.

PATRICK O'LEARY
2701 Douglas Drive, Bloomfield Hills MI 48304, USA

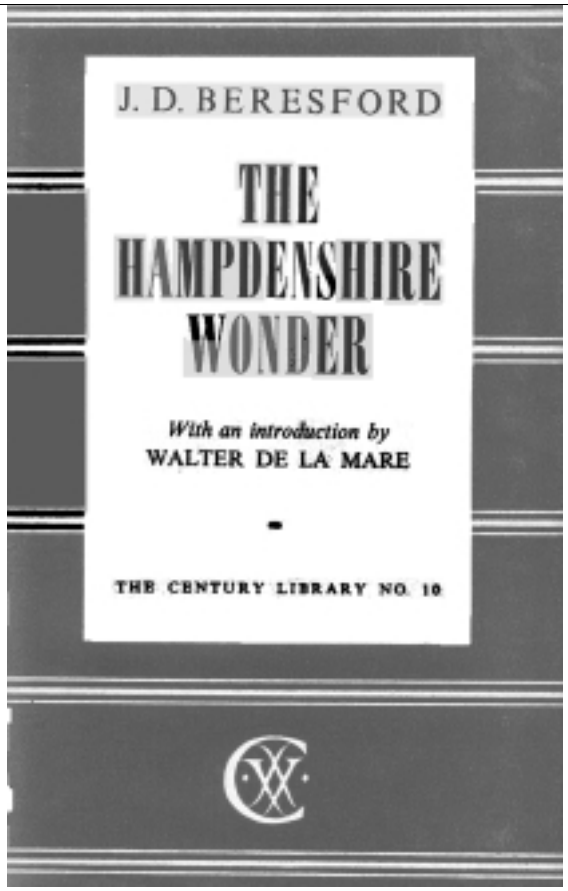
I've got the .pdf file of *SFC* 76 and 77 — thanks very much. Boy, I love my cable modem. I loved Turner's breakdown of the narrative structure of *The Dispossessed*, which I always thought set a high standard of ingenuity and achievement. I loved your comments about Engh's *Arslan* as well as Jeffery's review, and Sladek's Tom Disch article. I just met Disch in March at the ICFA in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Seems a nice guy, and his work is aces.

Perhaps I can coax David Hartwell to send you a reviewer's copy of *The Impossible Bird*. Let me know if that doesn't work out.

(21 November 2001)

Moshe Feder from Tor sent me a proof copy, and Steve Jeffery has reviewed your book.

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



Assuming John Crowley doesn't unexpectedly rush into publication with the fourth part of the 'Aegypt' quartet in the next few days, you stand a good chance of being the Best Thing Ever in Kidlington for a whole week. (Which may or may not be better than being declared the Best Thing Ever in Croydon for a day — I'll leave you to decide).

Wondrous indeed is *SFC* 77, as is the sight of your bookroom, circa 2001, and I feel slightly less intimidated by our own, where it is (just) possible for a cat to pick a path from door to windowsill.

FRANK WEISSENBORN
Flat 17, 9 Kooyong Road,
Caulfield North VIC 3161

Any silence I've expressed over *SFC* 76 is actually a compliment. George Turner's writing, and the way you contructed this issue, has given me much cause for thought. I've found myself reduced to silence by voice and commentary to which I feel I'm too young or innocent to pass sound comment upon.

I'm left floored by this paradox: even before knowing about Turner or his views, three of my favourite books were *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Dispossessed* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Here I agree with George, but I have to contend with his dislike for a lot of New Wave literature and a list of authors for whom I have a high respect.

Again re George Turner: I forgot to mention Beresford's *The (Hampdenshire) Wonder* on my list of favourite books. I discovered it at Slow Glass Books last year before I'd read *SFC 76*, and bought it largely because it came in such a handsome edition and seemed quite rare. What a superbly constructed work. It reminded me of everything I love about fiction, and I mean any kind of fiction. So here is where I take my hat off to you and George. You have both held true to the importance of SF, not been afraid to carry on a fight to make its voice heard.

(14 November 2001)

I wouldn't have known about *The Hampdenshire Wonder* without George referring to it from time to time. I was over the moon when he gave me his copy, and the book proved as interesting as he had always claimed.

RAY WOOD
PO Box 188, Quorn SA 5433

Tom Coverdale is alive and well [and sighted at a few meetings of the Nova Mob during 2002], and we continue to collaborate on this crazy book, tentatively titled *The Hook Book: How Writers Begin their Books*, but hope to finish it soon. We'll be working together on it through his coming long vacation.

If you or your readers happen to have in mind any truly great openings to any books (no shorter than novella-length) at all — 'literary', genre, non-fiction — we'd love to know about them; we're still looking for them. (We regard a narrative hook/introduction/opening to a book as being maybe as much as its first three pages; and also accept them to either prologue or chapter one if a book has a prologue/prelude.)

(15 November 2001)

The book hasn't appeared yet, so I presume you and Tom are still looking for candidates. I could list plenty of favourite first paragraphs from SF stories. A few years ago, when you first mentioned *The Hook Book*, Ray, I promised to write some of them down, but I didn't have the time. The best anthology of story hooks would be the complete short fiction of Cordwainer Smith, *The Rediscovery of Man* (the giant NESFA Press hardback, not the short Gollancz paperback), but you've ruled out short stories. The 'proem' at the beginning of Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* is probably the best novel introduction in Australian literature, but you would want to quote it in its entirety.

STEVE SNEYD
4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield,
West Yorkshire HD5 8PB, UK

The *Viriconium* review reminded me of a long-term intention to track down (if it exists) a portal from 'our' world to Viriconium in a Meme England cafe in Huddersfield. (There are four ME branches here, and Harrison has spent time in the area, so it's possible that he describes this link point.)

Recently I had a mini-jag of rereading Moorcock's 'Jerry Cornelius' books. They seem much darker when reread than at the time of their first appearance. Indeed, the 11 September bombings seem a very Cornelian act, even if Osama Bin Laden had a very different ideological cloak from that of Jerry Cornelius and his fellow multiverse anarchs. Which morphs to the reviewer's description of Banks's 'culture' as 'a loosely knit socialist utopia' (re *Excession*, p. 61). If humans being, in effect, amusing pets of immensely more intelligent, powerful machines is a socialist utopia, I wonder what a slave dystopia would look like? 'Loosely knit', yes, but only in the sense that the supermachines follow their own rival agendas, like Greek gods or Afghan warlords, but tangents socialism at no particular point that I can see.

(16 November 2001)

Race Mathews and Murray McLachlan have both given

papers to the Nova Mob on Iain Banks's SF novels, so I hand your question over to them. I'm still hoping that Murray will submit his paper to *SF Commentary* or *Steam Engine Time.*

In your editorial you mentioned the book collection of Ruth and Eddie Frow. Their library now has, we hope, permanent status as the Working Class Movement Library (wcml.org.uk). It welcomes donations of relevant material (I've given them a few things kept from long-ago leftie activist days). In SF terms, after all, from Shelley on, one strand of Utopian SF relates to the WCM.

