SF Commentary 108

February 2022 **80 pages**

First fiction ever published in SF Commentary
Michael Bishop special feature

Really cool works worth reading: hints from Michael Bishop
Jennifer Bryce
Tony Thomas

Booker Prize 2021:
Jennifer Bryce
Tony Thomas

Ron Drummond's first meetings with Samuel Delany and Joanna Russ

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Denny Marshall: 'The Handshake'.

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FRONT COVER: Denny Marshall: 'The Handshake'.
BACK COVER: Denny Marshall: 'The Planting.'

PHOTOGRAPHS: Michael H. Hutchins (p. 3)**; Murray Moore** (p. 15)**; Dick Jenssen** (p. 15)**.**
ILLUSTRATIONS: Carol Kewley (pp. 52, 54)**.**

Featuring Michael Bishop

First fiction to be published in SFC!

First, Michael Bishop sent me an email offering to send me a copy of his latest short story collection ***A Few Last Words for the Late Immortals***. I was about to send him a reply thanking him very much, but saying that he would find it impossible to post a book to Australia from USA through the USPO. He would need to spend a small fortune to send it via a private express service.

Next day, hero bookseller **Justin Ackroyd** (Slow Glass Books) turned up at our outer suburban house bearing books we had ordered. Among my orders that had arrived from America was ***A Few Last Words for the Late Immortals: 50 Short Stories & Poems*** (2021; Fairwood Press/Kudzu Planet; 249 pp.; US$17.99). It is edited by Michael H. Hutchins.

Second, Michael sent a second email offering to let me publish in ***SF Commentary*** a story from *A Few Last Words*. 'Yahweh's Hour', the last story in the book, has not been published elsewhere. Michael did not hide the fact that he would like ***SFC*** readers to consider 'Yahweh's Hour' when nominating items for the 2022 Hugo Award for Best Short Story. I won't hide the fact that I was very flattered to be offered the story. 'But,' I wrote to Michael, 'Even more than "Yahweh's Hour" I like your nice little comedy story "The Alzheimer Laureate". Could I publish that as well?' And Michael said yes.

Which is how ***SF Commentary* 108** has become the first issue in 53 years to publish a work of fiction.

A Few Last Words for the Late Immortals is a collection of stories that are 3000 words and shorter, plus quite a few poems. I like Michael's poems

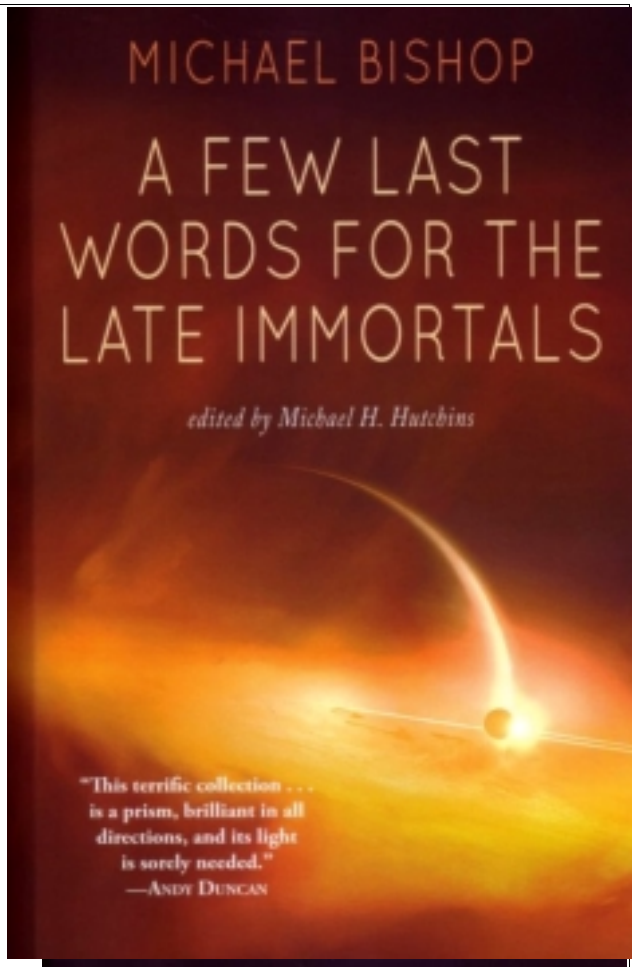
Above: Michael and Jeri Bishop. (Photo: Michael H. Hutchins.)

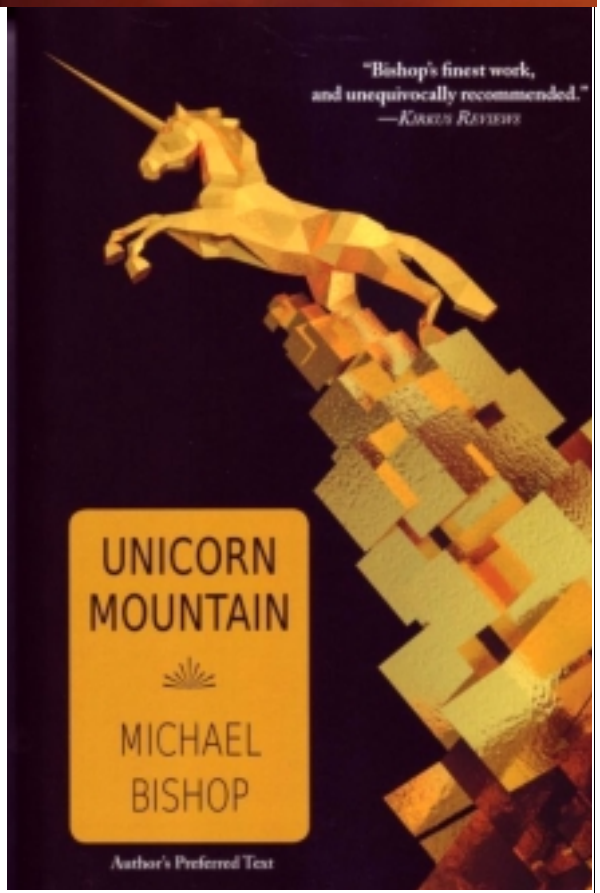
very much, but have never been much of a fan of the very-short-story genre. Besides, Michael Bishop is well known for his mastery of the SF novella. This book was my surprise. These short stories work very well. Some are one-idea surprise crackers, as you would expect in a short-short-story collection, but Michael Bishop gives to them a depth of perception that is difficult to find in most short fiction. Some of them are mini-novels, such as 'Love's Enemy', 'Tears', 'A Father's Secret', and 'Wished-for Belongings'. They are big stories hiding in small packages — complete responses to difficult situations. The poem 'Independence Day Forever' compresses the largest concerns of this and the last century into one page.

This **Michael Bishop section** of ***SFC*** includes not only two new stories but also the annual message from Michael and Jeri Bishop and family. Because of Michael's continuing illness, it's been an exhausting year for all of them. Nevertheless, the new edition of ***Unicorn Mountain*** has been published, and Michael has been writing on Facebook enlightening and entertaining accounts of his cancer treatments.

Michael also sent me his list of his 100 Really Cool Works of Twentieth-century Fiction in English. Thanks again, Michael.

— Bruce Gillespie, 10 January 2022





The new Fairwood Press edition of *Unicorn Mountain*.

Fiction: This is the first piece of fiction to be published in SF Commentary

Michael Bishop

The Alzheimer Laureate

In 20—, American writer Dominic McLock of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, received belated acknowledgment of his genius when the Swedish Academy bestowed on him that year's Nobel Prize for Literature. A photo of the cherubic-looking writer sitting at his antiquated Apple wearing a Russian cap, gutta-percha galoshes, and a candy-striped thong became poster fodder and sold millions of copies worldwide.

After toiling in obscurity for at least thirty years, the darling of only a fanatic proprietary cult, Dominic McLock now rose to stratospheric heights of international fame. Predictably, every remotely literate bumpkin claimed to have discovered his multivolume masterwork, *Chronicles of a Laminated Tomorrow,* an epic comedy of manners and technological innovation, back when its first instalment, *The Lost Cursor,* issued from a shoestring publishing house that sold eighty-six copies before plunging into unlamented bankruptcy.

In his late fifties when *The Lost Cursor* flash-in-the-panned over the literary landscape, McLock kept writing. He found other supporters — mad bibliophiles and eccentrics — to urge him on and publish him, and *Chronicles of a Laminated Tomorrow* grew by an instalment a year for the next two and a half decades. Sales rose modestly. Each addition to McLock's *Chronicles* attracted new acolytes and more nominations for obscure literary prizes: The Frickle Hambly Award, the Hypertext Medallion, the Enemies of Aesthetic Mediocrity Citation, etc.

As sequel followed sequel, each work had not only a quaint hardcopy avatar but also concomitant lives as video artifact, CD-ROM, eBook, podcast, computer game, continuously mutable wall hangings, psychedelic lozenges, and sheath-free talking birth-control aids, or *water-soluble fertility coins* (depending on the bio-state or procreative tenets of each consumer). Each avatar of McLock's *Chronicles* advanced, deepened, and glossed every other chapter in its revolutionary meta-structure. *Pixilated Pixels,* from 20–, sold well enough to appear briefly on the *New York Times* Bestseller List (in a footnote, as a likely up-and-comer) and became a glib catchphrase on a popular radio wranglefest. A dozen or more young McLock wannabes (at that point in his career, only a recluse would have wanted such limited notoriety) strove to emulate his style, voice, tone, and jolting impact on the collective unconscious of the five thousand or so dilettantes who actually read him.

If McLock had any precursors, said the one national critic who paid him any heed at all, they were bona fide inventors like Proust, Joyce, and Eliot, who left in their wake not flourishing schools but thunderstruck, largely impotent gangs of admirers. In many ways, pontificated this critic, McLock 'subsumes Proust, Joyce, and Eliot in his own sensibility, extending their socio-psychical criticisms in the astuteness of his encompassing judgments and the radical virtuosity of his vision.' *(Say what?* moaned even the people who read this pedant, a group smaller than that who followed McLock.) No matter. McLock's follow-up to *Pixilated Pixels, The Monitor and Merry Mack,* which some view as cryptically autobiographical, was remaindered in all its forms within six months, plunging the author back into the ironclad obscurity to which he and most of his loyal readers had grown accustomed.

Years passed, and Dominic McLock continued to manufacture a title — no one any longer called his productions 'novels' — a year, each complex, idiosyncratic, and abstruse. In Europe (mainly among Florentines, Swedes, and Parisians), translations of the first twelve instalments of *Chronicles,*

in a single indexed package, sold in staggering numbers and convinced the mover-shakers of their various literary establishments that the provincial clods of the US had again snubbed a homegrown genius. They touted his work as inventive, sad, funny, and trailblazing in its cagy profundity.

Meanwhile, back in Black River Falls, McLock added briefer, more runic book-length chapters to his masterpiece, episodes so dadaesque that the only American critic once receptive to his *oeuvre* confessed, to legions of the ignorant and/or blasé, that the 'scalding brilliance' of McLock's latest work had left him panting to keep up, baffled past insight, and humbled by his efforts to decode what McLock had 'so incandescently shaped'.

Today, most literary historians — American, European, South American, East African — agree that Dominic McLock would have received the Nobel Prize a mere five years after the release of the indexed package of the *Chronicles'* first twelve books, if not for the hidebound conservatism of many of the Academy's most intellectually decrepit members. As a like crowd had once repeatedly denied Jorge Luis Borges the laurel, these same reactionaries, or their heirs, repeatedly blackballed Dominic McLock, who bore their snubs with a dignity that may well have sprung from his total indifference to their opinions or deliberations.

By 20–, though, the last of McLock's detractors (Academy members who did not know a hard drive from a drive train, a hypertext card from a hypnotist) had died, and the appearance of the arcane thirtieth book of his *Chronicles,* charmingly titled *Yoyo y Yo,* at last provided the impetus for his admirers in the Academy to bestow on him the award.

When he flew to Stockholm to accept the prize, Dominic McLock was eighty-nine years old. The citation for his Nobel commented favourably — fulsomely, some said — on the uniqueness of his vision, the teasing opacity of his style, the gnomic delicacy of his wit, the prophetic sweep of his social criticism, the sureness with which he grasped and illumined technological matters, and the futuristic catholicity of his taste in product packaging.

McLock tottered up to receive his award and recite his acceptance speech. Along with his plum-and-ivory tuxedo jumpsuit, he wore the same furry hat and galoshes that later appeared in the poster commemorating his victory. (He may also have worn a candy-striped thong, blessedly hidden by his jumpsuit.)

Once at the podium, McLock delivered neither the shortest nor the longest Nobel address on record, but surely one of the most striking. It consisted only of a conjugation of the English verb *to fuck* in its present, past, and future tenses. Briefly, it appeared that McLock would also essay either the corresponding perfect or conditional tenses, but he halted, shouted, *'Boom boom bosilac',* and bowed.

This address was received in what one attendee called 'appalled silence', but after her own tentative effort to initiate some tension-breaking applause, the silence soon evolved into persistent clapping, cries of '*Bravo!*' and '*That's the way to tell 'em, Dom!'* and a tsunami of photographic activity.

McLock's address had scored a surprise TKO.

Under the inspiration of the Nobel, the laureate returned to Wisconsin and wrote many new chapters of *Chronicles of a Laminated Tomorrow.* His publishers, also under the impetus of the award, issued them in all the various media long after they ceased turning a profit: a failure owing to the fact that each new addition to the writer's belatedly celebrated masterwork seemed more gibberish-ridden and incoherent than the one before.

Except as poster boy and media-landscape book-talk staple, where his shrill cry '*Boom boom bosilac*' acquired shibboleth status, McLock was abandoned not only by the general public but also by many of his once staunchest fans.

New medications slowed his descent into total babbledom, but he refused gene therapy and eventually died alone, wearing the outfit in which, as a kitsch poster figure, he still decorated the walls of dozens of die-hard dilettantes worldwide.

The last 'words' on the screen of his Mac, preserved in the museum that had once been his house, are '*Y y y n y*'. Now Dominic McLock sleeps his eternal sleep in a family graveyard outside Black River Falls.

The site's custodian, once chair of the Dominic McLock Booster Club, tells visitors that the laureate, during his final month, wrote his own epitaph, which one may read on his mammoth salmon-coloured tombstone:

Hickory Dickery
McLock,
Dominic Celestine
Dead at 100
A Century unto Himself
What gohz aboot cumz aboot!

— **Michael Bishop**, first appeared in *Science Fiction Age* (ed. Scott Edelman), Herndon VA: Sovereign Media Co., March 1996

Fiction: This is the second piece of fiction to be published in SF Commentary

Michael Bishop

Yahweh's Hour

Mercer always showed up at the Dadd Tower & Lodge to watch 'Yahweh's Hour.' In these Patchwork States of America, Overman Troy B. Dadd's evangels had chosen the *Flam Channel* to air the show. Watching it at 8:00 p.m. on Thursday was mandatory for almost everyone, especially ex-cons, so it always had a one-hundred-percent rating for its time slot. Every other network went off the air.

At the grand ballroom's door, Mercer received his sized lobe-link crown, fitted it to his skull, and, elbows in, headed with other attendees toward the huge screen at the far end of the room. Many tables had filled, but midway in, a jaundiced-looking man yielded his place, which Mercer took. Then Mercer petitioned a weary-looking Chicano server for a beer and eyed with distaste the glowing screen.

'I hate TV,' said a burly man next to him. 'I'd dig ditches before I'd watch most of the crap they shovel, but I *love* this show. Wouldn't miss it for a scrub in the tub with First Lady Aaliyah.'

'If you miss it', Mercer said, 'you die.'

'Well, there's that, but thanks to Overman Troy's sponsorship, I can hardly wait for my weekly sixty-minute God fix.'

'Forty minutes, tops.' Mercer's disgusted look slapped the man dumb.

Three years back, after the first season of 'Yahweh's Hour' (replaced each summer by reruns of 'So You Want to Be Filthy Rich?'), every penitentiary in the land had released, on Overman Dadd's pardon, any prisoner who had slain an 'enemy of the state'. Which was how Mercer had escaped a life sentence for beating to death a 'godless transgendered teen' ten years before Dadd's ascension to the overmannery.

Mercer had been glad to walk free, but unlike the clod next to him he loathed 'Yahweh's Hour.' All he ever recalled of it later was its ads for Discount Daddcare, Troy Dadd University, Daddillac Escapade Limos, and Overman Troy's Casinos & Spas. These roughly five-minute ads came at ten-minute intervals after each God torrent, phosphor-dot hurricanes of mind-fogging vagueness. During them, attendees supposedly drank glory from God's aura. No one knew just what these storms embodied though, because conscious memory failed, and recording, or trying to record, a God spot was *verboten*.

Thursday's timeslot worked for the show, said Overman Dadd and his suck-ups, because more viewers stayed home on Thursdays than on weekends and God had no desire to piss off pastors, priests, rabbis, or any other regime-certified clergy who passed collection plates Friday through Sunday.

The *Flam Channel*'s animated devil-cherub danced, an ad for Discount Daddcare broke open Mercer's musings, and when the devil-angel next jigged, a hard flat glow from the screen frosted eyeballs and slowed brains.

Like everyone else there, Mercer succumbed.

In this first blitz, he felt tied to the Deity, raged against that tie, and endured a host of imposed emotions: surely, only milquetoasts and madmen sought a mind-meld with God. As an inmate on a prison yard seeking to skip a 'Yahweh's Hour' an entire season ahead of Dadd's controversial amnesty, he'd had a vision of hell that spoke to his adolescent anarchism: Dadd as God, God as Dadd, *smoke everywhere:* Dadd is to God as Muhammed is to Allah.

After that warning, he never avoided the show again. You got one chance. If you tried for two, you triggered a stroke and slept with worms.

God is love, *Mercer consoled himself, still awash in roiling mother-of-pearl images.*

If that was so, why did everyone else about him submit to this irreligious crapola? Yes, you had to watch — no, hallucinate *— these segments, but who but God decreed that you must yield your entire being to these blurry spiritual fugues? By this belated point though, even quasi-stimmed, Mercer had begun to frame an answer …*

A Dadd University spot started and ran, and as captives around him semi-awoke, Mercer bolted upright and pondered.

Then, as the ad faded to black, a God-lit nova flung everyone back into stupefaction: all but Mercer, who blinked the starburst away and edged toward epiphany: Since the first season of 'Yahweh's Hour', Overman Dadd's assets had quadrupled, his pals had prospered, and his self-aggrandising agenda had taken root. But some of his pardoned followers had recanted their crimes and asked forgiveness.

In its phosphor-dot storm, 'Yahweh's Hour' was now disclosing that this development greatly irked Overman Dadd, even though his rarely consulted Deity approved it.

Through a storm-dispelling lens, Mercer looked down upon his victim in a highway overpass outside Tyre, Georgia, beholding the kid's battered skull and a face warpainted with congealing blood.

And this act, which had defined Mercer for the country but which had charmed the sensibilities of Troy B. Dadd, he now regretted. Once, he'd seen the waif at his feet as vile human waste (as Overman Dadd still did), deserving of no sendoff nobler than that of flushing dung down a toilet, and Dadd had pardoned him for the glory of God and also for that of Dadd himself, with whom the latter motive had held the higher priority, a fact seldom remarked by his disciples. Or his children, as Dadd called them …

A third commercial spot kicked the crowd out of its hallucinations into more activity than it had shown emerging from earlier God fits, perhaps because ads of Daddillac Escapades toting revellers over the Golden Gate Bridge, through New York's China Town, or along the Blueridge Parkway stirred everyone's blood.

A buzz arose, bowls of cashews landed in front of patrons, beers were sipped, and the doofus beside Mercer raised his hands evangelically.

'*Hallelujah!*' he cried.

Mercer turned to him. 'Okay, what'd *you* see?'

Still groggy, the man replied, 'Maybe my ship's coming in. How 'bout you?'

'Nothing like.'

'Then you just ain't seeing things right.'

The devil-cherub icon pranced about the high screen, an alarm buzzed, and beers and tapas vanished from tabletops as the night's third deific eruption flowed like lava over every chained mind. Indeed, Mercer saw fires like those that, last summer, had beset every forest in the far West through the ballroom as well as the smoky grottos of his own cranium.

Under the overpass outside Tyre, Mercer's avatar knelt beside his victim's long-dead doppelgänger and touched its shiny face.

Wrong pronoun. Wrong place. Wrong time.

Wait. The pronoun might be wrong, but not the place or time, which were right for what Mercer was doing, for in this place and time an atoning harmony held sway, but if he dallied, the flames all about Tyre and environs would overwhelm and incinerate the kid and him like ants in a firepit. Mercer spoke an apology, scooped the broken body into his arms, and lurched toward the roadway.

Harmony, *he thought,* but no hope.

Headlights brighter than the scary all-embracing glow bored through smoke and flames toward them from the south. A limousine. A white limousine bearing down, scattering as it came the polluted atmosphere around it.

The vehicle halted beside Mercer and his victim, ticking: a hot hunk of metal shedding heat through quick contractions and expansions. It had no saintly white-clad driver to welcome and usher them aboard, but two of its passenger-side doors opened out like unfolding wings, and Mercer placed his mutilated victim on a seat behind the leather benchseat and slid in next to the empty place where a spectral chauffeur should have sat.

And off they sped anyway, to escape the surrounding devastation …

God's firestorm faded to black as a commercial spot for Overman Troy's Casinos & Spas shook everyone awake for more flash rowdyism and lobe-link adjustments before the last quasi-quarter of 'Yahweh's Hour'.

But Mercer couldn't move. He hunched on his chair just as he had perched in a Daddillac Escapade in the vengeful fires of the Overman's impersonations of an Entity that Dadd tried to ape, incompetently.

'Was it better for you that time?' the doofus beside him asked.

'Yes.'

'How so?' The other guy took a gulp of his Yuengling.

'I shaped some of its content myself.'

The burly man frowned. 'That ain't kosher. You gotta go with the flow.'

Mercer shut his eyes and waited for the spot to fade, which it did quickly, as usual, and after an indoor sheet-lightning flash, the ballroom's watchers again fell under the spell of, well, who exactly?

In Mercer's case, not the megalomaniac sponsor of 'Yahweh's Hour', but the wounded saint within himself.

The limo ferried his victim and him through fire after fire, cross-continent, toa locale in the Pacific Northwest where the kid had grown up, differently. It finally stopped at an upland cabin by a cordwood stack where a man in a watch cap, dungarees, and worn sandals looked up as if at an alien visitation.

Mercer scooped the nameless kid from the limo, let both doors close automatically, and walked with the kid's body toward the scowling man. The limo eased away into some scraggly reemergent evergreens.

'What in hell you want?' The man approached. 'And who in hell's that?'

'Your daughter.' Mercer knew in his gut that the child had purposely morphed from boy to girl, but the man stared at the ruined being a while, then glanced in outrage between the body and the interloper holding it.

'The hell it is, Sambo! That's our boy Garrett. If you've brought him back for us to bury, you're out of luck. We got shut of him long ago.'

'I'm here to confess I killed her.'

'Him!' *the man insisted. 'Why in holy fuck would you do that?'*

'I served time for doing it, but Overman Troy pardoned me, and I —'

'Then God's grace on him and cold ashes on you.'

Mercer narrowed his eyes.

'Get gone and take that mangled piece of shit with you.'

Mercer lifted the young woman higher, in supplication, but her father, scoffing, limped away, up toward his family's cabin.

Stunned, Mercer lifted the young woman, and whatever truer name she'd called herself in life, higher, and her body rose from his hands in chimerical ascension …

'Yahweh's Hour' concluded, with no heartening closing music, and the highest-rated *human* program in the Patchwork States of America came on: a show about bad cops retraining as horse whisperers. Most attendees stalked back through the ballroom, yielded their lobe-links, and filtered into the winter darkness.

Mercer also stood to go.

No cozy glow suffused him, his flat was blocks away, and tomorrow, if the trackers of the Endless Plague approved the Overman's return-to-work order (as they would), he'd return to work as a foam-extrusion operator for a Dadd-owned insulation firm.

Leaving the ballroom, the ex-con who'd sat next to Mercer bumped him. 'Hey, my bad. You forgive me?'

Mercer said nothing.

'Wasn't "Yahweh's Hour" really great tonight? Real marching music. The best episode in this ever-loving series so far.'

'Give me a break.'

'Easy. Didn't your own smart-ass dream-shaping work for you?'

Mercer took the man by his shirt front, twisted it, then stopped and released him.

'Yeah, jerk-bro, maybe it did.'

Then, in sudden liberating wonder he skipped twice before settling into his usual funk-ridden trudge back to his flat.

— **Michael Bishop**, first appearance in *A Few Last Words for the Late Immortals (ed. Michael H. Hutchins), Bonney Lake, WA: Kudzu Planet Productions, 2021*

Michael Bishop

Greetings from the Bishops, Christmas 2021

This past year, the ongoing pandemic (despite available effective vaccines) and health issues, mine and my mom-in-law's, kept us from doing a lot. (Mom, Minnie Whitaker, will turn 98 on 2 January 2022.) I've written elsewhere about my issues, but Mom's injuries from a fall on May 15 resulted in a broken leg, and have mostly healed. Knock on wood. Now her greatest friends are physical therapy and time.

On Jan 27, Jeri, Mom, and I had our first Pfizer vaccinations at a WellStar facility in LaGrange. Those of us injected had to stay on site for 15 minutes to make sure we had no adverse reactions. We saw no one who did. Three weeks later we had second shots at the same venue, and on October 13 we went for free boosters at a CVS on the western outskirts of LaGrange.

One of our pastimes at Mom's Breezy Pines unit centers on watching DVDs. We rent from Redbox, order via Netflix, or check them out of the new Harris County Library outside Hamilton. In February, we dived into the LA-based crime drama *The Closer*, starring Kyra Sedgwick as a lead detective from Atlanta, GA. Her overheavy Southern accent often amused, as did her pert Dixie charm. Another series that gripped us, *Last Tango in Halifax*, featuring Derek Jacobi, held and scandalised us in about equal measures. Maybe you saw it on PBS.

In March I read Barrack Obama's *A Promised Land*. The first of two volumes about his presidency, it weighs in at 800 pages. (I had to renew it to finish it.) In April, at my friend Rhys Hughes' urging to heed Vatsala Radhakeesoon's invitation to write a poem for International Dylan Thomas Day, May 14, I put Thomas's 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London' under close scrutiny. Called 'The Scaffold', this poem anchors my new collection of stories & poems, *A Few Last Words for the Late Immortals*, meticulously edited by Michael Hutchins and released on 16 November 2021 by Patrick Swenson's Fairwood Press.

Mom's fall in mid-May required surgery in Atlanta and stays at therapy or care units in Warm Springs, where we tried to visit, but often had to deal with Covid protocols that changed from day to day. Mom didn't get home until July, and was mostly bedridden even then. Jeri and I spent the end of that month at our daughter Stephanie's house on Atlanta's Clay Street, so I could finish 15 proton-therapy sessions to kill a tumour in my right thigh. The wound from my proton therapy still needs daily treatment, and often Jeri and I feel like assignees to a busy downhome MASH unit, I as a patient and she as an ever-on-call physician and nurse.

Jeri and Michael Bishop and family, Christmas 2019.

While at Steph's, I read a rollicking new SF novel by my pal Paul Di Filippo, *Worldshifter*; William Gardner Smith's NYRB Classic *The Stone Face*; and Jean Giono's *The Open Road*. Other titles that I enjoyed later were Atticus Lish's *Prepararations for the Next Life*, Aleksandar Tima's disturbing *Kapo*, and *Synthajoy* and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* by D. G. Compton, a British SF writer now in his 90s and resident in New England.

Back in May, Steph, granddaughter Annabel,

grandson Joel, Jeri, and I visited Hilton Head Island for three days and stayed in a roomy suite in a multistorey structure with easy access to tennis courts and a swimming pool out back. The island's tropical ambience, the sun-drenched days, and the dinners out with one another indeed lifted our spirits. On the tennis court, I took a turn swinging at easy-peasy shots that Joel hit my way, and, once, returning a high one, fell back and lightly conked the back of my head. Joel and Stephanie played smartly as Jeri and I watched and as Annabel ducked the sun until we went out to eat or shop again. My reading on Hilton Head Island? Colin Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, which compellingly literalises its title.

Home again with Mom, we watched DVDs at a crazily quick clip: *Rod Stewart in Concert* (thanks to our friend Brian Hite); *12 Mighty Orphans* (Depression Era orphans in Oklahoma become footballers); *In the Heights* (a zesty Lin-Manuel Miranda musical); *Another Round* (a Danish comedy-drama about four high-school teachers seeing how much they can drink and still remain observably sober); *Only the Brave* (the tragic story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, firefighters out west); *The Mauritanian* (Jody Foster working to free a Muslim man held for years in Gitmo without charge); *Eye in the Sky* (a drone strike in the Middle East conducted with highly problematic ethics); and, among a heap of others, *The Current War* (Thomas Edison and George Westinghouse battle to see who will electrify the US, with Benedict Cumberbatch as a very intense Edison). We'd also recommend *Stillwater*, a sleeper with Matt Damon and Abigail Breslin.