(28 November 2001)

LLOYD & YVONNE PENNEY
1706–24 Eva Road, Etobicoke, Ontario M9C 2B2, Canada

I really haven't made any comments on John Foyster's illness, but thank you for keeping us all informed via the listservs. So many of our numbers have been in bad health and worse.

September 11 . . . we are living in interesting times, in every sense of the curse. You're right; the perpetrators may be Arab in descent and lineage, but the ideas they carried out are all American in origin. One of my first thoughts after this disaster was that we are living in a Tom Clancy novel, and within a day, CNN had interviewed Clancy himself about this. He admitted that this was something he had thought up to put in a novel, but thought it too fantastic, even for one of his books. Movies, novels, television shows . . . America provides the plans for its own damage and potential destruction. Canada took on many redirected planes once air travel was halted within North America, and folks from Texas and Oklahoma got to see places like Gander, Newfoundland. Koreans on a KAL flight got to see Whitehorse, Yukon. They saw that civilisation and hospitality existed far outside their borders. Some people did ask why this horrible thing happened, and they were branded as unpatriotic and treasonous for not wanting to join the mob and Get Them Back Immediately. A university professor on the west coast nearly lost her job when she described the reasons for this attack as being continuous American meddling in others' business, and their foreign policies being soaked in the blood of innocents. So much for freedom of speech.

I found fandom at the age of 18, and I mark 24 years of fannish fun and follies in a couple of weeks. Do the math; I'm a hoopy frood at the age of 42. Yet, I feel old. I am older than many local fannish friends, and my interests would seem to belong to someone 10 or 15 years older. My interests include fanhistory and fanzines, and few here share them with me. Yet, I have tried to be younger by knowing younger friends a little better. With a little work and understanding, I have tried and largely succeeded at understanding the attractions inherent in anime and manga, filking, horror, vampires, furries and more. (My start in fandom was in *Star Trek* and other media fandom, so at least I can understand that, too.) Saw the Harry Potter movie yesterday, too! I have tried to treat my incursions into unfamiliar fandoms as continuing education. I have learned about Bardic circles, plushies, j-pop and cosplay, muggle that I am, and there's still lots more to know. Perhaps with a knowledge of fandom young and old, I'll stay a little younger myself. (Keeping more active, and at least trying to diet, and trying to live a little outside the usual sedentary fannish lifestyle has helped, too.)

My finances aren't sufficient to give a home to books as much as I'd like to. So many books, so little time and money. However, we do have semi-organised clumps of books here and there about the apartment, full of science fiction, fantasy, mystery/detective, astronomy, space, humour and religion. As you and Elaine did, Yvonne and I put our respective book collections together, and have built them up over the years. Most of them are used, but still contain those marvellous stories intact. I am making a serious dent in my To Be Read shelf, so I'll be able to justify buying more books soon. My shelves are about full, and I don't want to start boxing books and moving them to storage space.

I see a name from the past . . . Eva Hauser. I met Eva a couple of times at Worldcon, once in Holland, and I think once in Chicago. Lovely lady, and very pleasant to talk to. She was editing a pro SF magazine in Czechoslovakia at the time. I hope she'll come back to SF some time in the future.

I'm very happy that you're willing to send me a real, paper edition of *SFC* to me in Canada. I think I work best when I have a paper fanzine beside me, and a computer in front of me. It's much more difficult when the fanzine isn't in the In box, but somewhere online, and waiting to be responded to. It's easy to forget it's there. When I do receive a .pdf file, I usually print it out and make it as fanzinish as possible. Eric Lindsay's newest *Gegenschein* needs some response, and I must remind myself to get with it from time to time. Thank Ghod for a Palm Pilot; otherwise, I'd never remember. A zine's physical presence is usually reminder enough for me.

As I read more about George Turner, I find myself making comparisons between him and Judith Merril. Judith was the grande dame of SF in Toronto for some years, although some had other names for her. I remember working in a green room at a convention in Ottawa, and Judith was there, discussing and tearing down our local convention to anyone who would listen. She proudly admitted she'd done it for years, and I couldn't hold myself back. I blasted her for ruining the efforts of people she barely knew, and if she was such an expert at running cons, she could start being more constructive than destructive. Or words to that effect; I don't remember exactly. I got out of there before I said anything I might have regretted; I certainly didn't regret anything I did say, and I still don't. Judith and I had little further interaction, and it stayed that way until she passed away.

A word to Casey June Wolf . . . are you a member of BCSFA in Vancouver? I find it strange sometimes that someone who lives in the big city will not know about the local club.

Casey has been in Haiti all year, and has sent two despatches via her friends in Vancouver. I suspect she'll get in touch with you when she gets back.

In the WAHF list . . . I first met Terence Green at a course he was teaching at a public library about science fiction. That may have been close to 15 years ago.

The SF reference books Colin Steele mentions would be quite handy for me. I often lose track of trilogies and other series of books because I never know which books to read in sequence. Perhaps there's a website that could answer these questions for me? I'm sure those local fans more scholarly than me would have known about the Aurel Guillemette reference work; I didn't. The book *Science Fiction Audiences* is not new; there have been several other books on participatory fandoms, such as those on *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and other movies and television programs, all of which have a fandom that produces conventions, fanzines, clubs and

other ways to share the experience of being a fan of the show/movie. (Hmmm, they're not that different from us . . .)

So many books to read . . . One I have finished recently was William Gibson's *Idoru*. The usual gritty and hyper-described backgrounds and characters, with the usual lack of action and plot. It's a shame, for I want to like these books more, but there's got to be more there for me. Because it lacked in action, it reminded me of Larry Niven's *Integral Trees*, which was more description than anything else, and served as setting up the universe for the sequel, whose name escapes me.

I hope to have official word for you soon on a project I've been working on. I haven't done any voice work for close to 20 years, but I saw the call for auditions for a spoken word CD, and I went for it for a lark. I got the audition, and I got the roles. This spoken word CD will contain six short horror stories written by Canadian horror writers such as Edo van Belkom, Tanya Huff, Peter Nickle and Nancy Kilpatrick, so far, and the stories are being converted to radio-style plays. Two more stories need to have their permissions settled, and then the rest of the tapings can be done. The production company (and the CD, I think) will be called *Fears for Ears*, and I'm also assisting with the marketing. We're hoping that the CD will be available for sale in February.

(20 November 2001)

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

I found myself mentioned on page 32, with your remark 'The main reason Dave Langford's reviews no longer appear here is that (a) he put them on his web site, then very recently (b) has included them in his own large book of his critical writing.' My own explanation would be more in terms of (d) not having written that kind of regular multi-book review column since the days of 'Critical Mass'; (e) feeling flattered but almost guilty that you allowed me such a colossal spread in successive issues of *SFC*, to the extent that I'm nervous of taking up so much space again!

In theory there are to be two large books of Langford critical writing, in addition to all the polemical speeches and articles in *Let's Hear It For The Deaf Man* (NESFA Press 1996). I actually have a hardback copy of *The Complete Critical Assembly* (Cosmos Books 2001), which collects all 101 'Critical Mass' columns, and am now awaiting the affordable trade paperback edition. The second tome was finally delivered to Cosmos in October 2001, and with luck will appear in 2002: *Up Through an Empty House of Stars*, comprising 95 assorted essays and reviews from 1980 to 2001. If you want to run a few extracts in *SFC*, no doubt something can be arranged . . .