This year we also extended our DVD- and TV-viewing to include documentaries as well as standard Hollywood or even independent fare. We strongly recommend two biographical series from PBS: *Grant* (Ulysses S.) and a Ken Burns production, *Hemingway* (Ernest). We also spent time with *Raise Hell: The Life and Times of Molly Ivins*, a study of the late Texas-based columnist and pundit; *Toni Morrison: The Piece I Am*, about the Nobel Prize-winning American novelist, author of *Beloved*, among many other familiar titles; and *I Am Not Your Negro*, Raoul Peck's documentary and social critique based on James Baldwin's unfinished work *Remember This House*. We found all of these films, even if flawed, fascinating, and many of them helpful for grappling with the persistent issue of interracial understanding in the US.

Toward the end of the year, when we visited the Harris County Library, we began checking out books as well as videos. (That struck us as a novel thing to do.) I seized Jonathan Franzen's *Crossroads* (excellent); Joyce Carol Oates's dystopian *Hazards of Time Travel* (better than just okay); and Louise Erdrich's *The Sentence* (a study of the title's various meanings in the context of a Native American woman who works in a bookstore actually owned and run by the author herself (highly rewarding)).

On finishing *Crossroads*, I picked up and read my long-unread copy of Franzen's well-received 2001 novel *The Corrections*, and then devoured — surprisingly? — *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* by Elizabeth Taylor when it arrived this month as the NYRB Classics' December selection. (No, not *that* Elizabeth Taylor.) Currently, I'm reading a book of Jeff VanderMeer's that I also came to late, the disorientingly spooky *Annihilation*, the first volume of his Southern Reach Trilogy.

Our daughter Stephanie has been a godsend to us this year. She not only organised our trip to Hilton Head but also housed us in her own place during my proton-therapy sessions. (She bought the house, at least in part, for that very reason.) Further, during the pandemic, Jeri and I have held Sunday services at my computer monitor, watching as Steph delivered messages to her people at Fairview Presbyterian in Lawrenceville and, for the past four Sundays, at Light of Hope Presbyterian in Marietta. For this year at least, she has been not only our child but also our co-pastor, along with Pine Mountain First United Methodist's always exemplary Kaylen Short.

Jeri deserves a couple of paragraphs of her own. She has acted as my own Clara Barton this entire year while trying to keep up with Mom's condition and needs, though Mom does have people who come in during the day to help her clean house, fix small meals, and keep her from instigating yet another bone-busting fall by, say, buck-dancing. Jeri also relieved me of mowing our grass, driving our car, hauling our three-part Christmas tree down from the attic, and putting on and taking off my right sock or shoe!

As a stress reducer, Jeri not long ago hit upon the quasi-classic TV series *Bones*, and streams it using a Firestick (given us by Steph). She loves the show's characters, and to wind down often binge-watches several episodes at once. She merits this daily psychic amusement, for she keeps me going, tolerates my selective deafness (sort of), and forgives my many trespasses. God bless her. And, dear reader, God bless you too, for this intrepid woman and I wish you a Merry Christmas and a safer and saner New Year than the one year now departing passing.

Love to One and All,
Michael & Jeri Bishop

BRUCE GILLESPIE writes: I've read 35 books of Michael's list. Does that make me cool or not? I'm particularly pleased that he lists Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*, Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children* (the only Australian entry), Brian Aldiss's *The Malacia Tapestry*, and Gene Wolfe's *Peace*. He also lists books I bought many years ago but still haven't read (e.g. James Wilcox's *Modern Baptists* and Larry McMurtry's *All My Friends are Going to be Strangers*). I must catch up some year.

Michael Bishop

104 really cool works of twentieth-century fiction in English

In July of 1998, the editorial board of Modern Library, a division of Random House, selected the top 100 English-language novels of the twentieth century. The board included Christopher Cerf, Gore Vidal, Daniel J. Boorstin, Shelby Foote, Vartan Gregorian, A. S. Byatt (the only female member), Edmund Morris, John Richardson, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and William Styron, whose *Sophie's Choice* placed 96th. Critics quickly assailed this list as reprehensibly lacking in important work by women, minorities, and English-language authors from outside the United States and Great Britain.

Canadians Robertson Davies and Margaret Atwood, Nigerians Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, South African Nadine Gordimer, African-Americans Ernest Gaines, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and John Edgar Wideman, and the fine Southern female writers Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Harper Lee all failed to make Random House's 'geezer list', on which works by dead white males and titles from the 1940s and 1950s maddeningly predominate.

A day or two later, students at the Radcliffe Publishing Course on the Cambridge, Massachusetts, campus released their own list. Boldly, these 'future editors and publishers' chose short-story collections, children's classics, 'nonfiction novels', and satiric sf as well as esteemed traditional novels, tapping 22 books by women and 9 by either African or African-American writers. They placed Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the No. 4 position and acknowledged Willa Cather's accomplishment by choosing three, not just one, of her novels.

Stephen Ennis, a curator at Emory Woodruff Library in Atlanta, Georgia, called the making of such lists 'a cocktail party game elevated to marketing ploy'. In a newspaper editorial, another writer terms reading lists elitist; we should all read wholly at random (as he claimed the young Harry S. Truman had done) to discover the vast riches of our literary heritage.

Most of us, however, don't mind the advice of experts; in fact, many of us seek guides who will prevent us from wasting time. For a list to work, of course, we must put our trust in the compiler's tastes, however quirky. Me, I'd like to see all devout readers assemble new lists of their top works of fiction every year or so and then pass them around as some folks share recipes. To that end, I've compiled a list of my top 100 works of twentieth-century fiction in English, which I have appended in double columns at the end of this informal lead-in.

I do not put it forward as a compendium of works that every literate English-speaking person on the cusp of the new millennium should read to move successfully from the twentieth into the twenty-first century. Nor does it rank books, from greatest to least great or even from my most favourite to my 104th favourite. Instead, it catalogues '104 Really Cool Works' alphabetically by the authors' surnames. Not everyone will enjoy every book, but if you read open-mindedly and dislike the majority, compile your own list and let me see it; I find other folks' taste in books edifying.

I used these criteria in making my choices:

1 No work or writer on Random House's list, the Radcliffe Publishing Course's list, or

Oprah Winfrey's TV book club (not even Ursula Hegi's stunning *Stones from the River*) could appear on my list. I wanted stuff both good and different.

2 I must have read every book in its entirety and really liked it. This sounds like a no-brainer, but I'll bet Mr Cerf my first Bantam paperback edition of *A Medicine for Melancholy* (cover price: 35¢) that only a member or two of the Random House panel digested every word of *Finnegans Wake*. (Pardon me while I snicker up my sleeve.) I'll also lay heavy odds that several of the Radcliffe judges never willingly cracked a Henry James volume in their lives.

3 I admire many category or genre writers, but my tastes lean more toward sf and mysteries than toward horror, romance, or oaters. I also dig Southern writers, a function of my living among them. Adjust your expectations if you have more eclectic, or narrower, tastes.

4 I did not exclude works published within the last five years. (See Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, Kavanagh's *Gaff Topsails*, and Russell's *The Sparrow*.) Fie on the cowardly test-of-time approach, for even in our post-literate, visual-oriented era, writers of vision and skill still produce first-rate works of fiction.

Any great works here? Try *V.*, *The Man Who Loved Children*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Call It Sleep*, and *Waterland*. Add *Empire of the Sun*, *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, *Winter's Tale*, *Continental Drift*, *The Public Burning*, *Cold Mountain*, *Towing Jehovah*, and *Little, Big*. Look, too, at the beautiful but profoundly bleak novels of Charlie Smith. But who has read Smith's *Lives of the Dead*?

Why 104 works? Well, I prepared this piece for a *Calendar of Days*, a literary appointment book, and so I threw in four bonus titles, one for each season. Other oddities: I admit best-sellers, Christian apologetics, a novel in verse, and even a novel picked up from a remainder table on a whim and a prayer, namely, Thomas Cobb's country-and-western heartbreaker, *Crazy Heart*. I wish had each of these 104 books to read for the first time. In a sense, I do. And so do you.

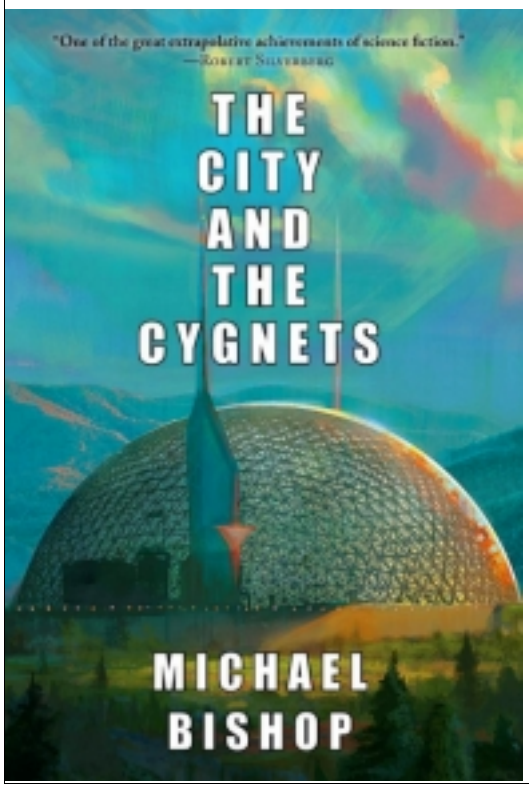
1 The Malacia Tapestry **Brian Aldiss**
2 The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven **Sherman Alexie**
3 Bastard Out of Carolina **Dorothy Allison**
4 Empire of the Sun **J. G. Ballard**
5 Continental Drift **Russell Banks**
6 Timescape **Gregory Benford**
7 Brazzaville Beach **William Boyd**
8 A Medicine for Melancholy **Ray Bradbury**
9 Rubyfruit Jungle **Rita Mae Brown**
10 The Book of Bebb **Frederick Buechner**
11 Jujitsu for Christ **Jack Butler**
12 Wild Seed **Octavia Butler**
13 A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain **Robert Olen Butler**
14 Possession **A. S. Byatt**
15 Saints and Strangers **Angela Carter**
16 Where I'm Calling From **Raymond Carver**
17 The Lady in the Lake **Raymond Chandler**
18 Crazy in Alabama **Mark Childress**
19 Childhood's End **Arthur C. Clarke**
20 Shogun **James Clavell**
21 Crazy Heart **Thomas Cobb**
22 The Public Burning **Robert Coover**
23 Little, Big **John Crowley**
24 Atlantis: Three Tales **Samuel R. Delany**
25 Blackburn **Bradley Denton**
26 Paris Trout **Pete Drexler**
27 The Man in the High Castle **Philip K. Dick**
28 334 **Thomas M. Disch**
29 Geek Love **Katherine Dunn**
30 The Floatplane Notebooks **Clyde Edgerton**
31 Deathbird Stories **Harlan Ellison**
32 The Black Dahlia **James Elroy**
33 A Fan's Notes **Frederick Exley**
34 The Siege of Krishnapur **J. G. Farrell**
35 The Sportswriter **Richard Ford**
36 Sarah Canary **Karen Joy Fowler**
37 Cold Mountain **Charles Frazier**
38 Bad Behavior **Mary Gaitskill**
39 In the Land of Dreamy Dreams **Ellen Gilchrist**
40 Snow Falling on Cedars **David Guterson**
41 Atticus **Ron Hansen**
42 The Silence of the Lambs **Thomas Harris**
43 Winter's Tale **Mark Helprin**
44 The Child Buyer **John Hersey**
45 The Swimming Pool Library **Alan Hollinghurst**
46 Angels **Denis Johnson**
47 Gaff Topsails **Patrick Kavanagh**
48 Nine Hundred Grandmothers **R. A. Lafferty**
49 Hard Laughter **Anne Lamott**
50 The Left Hand of Darkness **Ursula K. Le Guin**
51 Out of the Silent Planet **C. S. Lewis**
52 Winter Count **Barry Holstun Lopez**
53 Hard Trade **Arthur Lyons**
54 The Drowning Pool **Ross Macdonald**
55 At Play in the Fields of the Lord **Peter Matthiessen**
56 Time Will Darken It **William Maxwell**
57 Boy's Life **Robert R. McCammon**
58 Blood Meridian **Cormac McCarthy**
59 All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers **Larry McMurtry**
60 Such a Long Journey **Rohinton Mistry**
61 Towing Jehovah **James Morrow**
62 Rats in the Trees **Jess Mowry**

63 The Progress of Love **Alice Munro**
64 Unassigned Territory **Kem Nunn**
65 The Things They Carried **Tim O'Brien**
66 The Gospel of Corax **Paul Park**
67 The Dog of the South **Charles Portis**
68 Edisto **Padgett Powell**
69 Kate Vaiden **Reynolds Price**
70 Open Range: Wyoming Stories **Annie Proulx**
71 V. **Thomas Pynchon**
72 The Female Man **Joanna Russ**
73 The Sparrow **Mary Doria Russell**
74 Even Cowgirls Get the Blues **Tom Robbins**
75 Call It Sleep **Henry Roth**
76 Was **Geoff Ryman**
77 What Makes Sammy Run? **Budd Schulberg**
78 The Golden Gate **Vikram Seth**
79 The Jaguar Hunter **Lucius Shepard**
80 Glimpses **Lewis Shiner**
81 The Female of the Species **Lionel Shriver**
82 Dying Inside **Robert Silverberg**
83 Lives of the Dead **Charlie Smith**
84 Stone City **Mitchell Smith**
85 The Man Who Loved Children **Christina Stead**
86 A Flag for Sunrise **Robert Stone**
87 Waterland **Graham Swift**
88 The Old Forest and Other Stories **Peter Taylor**
89 The White Hotel **D. M. Thomas**
90 Pop. 1280 **Jim Thompson**
91 Imagining Argentina **Lawrence Thornton**
92 My Life and Hard Times **James Thurber**
93 Her Smoke Rose Up Forever **James Tiptree, Jr.**
94 A Confederacy of Dunces **John Kennedy Toole**
95 The Embedding **Ian Watson**
96 Fields of Fire **James Webb**
97 Fools Crow **James Welch**
98 John Dollar **Marianne Wiggins**
99 Modern Baptists **James Wilcox**
100 Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang **Kate Wilhelm**
101 Peace **Gene Wolfe**
102 The Barracks Thief **Tobias Wolff**
103 War and Remembrance **Herman Wouk**
104 Eleven Kinds of Loneliness **Richard Yates**

[I owe my designation of these books as 'Really Cool Works' to Dr. Jack Slay, Jr., formerly of the English Department of LaGrange College, Georgia, and now its Dean of Students.]

— **Michael Bishop**, 2004

Another book by Michael Bishop currently available from Fairwood Press/Kudzu Planet



As you probably have worked out, all of Michael Bishop's 50 years of fine books are being brought back into print by Patrick Swenson at:

Fairwood Press LLC
21528 104th Street Ct East
Bonney Lake WA 98391, USA

under the **Kudzu Planet Productions** imprint. The same label is publishing all of Michael's new work.

This poses a problem for me, first, of hearing about some titles, and second, obtaining them. As I've mentioned earlier, Justin Ackroyd of Slow Glass Books has been able to import quite a few titles for me.

A recent title that I haven't yet seen yet is ***The City and the Cygnets: An Alternate History of the Atlanta Urban Nucleus in the 21st Century***. Eight stories and various interludes, it gathers the novellas first published as *A Little Knowledge* and *Catacomb Years*. As Michael is one of SF's masters of the novella, this should be a particularly valuable book for those still unfamiliar with Michael Bishop's work.

I must be talking to my friends

Time's charioteer strikes again!

On 4 January I wrote a neat little editorial for this issue of *SF Commentary*. It was up to date. It said everything I wanted to say in the few pages I had left myself to say it. In only a few days I would send *SFC* 108 to the printer and the PDF to Bill Burns for efanzines.com.

But the dreaded time charioteer had other ideas. Yet another editorial shot down. Yet another *SFC* schedule destroyed.

On 16 January we lost **Bill Wright**, one of the key members of Melbourne fandom, indeed Australian fandom, since 1958. **Dick Jenssen**, his great friend, wrote a moving essay about their friendship since 1958. I found a copy of **LynC**'s Citation when Bill Wright won the A. Bertram Chandler Award in 2017. This described Bill's many achievements in fandom. And I found time to write of my own memories.

On 4 January, when I wrote the previous version of this editorial, ***SFC* 108** took up 76 pages. The tribute to Bill came to 20 pages, so it had to become ***SFC* 109**. It took me over a week to find and process the photos to illustrate the issue — and many more photo memories remain on file.

Pat Sims, Roger Sims, and Bill Wright, at LoneStarCon 3, 2013. (Photo: Murray Moore.)

Bill's death was hardly unexpected, since we often flinched at the news of his various medical disasters during recent years. But he did survive them all. The rest of 2022 will feel very flat because he is no longer with us, just as the whole of 2021 was overshadowed, for me, by the loss of Yvonne Rousseau.

On 17 January, international fandom lost one of its stalwarts, **Roger Sims** (1930–2022), from Parkinson's disease. He joined fandom in 1949, and has filled many roles within fandom. He and his wife Pat have been great friends of Australian fandom. He won DUFF in 1995, but he's visited world conventions in Melbourne as well. He and Pat were members of ANZAPA for quite a few years. Roger wrote stories about fandom in the fifties, when he was young and enthusiastic about the SF world. I can only point toward excellent eulogies on the *File 770* website (from Andy Porter), the *Fancyclopedia 3* site, and from Rich Lynch.


A tribute to Bill Wright (1937–2022)

Dick Jenssen: 'As I remember Bill Wright'

LynC's Presentation Speech
when Bill Wright was awarded the A. Bertram Chandler Award in 2017

Bruce Gillespie: 'Bill Wright: Mr Multitudes'

Facebook tributes to Bill Wright

Cover of *SF Commentary* 109/*brg* 121, which you will receive before this issue.

So what was I going to say on 4 January?

Much of what I was going to say in the first version of this editorial seems redundant now. However, Elaine's and my memories of the night of 13 December 2021 are unlikely to fade. At 10 p.m. I was finishing washing the dishes when the phone rang. This was very unusual. We retain our landline phone instead of switching to a mobile phone in the hope that almost nobody but Dick Jenssen rings us. It was Dick on the phone. He had fallen at home, and could not get to his feet. His legs would not hold him. He had been there for two hours. We live in a northern suburb of Melbourne and Dick lives in a south-eastern suburb. We called a taxi, which arrived quickly, and arrived at Dick's about an hour later. I won't go into the details of that night, except to tell you that it is very difficult, even for two able-bodied people, to lift another body from the floor in order to sit him down. In the end Dick had to concede he could not move anywhere in the house by himself, so Elaine called an ambulance. The ambulance people were very efficient. They were not allowed to leave Dick in the house with a temperature of 40°C and unable to move around. So they took him to the Alfred Hospital, and we took a taxi home.

It turned out that an infection had made his legs suddenly too weak to hold him. After several weeks in hospital and rehabilitation Dick was able to walk again, and could return home. Elaine and I were very glad to be able to visit him again a few weeks ago.

2022 was going to be a much better year than 2021

At the end of November, Melbourne's most severe Covid lockdown ended. There seemed no reason to suspect we could not resume some of our former activities, provided we wore masks indoors.

In early 2022, Omicron was just a new variant of Covid. Nobody took the trouble to keep it out of Australia. It has proved to have a much more rapid infection rate than previous versions of the Covid virus. At the beginning of January there had been a few hundred new cases each day in Victoria. Suddenly the daily numbers were in the thousands, with at least one day of 40,000. Insanely, the state government has been foxed into declaring there would be no more lockdowns. Those of us who are most vulnerable to any form of Covid have gone into self-imposed lockdown. Elaine and I are avoiding restaurants, cinemas, or other close-contact venues. We've been scared greatly because our next-door neighbours caught Covid from ghod-knows-where. He, the same as age as me, nearly died. Elaine and I have had our third vaccinations, and we hope that might save us from contracting a severe case.

So why did we believe, for just a few weeks, that things were looking up?

While driving around our area, Carey Handfield had noticed that a Minuteman franchise print shop had opened on Main Street, Greensborough. A few days after lockdown lifted, I put my foot in the door, and introduced myself to the manager, David Rawson. He seemed to twig to what I needed. I had 20 copies printed of **brg**s 117 and 118 (my ANZAPAzine). They looked just as pretty as they would have when printed by Copy Place. David also ran off black-and-white copies of ANZAPA mailings 322 and 323 for $50 each. At last I could start writing my mailing comments on the August mailing.

At last I finished compiling *SF Commentary* 107. It had to be 100 pages, and not the usual 80 pages. At first David said he couldn't do the job. However, he was able to mock up a sample copy. His stapler would just do the job. I put in an order for the extra copies I needed. Halfway through the job, he phoned me. His stapler had broken down! Fortunately, a repair person visited him on the following Monday, and the copies were finished on the Tuesday.

By our standards, Elaine and I began socialising like crazy. Murray and Natalie MacLachlan turned up on the doorstep the same day that lockdown ended. Very welcome visitors. Gifts were exchanged. And several weeks later, they invited us to a sumptuous Christmas dinner, sound-system listening, and cat-admiration session. Perfect weather, too.

Elaine and I attended our second Kensington Town Hall Nova Mob for the year. Ian Mond delivered his rattle-on about his Top 10 books (actually 13) for the year. One of his selections I had read already, Elaine ordered No. 8, *Slipping*, from Justin Ackroyd at Slow Glass Books, and Ian's No. 12 and 13 titles sounded interesting enough to order.

A week later, John Davies visited our place for the first time in two years for our monthly Film Night. He had bought for me the new Blu-ray edition of Joseph Losey's *The Servant* — intense and brilliant, filmed in widescreen black-and-white. On the same day, Charlie and Nic Taylor had rung us to catch up with us and drop in some things. They joined Elaine, John, and me for dinner at Cafe Spice (our wonderful local Indian restaurant), then watched the film with us.

There is one implacable cloud hovering over 2022 apart from the Omicron scourge. My superannuation fund has run out after nearly ten years. It wasn't large to begin with, and one-third of it

disappeared during the GFC in 2009. Suddenly I have to survive on less than one-half of the amount on which I had been surviving until a few weeks ago! No more CDs or Blu-rays, I expect. No more of the luxuries to which I've become accustomed. I won't be printing or posting more than a few copies of each *SFC*, for instance.

Of course, the situation would be improved if I had regular work, but indexing jobs seldom appear. I can't count on any more work being offered to me.

The moral of this is: never show signs of optimism. Time's charioteer is out to get us, whatever we do. Let pessimism reign. 2022 will probably be even worse than 2021.

— **Bruce Gillespie**, 7 February 2022

Good things come in the mail

(despite Australia Post and the USPO)

Mail services may be failing all over, especially in the US, because of Covid restrictions and transportation limitations, but it's amazing the amount and variety of mail our local mail officers have brought to our house. And there have been home deliveries from friendly retailers.

BIG WARS: WHY DO THEY HAPPEN AND WHEN WILL THE NEXT ONE BE? by John Storey (Hybrid Publishers, PO Box 52, Ormond VIC 3204, Australia; 2021; 519 pp.; $39.99)

John Storey is a Melbourne lawyer who seems to have an infinite capacity for military history research and who has read some science fiction. **Louis de Vries**, his publisher (**Hybrid Publishers**), is also Paul Collins' publisher. I have a copy of this book not because of publishing a magazine about SF literature but because I prepared its index. Otherwise, I might never have known about it. It has disappeared, although it should have been reviewed in the general press as one of the most important Australian books of the year.

I rarely call a book 'important', because most of the books I review or read don't find a resonance in the wider world. Politicians, policy-makers, and alert members of the public should read this book because it throws much new light on an issue that many people think they know something about — vast, destructive wars.

John Storey has read a vast amount about the major wars of the last 4000 years. He contends that the development and outcomes of wars have nothing to do with the justice or otherwise of the causes of the participants. Each war has its own beginnings, but each develops in a similar way. For instance, many people still believe that the First World War was a nasty war between imperial powers whereas the Second World War was a war between good and evil — democratic countries versus fascist countries. As Storey shows us, the Second World War was essentially a vast amplification, much more destructive, of the forces that fought the First World War.

The differences between wars are: (a) the size of the forces involved, (b) the amount of resources available to the participant countries, (c) the cleverness of the tactics employed, and (d) the superiority of technological developments

available to one force rather than another. These factors decide the victors in any war.

Storey categorises wars as those of the Muscle-power Age; the Gunpowder Age; and the Age of the Big War. In each case, wars are fought to the limits of the human forces available, the social forces available, and the technology developed by either or both sides. The force with the greatest forces, most ably deployed, wins the war.

I'll quote a passage that will delight John Davies, Geoff Allshorn, and other friends of mine who are fans of a certain program on TV:

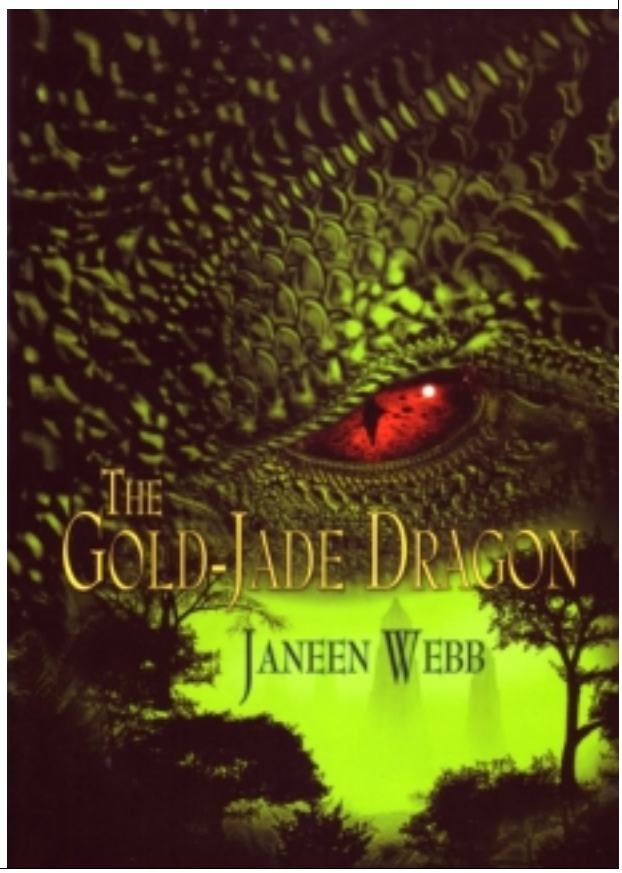
> The world of fiction may be enlightening (or at least entertaining). This time the British classic, *Doctor Who*. In by far my favourite Doctor Who adventure, *The Genesis of the Daleks*, the Doctor and his companions Harry and Sarah find themselves on a planet that appears to be a war zone. They find a dead soldier who was armed with a hand-blaster and an old rifle. 'These two weapons are separated by centuries of technology,' the Doctor concludes. The dead soldier also has a gas mask out of World War I as well as a radiation detector. He also is wearing a combat jacket made of synthetic fibre while the rest of his uniform is made of animal skin. 'It's like finding the remains of a Stone-Age man with a transistor radio,' says Sarah. What does this mean? The Doctor declares sadly, 'A thousand-year war ... A once highly-developed civilisation on the point of total collapse.'
>
> The Doctor and his companions are on the planet Skaro in the course of a thousand-year war between the Kaleds and the Thals. The war has gone for so long that the weapons deployed have become a mismatch of different technologies from different eras, but the result was stalemate and attritional trench warfare. As new technologies are developed, such as chemical and nuclear weapons, they are used to try and break the deadlock. This has left the planet irradiated and the Kaleds are destined to mutate into the Doctor's arch-nemesis, the Daleks. The war that would seem to most resemble his scenario in real life was the eight-years-long Iran–Iraq war .... (*Big Wars*, pp. 353–4)

Storey discusses how available technological and human resources decided the outcome of World War II, the most recent Big War. World War III? The deployment of instantly deliverable nuclear weapons, what is usually called the MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) strategy, has so far stopped the outbreak of the next Big War. Instead, warfare has developed into set of conflicts on various levels, often powered by highly sophisticated sub-nuclear weapons. But sooner or later, just as the European nations forgot the devastation of the Napoleonic Wars (1798–1815) when they leapt into World War I, enough policy-makers will forget the destructive power of atomic weapons and begin using them. You want to know when? Read *Big Wars*.