I admit that there is also the further factor that your majestic publishing schedule, vaster than empires and more slow, does mean that when I dash off a topical review I tend to forget *SFC* and send the piece to *Foundation*, *Vector* or *The New York Review of SF*.

Presumably you won't want to recycle anything that's been in these august skiffy journals — otherwise I'd try to persuade you that *SFC* Really Needs the hefty introduction I wrote for the John Sladek collection *Maps*, just published in slightly adapted form in *Foundation*. (This is not the same as my article on researching Sladekiana for the same book, which, after a preliminary airing in Acnestis, appeared in *NYRSF* and then *Vector*. All brilliantly timed publicity for the Autumn 2001 appearance of the collection itself, were it not that Big Engine's schedule continues to slip: they've just published their fourth title, originally announced for April 2001, and *Maps* is to be their ninth.)

However, I have submitted to *Steam Engine Time*! A longish review of a new translation of Alfred Kubin's surreal novel *The Other Side* (*Die andere Seite*, 1908), sent to Maureen in September 2000.

And appeared in *Steam Engine Time* 3, December 2001.

I really must do some research about the availability of my own books. Cosmos sent me only a hardback of *Guts* (horror spoof with John Grant, written in the 1980s; like *Earthdoom*, but much ickier) and I was amazed to see a few trade paperback copies in the Novacon dealers' room this month. Even the publisher claims not to have had trade paperback copies. The ways of print-on-demand are strange.

(21 November 2001)

This is just a glimpse of the email correspondence that led to the republication here of Dave Langford's fine article on James White. Somewhere in this discussion, I remember writing 'But just how do you make a living from writing, Dave?', to which the reply was the Internet equivalent of 'mumbledy mumble mumble'. Dave says he does make a living from voluminous freelance writing, although he submits many pieces to non-paying markets (such as *SFC* and *Steam Engine Time*) and to markets that take forever to pay. *Maps* has just appeared, and I must throw away my amazon.co.uk virginity and buy a copy. Likewise Big Engine's republication of Dave's novel *The Leaky Establishment*. These books have not been sighted for sale in Melbourne.

TEDDY HARVIA
12341 Band Box Place, Dallas TX 75244, USA

Ditmar's colourful astronomical art on your covers is surreal, all the more on a fanzine, but who is the character on the front shushing and why?

All is explained in Ditmar's explanation of the cover, on page 2 of *SFC* 77 — unless you're one of the people who received a copy without a page 2. If so, apologies. The character on the front cover is Elaine.

The interior art is equally fascinating. I'd like to have a closer look at the tattoo of the Celtic wildlife in the photo of Thomas M. Disch. And I can't tell if that's eye or an orifice on Joe Szabo's drawing of an alien creature. Strange stuff.

(23 November 2001)

If fabulous fannish cartoonists don't send me their drawings, I use the art that people do send me: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), Robert Mapson, and Joe Szabo specialise in computer graphics, while Frank Weissenborn sends me paintings by his friend Guy Browning. Elaine continues to generate amazing fractals using the DJFractals program. The great Steve Stiles has offered to draw me some cartoons if I send him copies of laid-out pages — but that assumes I'm well enough organised to lay out the pages long before the issue appears.

SUE THOMASON
190 Coach Road, Sleights, Whitby,
North Yorks TO22 5EN, UK

Ditmar's covers of *SFC* 77 are *wonderful*. I particularly like the back cover, which is a very arresting image, but the front

cover is clever, funny, and beautiful (and gives me a chance to see what Elaine looks like). Both Elaine's fractal graphics are lovely too (I bet they are stunning in colour). What *is* it about fractals that makes them so beautiful? Is it partly the idea that there is pattern underlying *everything*? (Very magical.) Is it because the patterns are self-referential but not identical repeats (either because of variation of scale, or because there's a complex call-out sequence where pattern A calls B calls C calls A . . .)?

Is that fractal-drawing program horribly expensive? I used to have (on my old computer, which only had a monochrome monitor, bless it) a copy of something called Fractint, which was apparently downloadable for free from the Internet, but the 'new computer' (which is, let's face it, a g-g-g-grandmother in modern IT terms) has a colour monitor, and I'm suddenly hungry for fractals again . . . I wouldn't have any means of printing them out (unless I make friends with a colour printer owner, which is not impossible) but it would still be nice to see them again.

(7 December 2001)

I've already explained to Sue that she can get a copy of DJFractals directly, and for free, from its author, Dick Jenssen (ditmar@mira.net). Dick is willing to pass on his own pieces of computer art to fanzine publishers who want snazzy covers.

ROBERT MAPSON
33 Westfield Road, Kelmscott WA 6111

If you are interested in illustrations for future zines, you might like to consider the attached thumbnails [see graphic above]. I've always had a certain artistic bent (but bent what?), which can now find some expression with the advent of 3D modelling packaging and accessible reasonable computing power.

(8 December 2001)

JOHN BERRY
4 The Chilterns, South Hatfield,
Herts AL10 8JU, UK

Re your observation that I am the remaining member of Irish Fandom extant — exactly one year ago I almost joined them in Celestial Irish Fandom. I visited the doctor to complain about chest pains, which I mistakenly thought were incipient indigestion. He called paramedics from the local hospital. He later told me that I would have died if I had made an appointment to see him ten minutes later. I had a pacemaker fitted, and also suffered a severe attack of shingles, plus PHN, plus fluctuating hypertension. For several months I was inactive, not even opening mail. Recently I have made an excellent recovery, and have now returned to most of my previous interests. I have commenced work on my army memoirs, *The Horsed Vassell*.

The front and back covers of *SFC* 77 are particularly exceptional, well worth framing.

I was in Aussieland in March–April 2000 to visit my son and family near Gundaroo, north of Canberra. He has a goat farm, which is actually his hobby, as a rest from computerising.

(Late November 2001)

John has sent me, for *TMR*, an entertaining article about his most recent visit to Australia — but I've told him that Australian fans would really like to meet him next time he visits. John Berry (usually known as 'the English John Berry') is famous for being a member of Irish Fandom during the early 1950s. We've now lost all the other famous members of IF — Walt Willis, Bob Shaw, George Charters, and James White — except for Madeleine Willis.

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
PO Box 8093, Silver Spring MD 20907, USA

I have been a silent reader of *SFC* for decades. I was a subscriber in the late seventies and early eighties (when Hank Luttrell was your North American agent). In the past decade, Patrick McGuire has been kind enough to lend me his copies of *SFC* and *Metaphysical Review*.

I suspect your best correspondence will continue to come from people who receive your zine in the traditional way. You mention that you've posted and sent *SFC* in a .PDF format, to which very few people responded. I think that even technophiles don't like receiving lengthy publications electronically. I have had email for nearly a year, and read *Ansible* online. But I have little patience reading anything electronically that's longer than one page. Moreover, a .PDF file, however well designed, loses all the touches that make *SF Commentary* worth keeping permanently as part of a collection. When I read your George Turner issue (which, of course, is a book in disguise) I put it on my shelf, along with other serious works of SF criticism. I wouldn't have done that if I had received the zine as a bunch of loose pages that I would have to collate and staple.