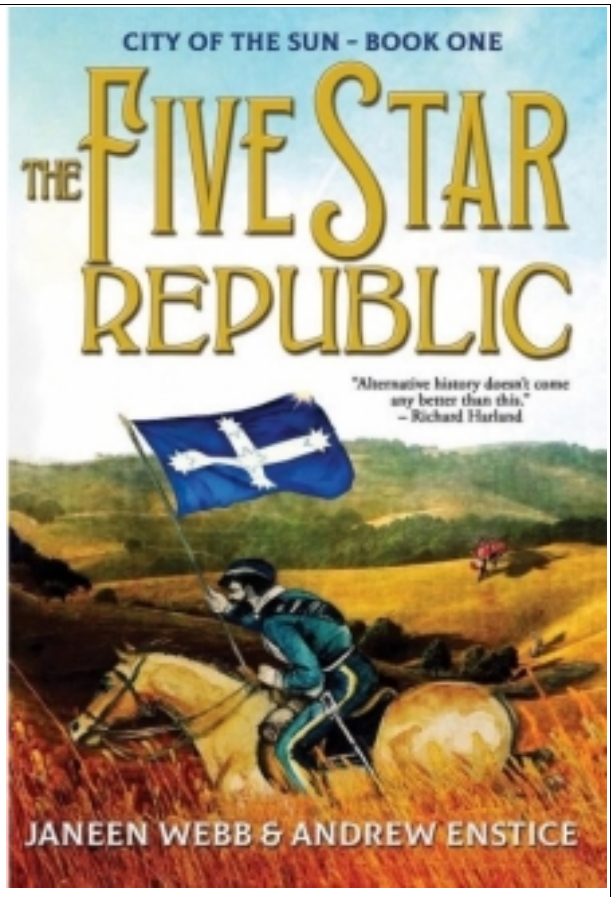
THE GOLD-JADE DRAGON
by Janeen Webb
(PS Australia; 2021; 311 pp.)

The Gold-Jade Dragon is a sequel to **Janeen Webb**'s novella/novel *The Dragon's Child* (2018), which I liked a lot. It tells of an alternative Hong Kong where an ancient line of dragons, in human guise, controls society. In *The Gold-Jade Dragon*, the renegade son of the ruling dragons discovers that he has been hidden away from power succession for the good of almost everybody. Revenge is his goal, and control of the situation is the aim of his parents. I'm not sure how to take a tale whose main character is definitely a villain, and whose parents are villainous in their patronising way. The story is well written and involving, but somewhat different from the feel-good story I was expecting.

I'm glad that Janeen Webb arranged to send a copy of this book to me. **PS Australia** is peculiar in that it is the offshoot of a British company that has no wholesale outlet in Australia. Therefore you won't find this book in any bookshop here, but must order it from PS Publishing in Britain, or from BookDepository.



THE FIVE STAR REPUBLIC
(CITY OF THE SUN: BOOK 1)
by Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice
(IFWG Publishing; 2021; 499 pp.)



I get the impression that **Janeen Webb** makes a specialty of upsetting expectations. I looked at the cover of ***The Five Star Republic (City of the Sun, Book 1)***, by Janeen and **Andrew Enstice**, and expected a tale of political/military action, rather like A. Bertram Chandler's *Kelly Country*, which was published only in Australia. I like the idea that the Eureka Rebellion in Ballarat in 1854 might have ignited a revolutionary future for the whole of Australia.

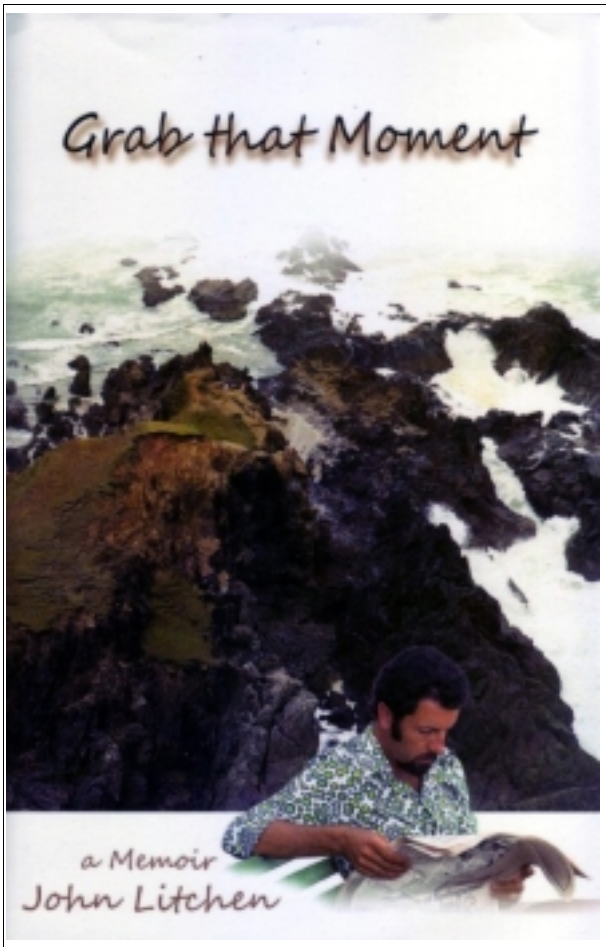
Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice begin their novel with a powerful evocation of the Eureka Uprising and conditions on the Ballarat goldfields. They also tell of a crime that affects most of the action of the novel, but which is still undetected and unavenged at the end of Book 1. The direction of the story then takes an unexpected turn. Let me quote **Jason Nahrung**, *Herald Sun* reviewer, novelist, and SF fan: 'A highlight is Lola Montez, bringing a welcome dash of colour and sass to the push for independence of the gold-rich colony of Victoria. ... There is no War of Independence, but rather a backroom drama played out over luncheons with peripheral dashes of sex and violence ... Plans for a solar-powered city add an exotic touch that, with the hint of the Empire's inevitable reprisal, lays the groundwork for the promised sequels' (*Herald Sun Weekend*, 2 October 2021).

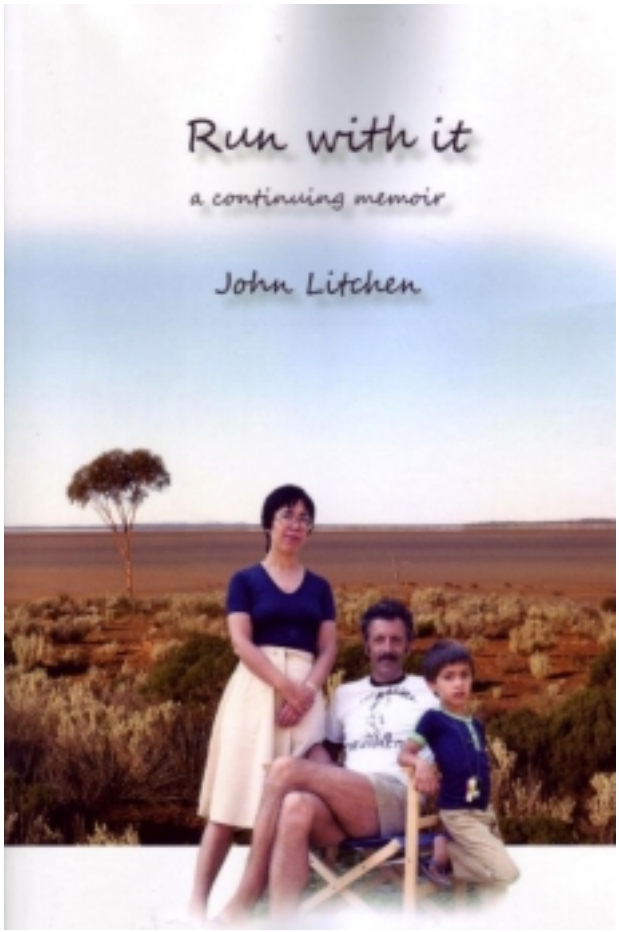
I find some of the upper-class dinners and tea parties a bit wearying, but the authors can provide unexpected accelerations of the story when needed.

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME: CONVENTION REPORTS
by David Langford
(Ansible Editions; 2021; 179 pp.)

When publishers send me review copies these days, often I'm not sure whether they have been printed in the old-fashioned way or in Print on Demand editions. For ***Don't Try This at Home***, I have no doubt. If **Dave Langford** had printed it in Britain and sent it by post, it would have taken six weeks to arrive, and would have cost him a small fortune in printing and postage costs. It might never have arrived. Instead, he sent the file to Lulu's PoD facility in South Australia, which sent it to me by internal Australian post. It arrived a week later. And it's a beautiful book to look at and own.

Dave Langford admits that his hearing level has been declining steadily throughout his life. Therefore it is a miracle that he can report any of the things he overhears at SF conventions. He must be





very good at lip-reading. The fact that he turns up at conventions year after year and writes so entertainingly about them is a victory of a dedicated writer. It's always puzzled me, though, that he often leaves himself out of the focus of his best pieces. I don't know a lot more about Dave than I did thirty years ago, when I first reprinted his wonderful review-articles. Perhaps modesty is the essence of successful humorous writing.

Don't Try This at Home includes a wide variety of convention reports, full of the rich details of fans and writers making fools of themselves (as people often do at SF conventions). In the early reports he includes funny stories about people I've never met and now will never meet. Later he covers areas of fandom with which I'm much more familiar.

But ... where is Dave's report on the best-remembered post-War British World Convention of them all, Brighton 1979? Even Australian fans, who are reluctant to write convention reports at the best of times, have written about that convention.

Dave also says little about Aussiecon 3, 1999, in Melbourne, a convention at which Dave was a special guest. I'd always hoped to read his detailed (humorous) analysis of Australian fans and writers.

On the other hand, one of the best pieces Dave has ever written is 'Minicon Diary: Minicon 33, Minneapolis, Easter 1998'. This article, 18 pages long, gives a detailed overview of the dynamics of a geographical area of fandom I've never visited.

Even if you're unfamiliar with the conventions covered, you will be still entertained by Dave Langford's articles.

GRAB THAT MOMENT: A MEMOIR
by John Litchen
(Yambu; 2021; 599 pp.; $70 hb, $40 pb)

RUN WITH IT
by John Litchen
(Yambu; 2021; 359 pp.; $40 pb)

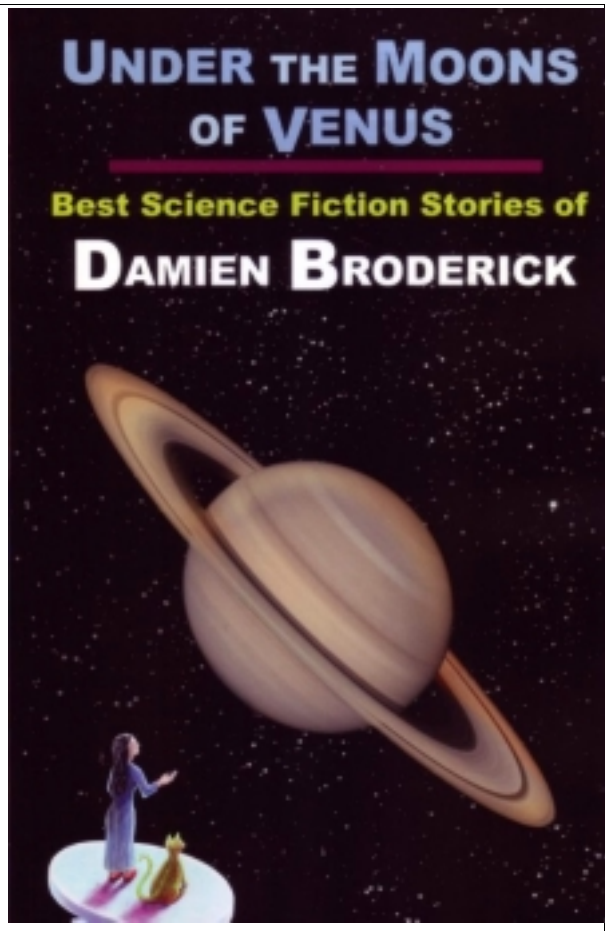
These books, adding up to 960 pages, form the most extraordinary publication by an Australian SF fan for many years. **John Litchen** writes in two parts the section of his autobiography that covers the 1970s. It includes reports on overseas trips, his meeting Monica his wife (who died recently; see *SFC* 107), the birth of their son Brian, and various important fan events at which John took photos.

Why is this not merely another self-published autobiography? Because John's style is always chatty and informative, and because he and Monica accomplished a great deal during that decade. These events are illustrated by hundreds of colour photographs, including many of John's undersea adventures, and never-before-published photos of

such fannish events as the Fannish Football Match in 1973, the making of the *Antifan/ Aussiefan* movies in 1972 to promote the Australia in 75 bid, and the 1978 Annual Convention at which Brian Aldiss and Roger Zelazny were co-Guests of Honour.

These are beautifully made books, good examples of what can be accomplished by PoD printing. Each would benefit from an index and clear dates at the beginning of chapters, but perhaps John will add these features as he writes his memoirs of the following 40 years.

UNDER THE MOONS OF VENUS: BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORIES OF DAMIEN BRODERICK by Damien Broderick (Ramble House; 2021; 494 pp.; $34.95)



Many of the books I receive are sent by individuals who might have expected to be published by one of the major SF publishers. **Damien Broderick** often comes to mind. He writes and edits many books a year, but they appear from small publishers. They are often not reviewed, not even by the SF press. Yet you would expect that all of Damien's books would have appeared from a major publisher, such as Tor, and receive detailed reviews in both SF and 'mainstream' magazines.

Under the Moons of Venus: Best Science Fiction Stories of Damien Broderick is one of the major Australian SF books of the year, yet the only way **Gavin O'Keefe** of Ramble House, Massachusetts, could let Damien's readers know it exists is via a Print on Demand copy from Lulu Books in South Australia. No doubt he could do the same for you, but you will have do the work.

Damien Broderick has been publishing short stories, both in Australia and Britain, and later in the USA, since the early 1960s, long before I joined fandom or began *SF Commentary*. His first collection, *A Man Returned*, appeared in Australia in 1965, the year he turned 21, and his second collection, *The Dark Between the Stars*, was published in 1991.

The earliest story in this new collection is 'A Passage in Earth' from 1978. Most of the stories have had their first publication during the last two decades. I confess I haven't had time to read this book yet, but of the stories I have read, the one I admire most is 'The Magi' (first published in Alan Ryan's *Perpetual Light*, 1982). This powerful story about a post-apocalyptic world is in itself a reason for buying the book. And then there are 20 other stories.

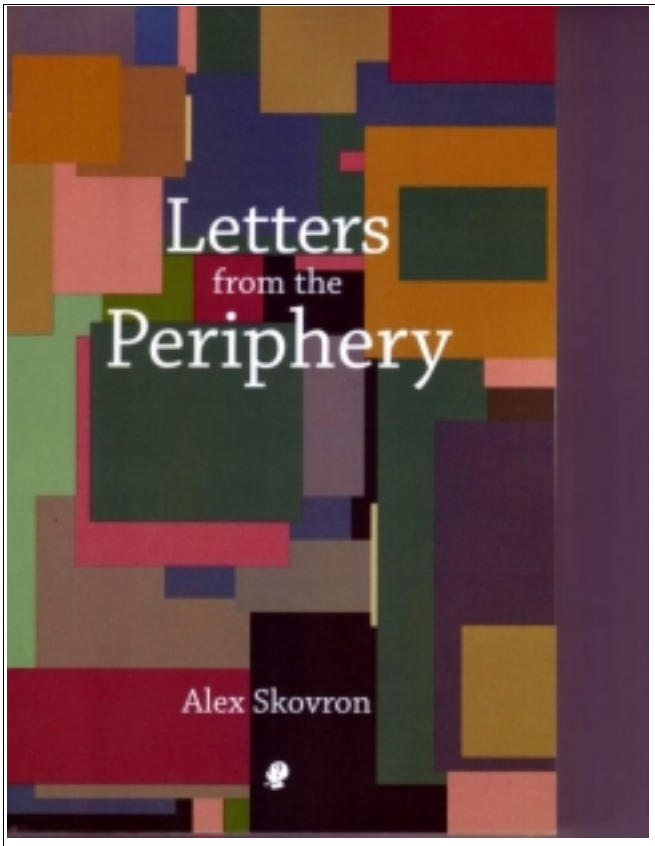
I assert that this book should win the 2022 prizes for Australian SF. However, Australian SF and fantasy awards tend to go to people I've never heard of, most of whom do not write science fiction. Let's hope that Ramble House can penetrate the Australian market.

(I am puzzled, I must admit, to see that publisher Gavin O'Keefe has prepared a cover illustration featuring Saturn, not Venus. I assume the story 'Under the Moons of Venus' explains this oddity.)

LETTERS FROM THE PERIPHERY by Alex Skovron (Puncher & Wattmann; 2021; 103 pp.; $25.00)

Alex Skovron was my supervisor during my days of freelance copy editing for Macmillan Publishers in Melbourne. One day he mentioned that a fellow employee was Philip Hodgins, who was about to publish his first book of poetry; and, by the way, Alex admitted that he also writes poetry. *The Rearragement*, his first book, appeared not long after, and I was very impressed. I read little poetry at the time, but it was Alex who encouraged me to read volumes of poetry every now and again. During the years since 1988, Alex has built on the skills already evident in *The Rearrangement*, and has written a novel, prose poems, and poetry in various forms.

Letters from the Periphery is **Alex Skovron**'s seventh book of poetry. One of the great achievements of my own publishing career was being offered 'Carousel Days' by Alex for the 50th Anniversary Issue of *SFC* (No. 98). 'Carousel Days'



appears here, along with a set of poems that mark a step forward from anything he has published so far. I don't have the critical tools to tell you exactly what he has achieved here; I just know that the poems have a collective depth and scope that move me very much. 'Arcane Geometry' explores all the implications and difficulties of trying to make meaning from one's most precious memories of the past; 'Double Clock' transforms memories of learning chess fifty years ago into a powerful tribute to his parents. In 'Only the Music', Skovron warns: 'Do not stare/into the sun, for you will be blinded with brilliant/half-truths, dazzling images that you will carry / like a false faith for the rest of your days'. Alex has been doing a lot of thinking about present connections with the past.

There are many fine poems in *Letters from the Periphery*, including the title poem, and they cover a wide range of the examined experience. I'm looking forward to his next volume.

FIL AND HARRY
by Jenny Blackford; illustrated by Kristin Devine
(Christmas Press; 2021; 103 pp.)

I am not a member of the group of people to whom this book is aimed — six-to-ten-year-olds — but I am grateful that Jenny Blackford sent it to me. Jenny has a style that is precise, penetrating, and entertaining, so it is always a privilege to read a book of either her fiction or her poetry. ***Fil and Harry*** is the story of Fil and her talking cat Harry, and how Harry helps her solve a number of personal problems that happen all at the one time, including betrayal by her best friend Kirsten. No matter what age you are, you read the book straight through because you enjoy the company of these characters. (Kristin Devine's illustrations are excellent.)

SCIENCE FICTION: A REVIEW OF SPECULATIVE LITERATURE No. 49/50 (Vol. 19, Nos. 1/2 2018): PHILLIP MANN
(ed. Van Ikin; 176 pp.)

SCIENCE FICTION: A REVIEW OF SPECULATIVE LITERATURE No. 51/52 (Vol. 20, Nos. 1/2 2019): THE EARLY WORK OF TERRY DOWLING
(ed. Van Ikin; 184 pp.)

Which magazine should have won Best Fan Production in the Ditmar Awards this year and last year? I voted for *Ethel the Aardvark*, edited by LynC for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, because of LynC's ability to create an attractive and interesting a magazine after a period during which it seemed likely to fade away.

The magazine that should also have been on the ballot is **Van Ikin**'s ***Science Fiction: A Review of Speculative Literature***. Ditmar voters consistently fail to notice the giant leap in quality and scope that *Science Fiction* has taken in recent issues. I assume

that Van can no longer afford to trade with other fanzines and most of his subscribers ($30 for one year/$50 for two years) are now academic institutions. But *Science Fiction* still represents the highest values of the great 'sercon' fanzines. You won't find academic doublespeak here, but instead clear, incisive articles about important areas of Australian and New Zealand science fiction.

When I was looking through my files, I found I had not yet reviewed *Science Fiction* No. 49/50, the issue covering the life and work of **Phillip Mann**, New Zealand's most prominent living SF writer. I remember reviewing *The Disestablishment of Paradise*, Mann's most recent SF novel. I found the review in *SF Commentary* 100, as part of my coverage of my Favourite Novels of 2019 — but no review of Van's magazine.

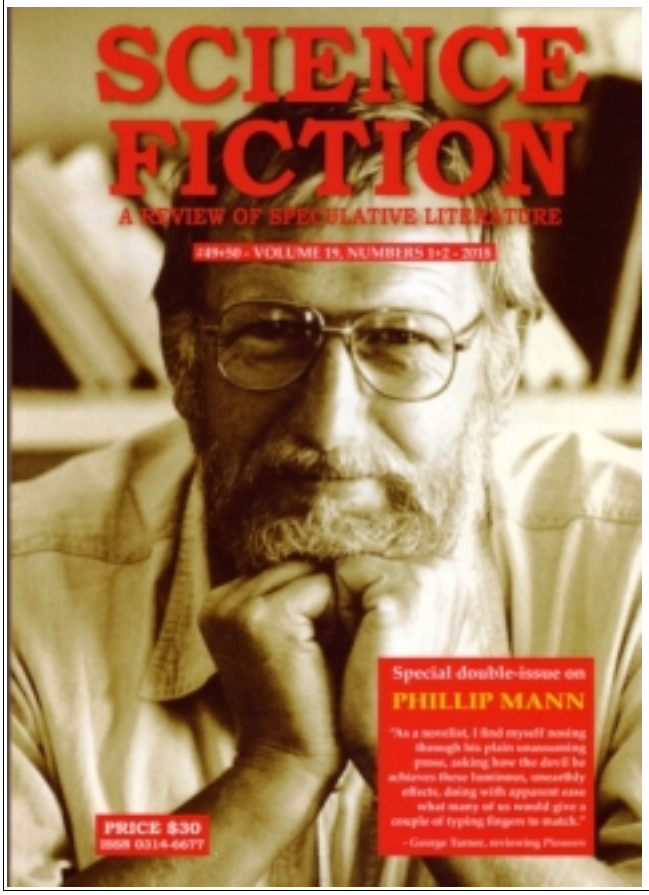
SF 49/50 is a treasure chest, and a delicious piece of magazinecraft (by Dane Ikin, Van's brother). Main articles about Mann's work are by Clare Coney (his editor at Gollancz for some years) and Michael J. Tolley. Van Ikin, David McCooey, and George Turner interview Phillip Mann, and six of his novels are reviewed by critics such as Stephen Hitchings, David McCooey, George Turner, Laura E. Goodin, Bruce Shaw, Stephen Dedman, and Russell Blackford. The issue also includes four pieces of fiction by Phillip Mann. I assume that the Phillip Mann Issue had been many years in the planning, since George Turner left us in 1997 and Michael Tolley has written nothing for many years.

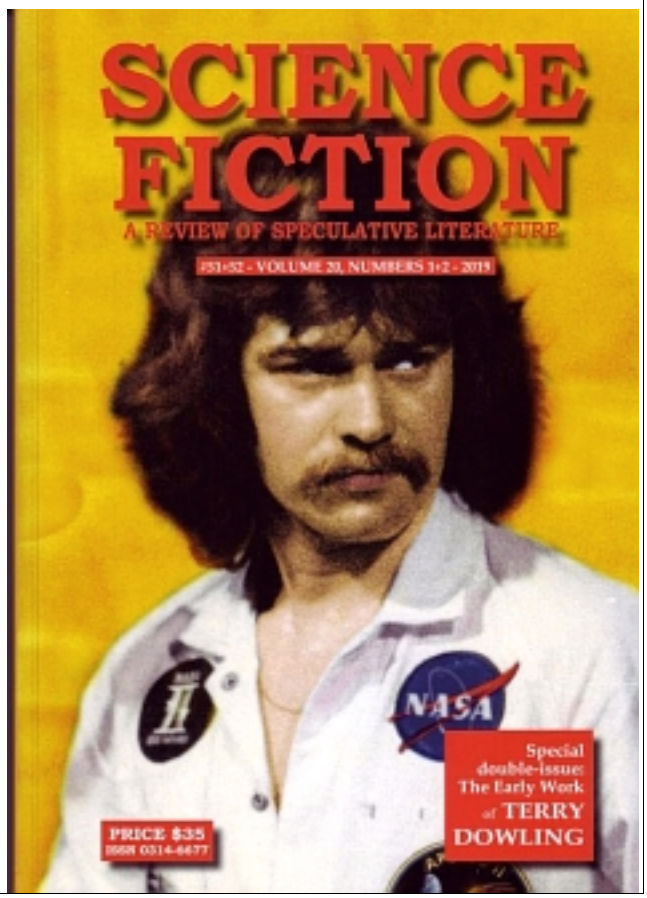
Science Fiction 51/52 is the special double issue on the early work of **Terry Dowling**. As Van writes, 'A very long time in the making, this issue of *Science Fiction* reprints the very first published works of Terry Dowling — which were poems, not stories — together with his first three published short stories' and much more besides. An interview is supplemented by journal entries, 'belltrees', cartoons, fiction, and commentary. Most of the items seem to have appeared first in *Enigma*, the Sydney University SF Association magazine that Van edited before he began *Science Fiction*. I'm not as much of a fan of Terry Dowling's work as Van is, but I do find it interesting to read so much about a writer of whom I know little. This issue, also designed by Dane Ikin, is a pleasure to pick up and read.

OTHER SPACETIMES: INTERVIEWS WITH SPECULATIVE FICTION WRITERS edited by Van Ikin and Damien Broderick (Wildside Press; 2015; 251 pp.; $A25)

As I scrabbled around among the books and magazines to be written about in this column, I gave a cry of horror! How did I miss writing about ***Other SpaceTimes***? Look at the date I received it: 27 January 2016. What was I thinking?

Maybe I had put *Other Spacetimes* away so that I could connect it to the other books **Van Ikin** and **Damien Broderick** have edited from the pages of



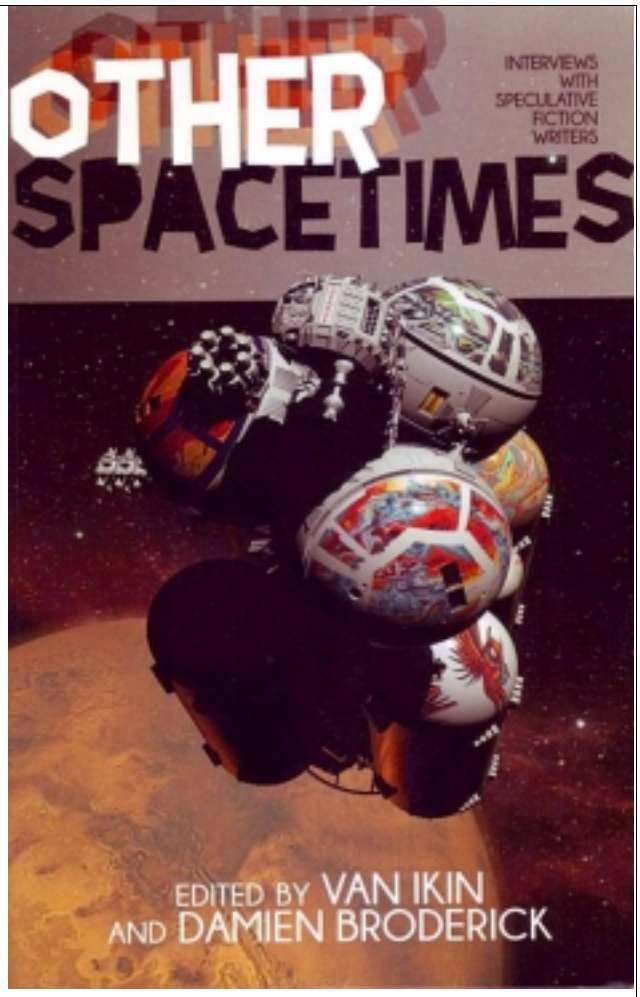


Science Fiction magazine? However, many of these interviews first appeared in *Aurealis* magazine, not *SF*. Maybe I just put it on the wrong shelf.

Other Spacetimes was published by Wildside Press in 2015, and is, I assume, still available through Amazon, or from Van Ikin himself: email van@ikin.net. Copies have almost certainly never appeared in Australian bookshops, which is the only way most *SFC* readers might have seen it. It's earned no prizes, and seems to be unknown among Australian SF readers. Yet it is an important record of the Australian and New Zealand SF/fantasy publishing boom that began in the early 1990s and is still sputtering along.

Two of these interviews are with writers whose deaths I know of: George Turner and Frank Bryning. Some are with authors who seem to have stopped publishing fiction: Beverley Macdonald, Maxine McArthur, Simon Brown, and Cameron Rogers. And I've never heard of Bernard Cohen or Charles E. Hulley.

But if you are at all interested in the sweep of Australian and NZ SF/fantasy publishing during the last 30 years, you would enjoy these interviews with Phillip Mann, Traci Harding, Rick Kennett, Dirk Strasser, Sean Williams, Kate Forsyth, Richard Harland, Stephen Dedman, Michael Pryor, Corey Daniells, Sean McMullen, Lucy Sussex, Tess Williams, Ian Irvine, Terry Dowling, Hal Colebatch, and Paul Collins.