There you are: looks as if I'll have to keep facing bankruptcy each time I want to publish a fanzine. I had hoped that within five years I could send every issue by .PDF, save myself a fortune on printing and postage, and return to monthly issues. But paper rules!

But if you want to save space in the future, may I suggest trimming the space you give to Colin Steele? What do you see in his work? He strikes me as a very glib reviewer, who probably gets given a thousand words once a month to report on as many titles as he can. But I don't find his work particularly insightful, and the lack of publication dates further reduces the value of his work. I had no idea, for example, that D. G. Compton was at all active in the 1990s, and would have liked to know when his novel appeared.

Colin Steele is the only regular newspaper reviewer of SF in Australia (weekly, in *The Canberra Times*). Others, such as Van Ikin (*Sydney Morning Herald*) and Terry Dowling (*The Australian*) receive spots irregularly. (I don't see Van's columns, but Terry seems to have been cut down to every two or three months.) Colin is the only person in the country who sees everything (although often by extracting books from publishers only with extreme difficulty), and he has to cover as much as possible in as few words as possible. Which I think he does remarkably well. No matter how slight a coverage he devotes to a particular book, he always gives me some idea of whether or not I would enjoy reading it. He sent me copies of his columns regularly for nearly ten years, hoping against hope I would get around to publishing them. I did so in *SFC* 77, but now I want to get away from short short reviews. I trust Colin will keep sending me longer articles he thinks might fit *SFC* or *Steam Engine Time*.

Devote more space to your own writing, including a more lengthy explanation as to why you chose the books on your Ten Best lists, and why in some years you expanded the list to 12 books or 14. In fact, you could produce a very interesting chapbook by publishing your Ten Best lists from the 1960s onwards in one place. Then you could a similar publication for your film list (unless you save that for *The Metaphysical Review*).

(26 November 2001)

Be careful, Martin. Massed armies of *SFC* readers out there will reach for their vomit bags if you suggest that I publish *more* lists. Lovely idea, though; something to do in my retirement, which I will never be able to afford to take.

TOM WHALEN
Hasenbergstr 15, 70178 Stuttgart, Germany

SF Commentary 77 made it to my new German address. I'm not sure how, but I'm glad it did. Especially glad to see the Sladek article. And all the lists and short reviews. *A.I.* I found quite interesting. Spielberg's intelligence may be artificial, but somehow Kubrick's cold inhuman humans managed to drive a stake through Spielberg's kitsch heart.

I retired from teaching (29 years is enough) and moved back to Germany ten months ago. My wife Annette Wiesner (MA on Nabokov) works in the IT field here for Trados, a translation software company. I tend house, write, read, watch movies, and travel. In late September I finished *Tales from the Hybrid Pool*, book four in 'The Encyclopedia Mouse Quintet'. Book 3, *Candelabra*, I finished two years ago. I hope to start the last one, *The Straw That Broke*, early next year.

Mostly criticism, though, of late for me. Just finished 5000 words called 'The Outrageousness of Melville's *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*' for talks at the university here and in Braunschweig, and I'm enclosing my thoughts on Carpenter's *Ghosts of Mars*, as well as a review/essay on Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt*, a German film you may have seen.

SF? Well, the Encyclopedia Mouse keeps me reading up on quantum and cosmological matters, among other things, and I finally read all of Russell M. Griffin's novels, all four of them. *The Blind Man and the Elephant* is still my favourite; next would be *Century's End*. An overlooked writer, as most writers are.

(27 November 2001)

The day that I typed this letter I walked into Reading Matters, the secondhand bookshop at the south end of Smith Street, and found a copy of the British edition of Griffin's *Century's End*. It was only $3.50. 'Hmmm,' said the bloke on the desk, 'that's the cheapest book I've sold for a long time.' Which means, I suppose, that it's been sitting there forever. As you did, I found *The Blind Man and the Elephant* one of the best SF novels I've read in the last 30 years. After I had bought a couple more novels by Griffin, I heard that he had died of a heart attack at the age of 43.

ANDY SAWYER
1 The Flaxyard, Woodfall Lane, Little Neston, South Wirral L64 4BT UK

SFC 77 was waiting for me when I got home Tuesday night. It was interesting to discover that big article on Disch, because yesterday I took part (as internal examiner) in the assessment of a PhD thesis on Disch from Elliot Atkins here at Liverpool. A very good assessment of his fiction it was too, particularly of his Gothic/'Supernatural Minnesota' stuff. Once we'd gone through all the formalities and assured him of our decision, I pulled out *SFC* and said 'something you might be interested in . . .' Fortunately, I'd checked his bibliography and he had seen it (and other stuff that appeared in *SFC*).

(15 November 2001)

I've just come back from seeing the *Harry Potter* film. I am not a big Potter fan, thanks, I think, to my first exposure to the phenomenon being through a gushing review in the *Guardian* about this children's book with an amazingly original concept and a wonderfully imaginative use of language. It's quite clear, now, that the woman who wrote this hadn't a clue what she was writing about, but if you strip away the sheer silliness of the way adults who should know better (including, I was going to say, members of the 2001 World Science Fiction Convention, but I'll nip *that* train of thought in the bud straight away) have gone overboard for J. K. Rowling, the *very* effective marketing campaign, and the quite natural way people who obviously haven't read many books at all have become extremely enthusiastic when they find something that speaks to them, we get — what? Something that still stands up in way that earlier writers of books that children have taken to their heart (Roald Dahl, for example) stands up. Which is a kind of evasive way of saying that I was very impressed by the film, although I was prepared to be less so. The script and acting were excellent (the only thing that grated on me was the announcement that the 'Sorting Ceremony', in which the new recruits to Hogwarts School are allocated their houses, would take place 'momentarily'. In fact, it took an appreciable amount of

time. I know we have the American market in mind, but there are numerous words that mean 'in a moment' or, better, 'immediately'. The public-school elements, of course (much of the early part of the film is taken up with Harry's preparation for school and his settling in there), are as much, if not more, fantasy than the wizardry: magic is so often a 'given' in children's literature that it is almost mundane; simply, another vocabulary for stating what might be said, but perhaps with some difficulty, in realistic language. The settings are sumptuous, the special effects good, and I get the distinct impression that the original was taken seriously and the relationship the audience has with it was not treated with condescension, as is so often the case. The actors were allowed to act and ('momentarily' apart) given lines that didn't insult them. The only part I thought didn't work (which I don't think works in the book) is Harry's relationship with his appalling foster-parents, who are too like the caricature-parents Roald Dahl did so much more successfully.

We DVD addicts, who never get to the cinema, haven't watched *Harry Potter* yet because it was released in Australia in pan-and-scan (4:3) ratio, not in widescreen ratio. The 'Special Edition', wide screen and all, was released here recently.