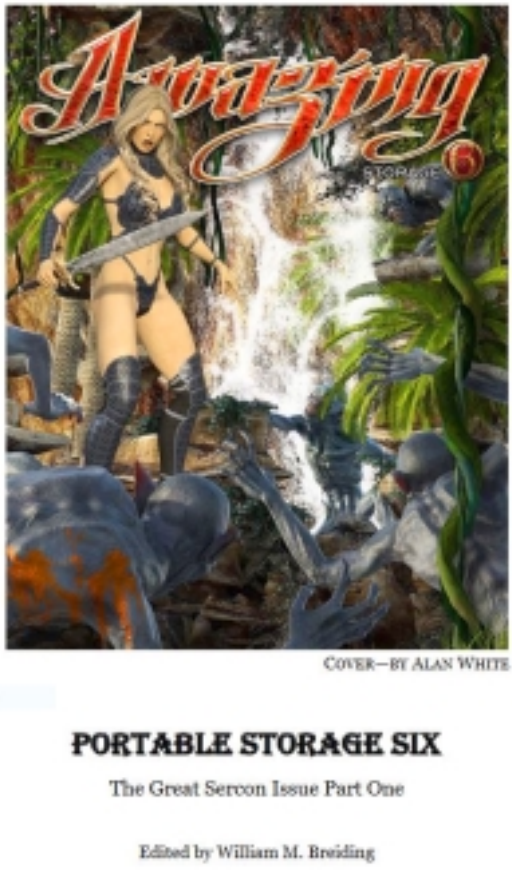


BANANA WINGS 77, November 2021
edited by Claire Brialey and Mark Plummer (60 pages)
(Available only by request through direct mail: 59 Shirley Road, Croydon CRO 7ES, UK; email: fishlifter@gmail.com)

Beware the temptation to review a fanzine in another fanzine. I made a few notes while reading ***Banana Wings* 77**, the first issue in nearly two years. I ended up with a 2000-word letter of comment, which I've sent to Claire and Mark.

I'm not going to print that 2000-word letter here. All I can say is that all fandom has been awaiting the return of *Banana Wings*. It usually appears quarterly, but the arrival of Covid-19 closed all but the larger printing firms in Britain. Things have lightened up a bit around Shirley Road, Croydon.

What would I do if I had not published for two years? I would attempt to publish a 200-page issue. I'm sure that Claire and Mark have several hundred pages of contributions in the Overmatter file. But they have not published a 200-pager. They've published a 60-pager, and filled it mostly with Claire and Mark, as well as the letter column and a short



Covers: *Portable Storage* 5 (*l.*) and 6 (*r.*).

article by Nigel Rowe.

That's how *Banana Wing*s' readers would want it. Most of the magazine's readers cannot read Claire and Mark's contributions to ANZAPA every two months, so they would have been suffering acute Fishlifter deprivation. Both editors are experts at the Shaggy Dog Fanzine Article, full of seeming non sequiturs that tie together at the end of the story. Mark, for instance, starts his column with a 'small flying thing' that hitches a ride on the outside window of Mark's daily commuter train. He ends it at Wandsworth Common station after what seemed like commute from another dimension. In between he tells us about 'William M. Breeding' as well as 'William M. Breiding'; the story of Jim de Liscard, Noel Collyer, and a horse; tributes to many lost fans, including John Bangsund and Yvonne Rousseau; nutria raising ('nutria', it seems, are 'two-foot long rodents'); and the Icelandic version of the Nova Awards site.

Claire's column covers 'drudge work' and lockdown survival; attempting to catch up with friends after things lighten up; board games (during lockdown); favourites among recently read SF books (I've read none of her selections other than Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* and Susannah Clarke's *Piranesi*); and, as a side-article, thoughts about the awards that are available to worthy British fans. She notes that by winning the Doc Weir Award, Alison Scott has now 'become the third ever fan to achieve the four stations of British fandom honour (the others being Peter Weston and Greg Pickersgill)'. I'm not sure what are the four stations of honour for Australian fans (Hugo? Ditmar? Chandler? McNamara? DUFF winner? GUFF winner?). Only Marc Ortlieb could tell us the answers.

The letter column is champagne reading, as always.

PORTABLE STORAGE 5 (Spring, 2021; 160 pp.)

PORTABLE STORAGE 6:
THE GREAT SERCON ISSUE: PART ONE
(Summer 2021; 160 pp.)

edited by William Breiding (PDF downloadable from http://efanzines.com; for print version email William at portablezine@gmail.com)

The bad news, **William Breiding**, is that I have not written letters of comment to either ***Portable Storage* 5** or **6**. The good news is that I did read *Portable Storage* 5. *PS* has become *the* focal point fanzine of

the decade, not just because it runs articles by everybody who's anybody I know (such as Leigh Edmonds, Taral Wayne, Casey June Wolf, Cy Chauvin, and Alva Svoboda), but that William also keeps finding fine new writers of whom I have never heard (such as Kurt Erichsen, Gary Casey, David M. Shea, Kim Kerbis, and Justin E. A. Busch).

My favourite articles in No. 5 are by Lynn Kuehl (medical adventures — 'I was a bad patient'), Dale Nelson (a lively account of his adventures in collecting stuff, usually stuff I would never collect myself); Casey June Wolf (the last days of her Gramma, and what she meant to her grand-daughter); Leigh Edmonds on the early days of the Melbourne Science Fiction Group, a chapter from his long-planned *History of Australian Fandom*; Andy Hooper's column on 'Original Staples: Fanzines and the Fans Behind Them', with much information I'd never seen, because I joined fandom only in 1968; Cy Chauvin (on the hooks that start you reading a story and keep you there); and a wonderful end-poem by G. Sutton Breiding (a member of William's accomplished family) called 'The Gorgon of Poses'.

PS 5 has a wonderful cover by Janet K. Miller, illustrations by Many and Varied, and a superb design by William M. Breiding.

I haven't read ***Portable Storage* 6** yet. The US Post Office won't let William send me a print copy. He's posted the issue — 'The Great Sercon Issue' — as a PDF file on efanzines.com, and I've downloaded it, but I do find these pages difficult to read on screen. I've just had it printed locally.

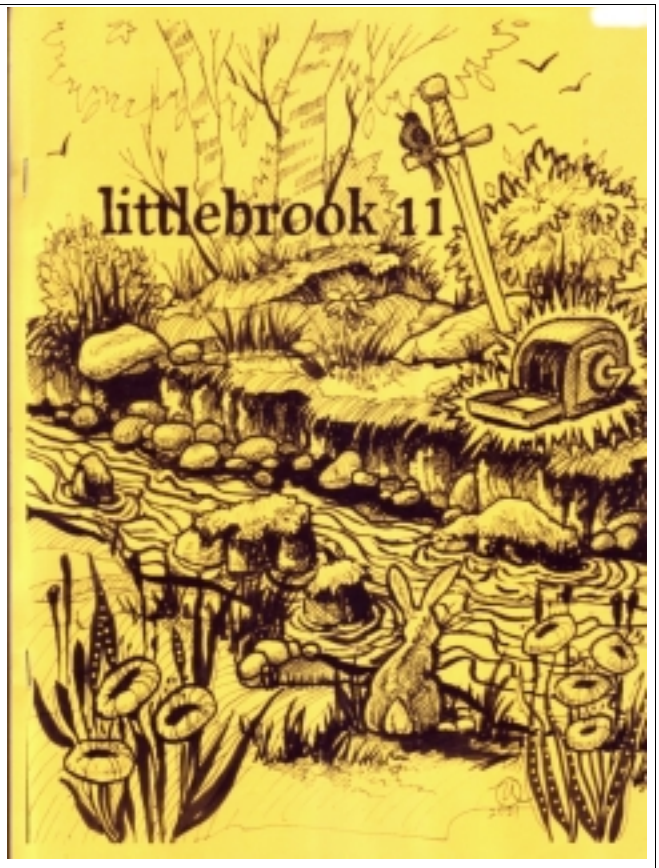
I've never had much time for the American separation between 'sercon' ('serious constructive') and 'fannish' articles for fanzines. My separation is between 'personal and deeply felt' and 'written for a particular audience'. William has struck oil by inviting various writers to contribute to his 'Sercon Issue'. He's had to divide it into two. Obviously there is a craving out there among fanzine writers to get stuck into examples of their favourite reading matter without writing a footnoted academic essay. The perfect 'sercon' writers are those who are also humorous about their favourite subject matter, such as David Langford and Christopher Priest. I cannot write as well as such people, but I have received the ultimate compliment of being invited to take part in the issue.

William has been too successful. Even I have been booted into Part 2 (*PS* 7), along with such notables as Claire Brialey. *PS* 6 includes among its contributors Alan White (cover art), Fred Lerner, Billy Wolfenbarger, Doug Bell, Jeanne Bowman, Andy Hooper, Cheryl Cline, Alva Svodoba, Peter Young, Paul Di Filippo, Howard Waldrop, G. Sutton Breiding, David Langford, and Cy Chauvin. If you can't find something brilliant here, you can't read.

INCA 19: FEATURING THE UNIVERSE FROM UNIVERSITY, September 2021
edited by Rob Jackson (46 pp.; PDF file available from efanzines.com; for a print copy send an email to Rob at either robjackson60@gmail.com or jacksonshambrook@uwclub.net)

Rob Jackson takes full advantage of the design capabilities offered by computer technology, yet his lightness of approach reminds me of the crunchy fanzines from the pre-computer era. His selection of colour photographs works well. He presents a satisfying mixture of the personal (his daughter Venetia's wedding); fannish meetings and meals; fandom nostalging (a colloquy of comments from well-known fans about their days at university, and the interaction between university life and science fiction); a very readable article (by Curt Phillips); and the usual interesting letter column. Feature letters include those by Mark Plummer, Curt Phillips, Joe Siclari, John Purcell, William Breiding, Jerry Kaufman, John Nielsen Hall, Hope Leibowitz, Jim Linwood, and Jeanne Bowman.

LITTLEBROOK 11, 2021
edited by Jerry Kaufman and Suzanna Tompkins (42 pp.) (PDF available from efanzines.com; for a print copy, send an email to Littlebrooklocs@aol.com)



'We didn't set out to have a theme for this issue of *Littlebrook*, but it looks like there is one: nostalgia. When we publish again (in another four years?) we'll attempt to face the future, not the past.' The last two years of lockdowns have left most fanzine editors with mixed thoughts about the present, let alone blank thoughts about the future. The past is a vaster territory than either, and Jerry and Suzle have been part of that vast territory of fandom for at least 50 years. They publish about every four years, so they don't need to rush things. And they prize quality over quantity.

Jerry's editorial nostalges about the last real world convention, the one in Belfast in 2019, as well as Titancon, the Belfast Eurocon held a week later. Like most other fans who wrote about the Irish experience, Jerry and Suzle seem to have enjoyed themselves greatly.

Eli Cohen's nostalgia is based on trawling through old boxes, which was also one of my major projects during the first few months of lockdown 2020. Eli found a lost issue of his well-remembered fanzine *Kratophony*, which includes his description of one of Eli's first jobs, and how he got married to Linda. When Eli popped up on Facebook and we began corresponding again sporadically, I had heard little about him since the 1980s. I had no idea that Linda and he had raised two sons, now in their 20s.

Suzanne Tompkins' 'Suzlecol' has a quite different view of 2019 than Jerry's. For instance, she deals with the difficulties that happened because they chose to take an AirBnB during the Irish Worldcon. If I had attended that convention, I would have assumed that I would be staying in a hotel — but these days world convention attendances are so large that I might easily have found myself in a 'convention hotel' a long way from the main events rooms. Suzle also deals with the practical problems caused by changing appliances after the old ones wear out. The instructions on the new appliances don't make sense. Of the examples Suzle mentions, Elaine and I have never used a microwave oven (we were given one years ago, used it once, and gave it away), and we had good luck with our replacement washing machine. We've never owned a car, but I've noticed that the control panels on friends' cars became incomprehensible nearly 40 years ago.

Terry Garey has suffered from severe health problems in recent years, so it's great to see her nostalgia piece 'How I Fell in Love with the Flying Karamazov Brothers'. During my early days of receiving fanzines from America, correspondents would often mention the Flying Karamazov Brothers, who seemed to be a combination of a juggling act and a comedy act, with connections to fandom. Terry's article is the first I've seen that describes what they did and why they were so interesting. The only Australian fan who has mentioned to me seeing a FKB performance is Robin Johnson.

Andy Hooper, who has made himself into fandom's most consistent 'sercon' writer in recent years, tells us about 'William Stephen Sykora and the 1939 Worldcon'. This is deep-time and largely unknown history for me. I believe Andy joined even later, so this is hardly a 'nostalgia' piece, but more an article of well-dug history about the first ten years of science fiction fandom. Will Sykora, it seems, was a divisive fan, mainly because he believed that the only purpose of science fiction stories was to promote the progress of science itself. Much of this mini- biography involves his attempts to form or take over new clubs during the 1930s, or divide existing clubs, according to whether the other members of those clubs agreed with his ideas or not. Australian fans who've read about Sydney fandom during the 1940s and 1950s will recognise the battle-stations approach to fandom.

The letters of comment include a long contribution from Andy Hooper, as well as stimulating letters from fans such as Paul Skelton, Greg Benford, Eli Cohen, and Milt Stevens. I notice that

Leigh Edmonds had returned to fanzine loccing in October 2017, not long after he had suffered a blood clot in the lung.

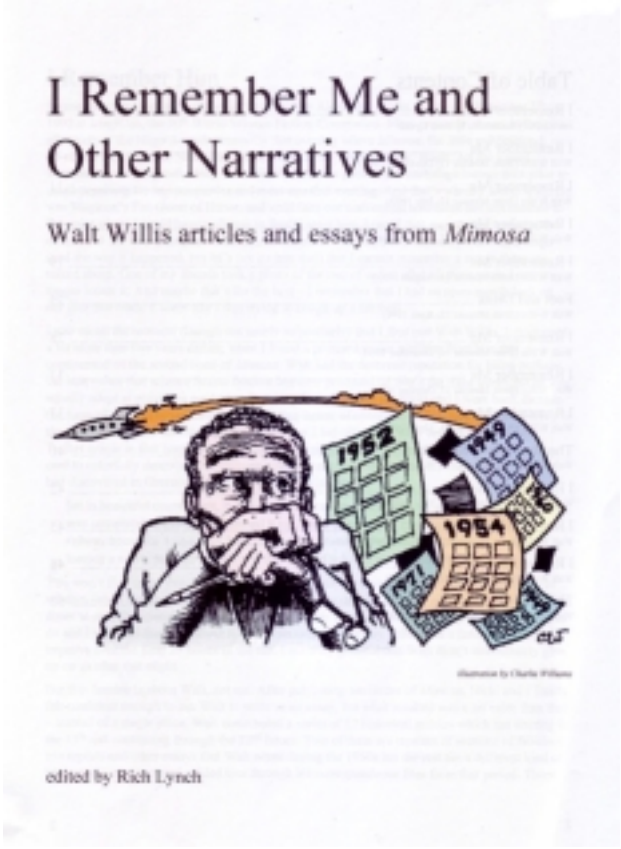
MY BACK PAGES 25, December 2020
edited by Rich Lynch (28 pp.; PDF available from efanzines.com or fanac.org, or enquire about the print edition to Rich at rw_lynch@yahoo@com

I REMEMBER ME AND OTHER NARRATIVES: WALT WILLIS ARTICLES AND ESSAYS FROM MIMOSA
edited by Rich Lynch (52 pp.; February 2021)

My Back Pages is not like other current fanzines. It does not invite letters of comment because it consists of previously written articles by **Rich Lynch** (in this case, from *Variations on a Theme*, which I assume is Rich's apazine). I enjoy receiving *MBP* because it is filled with photos as well as Rich's well-modulated, informative voice writing about people and places he and Nicki have met and been to. In this issue he discusses the 'defining moment' of the end of 2020 in the US, and takes us on a trip that he and Nicki made to New York: 'You can visit [New York] so often that you know the city almost like the back of your hand, and just when you think you've seen it all .... well, you really haven't.' (No wonder I would love to return to New York.) Rich and Nicki cover a fair amount of New York territory, including watching new, disappointing productions of *West Side Story* ('outrageous') and *Oklahoma* ('I absolutely hated the staging of the show'), and an exciting staging of *The Phantom of the Opera* ('splendid show'). They also visited the Museum of the Moving Image (which made up for the disappointments of the two earlier Broadway shows), and the Jim Henson Exhibition. Rich and Nicki went to see Ed Harris starring in a Broadway performance of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, as well as a musical I've never heard of, *Hadestown*.

My favourite article in the issue sneaks in at the end. Rich reviews a few of the tribute albums to Stephen Foster that have been issued over the years. His favourite is also mine: *Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster*, produced by Steve Fishell and David Macias. The CD includes contributions from many of my favourite performers, such as Raul Malo, Beth Nielsen Chapman, Mavis Staples, and Roger McGuinn. (But where is Martha Wainwright's version of 'Hard Times', one of the greatest cover versions I've ever heard?) Rich particularly likes tracks by Henry Kaiser ('Autumn Waltz') and John Prine ('My Old Kentucky Home'). John Prine was the first well-known performer to be killed by Covid-19, in early 2020.

The only oddity about every issue of *My Back Pages* is that both front and back covers feature photos from Rich's past — none of them with captions. I recognise Abraham Lincoln on the front cover and Bob Shaw on the back cover.



During an era when the Fan Hugos meant something, ***I Remember Me and Other Narratives*** would have been a nominee for the Hugo Award for Best Non-Fiction Production (or whatever it's called). Walt Willis is usually thought of as the Best Fan-Writer of All Time, with Bob Tucker a close second. The most highly valued collection of fannish writing is *Warhoon 28*, a 600-page gathering by Richard Bergeron of everything Walt Willis wrote up to the 1960s. *I Remember Me* gathers a set of columns first published in Rich and Nicki Lynch's *Mimosa* during the 1990s, when Walt Willis had returned to fandom after many years of gafia. Willis's intelligence, wit, and sense of style remained undiminished. He retained his memories of the great days of fandom in the 1950s. Therefore *I Remember Me* is a publication that everybody who owns a copy of *Warhoon 28* will want to own to read.

Mailbox heroes

Thanks to the people I've mentioned so far, who've taken the trouble to send me their publications by mail. They are some of my mailbox heroes. I hope I haven't forgotten anybody. Thanks also to **Michael Bishop**, who has already had a chapter to himself in this issue of *SFC*.

Other people have sent me stuff just because they felt like doing so. Truly, I must be talking to my friends.

Dick Jenssen

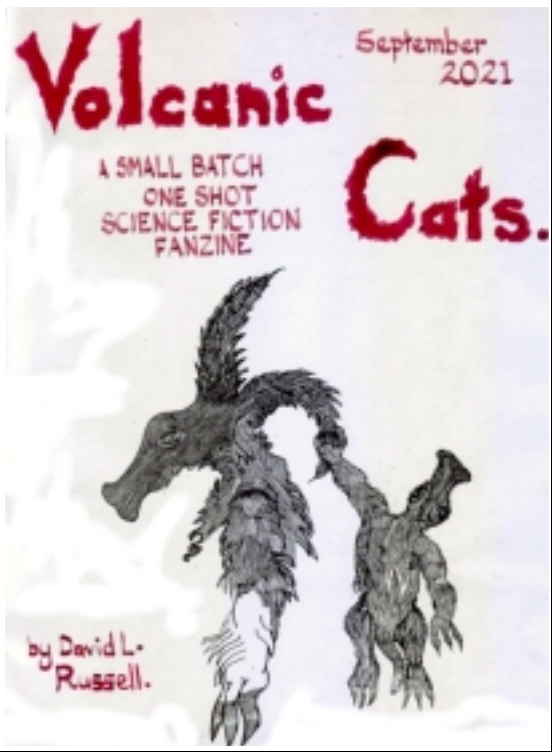
Despite a year of health problems, which began with major surgery and ended with several weeks in hospital, Dick has been as generous as always. Among the books he's given us are the three volumes of the Mark Musa translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and a handsome hardback edition of Leopoldo Alas' *La Regenta*, a nineteenth-century Spanish classic newly translated and introduced by John Rutherford. Among the many Blu-rays he's given us are *The Last Valley* and the 1952 *War of the Worlds* in new Blu-ray editions; Johann Johannsson's *Last and First Men*, a packet that includes the Blu-ray of the film plus the CD; and new editions of *The Dead Zone*, *Last Train from Gun Hill*, and *Corridor of Mirrors*. He also lent me the new Blu-ray of Franju's *Eyes Without a Face*.

John Davies

decided that my Blu-ray shelves were seriously lacking in some recent sets. He also kept in touch despite the fact we could not hold our monthly film nights for nearly two years. John took the trouble to order some major, very expensive packages from PlayMusic in the city and send them to me, even during lockdowns. Best of all was the 11-Blu-ray, 52-episode set of the Rupert Davies *Maigret* TV series from the early 1960s. He also sent sets of *Marlene Dietrich: the Josef Von Sternberg Years* and *Marlene Dietrich at Universal*; *Hands of Orlac*; new prints of *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* and *The Servant*; *The Night Has Eyes*, and two John Ford movies from the silent era. These sets include many hours of supplementary viewing.

David Russell

sent from Warrnambool cards for various occasions, plus artwork for *SFC* and his loose-leaf fanzine *Volcanic Cats*, containing almost nothing but David's drawings. He also sent me a copy of *I Saw the Light* (the biography of Hank Williams), and a unique item, a graphic arts book written by Margaret Atwood (*The Complete Angel Catbird*). I've never seen a mention of it until now.

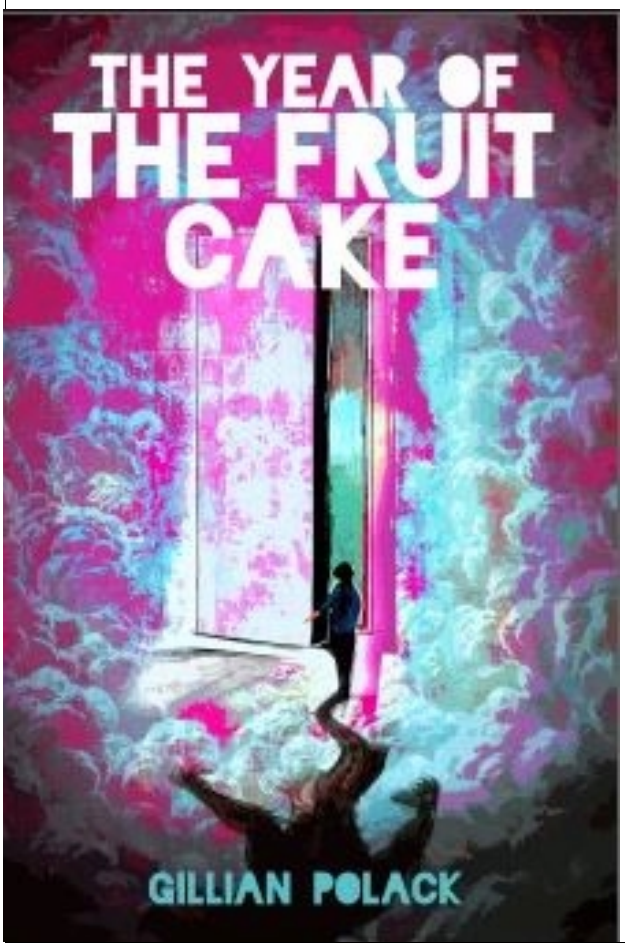


Colin Steele

sent from Canberra several books that sounded interesting when he reviewed them in his 'The Field' column in *SFC*. They included a sturdy hardback, Brooke-Hitching's *The Madman's Library*.

Jenny Blackford

sent from Newcastle not only her own book *Fil and Harry* (already reviewed in this issue) but also three of the 13 Babel Handbooks on Fantasy and SF Writers published by Norman Talbot during the 1990s. I already owned Yvonne Rousseau's *Minmers Marooned and the Planet of the Marsupials: The Science Fiction Novels of Cherry Wilder*. These are plain-covered foldout chapbooks, each containing an essay by an Australian SF-orientated academic about a well-known SF or fantasy author. I hope that one day I might be able to buy a complete set, but in the meantime Jenny sent me her spare copies of Rosaleen Love's *Michael Frayn and the Fantasy of Everyday Life*; Russell Blackford's *Hyperdreams: Damien Broderick's Space/Time Fiction*; and Sylvia Kelso's *A Glance from Nowhere: Sheri S. Tepper's Fantasy and SF*.



Murray MacLachlan

from Altona Meadows visits us from time to time and sends us CDs every now and again, the overflow from his browsings among op shops and second-hand CD shops. If op shops stayed open between lockdowns, Murray found them. He also has kept the Nova Mob operating, usually as a Zoom meeting, during the last two years — thanks for this, Murray.

John Hertz

from California sent many issues of his weekly fanzine *Vanamonde*, as well as letters of comment and contributions to *SFC*, although he does not have email at home. This makes it difficult to correspond with him (six weeks each way) or send him copies of fanzines (impossible at the moment), but somehow he manages to see issues of *SFC* on efanzines.com.

Irwin and Wendy Hirsh

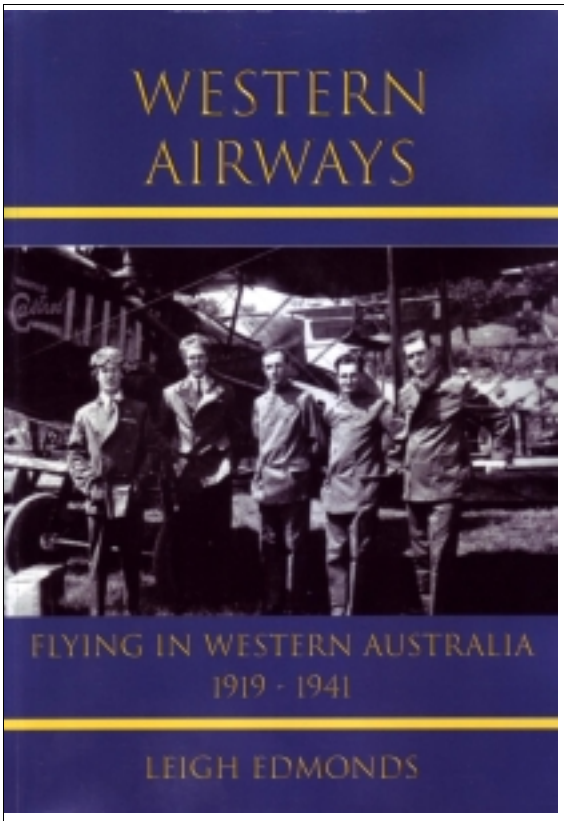
from Prahran decided that large numbers of books in their house needed homes elsewhere. Thanks to the little list that Irwin sent around, I've now acquired some interesting older paperbacks, including many books about films.

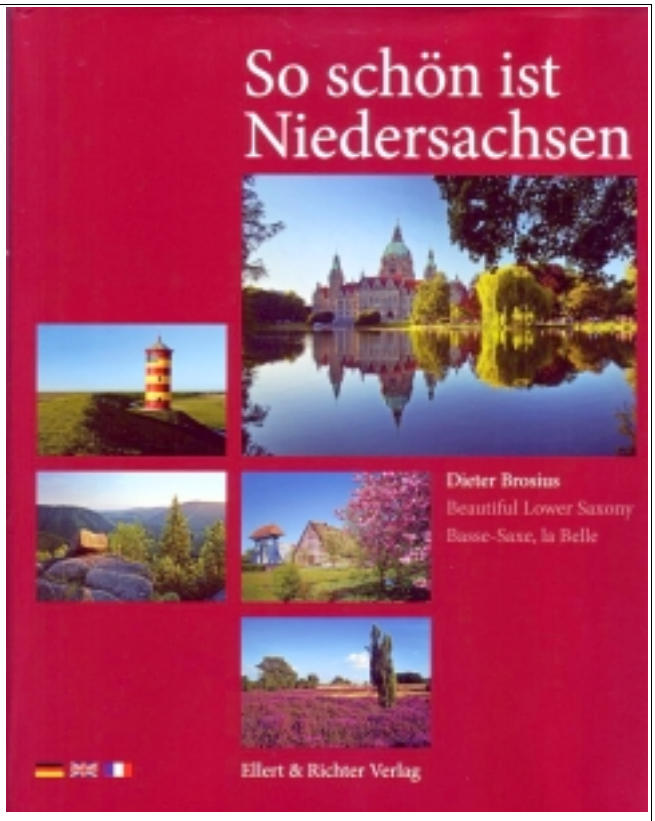
Michael Dobson

managed to send me from Maryland, USA, a copy of a book I didn't index for him: Humayan Mirza's *The Last of the Bengal Princes*. Michael had asked me several years ago to index this book, but it didn't arrive. When the job was ready, I was given two weeks to prepare the index — at the exact time when two indexes arrived from two different regular clients! I had to let this job go. Michael was very nice about it. Indeed, my work would have been wasted, since the author made massive changes after the index (by another) was finished. The book itself is a very handsome book of Indian biographical history. Those who receive Michael's splendid fanzines should enquire about a copy.

Gillian Polack

made available four recent Gillian Polack novels plus a story in an anthology. *The Year of the Fruit Cake* (IFWG Publishing) is the best known of the five, and it has already won awards. The others are: *Borderlanders*; *Poison & Light*; and *The Green Children Help Out*.





Mark Plummer

sent to me from London several books I had been unable to buy otherwise. Thanks very much, Mark. I must top up my sinking fund with you.

Robert Lichtman

sent me copies of his FAPAzine and his SAPSzine, despite health difficulties and the loss of his wife Carol Carr during the year. Thanks very much, Robert, for your article about Carol's last year.

Marc Ortlieb

Catherine Pickersgill

David Pepperell

sent me copies of CDs. Marc sent a copy of *Faithless*, a Richard Thompson CD that had been available only from Thompson's own website. Catherine sent me from Wales a CD called *Slip-Disc: Bombay London Grooves*.

And David Pepperell, he of Archie and Jughead's import record shop during the 1970s (with Keith Glass), send me a copy of the rarest and greatest of great American white country blues records of the 1960s, Dave Ray's *Fine Soft Land*. (Of course, if anybody ever comes across an actual copy of the LP, name me a price.) Only David Pepperell of anybody I've ever met would have the depth of musical knowledge to know about this item, let alone have a copy. (That's apart from my friend Rick Brewster, who bought a copy in 1963, but had it stolen from his flat.)

Geoff Allshorn

has given me two or three sets of DVDs of older TV shows have I have wanted to watch over the years. *Danger Man*, starring Patrick McGoohan, was a favourite show of a friend's during 1966. I visited the home of my aunt and uncle on nights when they were watching *The Avengers* and *The Man from UNCLE*, but *Danger Man* (*Secret Agent Man* in the US) eluded me in 1966.. Geoff also gave me the British *Pie in the Sky* series — very enjoyable.

Leigh Edmonds

sent me for free (although I offered him the selling price) a copy of *Western Airways*. Based on his PhD thesis, it is filled with Leigh's excellent writing and lots of piccies of aeroplanes and Western Australian landscapes. It is the story of the beginnings of Australian civil aviation, and should be generally available. However, Leigh says he has no remaining copies.

Werner Koopmann

rings me occasionally from Buchholz in Lower Saxony, Germany, and sends me lots of photos of

the trips he and his wife Ulla make, and their home. He also sends me heavy illustrated books from time to time. Dieter Brosius' *Beautiful Lower Saxony (So schon ist Niedersachsen)* (published by Verlag) has text in German, English, and French. Filled with colour photos, it is a very persuasive argument for visiting Lower Saxony next time anybody from Australia can visit anywhere.

Other heroes

Perry Middlemiss and David Grigg

Perry Middlemiss and David Grigg don't send me their productions as print fanzines, but I'm very grateful that I can access their publications on the Internet. They provide the service I can't: reviewing the current book releases. Each of them reads a great deal, and writes capsule reviews to check against your own book shopping lists.

Perry writes a monthly reviews fanzine, *Perryscope*, and produces, with David Grigg, an occasional 'sercon' fanzine called *Alien Review*. Both can be accessed from http://efanzines.com. Perry encourages readers to send letters of comment.

David's fortnightly *Biblioscope* blog covers a slightly wider range of books than Perry's magazines, but I find it equally useful when putting in my book orders. David's recommendation led me to read Trent Dalton's *Boy Swallows Universe*, for instance. I couldn't believe that a book that has been so popular could be written so well. (Years ago, David put me onto the books of Kate Atkinson.) Email David at david.grigg@gmail.com so that he can begin sending you Biblioscope.

Hero booksellers

I would have found it very difficult to keep up with necessary book purchases without the help of **Justin Ackroyd** (Slow Glass Books) who made several deliveries of orders to Greensborough after Covid restrictions made it difficult to visit his place in Northcote. Thanks, Justin, not only for the deliveries but also for being able to get the books from America to here.

Very useful, too, have been those little parcels of CDs and books that **Dave Clarke** has been sending me from Readings Books in Carlton. There were times during the lockdowns when he was almost the only person in the shut-doors shop attempting to keep up with orders from people like me. I'm very glad that Readings has been able to stay operating.


Through the Biblioscope

Dark Shadows Clearing to Shimmering Skies

My literary weather report: two more excellent books read, and several really interesting new ones impending.

Bookish News

New and Upcoming Releases

Several very interesting-looking books coming out this year.

Sea of Tranquility by Emily St. John Mandel

Jennifer Bryce and Tony Thomas

The Booker Awards 2021

Booker Prize Long List 2021

BEWILDERMENT by Richard Powers ($32.99)
KLARA AND THE SUN by Kazuo Ishiguro ($32.99)
A PASSAGE NORTH by Anuk Arudpragasam ($29.99)
GREAT CIRCLE by Maggie Shipstead ($32.99)
CHINA ROOM by Sunjeev Sahota ($32.99)
SECOND PLACE by Rachel Cusk ($27.99)
THE FORTUNE MEN (HB) by Nadifa Mohamed ($38.99)
THE SWEETNESS OF WATER by Nathan Harris ($32.99)
NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS by Patricia Lockwood ($29.99)
A TOWN CALLED SOLACE by Mary Lawson ($32.99)
LIGHT PERPETUAL by Francis Spufford ($29.99)
THE PROMISE by Damon Galgut ($32.99)

Short List

THE FORTUNE MEN by Nadifa Mohamed (Viking) (Penguin Random House)
BEWILDERMENT by Richard Powers (William Heinemann) (Penguin Random House)
THE PROMISE by Damon Galgut (Chatto & Windus) (Penguin Random House)
GREAT CIRCLE by Maggie Shipstead (Doubleday) (Penguin Random House)
NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS by Patricia Lockwood (Bloomsbury)
A PASSAGE NORTH by Anuk Arudpragasam (Granta) (Allen & Unwin)

Jennifer Bryce

Reading the Booker Prize nominees (2021)

Damon Galgut: THE PROMISE

Whereas last year, I predicted the winner of the Booker (**Shuggie Bain**), this year I was less certain. I haven't read the complete list of books but there were a couple from the long list that didn't make the short list that, when I read them earlier this year, I'd thought might be contenders.

Congratulations to South African writer **Damon Galgut**!

I hadn't read Damon Galgut before, and was intrigued by his way of changing point of view even, sometimes, within a sentence. I discovered that this device is very effective in taking you right inside a character.

The Promise is set in South Africa during the transition out of apartheid — a small farm near Pretoria where a white South African family gradually disintegrates. With each death that occurs over roughly 10-year intervals, the house is more decrepit and the family members less purposeful. Before his wife dies (and she is the first to go), the husband promises that the black maid, Salome, will be granted the deeds to the house she has occupied over the many years of her faithful service. Amor, the youngest child, overhears this exchange between her parents and every time (with a death) there is discussion of inheritance, she brings up the matter, which is quietly ignored. Ultimately — Amor is the last surviving family member — the deeds can be passed to the elderly Salome. But now they may be worthless, as black Africans are making claim to land that was originally theirs. However, we learn that Amor — who is rather reclusive and

out of touch of the family — has been entitled to payments over the years from her father's business. She has not claimed any of this money, and when she becomes the sole surviving family member she is in a position to hand the considerable amount of money to Salome.

Nadifa Mohamed: THE FORTUNE MEN

The other book I've read that was shortlisted is **Nadifa Mohamed**'s ***The Fortune Men***. At the time I thought it one of the best Booker short-listed books I had read. The book is based on the actual story of the last man to be hanged in Cardiff Prison, in 1952. He was Mahmood Mattan — a Somali seaman who had married a local Welsh girl and they'd had three boys. She had kicked him out of the marital home for his constant debt — on land, he didn't have a steady job, he was occasionally lucky with horse-racing. Because of his situation he was a petty thief, but he was not a murderer. And the love between Mahmood and his wife was strong despite her frustration at lack of money. He was a doting father.

Prejudice against people of colour was strong in the Tiger Bay area of Cardiff in 1952. When a shopkeeper, Violet Volacki, is murdered, evidence is fabricated and Mahmood is arrested and brought to trial. He knows he is innocent, and for a long time he assumes that the truth will save him. In prison he reflects a lot on his past life, treasuring memories of his mother, and he comes to see that his life is 'as fragile as a twig underfoot'. He sees that he could become 'the devil they always took him for'. But for most of the time he has a flawed confidence in the truth. The best writing is the descriptions of Mahmood's time in gaol — all written from his viewpoint. The book drags a little with descriptions at the beginning and, given that Mahmood was not the killer, and the book is about him, it is probably not necessary to go in so much detail into the life and family of the murdered woman. Nevertheless, at the end one is confronted with the brutality and finality of capital punishment — particularly in this case where Mahmood was wrongly convicted largely because of the colour of his skin.

Books from the long list that I've read are Rachel Cusk's *Second Place*, Mary Lawson's *A Town Called Solace* and Francis Spufford's *Light Perpetual*. I particularly liked the latter two.

Rachel Cusk: SECOND PLACE

I hadn't read any other work of **Rachel Cusk**, and it is frustrating to find that there are various assumptions about this. I assume when I pick up a novel I can concentrate on reading it from cover to cover without having to stop and refer to other sources. Naïvely, I read ***Second Place*** from cover to cover — there was some obscurity, but the main irritation was that the narrator kept addressing a person called Jeffers and, within the covers of the novel, we never found out who he was. Ah — but later, I read that Cusk based this book on an account of a time when D. H. Lawrence stayed at an artists' colony in New Mexico — Jeffers is a poet encountered here.

The 'second place' is a guest house on the property owned by M., the character I guess you would call the protagonist. M. lives on this remote marshy seaside place with her kind and usually compliant second husband, Tony. Her own 21-year-old daughter and boyfriend are also staying there. M. seems to like to have artistic people around — for stimulation? And she has invited L., an artist she encountered in Paris and whose work had made a deep impression on her. Is she in love with him? I assumed, at least at first, that it was a kind of love that drove M. to go to considerable trouble to invite L., who eventually comes with young, talented, and beautiful Brett in tow. L.'s presence is both internally and externally disruptive. Sometimes M. seems to be tormenting herself. Incidentally there are musings on mother–daughter relationships. In the end, L. has a stroke and dies when he's been re-housed in a Paris hotel. There is a note from L. to M. that says 'you were right about quite a few things ... I wish we could have lived together sympathetically. Now I can't see why we couldn't.' The book is 'a tribute' to Mabel Dodge Luhan's memoir about D. H. Lawrence at the artists' colony. I felt that I needed to have read that memoir in order to appreciate this novel.

Mary Lawson: A TOWN CALLED SOLACE

In ***A Town Called Solace***, Clara, Mrs Elisabeth Orchard, and Liam have each suffered tragedy. We learn very quickly about that of Clara; her rebellious sister, Rose, has run away following a row with their mother. Seven-year-old Clara attends school, but at home she spends every waking moment looking out of the window, willing Rose to return. Her only outlet is feeding Moses, a cat she's looking after for their neighbour, Mrs Orchard, who is in hospital.

Gradually we learn the story of Mrs Orchard. She and her husband have no living children — she suffered numerous miscarriages and understandably but very inadvisably became attached to Liam, the neighbours' son who had four sisters. She was ultimately driven to abduct him. Liam loved being with Mrs Orchard but of course was kept well

away from her after the abduction — and as punishment she had to spend a year incarcerated.

Everything ties together. Mrs Orchard dies and leaves Liam her house, which is next door to Clara's house — she continues to feed Mrs Orchard's cat, Moses. Liam has kept in touch with Mrs Orchard. At the time of the story, his marriage has (perhaps inevitably) broken up. He has travelled to Solace to take possession of Mrs Orchard's house. His initial intention is to leave by winter, but he's drifting and at the end of the book it seems likely he will stay on in Solace. The book is very simply written — at first I thought it might be a YA novel. There is vivid description of small town life and a poignant description of realising you are about to die: Mrs Orchard 'communes' (though she isn't religious) with her late husband, addressing him as 'you'. It was a quick and easy read but left poignant feelings of loss and love.

Francis Spufford: LIGHT PERPETUAL

Light Perpetual is a beautiful book, inspired by a plaque **Francis Spufford** sees when he walks to work at Goldsmiths College. The plaque commemorates a 1944 attack on the New Cross Road branch of Woolworths. Fifteen children were killed. The book commemorates these children's 'lost chance to experience the rest of the twentieth century'. The idea of writing about what someone might have been like had they lived is not new — but maybe this way of going about it is. The children in Spufford's book are fictitious — he's made up their names and the suburb of Bexford, where they grew up. The bomb explodes — seemingly in slow motion — then we are taken into a day in each child's life five years later, 20 years later, 35 years later, 50 years later and finally 65 years later. Death of a Christian believer is described beautifully at the very end when schizophrenic Ben, now confined to palliative care, literally sees the light. And at the end of the book 'Come, dust' going into infinity — the same words used at the end of the first chapter that describes the 1944 bomb aftermath. I thought this book a potential winner. But I was wrong.

Anuk Arudpragasam: A PASSAGE NORTH

Short-listed for the 2021 Booker prize, this book has been described as 'a meticulous but frustrating meditation on violence and memory' (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jul/15/a-passage-north-by-anuk-arudpragasam-review-a-journey-into-the-trauma-of-war)

For most of ***A Passage North*** we are on a train journey from Colombo to the very north of Sri Lanka — plenty of time for the main character, Krishan, to ruminate — as well as listening to the clanking wheels and staring out onto the Sri Lankan countryside. In his reminiscences, he describes times when he smokes and meditates. Krishan is Tamil, and the story (or scenes) take place just after the almost 30 years of civil war. Much of this book took me back to poetry of Tagore that I had read at university and, a little inappropriately because Hindu, to the Vedic hymns. If you are old enough to have seen Satyajit Ray's films, and if you found them tedious, you may soon lose patience with Arudpragasam's lengthy sentences and paragraphs. I studied Indian philosophy at university and this has provided me with some kind of entree into this ruminative writing.

Krishan's grandmother's carer, Rani, has died by falling into a well, and he is suspicious it may have been suicide, or other foul means. For a moment I thought that this book might be a 'whodunnit' — but it is far from this, and in the end the question of the means of Rani's death is immaterial. Rani's two children died as a consequence of the civil war.

As he sits on the clanking train, Krishan ponders his relationship with Anjum, whom he still loves although they have parted — one gathers that her activist responsibilities are more important to her than her love for him.

Krishan is travelling to Rani's funeral — he feels an obligation to attend it — it seemed to me that this was because he was 'the man' of the family. He ultimately reaches her village, a place that is foreign to him. After meeting at the crowded funeral home — professional mourners and all, but no-one he knows — he walks with the men to the funeral pyre, some distance away. The place of cremation is near a lake, which reminds Krishan of a documentary film where two young women are excited that they will be sacrificing their lives for the Tamil cause — rather like suicide bombers. This is compared to young women 'sacrificing' their lives by going into a Buddhist nunnery.

For Krishan, the funeral pyre is located 'at the end of the earth'. I found this part of the book the most illuminating (there may be a pun here with Buddhist thinking, but it is not intended). Once the fire is blazing and before the body starts to burn, it is customary for the observers to move away. Krishan is the last to leave. He gets to the entrance and looks back 'as the substantiality of a human life was transmuted, like a mirage or hallucination or vision, into thick clouds of smoke billowing up into the sky, thinning as they rose and then disappearing into the evening, a message from this world to another that would never be received'. There would be Tamil texts, I am sure, but for me the Rigvedic Creation hymn came to mind.

Patricia Lockwood: NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS

This book had me asking myself: what is a novel? These days we are so influenced by social media, we are used to reading snatches of often witty (or trying to be witty) observations. This book, particularly the first part of it, is made up of just that: short clips that you might call stanzas — indeed, **Patricia Lockwood** is a poet. I don't use Twitter, and this is most likely why I didn't 'get' the first part of the book. For example I just don't get the significance, or amusement of 'Can a dog be twins?' Yet I can see that Lockwood writes beautifully — poetically: turning 'like the shine on a school of fish'.

It has been suggested that this novel continues to answer a question that Lockwood has addressed on Twitter: How do we write now? For some, the Internet is life — we are addled by it, overwhelmed by it. And Part 1 of the novel shows this. Then, near the end of Part 1 the protagonist (who remains nameless throughout) receives a text from her mother, concerning her sister's pregnancy: 'Something has gone wrong.' Elsewhere, Lockwood has presented her family as highly dysfunctional (*Priestdaddy*, 2017). Her father is a gun-toting, all-American, frequently semi-naked priest who underwent a religious conversion after watching *The Exorcist* 70 times on a Navy submarine. He was converted to Catholicism and was admitted to the priesthood although he was already married and had a family.

For the rest of the book we see how a family nestles around the sister, who gives birth to a little girl with Proteus Syndrome — thought to be the cause of the deformities of the nineteenth century's 'Elephant Man', made famous through film and play. This baby is warmly loved and cared for during the six months of her life. The story is still conveyed in snatches, but there is a binding narrative. And I ponder whether that might be the best way to tell such a story. We would expect it to be tragic — but was it? 'She held the little hand and waited for its wilted pink squeeze, like the handshake of a lily.'

Kazuo Ishiguro: KLARA AND THE SUN

The only other book of this highly regarded author that I've read is *Remains of the Day*. I may be at a disadvantage having not read his other work that ventures into science fiction, particularly *Never Let Me Go*. Indeed, in his review in *The Guardian*, Alex Preston suggests that *Never Let Me Go*, *The Buried Giant*, and ***Klara and the Sun*** should be read as a trilogy: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/01/klara-and-the-sun-by-kazuo-ishiguro-review-another-masterpiece

Klara is an android. Specifically she is an AF: an Artificial Friend — in this society, which feels very much like America in, say, 30 years' time, the well-to-do young people have AFs who are combination sibling, plaything, and nursemaid. The book is written from the viewpoint of Klara, an AF who starts off in a shop on display with other AFs, but is ultimately chosen by Josie, a fragile adolescent.

Klara is powered by the sun, which for her seems to take on a kind of religious significance. She is a mixture of intelligence (she can read, teach/impart science) and what was for me unbelievable naivety, believing that the sun lives in a neighbour's barn and that there is only one polluting machine in the world.

Josie and her mother (always referred to by Klara as 'the mother'; Klara doesn't seem to be able to use pronouns) take Klara home to what seems to be a well-to-do perhaps-American household. The mother is a professional, who drives off to work each day, divorced from Josie's father. There is a housekeeper, Melania Housekeeper (a coincidence that this is the name of the former US First Lady?). As I read, in my mind everything was a bit artificial. And why don't they have a robot to do the housework? The house is in a rural setting — in my mind it was rather like a toy farmhouse and although the other characters were 'real' people, I pictured them as rather robotic.

Josie's illness may have been caused by her being 'lifted' — something that seems to happen to children of a certain class (maybe surgery — it's unclear) that increases their intelligence. Josie's friend Rick hasn't been through this process — he seems quite bright without it (he designs drones), but the reason is most likely that his family is not well-to-do. We later learn that Josie's sister died, possibly connected to the 'lifting' procedure. The main drama is that Josie might die like her sister.

Klara has learned to be devoted, and believes that it is her duty to 'save' Josie. Klara learns that she is, in fact, being groomed by Josie's parents (with the help of a scientist, Capaldi) to take on Josie's characteristics to replace her in the event of her death. Perhaps fortunately, Josie does not die. Is she saved by Klara's exhortations to the sun?

As Josie gets older, Klara is needed less and is consigned to a utility cupboard. When Josie goes off to college she glibly says, 'You've been just great, Klara'. That's it. And Klara ends her days in a rubbish dump, where she is visited by her original store manager and she is in the company of other abandoned AFs. This is acclaimed as a book about love. For me it was more a pessimistic comment on present-day society.

— **Jennifer Bryce**, August 2021

Tony Thomas

The Booker Prize Long/Short List 2021

The Long List was announced on 27 July 2021. The Short List was announced 14 September, and the winner on 3 November.

Kazuo Ishiguro: KLARA AND THE SUN (Faber; 2021; hc 6th edn) (finished mid August 2021)

Yes, it's another (unacknowledged) sf novel by an author from outside the field. This is the same sentence I started with, when reviewing John Lanchester's *The Wall* in 2019 and Sophie Ward's *Love and Other Thought Experiments* last year, and the problems this causes are again here in large measure.

The problems caused not so much by the unacknowlegement (done, I presume, for good commercial reasons) but more by the failure to properly build the imagined future worlds in which the authors choose to tell their stories. And these believable worlds are, I would argue, what we sf readers are looking for in order to engage our willing suspension of disbelief. So here, the android POV is barely credible, the android Klara itself is less physically able than some of our present dancing robots, but the consciousness aspects are vastly in advance of what we are capable of. Perhaps it's the magic juice with a gobbledegook scientific name that's extracted from Klara at one point that, as with a fairy tale spell, gives the gift of consciousness to these artificial friends. And the society around Klara and the family is barely in advance of what we see around us every day — indeed, in some respects well behind: college, cars, phones, coffee, teenagers, jobs, housemaids, are just like now — or a few years ago. Though there is nothing in the novel to suggest this, it all would have worked better if this world were an alternative reality, one a bit behind where we are now but with that magic gift of bestowing consciousness on some of our artefacts the Jonbar point at which our realities diverged. Or is it all just a failure of the author's imagination?

(*Klara and the Sun* didn't make the short list.)

**** for the writing about people and pseudo-people. * for the sf content.

Nadifa Mohamed: THE FORTUNE MEN (Penguin Viking hc; 2021; 1st edn) (finished September 2021)

Short list.

Based on a true story, the 1952 execution of a Somali seaman for a murder he didn't commit in Cardiff. Full of what I take to be authentic detail of the mixed cultures of the protagonist and his friends and family, much of it not translated from the various languages — Arabic, Somali, Hebrew etc — involved. We know (or can guess) the outcome from the beginning, so interest is in the characters (not so interesting) and on the milieu (interesting and unusual, but set out here at very great length). Sometimes the writing from Mahmood's point of view lapses into his idiom, as if he is writing his somewhat broken English, but mostly this is not the case. So, why? On the whole well written, sometimes moving, but couldn't see it as a winner.

***

Rachel Cusk: SECOND PLACE (Faber hc; 2021; 1st edn) (finished August 2021)

Much-lauded-by-reviewers novel which takes the form of a 'Letter' addressed to the otherwise unexplained Jeffers — why? A couple of the main characters, including the first-person narrator are known by initials only, but all the others not — why? Very little happens. Most of the novel is what the narrator is thinking, often what she makes of other people, or what she thinks they are thinking, and when a significant realisation strikes her she tells us by shouting! Thus!

The book attempts to say something about art, as in painting, but this seems to me mostly unsuccessful, as it usually is because so difficult. Even Anthony Powell found difficulty about this in his

12-volume opus. Part way through this reminded me (and not therefore favourably) of D. H. Lawrence, and then I read the Afterword, which tells us that it was inspired by Lawrence's stay in Mexico and a book about this. I found it very heavy going and had to force myself to finish.

(It didn't make the short list.)

***

Mary Lawson: A TOWN CALLED SOLACE (Chatto & Windus; 2021 hc; 1st edn) (finished August 2021)

Set in northern Ontario in 1972, and told very well by three different viewpoint characters in alternating chapters. Has a semi-mystery plot that brings together the three characters in an interesting if initially puzzling way. The strength is the adoption of three very different viewpoints, a dying old woman, a young child, and an adult 30-ish male teacher, each drawn extremely well and convincingly. Couldn't guess where this was going, but the resolution is very satisfying and life-affirming. I guess a bit too conventional for the Booker judges, but easily the pick of the books I've read so far.

(Didn't make the short list.)

*****

Nathan Harris: THE SWEETNESS OF WATER (Tinder Press; hc; 2nd British edn 2021) (finished September 2021)

Debut novel by a black author set at the end of the American Civil War, in the south, with freed slaves and racism and lots of farming. All very well done, with interesting characters, some stock ones, but others unique, even the white farmers. Written in an idiom (both dialogue and ordinary prose) that attempts mostly successfully to give us the right feel for nineteenth-century country life. Somewhat predictable, but I enjoyed reading to the end.

(Missed the short list.)

****

Patricia Lockwood: NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS (Bloomsbury; hc; 2021 later edn) (finished Aug 2021)

The author has a Twitter reputation as a poet, and the book is written in short paragraphs, often several to a page. The first half has no plot; merely follows the author's peregrinations around the world making wry, sometimes witty, sometimes incomprehensible (unless perhaps you're a Twitter aficionado) comments about her life, and the rather pampered world she inhabits. The second half develops a plot, based on the author's sister's young baby, born with the Elephant Man's Proteus disease, who dies after six months. This is better, but the short paragraph form — no matter how clever the poetic bons mots — hardly can do justice to this story (or any perhaps). I started reading faster and faster, to get to the end, only understanding some fraction of what was here, but not wanting to waste more time on an experiment that only partly came off.

But Twitter fans, including apparently judge Rowan Williams, have loved it enough to put it on the short list.

***

Maggie Shipstead: GREAT CIRCLE (Doubleday; (UK) hc; 1st edn) (Finished 30 September 2021)

A great book, successful on all counts. A historical novel with over a century of scenes all handled brilliantly. Beautifully researched and written with a large range of locations — farm life in rural Montana, flying in Alaska, flying in wartime England, Hawaii, New York, filming in LA, and more. Follows one main character, Marian, from childhood to death, but with flashbacks to her father, and sideways to her brother and others, and forward to the film of her life and the actress playing her in present day. All of this is remarkably well organised in chapters with dates and places, so you are never lost or in doubt about where we are and with whom. The conclusion is a flight around the world over two poles, the Great Circle, but this is also a metaphor for the journey of the novel and the lives we learn about. All the characters come to life well, but also remain in part unknown or unknowable — something the author wants to insist about as Marian reflects on her life and what drives her. Everywhere there are fine descriptions of the locales, the oceans, the polar ice, the sky while flying — and much more. Some detractors have called it an airport novel, and it does have a lot of plot, and a fair bit less of self-preoccupation which more 'literary' writers seem to feel necessary for 'literature', but all the better. By a good way the best book of those I've read to date.

Short list.
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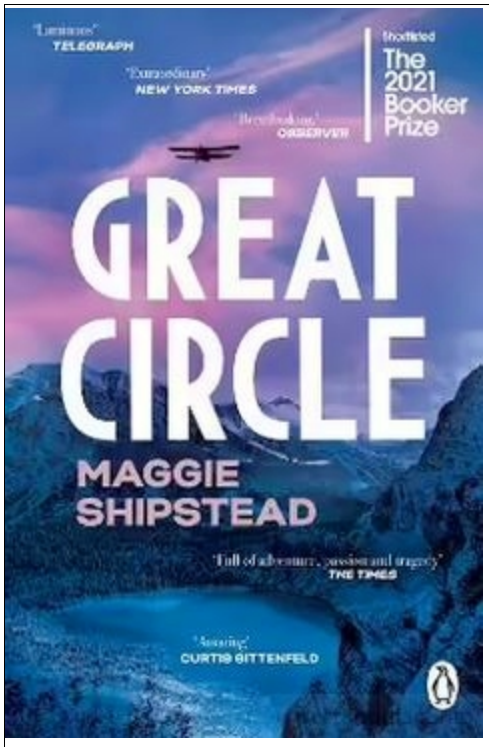


Damon Galgut: THE PROMISE (Chatto & Windus; hc; 1st edn; 2021) (finished 8 October 2021)

Well written, at times reaching a sort of Dickensian lyricism — and innovative, skipping merrily between viewpoints, within a paragraph, and (as someone has said) even within a sentence. But the authorial presence remains ever present too, always inserting another viewpoint — and unfortunately, the characteristic insertion here is the sneer. For example, this is a minor character, old Dominie Alwyn Simmers, a Dutch Reformed minister, who is losing his faith:

'Much about him has a crumpled look, for his sister Laetitia, who tends to him at home, is not a dab hand with an iron. And the skin on his hands and neck and face, all that's visible of him, is loose and lined, and you really wouldn't want to see the rest, under his clothes.'

Later we hear more of the Dominie, who changes his faith into a kind of Pentecostalism, induces one of the main characters, Manie, to leave him land and money for a new church on the family land, and it is revealed (in an aside) has had a brief incestuous relationship with his sister. This minor plot strand in the main story — about generations of a family in South Africa as it survives the Voerster and then the Mandela years — is typical. Galgut dislikes all his characters, without exception, and most are venal, stupid, racist, and worse, while the few who have somewhat more acceptable reasons for living are failures, lonely, unloved. Likewise the country and the people are shown to have really no redeeming features, or even any beauty. Hard to understand why the author continues to live there, among these unpleasant characters, and write novel after novel, instead of escaping, like Coetzee.

So, the opposite of a noble failure: a deliberately nasty one, from an author who can really write.

Short list.

****

Sunjeev Sahota: CHINA ROOM (Harvill Secker; 2021; hc; 1st edn) (finished 20 October 2021)

Good novel about India in two time periods: the fight for independence years and recent decades, though this is very focused on a single family with the world outside the family just sketched in. In the older story — the bulk of the book — the grandmother of the present-day narrator is a young girl, in a traditional matriarchal farming family with three sons and three wives, all much under the matriarchal thumb. Mehar is the wife of the eldest son, as we — and she — eventually discover, but she finds her sexual identity with the youngest son, Suraj. The story follows her daily life in beautiful detail and we can really see and feel this almost unknown locale. Her plan to run away with Suraj almost inevitably is thwarted, Suraj is sent away, and she falls into the childbearing prison of traditional life. In 1999, the narrator, descendant of Mehar and Suraj, getting away from addiction and study in England, travels to the family property in India to isolate himself and reclaim his life, and lives in near isolation in the room his grandmother spent much of her life in, the eponymous China Room. Said to be based in part of the author's own family history. The main characters are all well drawn, and we know enough about the supports to make the whole story work well. The characters' defects reveal themselves, horrifying us enough, without the author's constant intervention, as in Galgut's *The Promise*.