Sladek on Disch made me realise how little of Disch I'd read. The Gothics, such as *Clara Reeve* (which I read only in the process of assessing the dissertation) and the later 'Supernatural Minnesota' tetralogy (of which I'd only read part, and not really considered as a series of linked works) show how much he plays around with ideas of genre and sub-genre (and probably even sub-sub-genre), while revisiting *334* only made it clear that it's one of SF's classics, a book that does fascinating things with the utopian/dystopian idea. Delany's *An American Shore*, a *tour de force* analysis of 'Angouleme', just one short section from *334*, may have made people wary about lengthy works on Disch, but reading the whole novel made me consider one aspect of Disch's work that he does particularly subtly, the matter of 'historical' references. I use the quote marks because these are the cases where a writer invents history stemming from his present: things that have happened to actual buildings, compositions by contemporary artists, etc. An odd thing happens when we read these texts, and I don't think too much attention is given to it.

Considering that we are now living in the future, in some cases *beyond* the time in which these texts are meant to be set, we need to be careful when rereading them that we don't overlook the 'invented' history. I have to admit that there are aspects of Disch's future New York that I do not know *are* fictional. I know that there is no day-long opera of *Orfeo*, because Delany says so. I would be quite capable of reading 'Angouleme' and taking this reference as fact. Reading a story written in, say, 1970, which refers to interplanetary space flight in, say, 1990, is one thing. But a more naturalist story referring to, say, a bridge that has been built, a bank in a location where at the time of writing there was no bank, a fictional make of car by a real car manufacturer or work of art by a real artist, along with references to the real geography or culture of the time of writing is bound to confuse. The point at which the reader realises the nature of the difference between the world the writer has extrapolated from the then present and the extrapolation we live in will be different for each reader, and certainly different from that of a reader when the story first appeared. All science fiction aspires to the condition of alternate history, perhaps?

I was interested to see the reviews by Colin Steele, somebody I seem to remember from other issues of *SFC*, but for some reason I never connected him with the Colin Steele who gave the Follett lectures. I rarely go to academic library conferences, and never, so far, to international ones (it's tough enough keeping up with all the sf conferences/conventions I need to go to) but if I do move in such rarefied circles I'll keep an eye out. Damned if I know how he keeps up with academic librarianship, IT *and* science fiction. If he has a secret, maybe he could pass it on.

I liked the picture of your book mountain on page 14. I like the neat piles. Mine is more like mounds of scree. Every so often there's an avalanche and something gets lost. In fact, it's more normal that I can't find a book than I can (look, I'm a professional librarian *at work*, OK; at home I'm a slob like anyone else). In the course of writing this letter I phoned my daughter to see if she had my copies of the first two Harry Potter books. 'I think they're in the cupboard upstairs on the landing,' she said. 'Which cupboard?' I asked (because I thought I'd looked in the one she meant). 'The cupboard where we keep books,' she replied testily, as you do when dads are slow on the uptake. But this house is full of cupboards and there are books in most of them . . . (And yes, they were there, next to the Lindsay Davies and Doris Lessing books. There is probably a classification scheme there, if I could think of it.)

(3 December 2001)

Book avalanches are common around here as well. Not to mention CD avalanches, which damage to the plastic covers. I get red in the face and invent new swear words when this happens. Polly hides under the couch, but Sophie just ignores me, as usual.

RALPH ASHBROOK
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On the assumption that something extraordinary happened in the SF of the late forties through the sixties, I am exploring the possibility of a high school curriculum based thereon. That imagined world has crept in on little mouse feet: ubiquitous PCs, emails, hyperlinks, Mars, cell phones, MP3 packets. It should be worthwhile for kids to read these extrapolations to find patterns of divergence and convergence, as well as having the fun we did. Encouraging the class to suggest current production would allow the program to jump outside of its own system.

The Dick-based film, *Impostor*, came and went. Clever and fun, but thin. *Minority Report* promises to be more ambitious.

(5 February 2002)

Aronofsky's *Pi* reminded me of early Jeunet (*City of Lost Children* and *Delicatessen*) and *Being John Malkovich* — what has come to be called Phildickian. I see mainstream (albeit independent) cinema catching up with the worlds that SF writers explored, starting in the late forties. Even some mainstream fiction is testing the same waters: *House of Leaves* (Mark Danielewski) and *Center of Things* (Jenny McPhee).

(26 February 2002)

When Cronenberg slips into many of his films the visual equivalent of thank-you notes to Philip Dick, and *Being John Malkovich* is several degrees more surreal than any Phil Dick novel, and *Sixth Sense* and *Fight Club* are also very

Phildickian, it seems as if the spirit of PKD is invading American cinema. When will some film or TV production company call itself Palmer Eldritch Productions?

FRANK C. BERTRAND
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So there I recently was, perusing *SF Commentary* No. 77 (November 2001), one of but several items in a marvellous fanzine package that finally caught up with me, and in the 'Pinlighters' section came across a letter by *moi* dated 11 February 1994 (page 30)! While not exactly finding myself in a PhilDickian 'time-slip', I did experience a bit of 'conceptual dislocation' — to use a PKD phrase from a letter of his dated 14 May 1981. I mean, that's only a time-slip of some seven years, which in fanzine time is nothing to sneeze at.

But upon re-reading my letter, and your appended comments, I would like to wax metaphysical for a bit — or perhaps several bits. And that's because, sad to say, the situation I delineated has not changed for the better. As you aptly note, PKD's 'strange exegetical writings' have become 'more important for some critics than the lithe, brilliant earlier writings', then *and* now. It's as if Dick's *oeuvre* consists of *just* the so-called '*VALIS* trilogy' and the *only* important part of his life is the so-called 'pink beam' experience. (Yes indeed, it is time for a new edition of *Electric Shepherd*, or another 'PKD special issue' of *SF Commentary*!)

I'm sure Phil's strong satiric/'black humour' sensibility would find this hilarious, if it wasn't so tragic. Such a narrow, selective approach by the critical/academic community does not bode well for him, or any writer, especially when most of it comes after the writer has died and cannot respond. (I mean, wasn't it Nietzsche who wrote somewhere in his *The Antichrist* (1888) that some persons are born posthumously?) And Phil did write, in a 1980 book review of Patricia Warrick's *The Cybernetic Imagination in Science Fiction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980), that: 'This book praises me by terming my writing important but it arrogates to itself the role of arbiter of viewpoint and proper concern. Viewpoint and concern in SF are a transaction among author, editor, and reader, to which the critic is a spectator. Don't dignify us. Our power to stimulate human imagination and to delight is intrinsic to us already. Quite frankly, we were doing fine before you came along' (*The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick*, pp. 97–8).

Or, does this point to, instead, the 'rise and fall of the critical/academic empire'? (a subject we very much need a modern Gibbon for!) True, they did creatively try their best to adopt Phil Dick as a 'postmodernist poster child'. But, as Sokal and Bricmont nicely state it, in *Fashionable Nonsense* (NY: Picador USA, 1999), 'not all that is obscure is necessarily profound' (p. 186). Why would any writer want this kind of attention or 'fame'? (see especially: David Lehman, 'The Questions of Postmodernism', www.zip.com.au/~jtranter/jacket04/lehman-postmod.html)

It's much more likely that the critical/academic acolytes struggling to win publish-or-perish tenure points are using Phil Dick, and 'postmodernism', to fabricate their own special brand of narcissistic fame. As Professor Leo Braudy incisively states it: 'Many seek fame because they believe it confers a reality that they lack. Unfortunately, when they become famous themselves, they usually discover that their sense of unreality has only increased' (*The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 589).