This didn't make the short list, but might well have.

****

Francis Spufford: LIGHT PERPETUAL (Faber; hc; 2021; 3rd edn UK) (finished October 2021)

Follows five children from childhood in 1944 to old age. Inspired by the World War II bomb blast that killed what could have been these characters, the site of which Spufford passes daily on his way to

work. So we get the bomb blast at length at the beginning and then a couple of words at the end — but all this is really unnecessary — it's just a novel following imagined characters through their lives, dipping in with a chapter for each at somewhat irregular intervals, and stands or falls on our interest in these.

These are a diverse set, and Spufford is better at some than others, probably as he is closer to their circumstances. Early on, there's a *tour-de-force* scene following Ken as he battles his schizophrenia, good but goes on too long. In later life, Ken manages to fall in with a sympathetic religious woman and there's another brilliant scene centring on a family party, but before this there's another scene which goes on too long, as Ken's partner's religious mentor delivers a what seems-to-be-never-ending hot-gospel sermon. Alec is perhaps the least successful (or interesting) character — starts off as a typesetter, has to change careers when this becomes computerised, changes partners, through Open Uni becomes a primary teacher and then school head, retires. Jo's life as a rock star hanger on and then teacher takes us to a rather clichéd California before returning to England. And the story of her twin Val who hangs out for years with a super-violent bovver boy falls into cliché when he kills an Indian student and is imprisoned, with his violence 'explained' as due to his repressed homosexuality. Alec is also a somewhat clichéd go-getting 'businessman' who has his bankruptcies and successes, but gets what he 'deserves' when he finishes up alone in a retirement home.

There is lots of good work here, but also a bit too much which is predictable, and also rather 'ordinary' — I didn't feel surprised or excited most of the time.

Nevertheless, mostly very readable and better than the Lockwood which, unlike this novel, made the short list.

****

Anuk Arudpragasam: A PASSAGE NORTH (Granta; 2021; hc; 1st edn) (finished October 2021)

Set largely in Sri Lanka, with flashbacks to India, this is told entirely through the viewpoint of the lead character, the Tamil Krishan, mostly in extremely long Jamesian sentences, very well handled, so we are rarely in any danger of losing the sense. It focuses on Krishan's relationships with three main other characters, his grandmother, his lover Anjum, and his grandmother's former caregiver, Rani, who dies in somewhat mysterious circumstances and whose funeral forms the conclusion of the novel. Each of these characters is explored in great and sympathetic detail, with others (such as Krishan's mother) hardly appearing, often not named. All this works very well, and we are given a very great understanding of how each of these interacted with Krishan and what life was like in this narrow focus, but almost no understanding of life outside — so, for instance, we never meet or hear the names of Krishan's friends with whom he spends time, smokes pot with, while Anjum is away working. Nor do we know almost anything about what he or anyone does for a living, but we understand it's a very comfortable middle-class existence, quite unlike much of the rest of Sri Lanka.

The exception to this is allusions to the political situation in the country, particularly the fate of the Tamil population, with a few details about the horrific mass exterminations that were lived through, but almost as asides to Krishan's self-preoccupation, though relatives and friends are among those who died. This is obviously a deliberate strategy, as if the horrors were too much to be described directly, but I'm not sure it works. The novel therefore falls into two parts, with the first two-thirds almost entirely about grandmother and Anjum, with the Tamil extermination very much in the background — even though Anjum is an activist working against the Hindi domination. In the last section, when Krishan undertakes his journey north to attend Rani's funeral, the Tamil disaster is more to the fore — but always at a considerable remove, and admittedly the violence is now largely in the past (we're told). Very good and very effective in parts, but overall can't be counted as a unified success.

Short list.

****

Richard Powers: BEWILDERMENT (Hutchinson Heinemann; 2021; 5th edn; hc) (finished 3 November 2021)

A very fine and moving novel. Full of botanical, ecological, astrophysical, and other science — more than most sf books — and Powers acknowledges this: the main character, Theo Byrne, has 2000 sf novels scattered around his house, and there are several mentions of *Astounding Stories*, Stapledon's *Star Maker*, and Keyes's *Flowers for Algernon*, the latter of which provides the plot arc. In this case, it's Theo's troubled nine-year-old son, Robin, whose abilities are first enhanced by a revolutionary (though almost credible) brain treatment, and

when the backward-looking Trumpian government forces the treatments to stop, finds his abilities waning. The ability allows Robin to not just recognise and understand but to feel he is one with the infinite variety of living things we are constantly surrounded by, and to deeply understand the rate at which humanity is more quickly than ever destroying the planet and its inhabitants. The end is the same as Algernon's, or another possible source not mentioned, that of Disch's *Camp Concentration*.

This is a timely, deeply felt, and salutary warning to us all — and for that reason will be largely ignored, in favour of those stories surrounding us everywhere, in sf too, where adversity and disaster can be overcome by the superhero, or the world-saving invention in the nick of time. As Adam Roberts points out in a recent post about the eucatastrophe, such stories may leave us with a positive feeling, but bear little relation to reality, where the struggle to avert disaster is often long, hard, and often unsuccessful. Prayers won't save us, and nor will our current Prime Minister.

A great book.

Short list.

*****

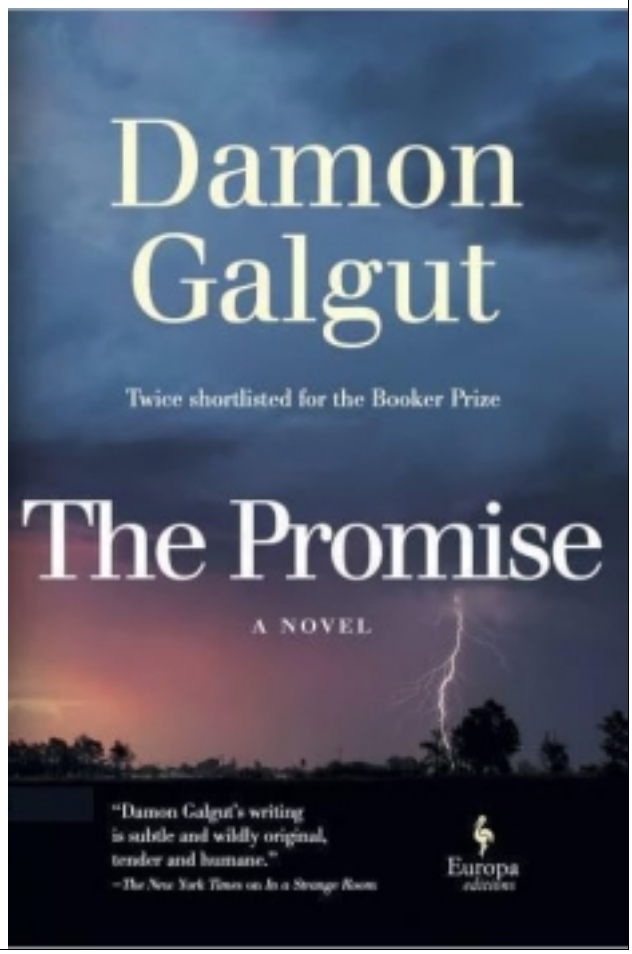
Karen Jennings: AN ISLAND (Holland House; 2019; pb) (finished 9 November 2021)

This is the least interesting of all the long and short list. A sort of parable about an old lighthouse keeper set in an imaginary island in a bay near a city of an unnamed country in something like South Africa, but with a Dictator more like Idi Amin. Samuel values his own society, though he barely scrapes out a subsistence, relying on a few chooks and the weekly supply boat. A man is washed up on the island, just alive, and as Samuel deals with his unwelcome presence, he remembers his past life, as a sort of activist, a prisoner, a sort of outcast once he's released after many years. He hasn't been a killer, but eventually (on the last page or two) he kills the island interloper, for reasons that remain obscure, even to him.

The Booker Prize: The winner!

The Booker winner was announced on Wednesday, 3 November 2021.

Damon Galgut's ***The Promise***, not at all unexpected by the bookies, or for that matter by me, as it was the most conventional of the top three novels (and favourite, according to the bookies). I read in the last few months an interview somewhere (the *Guardian*?) with the executive officer for the Bookers for the last quite-a-few years. She described the usual judging process, which involves the judges reading the six books that make the shortlist three times before they select a winner: once when they read the books to go into the long list, once when they read the long list to select the short list, and once more when they select the winner from the short list. This, she explained, was the reason why mysteries didn't do well. Unstated, but obviously implied, was her view that mysteries (and, I'd suggest, other genre fiction) were deficient because one was mainly reading for plot, and once one knew how it came out, there was little interest in a re-read. This of course severely undervalues novels of all sorts that may include a mystery, or action, or adventure, or world building, or ... the list might go on ... but which still may include other elements of the good novel, which make a re-reading another enjoyable experience. It doesn't even explain the perennial interest in Agatha Christie in



version after version on TV and film, where anybody who's read the books (which I find myself totally unable to do) knows just what happens.

Of the two novels that I thought were better than *The Promise*, I could see myself re-reading ***Great Circle*** some time after I'd forgotten the detail, for the great prose, for the adventure in multiple locales, for the surprises and the bit of a mystery; and also ***Bewilderment***, really an sf novel, for the magnificent zoology, botany, astrophysics et al., beautifully incorporated into the story, at just about the right length, and for the astute and acerbic comments on current (or near future) American society ... and for its heart.

But I couldn't see myself ever re-reading *The Promise* — no heart and in the end too smart-arse — nor any of the other Booker contenders this year, quite a number of which I had to force myself to finish.

50 years of reading

So this led me to reflect on re-reading and to consider what books, and what sorts of books, I've re-read over the last 50 years or so. It seems to be a motley collection.

The longest sequence I've re-read (twice, with decades intervening) is Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time* (12 volumes). Not sure why; the prose is good. Once may have been to do with the TV adaptation. Each time I'd forgotten how things turn out, and I've forgotten it (partly) again now since it must be 20 years or more since the last time. It led me to read all Powell's other novels, his autobiography, plays, some notebooks — but not yet the latest biography. It's on the list, though.

Other re-reads from general literature include early comic novels of Kingsley Amis — but not his Booker winner; some novels, but more non-fiction, of Robert Graves — but not his two-novel Claudius sequence, though I have fond memories of it; the crime novels of Donald Westlake, writing as Richard Stark; lots of Shakespeare, though this was sometimes but not always usually because we were putting on a reading or production; Chekhov stories; Lawrence Block crime novels; Hal Dresner's *The Man Who Wrote Dirty Books* (when I was 20 I thought this was a comic masterpiece — Dresner was a friend in the pulp years of Westlake and Block and I don't know anything else he wrote — I once lent it to John Bangsund, who was a bit non-committal when he returned it, sometime in the 60s); Evelyn Waugh's comic novels; Raymond Chandler; Jane Austen; J. B. Priestley — a couple of novels.

In sf, a few authors whom I've come back to are Fritz Leiber, Heinlein, Wyndham, Vance, de Camp, Pohl. And Disch.

All the above was for pleasure, and excludes re-reading when I've been writing something about an author, such as Graham Joyce or Adam Roberts, both of whom have written books I love.

I can't see much coherence in any of this — though comedy rears its head more often than anything else perhaps. (Now take a look to my list of the 100-plus Books that have Influenced My Life.)

Almost the only regular thing I've been doing, apart from reading a lot, is continuing once a week with *Contemporary Visions* (*CV*) on 3MBS, supplied with disks from composers and Readings, including occasional excursions there when lockdowns permitted. Today I just picked up the latest *Gramophone* magazine (September's) from my local newsagent, who's closing down this month, and a scout around other newsagents still going revealed only one who stocked or would get *Gramophone* for me. So I subscribed again, but might miss a few issues. The September issue features reviews of three disks I've already played in whole or part on *CV* — works by Coll, Fagerlund, Muhly, and Glass — so Readings is helping me keep up with the latest, part of my self-imposed reason for doing a contemporary classical show. Composers and musicians are always happy to be heard there, but everything nowadays seems to revolve around Youtube and Spotify etc, and fewer and fewer, I imagine, are tuning in to traditional radio.

— **Tony Thomas**, November, December 2021

Jennifer Bryce and Tony Thomas

Books that shaped our lives

Jennifer Bryce

100 books — actually 75 — that shaped my life

I've noticed that my science fiction friends are keen on making lists: the 20 best films of the year, or my 10 favourite operas. I don't see much point in a list unless you discuss why you've selected particular items. English author Christopher Priest was inspired by a BBC program, *100 Novels that Shaped Our World*: https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/100-novels on his blog, to compile a list of 100 books that have shaped his life: https://christopher-priest.co.uk/a-hundred-books

Of these he says, 'The uniqueness lies only in the totality, the existence of one title thought of as special in the context of all the others of similar specialness, memorable in a life full of fairly disorganized and impulsive reading ... I do not claim world-shaping impact on me from these titles, nor are all of them novels, but they form part of the silent context from which one views the world and reacts to it.'

I decided to have a go. What are the books that have shaped my life? I was daunted by the thought of 100 books, and in the end I came up with only 75 titles. Past 75, I was starting to list books I'd enjoyed, whereas for each of the 75 books I've listed I believe I can describe some way I was affected or changed. Not surprisingly, a lot of books from childhood fall into this category — some are very simple, opening up an awareness, for example, of history.

Chris and I had eleven books in common. Listed in alphabetical order by author, they are:

1 Paul Brickhill: *The Dam Busters*
2 Albert Camus: *The Outsider*
3 Lewis Carroll: *Alice in Wonderland*
4 James Joyce: *Dubliners*

5 George Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
6 Beatrix Potter: *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* [all of Beatrix Potter for me]
7 Oliver Sacks: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*
8 William Shakespeare: *Collected Sonnets* [particular sonnets in my case]
9 William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*
10 Nevil Shute: *On the Beach*
11 H. G. Wells: *The Time Machine*

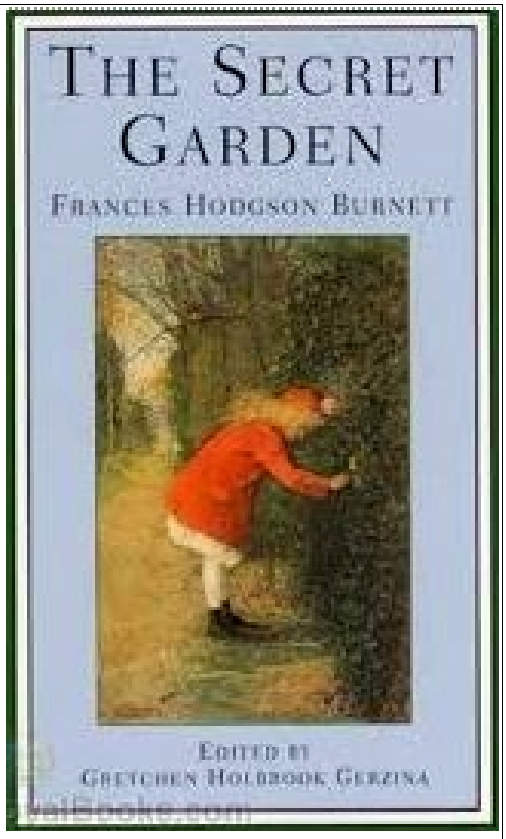
I was intrigued that Chris Priest chose ***The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*** as his special **Beatrix Potter** book. It's the story where, up above the ceiling, rats make a kitten into a roly-poly pudding. I loved all of the Beatrix Potter books and especially remember that the Flopsy Bunnies became 'soporific' when they nestled amongst the cabbages — it became a word in my three-year-old vocabulary.

Here are my books, in alphabetical order by author:

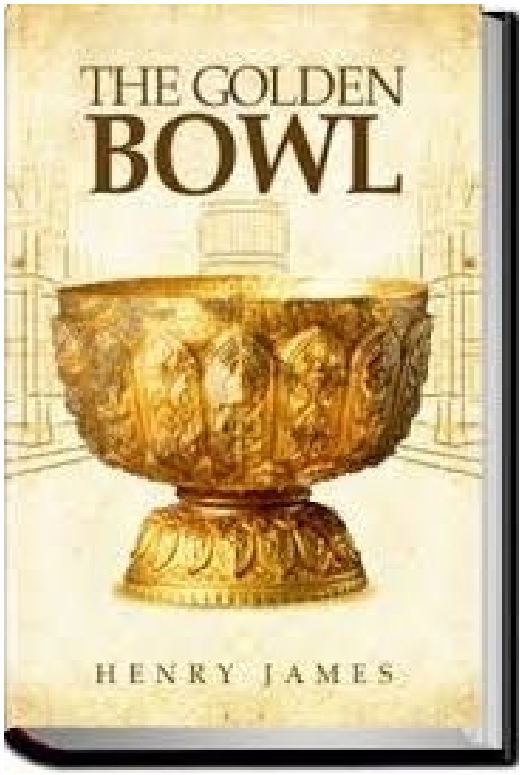
12 Kate Atkinson: *A God in Ruins*
13 Jane Austen: *Emma*
14 Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*
15 Julian Barnes: *The Noise of Time*
16 Julian Barnes: *The Sense of an Ending*
17 Behrouz Boochani: *No Friend but the Mountains*
18 Vera Brittain: *Testament of Youth* [*of Friendship* and *of Experience*]
19 Emily Brontë: *Wuthering Heights*
20 Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*
21 Mary Grant Bruce: *Peter and Co* [and all of the Billabong books]
22 Frances Hodgson Burnett: *The Secret Garden*
23 Truman Capote: *In Cold Blood*
24 Lewis Carroll: *Through the Looking Glass*
25 Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*
26 Antonio Damasio: *Descartes' Error*
27 Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*
28 T. S. Eliot: *The Wasteland*
29 F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*
30 Richard Flanagan: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*
31 Betty Friedan: *The Feminine Mystique*

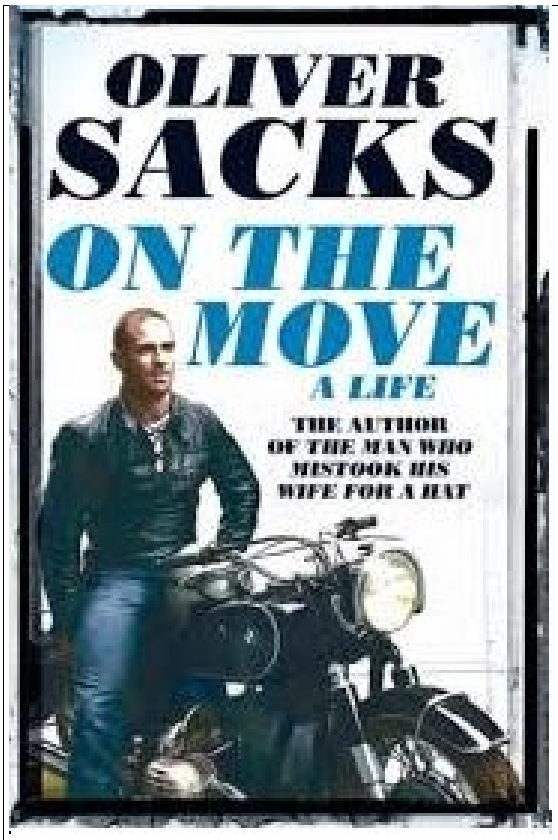
The Secret Garden was first book I read completely by myself: I can still hear the wind 'wuthering' on the moors.

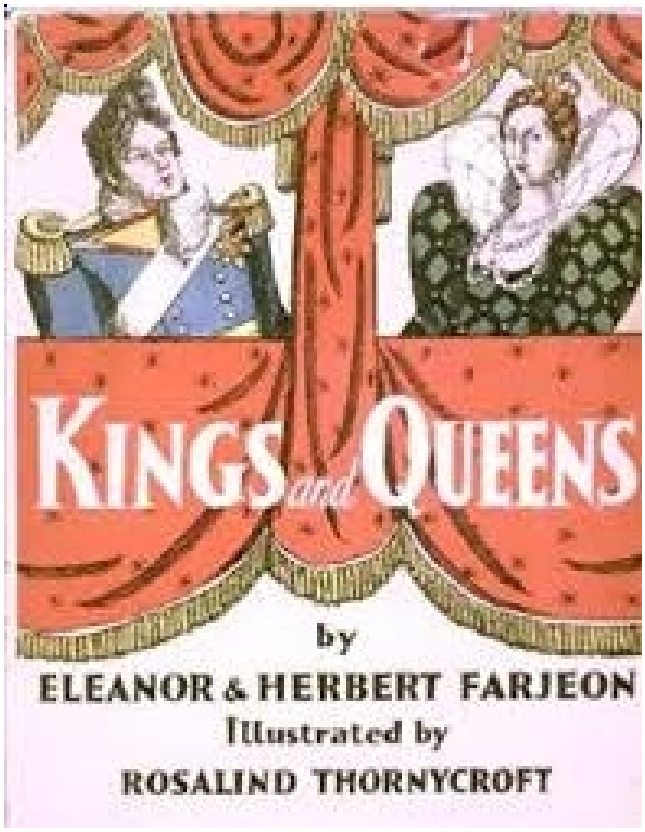
32 Anna Funder: *All That I Am*
33 M. Gandhi: *My Experiments with Truth*



34 Howard Gardner: *Frames of Mind*
35 Helen Garner: *Monkey Grip*
36 Kenneth Grahame: *The Wind in the Willows*
37 Germaine Greer: *The Female Eunuch*
38 Germaine Greer: *Daddy We Hardly Knew You*
39 The Brothers Grimm: *Grimm's Fairy Tales*
40 Ernest Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea*
41 Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*
42 Henry James: *The Princess Casamassima*
43 Henry James: *The Golden Bowl*



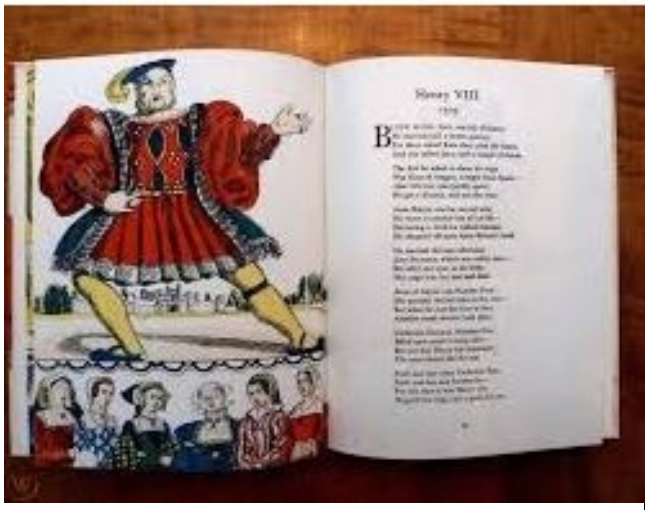




44 Henry James: *The Turn of the Screw*
45 Henry James: *The Wings of the Dove*
46 George Johnston: *My Brother Jack*
47 James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
48 Hannah Kent: *The Good People*
49 D. H. Lawrence: *The Rainbow*
50 D. H. Lawrence: *Women in Love*
51 Cormac McCarthy: *The Road*
52 Ian McEwan: *Saturday*
53 Ian McEwan: *Nutshell*
54 Katherine Mansfield: *Collected Stories*
55 Somerset Maugham: *The Complete Short Stories*
56 A. A. Milne: *The House at Pooh Corner* and *Winnie the Pooh*
57 Drusilla Modjeska: *Stravinsky's Lunch*
58 Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*
59 George Orwell: *Animal Farm*
60 Edward Osmond: *A Valley Grows Up*
61 Arthur Ransome: *Old Peter's Russian Tales*

I expect that many readers won't have come across ***A Valley Grows Up*** by **Edward Osmond**. It was given to me when I was about eight years old. It describes the changes in a fictitious valley, both geological and social, from ancient times to the twentieth century. Beautifully illustrated, this book made me think about what particular places were like, say, 100 years ago and how they had changed over time.

62 Adam Roberts: *The Black Prince*
63 Oliver Sacks: *Awakenings*



64 Oliver Sacks: *On the Move*
65 J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye*
66 Siegfried Sassoon: *Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*
67 William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*
68 Rabindranath Tagore: *Gitanjali*
69 Leo Tolstoy: *Anna Karenina*
70 *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb*
71 Edith Wharton: *The House of Mirth*
72 Patrick White: *Voss*
73 Eric Williams: *The Wooden Horse*
74 Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse*
75 Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

I come to the end of my list of 75, only to find that

by technical error one of the most influential books of my childhood has 'dropped off'. It is a book of poems about the ***Kings and Queens of England***, given to me when I was seven. The poems are factually accurate: Henry VIII was 'Bluff king Hal was full of beans/He married half a dozen queens ...' At that impressionable age I remembered a lot of the poems off pat, and even today, when I want to remember when a particular king or queen ruled, I mentally refer to those poems. The book also gave me a time reference — What year was Guy Fawkes? When were the Wars of the Roses? So, I really had 76 books.

Tony Thomas

100+ authors and books that changed my life (and when)

This list emerged after reading about Christopher Priest's 100 best books (on his blog), from my own reading lists and memories of the years before I created my own best books lists, along with the decades of my life in which I first read them, to come up with the only sort of autobiography I'm ever likely to want to produce.

One of the things that has apparently confused you is my title, '100 books that influenced my life', when I should perhaps more accurately have said, '100 books that influenced my reading life'. I don't know whether the two things are so very different. So much of my life has been spent reading, and what I read has been so much influenced by the books I had already read, that in terms of elapsed time, a large chunk of 'life' has been in fact about books. Of course there were 'turning points' that were about other things — marriage, children, work — but then I reflect that a lot of these involved among other things sharing books with wife and partners and children.

And of course there have been turning points in life that came directly from books and reading: discovering sf as a primary school child in such things as *Boys Annuals* and magazines, then going on to Poe, Wells, and Wyndham, led on to a life which has substantially revolved around sf. And reading all kinds of literature and poetry led to a decade working on *Scripsi* magazine, and doing a bit of editing.

Reading Shakespeare from an early age led on to semi-professional acting, mainly in Shakespeare, and the Melbourne Shakespeare Society. And music books, especially Andrew Ford's, as well of course as music, led on to presenting *Contemporary Visions* at 3MBS for 20 years.

The main source of 100 'best books' was mainly the record of books read, kept since 1968 when I was 21, supplemented by the memory of books read earlier than this. And except for the last few years, there has been no ranking of these books, or any record of how good I found them. So my list is in random order, as I came across authors and books in this list, and then thought about other books I had read by this author, and put down the first or most significant book as a 'favourite'.

The list also represents, importantly, authors, since my practice from an early age has been to buy and read everything I could find by authors I liked — at least till I got sick of them — so the list of 140 or so books includes upwards of 100 authors whose more-or-less complete works I have collected over the years, and read, to a greater or lesser extent.

There are probably another 100 entries that didn't quite make the list. The latest example of this comes from this year's Bookers, where I thought Maggie Shipstead's *Great Circle* was very good and could well have won. So I bought her earlier two novels, have read *Seating Arrangements*, and thought this very good also. But all this was too late to make the list of books I sent you earlier in the year. As I recall, Chris Priest's 'bests' list was in alphabetical order, so in a way equally random.

Because I didn't rank as I went along, there is no way now I could attempt to rank favourites in order. I rely on memories of a scene, or style, or character, or suchlike, for the book to make the list. For *The Catcher in the Rye*, for example, what struck me then (as I recall, not having looked at the book for 60 or so years) was the voice Salinger captured — the adolescent boy who spoke to another adolescent in a voice instantly recognisable, and likable enough, despite his obvious obsessions. Perhaps these also related to my obsessions of the time. I read some more Salinger way back then — *Franny and Zooey*, quite different, but I liked this too — then couldn't

find any more Salinger (but he went quiet, I think, anyway).

But here's mine, for better or worse. I couldn't keep to 100. as you might have expected.

Books: one (or two or three) books, or series, for each author – often representing many others by that author.

Changed my life: a scene, a character, a feeling, an approach, a style, a world, stays with me still.

Years of influence: related to the first book mentioned, or occasionally earlier when there were other 'less' significant books/stories by the same author which I'd read. (Shown in brackets)

–20 = earlier than age 20

- J. D. Salinger: *The Catcher in the Rye* (–20)
- Iris Murdoch: *Under the Net* (20s)
- Henry Fielding: *Tom Jones* (20s)
- Jonathan Swift: *Gulliver's Travels* (–20))
- Jane Austen: *Pride and Prejudice* (30s)
- Maurice Sendak: *In the Night Kitchen* (20s)
- Peter Dickinson: *Tulku* (30s)
- Sebastian Barry: *Days Without End* (60s)
- Fiona Mozley: *Elmet* (60s)
- Fritz Leiber: Fafhrd and Grey Mouser books (–20)
- L. Sprague de Camp (and Fletcher Pratt): *The Incompleat Enchanter* (–20)
- Tom Disch: *Camp Concentration* + *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of* (20s)
- Philip K. Dick: *The Man in the High Castle* (–20)
- Hal Clement: *Mission of Gravity* (–20)
- James Blish: *A Case of Conscience* (–20)
- Deborah Levy: *Things I Don't Want to Know* (70s)
- Primo Levi: *The Periodic Table* (40s)
- Ian McEwan: *The Cement Garden* (30s)
- Tom McCarthy: *C* (60s)
- Franz Kafka: *The Trial* (–20)
- Anthony Powell: *A Dance to the Music of Time* (30s)
- Simon Mawer: *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (60s)
- Thomas Harris: *The Silence of the Lambs* (40s)
- Julian Rathbone: *Joseph* (40s)
- Michael Connelly: Bosch novels (60s)
- Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness* + Earthsea novels (20s)
- Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas (eds): *Adventures in Time and Space* (–20)
- Robert A. Heinlein: *Stranger in a Strange Land* (–20)
- Adam Roberts: *Gradisil* (60s)
- Matthew Hughes: *Black Brillion* (60s)
- Kate Wilhelm: *The Infinity Box* + *Death Qualified* (20s)
- Brian W. Aldiss: *Hothouse* + *The Malacia Tapestry* (–20)
- Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (–20)
- Christopher Priest: *The Separation* (50s)
- Ray Bradbury: *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (–20)
- Jack Vance: *The Dragon Masters* + *The Dying Earth* (–20)
- Kim Stanley Robinson: *Red Mars* (60s)
- Frederik Pohl (and Cyril Kornbluth): *The Space Merchants* + *Man Plus* (–20)
- Jo Walton: *Farthing* + *Among Others* (50s)
- Joanna Russ: *The Adventures of Alyx* (20s)
- Margaret Atwood: *The Edible Woman* (30s)
- Karen Joy Fowler: *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (60s)
- Robert Aickman: *Cold Hand in Mine* (20s)
- Lord Dunsany: *My Talks with Dean Spanley* (60s)
- Graham Joyce: *The Tooth Fairy* (50s)
- A. C. Bradley: *Shakespearean Tragedy* (–20)
- Jonathan Kellerman: *When the Bough Breaks* (30s)
- John Grisham: *The Firm* (40s)
- Donald E. Westlake (Richard Stark): *Blank Shot* + *Point Blank* (*The Hunter*) (20s)
- Bill James: *You'd Better Believe It* (40s)
- Lee Child: *Killing Floor* (50s)
- Jim Thompson: *The Grifters* (40s)
- Alastair Maclean: *The Guns of Navarone* (–20)
- John Buchan: *The 39 Steps* (–20)
- H. Rider Haggard: *She* (–20)
- Edgar Rice Burroughs: *Tarzan of the Apes* + *A Princess of Mars* (–20)
- A. E. Coppard: *Dusky Ruth and Other Stories* (30s)
- Kenneth Grahame: *The Wind in the Willows* (–20)
- A. Conan Doyle: *A Study in Scarlet* (–20)
- Clive James: *The Metropolitan Critic* (20s)
- Edmund Wilson: *The Triple Thinkers* + *I Thought of Daisy* (20s)
- William Shakespeare: *The Tempest* + *King Lear* + *Henry IV Part 1* (–20)
- Anton Chekhov: *The Oxford Chekhov* (40s)
- Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist* (–20)
- Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita* (20s)
- Philip Roth: *The Plot Against America* (60s)
- William Trevor: *Collected Stories* (60s)
- Rudy Rucker: *Postsingular* (40s)
- Kingsley Amis: *Lucky Jim* + *The Alteration* (–20)
- J. B. Priestley: *Bright Day* + *Literature and Western Man* (–20)
- Emile Zola: *Drunkard* (20s)
- Joseph Furphy: *Such Is Life* (30s)

- John Le Carré: *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (–20)
- Garry Disher: Wyatt novels (40s)
- Amy Witting: *I for Isobel* (30s)
- Julian Barnes: *Before She Met Me* (30s)
- Jane Gardam: *Bilgewater* (20s)
- Thomas Pynchon: *V* (–20)
- John Barth: *The Sot-Weed Factor* (–20)
- Samuel Johnson: *Preface to Shakespeare* (30s)
- Aldous Huxley: *Music at Night* + books of essays (20s)
- Patrick White: *The Solid Mandala* (–20)
- Robert Graves: Claudius novels + *Goodbye to All That* + poems (–20)
- Gore Vidal: *Matters of Fact and Fiction* + *Myra Breckenridge* (20s)
- W. H. Auden: *The Dyer's Hand* + poems (30s)
- A. D. Hope: *The Cave and the Spring* + poems (30s)
- C. S. Lewis: *Perelandra* (–20)
- Evelyn Waugh: *Scoop* (20s)
- Richard Flanagan: *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (60s)
- Bertrand Russell: *Why I Am Not a Christian* (–20)
- John Gribbin: *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat* (30s)
- Richard Dawkins: *The God Delusion* (40s)
- Daniel Dennett: *Consciousness Explained* (40s)
- Sam Harris: *The Moral Landscape* (60s)
- A. C. Grayling: *Ideas That Matter* (60s)
- Frank Kermode: *The Age of Shakespeare* + *Not Entitled* (20s)
- Tim Flannery: *The Weather Makers* (50s)
- Nicholson Baker: *The Size of Thoughts* (40s)
- George Orwell: *1984* + *Collected Essays* (–20)
- John Wyndham: *The Day of the Triffids* + *The Chrysalids* (–20)
- H. G. Wells: *The Time Machine* + *War of the Worlds* + *Short Stories* (–20)
- Frank Moorhouse: *The Americans, Baby* + *Forty-Seventeen* (–20)
- J. R. R. Tolkien: *The Lord of the Rings* (–20)
- Thomas Burnett Swann: *The Day of the Minotaur* (–20)
- Peter S. Beagle: *The Last Unicorn* (20s)
- Ian Fleming: James Bond books (–20)
- William Golding: *Lord of the Flies* (–20)
- Joseph Heller: *Catch-22* (–20)
- Edgar Allen Poe: *Short Stories* (–20)
- K. J. Parker: *Mightier Than the Sword* (70s)
- Raymond Chandler: *The Big Sleep* (20s)
- Lewis Carroll: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (–20)
- Pauline Kael: *I Lost It at the Movies* (30s)
- Audrey Schulman: *Theory of Bastards* (70s)
- Sally Rooney: *Normal People* (70s)
- Patricia Highsmith: *The Talented Mr Ripley* (40s)
- Sarban: *The Sound of His Horn* (20s)
- Keith Roberts: *Pavane* (20s)
- David Crystal: *Linguistics* (20s)
- Philip Jose Farmer: *The Image of the Beast* (20s)
- William Empson: *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (30s)
- David Lodge: *Changing Places* (30s)
- Anthony Burgess: *A Clockwork Orange* (–20)
- Ken Macleod: *The Execution Channel* (50s)
- Clive Hamilton: *Requiem for a Species* (60s)
- Naomi Oreskes (and Erik M. Conway): *Merchants of Doubt* (60s)
- James Shapiro: *Contested Will* (60s)
- Larry McMurtry: *Lonesome Dove* (60s)
- Joe R. Lansdale: *The Bottoms* + Hap & Leonard series (60s)
- Hal Dresner: *The Man Who Wrote Dirty Books* (20s)
- Andrew Ford: *Composer to Composer* (40s)
- J. G. Ballard: *Vermilion Sands* + *The Crystal World* (–20)
- John D. MacDonald: *A Deadly Shade of Gold* (20s)
- Kate Atkinson: *Case Histories* (60s)
- Colin Wilson: *The Outsider* (–20)
- Thorne Smith: *The Night Life of the Gods* (–20)
- Walter M. Miller: *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (–20)
- George MacDonald Fraser: *Flashman* (20s)
- Johann Wyss: *The Swiss Family Robinson* (–20)
- T. S. Eliot: *Selected Poems* (–20)
- E. B. White: *The Sword in the Stone* (20s)

— **Tony Thomas**, 2021

Guest editorials

Feature letter: Gillian Polack: Authors and reviewers

GILLIAN POLACK
Chifley ACT 2606

Thank you for the new *SF Commentary*s. I hope this finds you well, or at least better than me, given my curious birthday month. This letter is short because I'm not operating on all fingers. I spent much of last week undergoing medical tests to find out what's wrong with my sore finger and have still more ahead. They're trying to rule out a bone infection. This limits my email to the thank you and to my new dream and to my new project.

My new dream is for Colin Steele to notice my fiction. I've never been included in one of his reviews of the scene. Or even, to be honest, one of his reviews. I've assumed that my writing is simply not good enough, but the rest of my history suggests otherwise so ... I shall continue to dream. While I dream, the final edits of my next novel will happen. This week or next, in fact. I used my historianness to build an alternate Earth and I've finally written a Gillianish superhero origin story. It'll be published in the US as soon as the pandemic permits.

My new project is another PhD. I'm looking at cultural transmission in fantasy novels and I'm having so much fun with it. Let me know when you need more articles and I'll write you up something about it. Or watch for me online. The advantage of being disabled during a pandemic is that some conventions are giving me space I wouldn't otherwise find.

— **Gillian Polack**, 1 June 2021

Colin Steele: Science fiction and fantasy small press book reviewing in Australia

The following guest editorial by Colin Steele was prompted by the above letter of comment from Gillian Polack, which I sent straight to Colin. Gillian and Colin were subsequently in email correspondence about the small press issues and to ensure that Gillian's books in future will get to Colin and *SF Commentary*.

The letter from Gillian Polack, and perusing the recent 2020 Aurealis Awards Winners list, reminded me how few of the listed small press titles came for review for the *Canberra Times* and *SF Commentary* other than Allen & Unwin publications. Indeed I was not even aware of a number of the titles. That then raises the issue of how do small press titles get publicised/sold to a wider public other than those who are on the small press publisher email list or social media feeds?

Having said that, it is still unlikely that many of the titles will get covered in the national press because of the significant reduction in newspaper and magazine book pages and a reluctance for literary editors to include science fiction and fantasy titles despite the genres being the most commercial after crime fiction.

Bruce Gillespie, in a comment dated 26 November 2001 in *SF Commentary* 78, wrote that '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'.

That was in a literary galaxy far far away, but the comment is still apposite. I used to have a Sunday small column in *The Canberra Times*, which allowed three small reviews every two or three weeks. Now what I do is bundle up a number of reviews into one composite, which appears every couple of months, but at least I do get to cover titles that never feature in the *Australian* or the *Sydney Morning Herald/Age*.

The Canberra Times also has the advantage of being part of the ACM network, which distributes reviews across 100 regional websites across Australia. It also has one of the best overall book pages in terms of size compared to the *Sydney Morning Herald/Age*, which seems to be suffering since the Channel 9/Fairfax merger and Covid lockdown. One of its reviewers told me this year that she had been told by management that they could not increase the book pages from more than two pages until they got more advertising. The same principle never seems to be applied to the sports pages, which often run into 8 to 10 pages.

The Australian used to have, every couple of months, SF reviews by Professor George Williams, but I haven't seen one by him for some time. James Bradley also used to review regularly for *The Australian*, particularly in the area of climate fiction. *The Saturday Paper* and the *Australian Book Review* occasionally have a book review that could be classified as science fiction or fantasy, but their genre selections seem to have to fall within a perceived 'literary framework' or within the favoured 'cli-fi' category. Many newspaper book reviews, if you can find them — they are usually hidden under Entertainment — are understandably behind paywalls.

It has been argued, however, that newspaper book reviews are less important than they used to be. Recent *Australia Talks* surveys have revealed that 70% of those under 35 obtained most of their information online. In terms of being informed on news and current photos, only 3% reported they got the news from the newspapers; 25% from TV; 13% from radio; 38% from the Internet; and 17% from Internet social media and podcast 2%. So 55% come from the Internet sources, which can be of varying quality, depending on the source material.

In terms of dissemination, social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, and Tik-Tok book promotions, are more relevant. One-minute Tik-Tok book promotions have been particularly successful in reaching female teenage readers of fantasy. This then plays into restricted social media groups/loops. And is this a problem for small press publishers?

On the other hand, it could be argued, as Kim Wilkins has implied in a 2017 article in *Media International Australia*, '"A crowd at your back": fantasy fandom and small press', that Australian fantasy fandom enthusiastically supports 'a thriving small press culture, enabling writers to work in specific ways, enriching and developing the individual craft and the genre as a whole'.

Wilkins provides interesting details of the Australian small presses, revealing that 75% of them have three or fewer staff, and cites case histories of some of the SF and fantasy authors and their interactions between small and mainstream commercial presses. It is interesting that one of the authors she quotes, Tansey Rayner Roberts, is referenced as self-published in the latest *Aurealis* list.

Wilkins reveals an understandable place for, and support of, the small press and the enthusiasm of fandom, but she does quote that 'distribution is the bugbear of the small press'. Does, however, restricted circulation to dedicated and small readerships prevent authors with a potentially wider public appeal, like Kaaron Warren, Gillian Polack, and Cat Sparks, being more widely known in the general book world and breaking through the literary glass ceiling?

— **Colin Steele**, July 2021

Bruce Gillespie's editorial bit:

Most years, rarely have I heard of most of the winners of the Aurealis and Ditmar Awards, except where books have been sent to Colin Steele for review, or if I happen to see publicity squibs on Facebook. I cannot buy 95 per cent of Australian SF/fantasy genre books in bookshops, and I do not read ebooks. If authors send me copies of their forthcoming publications, I do my best to read and review them, or at least mention them prominently. Apologies to authors, where I've failed in this intention.

Dr GILLIAN POLACK is an Australian writer and editor and won the 2020 A. Bertram Chandler Award. Her 2019 novel *The Year of the Fruit Cake* was given the 2020 Ditmar Award for best novel and was shortlisted for best SF novel in the Aurealis Awards. She wrote the first Australian Jewish fantasy novel (*The Wizardry of Jewish Women*). Her latest book is *The Green Children Help Out*.

Gillian Polack

FlyCon, the first international Internet science fiction convention

This talk about FlyCon was delivered at Futuricon, the 2020 European Science Fiction Convention in Croatia.

Various people called FlyCon 2009 the first Internet Science Fiction Convention. For me, it was the first international internet SF convention. There's not a lot on record about FlyCon. Eleven years is a very long time on the internet. I'll talk about the history first (from my peculiar perspective) and then I'll talk about FlyCon itself.

So where did FlyCon begin? It began with a moment.

Let's start with that dream moment.

Sherwood Smith commented that we needed an international online convention. Sharyn Lilley and I were chatting with her. We realised that my background meant we could do this thing.

Gillian Polack (from cover of *Poison and Light*).

My background? It began with Women's History Month 1999. Then there was Conflux's online events. Conflux is Canberra's SF convention. Our online material consisted of simplified versions of WHM, with the addition of voice. Stuart Herring did the work and I backed him.

Sherwood and Sharyn Lilley and I said, 'We can do this' and became conveners. We called on friends and colleagues. Pamela Lloyd created us a set of lovely logos: https://pameladlloyd.dreamwidth.org/tag/flycon+2009

Our web presence was set up with much volunteer work and offers of free resources. Our budget was vast and expansive and universal: $0. We used resources that were freely available or donated. Nyssa Harkness's *A Writer Goes On a Journey* site, http://sff.net/, and LiveJournal were the centres. LiveJournal was the noticeboard and dealer's room and overflow for program items. There was a spillover onto ABC's Arts page because Gary Kemble interviewed seven writers for the Articulate program.

To start things off, we sent out an explanation to get fans involved:

> FlyCon will be an online convention planned to have activities during the peak hours of every time zone. It will begin midnight, Friday 13th in March 2009, in Australia and roll with the sun. We are looking for panelists, authors and editors and agents to host discussions, podcasts and readings, volunteers, and for people to spread

> the word through the blogosphere. We will be having a couple of sites host forum and chat space, with everything co-ordinated through this Live Journal community with rss feeds, updates and eventual archiving. We will be running IRCs as well as bulletin boards, so that every time zone is covered. Panels are still open for volunteers (just check back through the most recent four posts) and we're open to suggestions. We're trying to overcome the tyranny of travel and cost — and reach as widely as possible.

When we were ready, we issued an invitation that used most of these words but began:

> You are cordially invited to attend the first Internet Science Fiction Convention ... and the best part is that you don't need to leave your 'comfy' chair in order to attend.

We dropped podcasts and readings. We needed money for them. In the end, we had asynchronous panels, using discussion boards, and we had a truckload of IRC/chat. A few hundred pages of this material was archived and I'll be referring to it.

Just before FlyCon began, Beat Ettlin, the chef for the Conflux banquet, made national news by wrestling a six-foot red kangaroo out of his son's bedroom: https://edition.cnn.com/2009/ WORLD/asiapcf/03/09/kangaroo.australia.wrestles/index.html

He was apparently wearing only underpants at the time. I was the designer of the Conflux banquets (Cookbook and Ditmar Fan Award 2010 — the award was for that year's banquet). I had to face Beat across a table a few days after the wrestling. SF at that moment seemed much less unlikely than the everyday. FlyCon no longer scared me.

This was just as well. Half the committee — including two of the conveners — came down with illness or had family problems. We all worked through it. I was one of the ones who took on extra work. Whenever things became too bad, I thought of Beat Ettlin and that kangaroo.

Let me give you one example of the schedule for one of the asynchronous panels. If I were doing it now, I'd include more time zones on the list. Every time zone listed gave participants permission to speak. Time zones said, 'You are supposed to be here.' For the first convention of its kind, this was important, and we didn't push it far enough. We didn't have enough staff to reach out past our own networks and the networks of our networks, either. The week after FlyCon finished, I had a flood of 'Why didn't I know about this?'

This panel had members from Australia, the UK, and the US. It covered four (maybe five) time zones.

> **Title:**
> Fantasy and History: Historians who write fantasy
> **Times:**
> NZ (Wellington) 11 a.m.
> AUST (Sydney) 9 a.m.
> UK (London) 10 p.m.
> US (Eastern) 6 p.m.
> US (Pacific) 3 p.m.

Where was 'here'? Online, it could be anywhere. Except that, of the three conveners, I was the one who handled the tech questions and linked most of the websites. Sharyn only lives five hours from me, so she and I had the same time zone and even the same internet problems. I think that 'here' then was my flat — except it wasn't as pretty in 2009.

Who was there? How many of us were there? We don't know. This was partly because most people

used nicknames and changed them whenever they wanted to. It was partly because of technical problems.

In terms of languages, we were willing to use French and Spanish in FlyCon (because these languages we could back up) but we had no idea how to make contact with sfnal people from these backgrounds, so everything was in English. It wasn't just an English-language convention; it was an anglophone one. Not even the whole anglophone world — just a few countries in many time zones. This disappointed all three co-conveners.

Many participants used nicks (nicknames). We don't know who they are, and we did not ask. This was because we wanted access for as many people as possible, and we didn't want the con larded with judgments and othering. I didn't get complaints back about judgments and othering, but that doesn't mean these things didn't happen. We've come a long way in our understanding of how to be inclusive since 2009, after all, and we've still got a long way to go. Most of these issues were not discussed in chats, or even at the bar-equivalent, which suggests to me that they were invisible rather than that there were no problems.

Because of these decisions, however, identity in chat was fluid and complex, so was subject matter. Chaz Brenchley summed it up for all of us when he typed: 'This chatting is not so easy to control, sometimes.'

One of the reasons things got a bit messy was because we had some issues with introductions. Oh, but they were such a messy thing, those introductions. We didn't have a con culture for online conventions — world sfdom is only beginning to develop one now, so there was only the hint of one in 2009. We didn't have access to SMOFs to give us wise advice, because the biggest impetus came from my part of Australia and there were no SMOFs on hand in Canberra and certainly none in Culcairn. For everyone who laughs at Secret Masters of Fandom and their chat and their conventions — don't. Without them, Sherwood and Sharyn and I and our team had to do everything from scratch. Some aspects of FlyCon went a bit peculiar ... because of this. Introductions is the simplest to demonstrate.

Let me begin with an example, taken from Chaz Brenchley's author chat:

> **PaulaL:** Can you give hints about your pseudonyms?
> **GillianP**: And do you want a formal introduction?
> **Chaz:** Hee. Okay, let me be transparent: I'm in mid-sequence on a Chinese fantasy series. Vol. One just out now in the States, vol. two finished and delivered, vol. three just a wisp in my head.
> **PaulaL:** Do a nick change to each pseudonym ....
> **GillianP:** Or are you perfectly happy to trail mystery behind you for the cats to chase?

For the next ten minutes, audience members popped up to ask about the missing introduction.

Moderators could only introduce if they had a bio or could research someone. We were really short of standard pieces we could recycle because there was a limit as to how often we could ask participants to put their bios up in the right place, and a limit to the number of times we could ask moderators to make sure they gave introductions. There was so much training and talking through things with every single volunteer because of the newness of it all, and the bulk of the work fell on the same group of people.

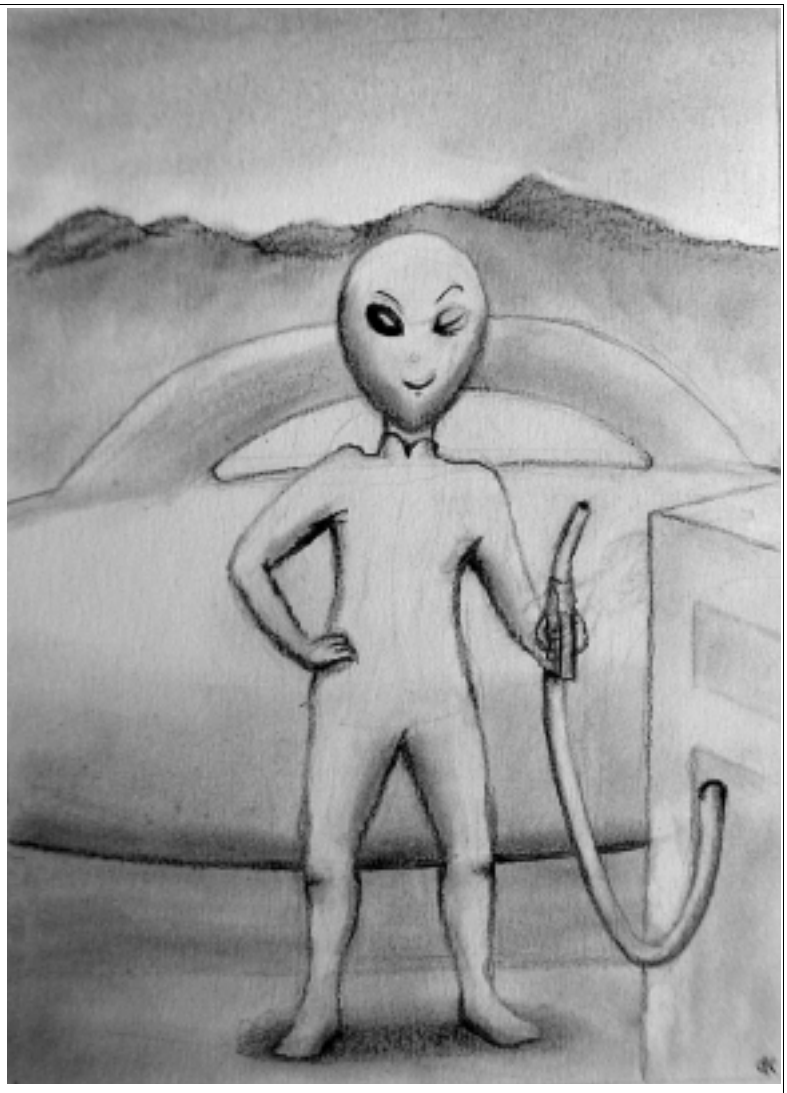
What things fell through is interesting. When I volunteered for LonCon and worked with Grenadine I was enraptured by it, because all the material we needed could be obtained through one form. Every form filled in gave the whole convention the information they needed at their fingertips. We didn't have that. Some authors were introduced and some were less so. Dave Freer had an introduction by his moderator, who had researched:

> **thistleingrey:** Dave Freer is 'author, doorstop, ichthyologist, buffoon, gastronome, part-time monkey, and man of one letter,' according to his website.
> **thistleingrey:** I'm curious about the 'man of one letter' part, if you don't mind ...?
> **Dave:** All true.
> **Dave:** I wrote a letter once.

I didn't skip introductions. I introduced everyone I could. Even myself when I had to, on the History and Fantasy panel. Who was I at the convention? Not quite an unknown, but almost. Yet I was co-running the thing. Sherwood and Sharyn said, 'You're a writer, you need to be on the program.' So I introduced myself at a panel at great length, to hide my shyness.

Chats varied according to who the guest was, but they were more discussions with the guest as a focus than interviews. This meant that every single chat had a different atmosphere. The person central to the chat was generally the focus (except in places where a participant talked more loudly and had something personal to prove). Because the guests were writers, and strong writers, personality intervened, and the chats each developed atmosphere. They reflected the writer, in other words, in an extraordinarily personal way. Years later I look at it and think, 'You can see where we're all going, fictionally and who we are all as writers from this forum.'

We had over 50 guests. They included:
Alma Alexander
Cat Hellisen
Chaz Brenchley
Chris Dolley
Dave Freer
Elizabeth Wein
Elizabeth Moon and possibly
Elizabeth Knox popped in
Geoff Ryman
Jack Dann
Jennifer Fallon
Kate Elliott
Marie Brennan
Nancy Jane Moore
Pamela Freeman
Pati Nagle
Rob Hood
Roberta Gellis
Sara Douglass
Sarah Zettel.



We had no guests of honour. We had no fan guests of honour. Several critics (especially but not exclusively UK critics) were on panels. Not everyone knew who they were, especially when they used nicknames. When groups said they would support us, they decided on the panelists (Book View Cafe, and the Australian Horror Writers both did this). Each and every panelist was expected to give us a bio, and we put them on our LiveJournal page — but many didn't bother with bios. Which meant that anyone who wanted the convention to see how wonderful their work was began at a disadvantage. The disadvantage in the chats was that they were overtalked in at least two cases. The disadvantage in panels was that audiences didn't bother coming. Fame turned out to be about as important on the whole as having a good bio.

What did the program look like? A very large part of it was author chats. Then there were maybe a dozen panels. For one author (who had many readers and limited time) we had a Q&A session. Roberta Gellis had deadlines, so her session was the most strictly regulated in the whole convention. It was also one of the best attended. By strictly regulated, what do I mean? We collected questions from readers in advance. She emailed us the answers and we posted them.

Some panel titles were:

- Writing: Incorporating regional flavor into the work
- Mannerist fantasy and Georgette Heyer
- They may do things differently there, but I'm reading from here
- Where do you get your ideas from?
- The Working Dark Lord
- Book Promotions: What works and what should be buried in a bucket, under the ocean, of a distant planet, in another universe?

Everything was texted. Everything. There were no recordings. No uploads from authors. Nothing except the written word and occasional picture. This was my decision based on the expertise we had access to. The WHM experience had scarred me. I'd seen download times measured in two digits of kbs/s. My download at this moment is 37 Mb/s. Also, the three conveners talked about it and decided that access should be as broad as possible. This meant using as little bandwidth as possible and this meant old-fashioned text-based places for the whole program.

This was criticised by a group of fans. They wanted to show off the glory of the internet. Our goal was to get people into chat rooms and discussions for the very first time. That was the biggest

thing of all. For over 40 per cent of the people who turned up on the day, this was their very first contact of this sort. It was amazing, watching them react to being in the same room as people from different time zones when one of the people was their favourite author.

Even with the decision to minimise download amounts for participants, there were many people who couldn't get on because these were still the days of dial-up. Or they were thrown off at once. It's impossible to know for certain how many of our audience we lost, but we know that several of our guests didn't turn up when they should, and some explained afterwards that their dial-up simply wasn't effective enough.

Trolls were the same then as now, but technology was different. We had a very tiny troll problem in the chat rooms, but it was easy enough to throw trolls out. The possibility of trolls meant we needed a trained volunteer in each and every chat room all the time. This helped when so many congoers were, like the person who knew not what a mouse was during WHM, less knowledgeable than they realised. When I re-read the logs I found that our learned behaviour was simply to say the basic instructions over and over, the moment someone fell into disorder. The instructions to change one's name were the most used after help in getting started. Even guests and committee didn't use their full names.

Fans attended as much in groups as alone. Purple Zoners are my favourite example of a whole group of fans who turned up and gave much support. The PZ is a fan part of the HarperVoyager success story — part of Australian writers joining international SF. Many of us are still friends. It was simply a discussion page on the Voyager website. It became a community.

Another group of people followed each other on LJ, a third was linked to BVC, a fourth was the SFF, and a fifth was the Australian Horror Writers' Association. This is obviously how word of the convention got out there — through small circles of people who knew about it and who were willing to take the risk of something new.

It was such a new thing. Some fans dropped in for one session and then returned for more and more and more. Some fans had a lot of trouble getting in and discouraged their friends from even trying — the networks worked both ways, for good and for ill.