A sense of their unreality can be gleaned from the fact that a conference was held on 18 and 19 May 1996, called 'Reconsidering the Postmodern'. More telling was a gathering at the University of Chicago on 14–16 November 1997 titled 'Conference on After Postmodernism'. Apparently the newer academic fads are not lasting very long. As Walter Laqueur explains, it's actually been since the middle 1980s that 'postmodernism has been in slow decline; its advocates have been unable to agree on many things. Its effect outside the university, to the extent that it had one, has been the opposite of what was intended' (in Derek Maus (ed.), *Postmodernism*, San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2001, p. 161).

And long after all of them have faded away, I'll still be able to read, reflect upon, and discuss the pivotal and lithe *early* works of Phil Dick, especially *The Man Who Japed* and *Time Out Of Joint*. More than these, I continue to be thoroughly intrigued and fascinated by his first published short story, 'Beyond Lies the Wub'. Within it can be found embedded many of the 'philosophical seeds' that later germinate into his dominant themes and motifs, one such being, as Ralph Ashbrook notes, the 'oddness of morality' (his letter of January 1994, also *SF Commentary* 77). In fact, the Wub eloquently sums up what I've been trying to wax metaphysical about here: 'But how can any lasting contact be established between your people and mine if you resort to such barbaric attitudes?'

(23 March 2002)

STEPHEN THOMPSON
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Vision magazine was initially the writers' group's newsletter (still is), but it came out sporadically and only as a photocopied paper copy, stapled in the corner. In the middle of last year I became interested in editing and publishing (rather, I decided to do something about my interest). So I took over the newsletter and set about expanding it and making it more interesting.

Essentially it still is about writing, but it also now occasionally includes articles about fannish things. I have to admit to not being into fan stuff; my connection to the genre is purely through writing. It's only through my publishing interest that I decided to drop in on fan sites, therefore I found the eastcoastsf list.

The zine comes in hard copy for financial members of the Vision group, and arrives by email for the rest of the world. My budget is very small, giving me just enough dough to get 30 copies printed for members. Because of the budget constraints (and the need to get it printed from disk), the zine isn't very big — 12 pages per issue. Recent issues feature Mr Dalrymple, Robert Hoge, Julian Warner, and Cat Sparks, all from the eastcoastsf email group.

(18 April 2002)

I Also Heard From

Sarah Marland, who sent a postcard from Japan in October 2001. With **Andrew Macrae** and **Audrey** the cat, she has hosted several meetings of the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group) this year. She played drums in Andrew's band at his birthday party last year.

Matthew Davis has been a great help in arranging publication of John Crowley's article in this issue and tracking down the *Yale Review* version. Matthew's main interest is the work of Tom Disch.

Jeanne Mealy keeps sending me books and articles from

Minneapolis newspapers about Garrison Keillor and *A Prairie Home Companion*. She (and Melbourne fan **Murray McLachlan**) also sent me an article from *National Geographic* by Garrison Keillor. It is the best article about the art of fiction that I've read for a long time. The article includes photos of the original locations for what became Lake Wobegon. In Australia, weekly episodes of *A Prairie Home Companion* are still not played on radio. I keep meaning to see whether CDs of the programs are available, but never quite get around to surfing the Net to find them. Thanks, Jeanne, for the gifts, and apologies for not replying adequately until now.

Michael Waite and **Tim Marion** each produce fabulously expensive, well-produced fanzines for FAPA, and they are kind enough to send us copies as well. Both have adopted Australian fandom as a special interest; you could, for instance, read Dick Jenssen's ConVergence report in Michael's *Trial and Air* long before you read about the same convention in my report.

Michael Waite is a busy man, so I don't know where he finds the time for *Trial and Air*. Nevertheless, he's sent us some wonderful books, including H. G. Wells's *An Experiment in Autobiography*, which I'd never seen before. He is also a music fan: 'I listen to music all day while I'm at work. At the moment I'm listening to Mozart's Horn Concertos (Dennis Brain/Herbert von Karajan: EMI). I can think of no other horn player who compares to Dennis Brain. The sound he creates transports me to another world. He is unique. What a tragedy he died so young.' Michael put me back in touch with **Robert Sabella** (now trading copies of *Visions of Paradise*), who was an *SFC* subscriber in the 1970s.

Tim Marion is beset by problems, which this year have included the loss of three of his cats to various diseases. We've lost two cats in less than twelve months, so we sympathise greatly.

Ken Bailey sent me from Alderney, Channel Islands, two collections of his works, *The Vortices of Time* and *The Sky Giants*. '*The Vortices of Time* is a miscellany of haiku, senryu, triolets (a favourite form) and other verse, much it sfnally oriented. Steve Jeffery did the cover illustration.' Ken is one of the amazingly erudite people I've met through Acnestis, the English apa with the eternal waiting list. He's written a sublime article on Coleridge that I would love to reprint in *Metaphysical Review* just as soon as I can revive that magazine.

During the last couple of years, **Bill Burns** has been the benefactor of many fanzine editors. He hosts the electronic version of our fanzines on **eFanzines.com**. Check it out.

Also check out the monthly fanzine reviews posted by **Ted White** on eFanzines.com. Thanks, Ted, for the generous March review of *SF Commentary* 77.

Dwain Kaiser enjoys *SFC*, and sends as a trade his own fanzine.

The overseas mailout of *SFC* 77 led to a discussion about non-cancelled stamps. **Rich Lynch**: 'The stamps on the copy we received were not cancelled, and I guess could be soaked off and reused, if you'd like them back again. (Assuming it's legal and ethical to do so in Australia.)' It turns out it's neither legal, ethical nor practicable. The stamps have been electronically cancelled by Australia Post, whether or not the cancellation shows.

Bill Bowers, on the other hand, seemed picked out for Special Treatment by the post office: 'What else would explain why the envelope containing my welcomed copy of *SFC* 77 (how'd the hell did he get ahead of me in issue numbers?) did indeed warrant postal cancellation?'

Eric Lindsay's *Gegenschein* is now only available electronically, except for people such as me (we're both members of ANZAPA): 'Now I'm not working, the cost of producing and mailing 300 copies of four minimum-weight fanzines a year would be half my annual income.'

Curt Phillips is one of many people I've met through the Internet lists during recent years. To the packet I sent him, he replied: 'You'll be glad to know, I think, that *SFC* 76 has caused me to search out some more George Turner books. *Beloved Son* currently awaits my attention on the to-be-read stack.' *Drowning Towers* would be a better start, Curt, but I'd be interested to hear what you make of *Beloved Son*.

Ahrvid Engholm sent me a copy of a very enthusiastic review he wrote about *SFC* 77 for a Swedish fanzine. One thing that worries me: he mentions that the table of contents was missing. Several other people have mentioned this as well. It seems that in several copies, page 2, which included the ToC and Ditmar's explanation of the cover art, was not printed. Sorry about that. I was in too much of a hurry stuffing copies in envelopes to check each copy.

Bob Tucker, who celebrated his eightieth birthday recently, received *SFC* 77: 'Now I have this trove to read this winter, I may reach page 82 by next March or April.'

David Cake sent greetings from Western Australia. He offered to write book reviews for me, but I've been so overwhelmed by incoming reviews recently that I haven't yet taken him up on his offer.

Arthur D. Hlavaty enjoyed *SFC* 77: 'Delightful, particularly Sladek on Disch. He even makes *The Genocides* sound interesting. Along with Michael Dirda, I wonder why the Serious Lit/Avant Garde establishment hasn't noticed that Sladek is one of theirs.'

Jan Stinson keeps me sending me *Peregrine Nations*, but has now been forced, because of a lack of a cash, to distribute it only on eFanzines.com. I still haven't sent her the bundle of Gillespiezines I promised her about a year ago.

Jenny Bryce is not an SF fan, but she always says hello when Elaine or I send her fanzines: 'I leave in five minutes for Canberra. But just wanted to say thank you for *SF Commentary*: it looks terrific, especially the front cover (I've barely got past it)!'

Judith Buckrich enjoyed *SFC* so much that she arranged a Morning Coffee of Comment: 'Marc Ortlieb's review [of *George Turner: A Life*] was fine. I kind of dread reviews of the biography these days. But his was not a bad one. And you are always recommending that people read it. Thank you.' Judy has recently had two launch parties for her book *The Long and Perilous Journey: A History of the Port of Melbourne* (Melbourne Books 1-877096 00 8; 240 pp.; A$24 hb), which includes lots of wonderful pictures as well as a lively account of the history of Melbourne.

Paul Anderson from Adelaide sends regular emails to keep me up with news of his family and my old Adelaide friends, who are now scattered throughout Australia. Both Paul's parents have now died; I remember them fondly from the times I stayed at their place in Hawthorndene in the seventies.

Rowena Cory Lindquist, mentioned in my piece on Wynne Whiteford (p. 7), was at ConVergence (see photo in **brg** 33), and is married to **Darryl Lindquist**, a bloke I first met in 1969 in Ararat. Rowena wrote: 'Haven't had a chance to have a good look at the *SFC*s yet, but Daryl picked them up and smiled and said, "I remember when these were roneoed off!"'

Robert Lichtman, chatting about this and that, reminded me that I haven't yet run off extra copies of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, my Acnestis fanzine. I haven't run

them off for **Irwin Hirsh**, either. **Ray Nelson**, whose 1960s short story inspired the title of the fanzine, got in touch, so I must run off a set for him as well. As soon as I find the time.

Tom Disch liked the reprint of the Sladek article about his SF novels (*SFC* 77) so much that he arranged with John Crowley to reprint the article that begins this issue. I have one question: does anybody know John Crowley's snailmail address, so that I can send him a copy?

Damien Broderick sent lots of nice bits and pieces throughout the year, including photos, and arranged with John Romeril to write the review that appears in this issue. Many thanks, Damien.

Paul Collins and **Meredith Costain** held the New Year's Eve party, 2001/2, that was the last time I saw Wynne Whiteford. Paul and Meredith also bought the Clifton Hill house that I lusted after on page 14 of *SFC* 77. I was disappointed to find they have not filled the nine-room house with books and CDs, as Elaine and I would have done. Paul writes: 'Life here is great: it's like a country property with all mod cons. Certainly the centre of the universe so far as public transport is concerned, what with trains, trams and buses all within ten minutes' walk. We have Jack the kelpie, Harriet the bitsa pussycat, four goldfish called Georgenella (we had two, George and Ella — one died but we didn't know which one, so we called the survivor Georgenella — now we have four, we figured it easier to call all of them Georgenella), and four chooks, Sibyl, Henrietta, Agnes and Doris.'

Jerry Kaufman, who has just returned to fanzine publishing, received his *SFC* 77 'just in time to take it along on another long drive. This time I took it as car and breakfast reading to Orycon, an annual convention just outside Portland, Oregon. 'Lovely cover graphics by Ditmar. I assume he's the inspiration for the name of the Australian SF Achievement awards? I'm glad you explained the front cover's meaning, as I would never guessed it. Furthermore, I would have been left in the embarrassing position of thinking that the shushing figure might be Ditmar, not Elaine!' Fortunately, there are plenty of pictures of Ditmar in the ConVergence Report that accompanies this issue. 'Despite having read Sladek's piece on Disch before (many years before), I still found it the liveliest and most interesting piece in the issue. I felt like I might want to tackle some of those Disch books again, especially *Camp Concentration* and *334*.'

Moshe Feder, in his capacity as an editor at Tor Books, last year did me an enormous favour, which saved me well over $A2000, so he's been placed on the Gillespie Lifetime Subscription list. (I don't offer such subscriptions officially, but some people are on the list anyway.)

Michael Levy thanked me for the magazines I sent.

Ian Sales has recently returned to Britain from Abu Dhabi, where has been working for some years. 'Can't say I agree with all the book reviews', but Ian and I enjoy disagreeing with each other's reviews in Acnestis.

Sherry Thompson recently retired, but is still finding it hard to find time to write letters of comment: 'I'm glad I'm not one of those people whose career defines them and their lives, and who becomes terminally bored upon retirement. I might add that I've never understood that kind of a mindset. If a person is reasonably healthy and has enough income to cover basic expenses, how can they possibly be bored or have time on their hands?' I have all my retirement activities planned out, but cannot ever afford to retire.

For those who are wondering 'Whatever happened to **Elizabeth** and **Peter Darling**?', they tell us in a more-than-usually newsy Christmas card that in 2001 Elizabeth 'celebrated her sixtieth birthday by staging her second [art] exhibition (after a gap of 38 years)' and Peter 'almost managed to keep his resolution to work less than 40 hours per week (not counting work around the farm)', despite the fact that he officially retired a year or so ago. What used to be the barn at the Pondarosa (the farm near Kyneton, Victoria, where Peter and Elizabeth now live) was turned into 'Pondarosa Galleries', the site of Elizabeth's work in water colours and mixed media. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's cartoons about Australian fandom have recently begun to appear in John Foyster's *eFNAC*. Peter has been working on several major projects, travelling to Europe, and chairing convention sessions.

John Light (Photon Press, 37 The Meadows, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland, TD15 1NY, UK) offered to list my magazines for free in his annual catalogue *Light's List 2002*. He supplies the following details: '*Light's List of Literary Magazines 2002* contains the names, addresses, price, frequency, page count and a brief note of interests (for example, 'Traditional: poems to 30 lines, fiction to 2000 words, reviews, artwork') of over 1500 UK, US, Canadian, Australian, European, African and Asian small press magazines publishing creative writing and artwork in English. 17th annual edition: £2.50 including postage (US$6 surface; US$7 air); cheques payable to John Light. Email: photon.press@virgin.net.'

Robert Day sent a very long letter of comment to the most recent issue of *Metaphysical Review*, plus some scanned photos, but since then he has been Busy. 'Highlights of the year: my first professional sale (an article on an Austrian rural railway), a new relationship, a holiday in Vienna. Lowlights: work, and a burglary at home. I was at an SF convention when I was burgled. Have these people no decency?'

I didn't hear from long-time Sydney reader and supporter **Annette Carter** during Christmas 2000–2001, but the end of 2001 brought news of a change of address and moving house. Alex Skovron, Lucy Sussex and we are still hoping that we can resume our dinners with her.

David Russell sent his usual fascinating letter of comment (as well as the unusually fascinating parcel he sends me on my birthday). He had hoped to catch me out by sending a letter before he received his copy of *SF Commentary*. He borrowed the Melbourne Science Fiction Club's copy, which I had handed to Alan Stewart. A mutual friend had seen David at the Club, so I was not surprised by his letter. He read my short review of Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years*, then bought a remaindered paperback: 'Reading your zine, Bruce, causes me to read that which I would not normally read: mainstream fiction'. I could run a long list of books that David should read now he's broken the drought. Instead I sent him my favourite (non-SF) book of the last few years: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*.

Ron Clarke didn't make it to Aussiecon III in Melbourne, although I did mention him in my Fan GoH speech as one of the people who should have been standing there instead of me. Ron's *The Mentor*, if it's still officially being published, is 40 years old this year (makes *SFC* seem like a toddler). Of *SFC* 77, he writes: 'I really enjoyed the lead article about Thomas M. Disch. Sladek really gets into Disch's head for his works. The details of Disch's life were an additional bonus.'

Last Christmas **Susan Batho**, long-time Sydney fan and

A. Bertram Chandler Award winner, who was once married to Ron Clarke, sent us one of those round-robin Christmas letters that tells us all the things we would never have thought to ask, because we don't know any members of the Batho extended family other than Susan. She's very, very busy at the moment, but I look forward to her next electronic fanzine. I caught up with her at ConVergence in June.

Heather Johnson sent a card on behalf of her daughter **Karen** and son **Greg**. Karen never quite takes a long-hoped-for trip to America, but she continues as a member of ANZAPA. Heather attended ConVergence, but I didn't get to sit down and talk. Heather would be Melbourne's most active fan if she had the time.

Adrienne Losin sent some of her drawings, although not in a reproducible form, and a round-robin letter in which she says she has started selling her art overseas. Adrienne used to call in occasionally at the Friday night group when it met at the Myer cafeteria, but perhaps she hasn't found us since we moved to the Australia Arcade basement.

I've been swapping books with **Lizbeth and Paul Billinger** — or rather, sending them enough books to justify a continuing subscription to the British Science Fiction Association (whose quarterly package includes *Vector* and other goodies). I sent them the latest Kate Grenville novel the week she won the Orange Prize in Britain, and they did me the favour of turning me on to the novels of Christopher Brookmyre.

I had a very short note from **Colin Steele**, which ended: 'My wife is getting a bit uptight re boxes of books on floor!' So's mine, Colin. My mighty collection of boxes of books stays right there on the floor, threatening to topple over, until we solve the Extra Room Problem (*Titanic* Deck Chairs Problem). I've been suggesting that the Canberra fans get in touch with you for advice about running conventions, since you ran the Canberra Word Festival successfully for many years.

William Brieding has sent me several encouraging notes, some American folding money, and his fanzine *Books Read, 2001*. If I reprinted it as a contribution to *SFC*, it would take up 10 packed pages. I'll merely note that William reads widely and wisely. Better, he alerts me to books I haven't heard of and would order if the house were not already full; for example, Wallace Stegner's *The American West as Living Space* ('speeches at U. of M. at Ann Arbor, dealing with human culture as affected by the lack of water and the endless open spaces of the West'), James Sallis's *The Long-Legged Fly* ('triumph of construction, literate, melodramatic, post-modern, and gloomy'), and a book I really should have known about and bought before writing my recent article about SF novellas: *The Arbor House Treasury of Great Science Fiction Short Novels*, edited by Silverberg and Greenberg. Bill is probably out of copies of this year's list, but you could write to him for next year's: PO Box 1901, Tucson AZ 85702, USA.

In an earlier note, William praises both *SFC* 76 and 77, and writes: 'I had a chance to meet **Paul Kincaid** early this year and really enjoyed the brief moments we had together standing about at the Potlatch parties. I also met **Jae Leslie Adams**. Of course, I am very shy, so they probably were puzzled'.

Erika Maria Lacey keeps in touch from Brisbane, although she hasn't done much fannish during the last year or so. She promises to get back into action soon, and might even rejoin ANZAPA.

Jerry Davis sent me money after he received the most recent *SF Commentary*, despite declining vision. He ends his letter, as we all should: 'Well, I had better feed the cat.'

Early this year, **Mary Sheridan** and **Lister Matheson** from the Clarion Workshop at Michigan State University at East Lansing toured Australia, hoping to find people who would help them set up Clarion South. Looks as if this will happen in Brisbane in 2003 or 2004. Lister and Mary sent me the *Clarion Newsletter* (No. 21, Summer 2002).

Vanessa Jacobsen received her copy of *SFC* 77 just before she took the bus to Melbourne from Canberra for ConVergence. 'I'm most interested in having a chat to you re fan history.' This didn't happen, as Vanessa and I said about two words to each other during the convention ('Hi!' 'Hi!').

I didn't even get to talk to **Cat Sparks** at the convention: 'I seemed to spend the whole four days yabbering with people, not that I can clearly recall anything much that was discussed!' Thanks again for the CD of convention photos, Cat. 'I would also be keen to contribute artwork to *SFC* at some stage. I seem to be overburdened with work this year, probably because I decided to do a Uni course as well as Agog! Press and a host of other things for other people's projects.'

Alison Barton was also kind enough to send some photos from ConVergence. So was **Rose Mitchell**. After surviving ConVergence, they sound as if they want to keep organising conventions. That's a worse addiction than fanzine publishing.

I'd lost track of **Gary Farber**, but it seems he's been hiding out in Boulder, Colorado, and keeping a weblog (or 'blog'). He tried to explain weblogs to me — daily fanzine entries accessed through one's Web site — but I couldn't work out why anyone would want to write so much so often about one's own life. I'll stay with the glacial art of the paper fanzine.

Lenny Bailes is, like many of the people mentioned here, someone I met only because of the Internet. His fanzine *Whistlestar* is recommended.

Gerd Maximovic (Am Wall 183, 28105 Bremen, Germany) would like to publish fiction in Australian magazines or anthologies, regardless of whether payment is offered. I sent him the addresses of the usual suspects (including the magazines and anthologies launched at ConVergence).

Garry Dalrymple is famous for trying to organise non-organisable Sydney fans, especially through Freecons. Some of his ventures work, and others don't. I was interested in the results of a survey he did among people who attended the recent Canberra regional convention.

Fiona Kelleghan is Book Reviews Editor of the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*. Thanks to John Bangsund, she got in touch with me to write a book review. It sounds as if she would like to see other fanzines about science fiction and fantasy (Otto G. Richter Library, University of Miami, Florida 33124-0320, USA).

— Bruce Gillespie, 22 October 2002

And suddenly it's Christmas (26 December 2002):
Thanks for all the cards from readers, especially those containing letters or (even) money. (Yes, thanks, **Gian Paolo Cossato**. May the floodgates of Venice be kind to you.) Some have had uppish years (including **David**, **Sue** and **Kathryn Grigg**, and **Sally Yeoland**) and some downish (thanks for the personalised card, **Leigh** and **Valma**). May things be better in 2003.

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Photo of Bruce Gillespie by Jeanette Gillespie, May 2001.

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