If we had the resources and could have run a second one the year after, it would have flooded with people. But we couldn't. The downside of it is the same as the downside for running a worldcon — we were physically and emotionally beyond exhaustion.

The sessions were quite long, and discussion covered a lot of stuff. Ideas that reappeared over and again included whether the worlds in novels are real to the writer and reader; Georgette Heyer and Jane Austen came up in several panels, as did Japanese horror. And vampires.

There were some subjects that were not there. RaceFail appeared because it had just happened, but that was as far as anyone went. We did not discuss RaceFail in any detail. This really illustrates what subjects were missing. Gender, for instance, was: do not ask, do not tell. We were treading new turf and we played it safe — mostly.

People talked about novels that used Chinese material and about incorporating regional flavour, but cultural appropriation was skirted around very carefully. RaceFail wasn't quite gone and most of us were learning how to share culture without hurting.

One factor that influenced the way we talked about things was, I admit, me. I was and am openly Jewish, but I didn't admit I was an ethnohistorian until FlyCon. Our particular backgrounds affected program choices and the program choices affected what people said. They always do. How did they change things? I'm the wrong person to ask. We'd need someone who wasn't involved to look at the records and talk to participants. It would make a great PhD subject.

A lot of our thoughts were reflexive, and showed so much more about ourselves than most people have shown in recent online conventions. We'd come out of isolation and didn't know how to protect ourselves yet. I'm going to use myself as an example of this. It's not that I'm the best example — it's that this is something I don't feel comfortable sharing from the intimacy of the chats. Public intimacy. We're so used to it now and to making decisions to maintain our privacy, but in 2009 it was new to many.

In reading through the logs, I found that I said, 'My dream straight SF is using the science but still focusing on people. It annoys me to have a world of great what-ifs and nothing deeply human.' I now have two novels that do that, and one just won a Ditmar. These logs are an amazingly good way to trace how many writers have progressed and what they thought, just over a decade ago. Public intimacy leads to revelation. The other thing I discovered about myself as a writer was that I didn't think I was one.That was sobering. I've met so many first-novel writers since then and they are so confident in themselves. Me, I've developed the confidence since then. By the time I'm 100 I will have an impossibly narcissistic personality and an overweening ego. In 2009, though, I was full of apologies.

So many chats and panels and guest spots

included swapping time zones, meals in time zones, weather. Though we spoke much less of the weather, which is interesting, considering that, at my end, we had severe lightning strikes over the weekend and Sharyn and I kept being thrown off.

We wanted to know each other as people, and that included where we all lived and whether it was daylight, or if someone was up at midnight just for a panel. This was how we humanised it for ourselves, I think, for the conversations about time and meals were similar to those we had with GameBot, a tiny little program that responded to the strangest words and suggestions. Botty was always reliable to get drinks for participants — if they knew how to ask. Botty broke a lot of ice, and I named a time machine after it in one of my novels because in a strange new place, where a *lot* of participants had no idea what to do, Botty made things friendlier. Botty was part of the SFF's generous support. They gave us chat rooms, Botty, and Pat Fogarty, who was our technical whiz. Everything he had a hand in was easier. He knew his stuff and shared that knowledge and spent so many hours hanging round and trouble solving.

We were so busy learning at FlyCon that PaulaL, moderating Dave Freer's session, asked if he wanted a tightly moderated one or a free-for-all. Dave Freer instantly chose free-for-all, and his session was notable for the flights of fantasy that ensued. The freshness of it all meant that the chats often took on lives and moods that helped us understand the authors. Their characters helped shape discussion.

Reader reactions to talking to their authors in chat was fascinating. Their reactions were public and wove themselves into the mood and feel for each session. At times, with particular authors, no one developed a relaxed approach, or made many jokes, or developed deep discussions: this was when everyone piled in with compliments initially. The density of the compliments limited choices, and the focus was solely on certain aspects of the author's work. Karen Miller's session is the best example of this.

Authors didn't share as much about themselves when compliments were too ecstatic — with one exception: Geoff Ryman. The moderator hadn't turned up for Geoff's session, and I had to take over at the last minute. Geoff was new to me, but his work wasn't. He was, and still is, one of my favourite authors. I knew enough to introduce him, but I was well ... normally I am intellectually quite collected, but not in that moment. That chat was one of the best sessions in the convention, no thanks to me.

GillianP: Welcome to the first chat at a sensible hour (for Australia — other sensible hours are forthcoming). I keep looking round for someone else who wants to introduce Geoff Ryman because firstly, he has no idea who I am and secondly, if I weren't Jewish I would be worshipping at his feet. He is a superlatively brilliant writer whose works linger long in the mind after the book is closed.
Geoff: Wow
Geoff: Me?
GillianP: I am a squeeing fangrrl :)
Geoff: Ok, well, help.
Geoff: I need a question?
Anghara: How are you? –G–
GillianP: How was dinner?
Geoff: Very well. Glass of wine in hand.
Geoff: Ah. Lemon sole.
Geoff: Good.
Jeri_Smith-Ready: What are you working on now **(besides glass of wine)?**
Geoff: Something called *Life is Physics.*

Geoff made his session work, despite me.

Most of the live texted sessions were more like a barcon with guests than like formal discussions. I'd like to see this element done again, where the guest is a friend popping in to visit a group of people some of whom who sorta know each other and share a lot of interests and really want to talk. Interestingly, there was a lot of insightful discussion of speculative fiction in this framework. There were also many, many jokes.

We didn't have large numbers. Maybe 30 people at a time at the most. How good or bad is that? Actually, quite good. The first Australian WHM online events had fewer people for live chats. The numbers came later, for WHM, when the chat records were posted on the web. There was one where someone had to open several screens at once so that we would have, in appearance, more audience than panel. That didn't happen for FlyCon. We had a lot of silent people, but we had real people the whole way, excluding Botty. I can't give you numbers, because of the nicks that were used and because we didn't track numbers.

There were people who came to just one session because it was someone they loved. There were a few people who came to every single thing they could and these congoers learned the systems and helped out the newbies and made my tech team's life easier. It was a community, at its best, and a bit of a mess at its worst. One set of chat rooms was inaccessible to 50 per cent of computers, and so when we could, we shifted things to the other which was a pain.

The most moving session was with Sara Douglass.

This was about two years before she died. She already had cancer. She accepted the side effects as

part of her life, and did a lot to meet with readers and share her experiences. It was such an important moment for her readers to have her in a room with them, even if the room was virtual. In her memory, let me give you snippets from her chat. She had just finished her first round of chemotherapy and did not know the results. This was time with people who were special to her, and she didn't hide a thing. She told us, 'I spent a drugged up night trying to pot one of the cats who I thought was a fruit tree ... I shouldn't be allowed out, really I shouldn't.'

Her approach to the events of her life helped a lot of us who were undergoing our own lesser challenges, and the gift she gave all those in her extended circles was the capacity to talk about illness and to turn it into story. If nothing else had come out of FlyCon but this, it would have been enough for all the work and all the impossibilities we faced.

Douglass changed the discourse about illness in Australian fandom. Let me show you how she did it (this is a bit edited to focus on her voice):

> **Falcon:** Sara I loved the blog you wrote about the intensive care unit a la *Star Trek*!
> **SaraDouglass:** I actually really enjoyed my time there (apart from the damned pain). It was fun and REALLY interesting — there was always something exciting happening. I hated being transferred back to a normal ward.
> **taelian:** Me too — especially the description of the kind staff offering to remove their clothing!!
> **SaraDouglass:** OH, those boys ... all promises and no action. Pffft! ...
> **SaraDouglass:** I lucked out with all the staff — boys and girls — they were just great. I even managed to get my high and mighty anaesthetist to make me a cup of coffee once. He charged me an extra $1000 for it on his bill.
> **taelian:** oh dear!
> **Joy:** I hope it was worth it. :)
> **Falcon:** But it was so uplifting, Sara, to hear how a traumatic event could be experienced differently!
> **taelian:** Did he know he was dealing with a very famous and loved author? He might have changed his mind with a signed book ;)
> **Falcon:** That's one golden cuppa.
> **SaraDouglass:** Or maybe it was the fact he was called in at 2 a.m. to see me, then at 3 a.m., and then again at 5 a.m. when I sent him on the coffee run — I thought he should be useful for something as his damned epidural wasn't working.

The thing that hit home was her statement that she would write, and I quote, 'Stand Alones from now on. I couldn't bear to put HarperC through the pain of wondering if I will live to complete the final book in a series.' I never met her beyond this, but thinking about that chat has led me into thinking about my friend Milena Benini. We lose too many important people from our lives.

A curious thing was how many panelists and author guests questioned the whole thing while they were participating. Is this really a panel? I think I might be in the right place at the right time for a change. There aren't a lot of us and it's like an earlier topic. Should I be here? Does this start now, or at the advertised time? I mean, I'm here, and there's a heading, so maybe the advertised time is wrong? Does it start in ten minutes, nine minutes? Some of the most professional people I know developed an air of the amateur.

Some of the least professional tried to reshape the whole event because we were 'doing it wrong'. Both of these happened behind the scenes, and for 18 hours a day (19 hours for two days) I was handling queries and complaints and suggestions and fixing tech and talking to other more webbish volunteers at the same time as I was in my own program items. I admit that I enjoyed it, but now I remain junior in my volunteer capacities and focus on my program items a bit more and make sure I eat more than breakfast.

We had to send emails and even phone calls for missing authors. Two were rescheduled when they missed their chats. Reliable people became unreliable people and those with computer knowledge and much online experience led everyone else, whether they were officially on concom or not. Friendships made this work, so the networks I talked about earlier saved us in many perilous moments.

We discovered the hard way that not everyone had equal skills, even though many claimed them. It was like WHM all over, with that mouse. One moderator, for instance, spent quite a bit of time during one session learning how to do their job. They were cheerful and funny about it, but it ate into program time and was 50 per cent on show.

So many years after the event, and with half the formatting stripped off, the blog sequences are very hard to read. Our speech patterns slide into each other and sometimes I can't tell who is quoting and who is writing something new. This reflects a problem at the time for some readers. I had to teach them how to follow threads: they didn't all read blogs and had no concept of threaded discussion. I saw this happening again at some 2020 online conventions: where someone is new to a type of discourse and there are no people in the room who say, 'Things will happen in this way at this time', all

kinds of people can be confused, silenced, or even leave.

One really cool thing about the blog-style panels was that the panelists didn't have to wait to talk and the audience didn't have to wait to ask questions. The panels didn't have the social content of the chat rooms, but at their best, they were intellectually fascinating and went in terrific directions. The other good thing about them, of course, is that congoers could continue the discussion for three days. This was the bit of the convention that was most available to the whole world. The whole world, of course, had no idea it was there.

This event changed the m/f panelist/chat ratio. Paul Weimer did a star map of SF writers who knew others, and this event showed how those links worked. I've noticed for many, many other events since then (live and online) that similar patterns operate. There are writers we all know of, and then there are writers linked to writers. 'People. People who know people — are the programmiest people in the world.'

We need to break this down a bit more to find out how to get new people or othered people or genuinely interesting outsiders into the mix. The on-lineness and the relative ease of use broke it down in some ways, but there were still barriers at FlyCon.

We broke down some barriers as we went, as I said earlier. We used food and time and location to open conversations with strangers. When someone suggested a book or an author, a whole conversation could go into that rabbit hole. It would emerge triumphant, because these chats were generally part of the chats with authors' streams, and fans remembered they were with a favourite writer and had questions to pose. One discussion was very serious until the last ten minutes, when it became an intensive discussion about food, including medlar liqueur and the importance of pickled walnuts.

Some of the most entertaining discussions came after the session was officially over. At one time, we discussed this:

> **merlinpole**: You did talk about SF/F...
> **Chaz:** Splish-splosh!
> **Roger:** Splash!
> **GillianP:** That's actually an important question.
> **merlinpole:** Besides, going offtopic is TRADITIONAL at conventions on panels and such!
> **GillianP:** Is food and steeplechasing any less related to SFF than meat fantasy theory?
> **Chaz:** Is true. But there's usually a moderator to drag us back.
> **merlinpole:** First conventions are first conventions....

and then we were in the next session.

There was an unpredictability about it all, but also, at its best, a joyousness. So many participants wanted to know about how their favourite writers wrote.

Towards the end, someone summed us up as: 'FlyCon Survivors — three days of convention away and posting, straight through.'

And that, for me, is the perfect place to finish.

— Gillian Polack, 2020

Ron Drummond

Getting to Joanna

RON DRUMMOND writes:
My Joanna Russ piece has only been officially published thrice, all three times in fairly obscure/rarefied print publications. The first two times happened the same week in December 2011: in abridged form in *Chunga*, and at full length in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. The third time was in August 2017, a slightly revised, improved, full-length version, as the entry on 'Russ, Joanna' in *Encyclopedia Vol. 3 L-Z*, the final, print-on-demand volume of a three-volume mixed-genre encyclopedia edited by three feminist academics, where the first two volumes had single fixed print runs of I think 2000 copies each, and may now have been turned into PoD reprints. Vol. 3 is quite expensive — $40 a pop.

In the spring of 1982 I hitchhiked across Canada west to east and wound up in New York City, where for a month I worked demolition for Karma Construction Company, the commercial arm of a Tibetan Buddhist organisation to which I had been commended by composer Pauline Oliveros. I was 22. With my first wages, on my day off I went down to the Science Fiction Shop in Greenwich Village, where I found two books I'd never heard of by or about my favorite writer: *The Tides of Lust* and *Samuel R. Delany: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography, 1962–1979*, the latter by Michael W. Peplow and Robert S. Bravard. My excited exclamations drew the attentions of the two men working in the store, who I soon learned were Baird Searles and Martin Last, a fact that blew me away even more than the newly discovered books I now held. Searles and Last were two of the 25 dedicatees of my all-time favourite novel, *Dhalgren*, the first I'd ever met.

At the time, the good folks at Karma Construction were housing me free of charge in an empty, as-yet-unrented $2500-a-month loft apartment in Tribeca, on Thomas Street. It filled the floor it was on (the fourth, I think), which I gathered was part of the definition of a 'loft' apartment; it had beautiful hardwood floors and 20-foot ceilings, the only furniture a refrigerator and a baby grand piano, and wonderful views of the Twin Towers through the incredibly tall living room windows: you could see them poking up over the roofline across and down the street, only blocks away to the southwest, though I never visited them. The bedroom was like its own house inside the apartment, a walled, stained-glass-windowed island in the grand prevailing openness, with a lower ceiling conducive to a more intimate space behind its ornate double doors. A ladder at one end led up to a loft space at the back of the bedroom's roof, against the apartment's long, unbroken wall, and that was where I was told to sleep, on a small mattress they loaned me, and to keep my stuff, so that during the day when I was at work they could show the apartment to prospective renters without concern for overt signs of its occupancy.

The fact that I was living in a loft within a loft very much reminded me of *Dhalgren*'s twin lofts, scene of so much of that book's angular and oddly convolute sex, and it was here at night over the next few days that I read *The Tides of Lust*, twice. (I decided that the chapter portraying the lead character's unsought, unexpected acid trip was one of the most brilliant set-pieces in all of Delany, and three decades on I'm still pretty sure that's so, along with Section 9.82 of *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*.) I also read with great interest the 60-page biography of Delany contained in the introduction to the *Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, the longest and most accurate biography of Delany published up to that time. At one point the authors quoted a letter from Delany describing the home office where he wrote, in which he mentioned that the window by his desk 'looks down on busy Amsterdam Avenue'. Ten pages later came a passing mention that Delany lived on West 82nd Street. A-ha, I thought. On my next day off I made my way to the Upper West Side, falling-apart spiral notebook in hand, and found the storied intersection, where I systematically examined the entryways of the apartment buildings on all four corners; 'S. Delany' topped the list of residents in the last. Though the grill of an intercom was not to be found, after some hesitation I pushed the button

beside Delany's name. Within moments a loud buzzing sounded and I pushed the door open and went in. Finding no elevator, I started ascending the stairs and soon heard the sound of a door being opened five floors above.

'Hello ...?' someone called down, and then started down the stairs from the top while I continued up from the bottom.

'Mr. Delany?' I called.

'Yes?'

'I hope I'm not coming at an inconvenient time. I wanted to introduce myself!'

'*Oh!* And you are?'

We met on the landing between the third and fourth floors. I introduced myself, shaking his reciprocally offered hand, apologised for the intrusion, told him I was a huge fan of his work, especially *Dhalgren*, and wondered if he would be willing to talk to me for a few minutes.

'Sure, why not. Come on up.' And he turned and started back up the stairs, and, feeling more than a little awe-struck, I followed him up.

It turned out he'd been expecting a UPS delivery, which was the only reason why he buzzed me in. If not for that, I suspect my life since then would have been substantially different.

I followed him into his apartment, an old railroad-style place with a single corridor and rooms opening off it to either side. Delany told me to wait in the entryway while he finished something, and walked down the hall and disappeared into a doorway on the left. I stood where he left me, feeling suddenly very shy.

A minute or so later a disembodied arm stuck out of the doorway into which Delany had disappeared, pointing across the hall. 'Go ahead and have a seat in the living room.' And the arm disappeared again. I made my way down the hall, not daring to glance into the room Delany was in, and into the living room, where I sat on the front edge of an armchair in a far corner. Every wall was covered in overflowing floor-to-ceiling bookcases; books were piled almost everywhere else too, not always stably, and there were drifts of newspapers and magazines around the perimeter, piled at one end of the couch across from me, spilling across a coffee table. Or not — it may be I am overlaying that earlier memory with the memory of the days two decades hence when I stayed with Chip and Dennis during my trip to NYC in December 2002 to promote *A Garden Stepping into the Sky*. Maybe in 1982 the bookshelves weren't quite so overflowing, the drifts of paper not quite as high or ubiquitous. But the serious bibliophile in me absolutely loved it. I tried to read some of the titles on the shelf nearest to me, unwilling to stand and browse uninvited. I'd never heard of most of them; many were simultaneously confounding and deeply intriguing.

Delany soon joined me, saying he'd had to finish a sentence he'd been in the middle of writing — I apologised again for the interruption and he said it was no problem — and sat down on the forward edge of the couch across from me. We talked for about a half hour. He asked me where I was from, and I told him about hitchhiking across Canada, and meeting poet Anne Szumigalski in Saskatoon. I waved my unravelling spiral notebook at him and told him about the novel I was writing about the reincarnation of John Lennon and how in my first days in New York City I had fulfilled a vision of sitting outside the Dakota and writing a scene of it there. I asked him if he'd be willing to read a poem I'd written in San Diego in March 1980 about a man dying violently on the streets of New York, which seemed to me to contain some uncanny pre-echoes of Lennon's death nine months later, and he gamely said 'Sure.' I sat there, blushing furiously, studying the upper corners of the room, while he slowly read through its five typescript pages.

'Well,' he said, handing it back. 'It certainly is energetic.'

'Oh!' I gulped. 'Well. Thanks for reading it!' Delany smiled wanly, and I quickly slipped it back into my notebook.

Really, in retrospect, I'm sure it was the *nicest* thing he possibly could have said.

He asked me what my plans were. I said I was unsure how long I would be in New York but that I was thinking about returning to Seattle, the city of my birth, and settling there.

He brightened at the mention of Seattle. 'One of my best friends, and a really great writer, lives there — Joanna Russ?'

'Oh sure!' I said. 'One of the dedicatees of *Dhalgren!* I read your essay about her in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*. But I haven't read any of her work — yet.'

'Oh, you *must* read Joanna's work! She's just about the best writer working today!' Delany told me Russ was a professor of English at the University of Washington and that just about the smartest thing I could do once I was established in Seattle would be to look her up at UW, make an appointment and ask her if she might be willing to let me audit one or more of her classes — Delany's way of suggesting I approach her formally, in the socially accepted fashion, and not by showing up unannounced on her doorstep.

And right about there Delany told me he needed to get back to work. We stood, and I thanked him profusely for taking the time to talk to me; at his gesture I preceded him into the long hall and up it to the front door, which he opened for me. I stepped out and turned around, and standing there on either side of the threshold we proceeded

Joanna Russ, 1970s.
(Photo: Illen Weber.)

to say goodbye to one another at least three if not four or five times ('All right if I write to you?' 'Of course! Any time! *Please* do!'), and when he finally shut the door and I started down those five flights of stairs, I was quite certain that each of us had said goodbye to the other *at least* one time too many! Which reminded me of *Dhalgren* and the excruciating inanities of Kidd's interactions with the Richards family so thoroughly that it left me blushing all the way to the back of my neck and feeling like an utter fool.

But I also felt thrilled to pieces, exhilarated — I'd met my greatest hero and he was a super nice guy! — and I ran down the stairs and out into the street and walked at a joyful clip down Amsterdam Avenue. In a bar a block away I made a collect call to a friend in California, a struggling Swedish filmmaker named Jeffrey Wickstrom who had spent the previous decade refining two scripts, someone I knew would love to hear my news.

'You're not going to *believe* who I just met!' Several minutes into my excited recitation, as I looked out into the rectangle of sunlight through the bar's open door, who should walk by on the street outside but one Samuel R. Delany, heading south (back then, at 40 he still had the springy step of a young man), UPS deliveryman abetted or forgotten, to who knows what appointments or assignations.

Four months later, after another cross-country hitchhiking adventure and a season working for friends cutting down trees and clearing land across the Green River Gorge from the old mining ghost town of Franklin, Washington, I rented a small basement room in a giant shared house in Seattle's University District. I knew no one in the city.

Soon I decided to visit Joanna Russ. I'm pretty sure I called ahead to make an appointment, though I wouldn't swear to it. On a brilliant fall day I walked through huge, wind-stirred drifts of multi-coloured maple leaves carpeting the maple-shaded greensward running down the middle of 17th Avenue Northeast to the University of Washington campus and crossed it to Padelford Hall, where Russ had her office.

Padelford is a bizarrely thin, long, rambling multi-storey building that twists and turns along the ragged edge of a cliff 30 and 40-plus feet above a small forest and a huge parking lot. On first encounter the building's conceit seemed cubistic, modular, many of the offices and classrooms connected to the main body of the building along only three, or two, or sometimes only one of six sides (six counting floor and ceiling), often projecting out into space and held aloft on stilts; every space there felt changeable and temporary and subject to sudden dislocation.

When I finally found her office, Russ was welcoming but brusque. From where I sat against the office's inner wall across from her desk, all I could see out her windows to left and right were the upper branches of the evergreens growing up from the slopes below. When out of sheer nervousness I started talking about the view or the weather or something equally inconsequential, she quickly lost patience with me, interrupting me to tell me she was extremely busy and to ask me what it was exactly I wanted from her. I started a stammering apology but she cut me off and asked, again, *what* did I want? I sat up and told her Samuel Delany had praised her work to the skies and had urged me to look her up when I got to Seattle and possibly see if I could audit some of her classes. She naturally asked how I knew Chip, and when I said I'd only met him a few months before and explained my detective work and how I had appeared unannounced at his apartment in New York and how he had invited me up for a 30-minute chat, she was *horrified*. Told me I should *never* have done that, moreover that I should never *ever* do that to *any*one! I think I must have recoiled, shrunk down into my chair, totally understanding her horror and seeing it clearly from her point of view; Joanna had an uncanny ability to convey to others not only her perspective on things but its emotional and intellectual charge, the sensibility informing it.

I told her the first thing I'd said to him was to apologise for the intrusion and to ask him if it was a good time, and that I would have happily retreated and never returned if he had expressed any disinclination to talk to me, all of which was true. And though I think she appreciated all of this

she still reiterated her objections, and I agreed she was right but at the same time that I was still glad that I had done it, glad to have met Delany, and glad that because of meeting him I was sitting in her office now. What was funny about this is that as forthright as Joanna was in expressing her severe disapproval of what I had done, and believe me she was formidable, it was *not* fun being at the receiving end of her disapproval or criticism, even then it felt like she was talking to me like she would to anyone, including a loved one or best friend, telling me in no uncertain terms what she thought and yet *not* holding it against me.

What it was about Joanna is that she consistently spoke to the best in who you were, so even if you had done or said something foolish or stupid she never resorted to assuming you were, therefore, stupid, but that you had had a lapse, maybe a major one, but right now she was talking to the part of you that was smart, smart enough to get just how stupid you'd been and by goddess you are fully capable of snapping out of it and seeing things in a better light and learning how to put your smartest, best self in the driver's seat, and here's how you might consider doing that and whether you try to do it that way or some other way the point is I *know* you can do it! And the preceding sentence is only the barest attempt at trying to capture a quality in Joanna that was truly extraordinary, extraordinary in how she dealt with people, how she understood that the best was there to be found, but sometimes it was cowering in a dark, inward corner or covered over in scar tissue or zoned out or habitually self-denying, sometimes you had to coax it out, and maybe the best way to do that was to talk to it directly, one on one, and ignore the dissembling ego-mess that nominally keeps it in the dark, just talk past it to the *real* person inside. What an amazing soul she was!

When Joanna heard that I was in effect new to Seattle and knew no one, she immediately told me about Vanguard, an informal group of incredibly smart, incredibly well-read science fiction fans who hosted a party on the first Saturday of every month where folks got together to yak about anything and everything under, around, and beyond the sun, which sometimes included science fiction and sometimes did not. Would I be interested in going to the next one? At my enthusiastic Yes she wrote down Kate Schaefer's name and phone number and gave it to me and told me to tell her she'd sent me. And right there Joanna Russ introduced me to a social group that would have a profound impact on my life for much of the next twenty years and beyond. There's no question: the folks in Vanguard changed my life, for better and for worse and for everything in between — kind of like a marriage! Without her invitation I'm not at all sure I would have ever found that group, or any of the lifelong friendships I made with some of those in it, or if I did it almost certainly would have been years later and everything would have been different.

And yes, she said, I was welcome to sit in on her classes. And our first meeting was at an end.

I attended at least three of Joanna Russ's classes that Fall. What I recall most vividly is a lecture she gave on Herman Melville, specifically how the publication of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre* all but destroyed his career. Joanna explained that Harper Brothers, Melville's US publisher from *Typee* on, was so dismayed by the poor sales and worse reviews of *Moby-Dick* that they published his next novel, *Pierre*, with only the greatest reluctance, for the first time offering Melville a much smaller advance, where the advances for his previous books had only grown larger with each new title. Melville knew full well that he was writing his best work, so his treatment by Harper Brothers, by the critics, and by his reading public left him increasingly bitter. After *Pierre* Melville wrote a 300-page novel called *Isle of the Cross*, which Harper Brothers outright rejected; in an access of bitterness, Melville destroyed the only existing manuscripts of the book, rough draft, fair copy, all of it: threw it in the fire and watched it burn.

'Given the quality of the books he wrote before and after, there can be no doubt that *Isle of the Cross* was a *major* masterpiece,' Joanna said. '*How* could he destroy his own work like that, because of some fool publisher? It *doesn't* make sense! Oh, just *thinking* about it makes me *so* angry — if I had a time machine, I swear I'd go back in time, find Herman Melville, and *strangle him!'* — holding her hands up in a stranglehold gesture and giving a good twist to the innocent air at the critical moment, a veritable snarl of frustration lighting up her face. And the whole class erupted in astonished, delighted laughter. Joanna Russ wouldn't go back in time to save *Isle of the Cross*, but to kill Melville for destroying it! Which was hilarious and completely unexpected, and telegraphed her passion and the intensity of her enduring anguish at the thought of that forever irretrievable masterwork *far* better than if she'd simply put that imaginary time machine to its obvious and expected saving use.

From the friends I soon made at Vanguard I learned of a related book discussion group called Babble-17. The first meeting I attended, on March 17, 1983, was held in Joanna Russ's lovely home, situated on a curving street angling down the western slope of Fremont above Ballard. Thirty people were jammed into Joanna's modest living room; there were almost as many women there as men. The topic that month was a novel I'd never heard of by a writer I'd never heard of, something called *Little, Big* by someone named John Crowley.

Thirty years later, as I write, I am nearing completion of production work on a museum-quality new edition of the very novel discussed that long-ago day in Joanna's home.

I read most of Joanna Russ's fiction in the early-to-mid 80s. Fifty pages into *And Chaos Died*, I put it down, unable to grok its neonative tongue. A few years later I picked it up again and kept reading from where I had left off and had no trouble with the language, which I found brilliantly evocative, invigorating, and perceptually startling.

What I found most viscerally profound about *The Female Man* was its menstrual structure, the swell, slough, and flow of its four intertransiting narrative moons. *The Two of Them* was my favourite; I've rarely felt more joy at a novel's denouement, however troublesome and fraught with ambiguous possibility it may be.

The unblinking truth telling and sheer steely nerve of *We Who Are About To* is devastating, bespeaking a writer of uncommon courage and wisdom.

On Strike Against God has the best sex scene I had read up to that point, humane and full of awkwardness and heat and humor, laugh-out-loud funny, and delightfully arousing. (The only equals to it I've come upon can be found in John Crowley's 2009 novel *Four Freedoms*.)

All of which reminds me that I am long overdue for a good, close rereading of Russ's work. As someone inclined to believe it's not possible to understand a story you've never heard before, and given that Russ is among the least clichéd writers of recent decades, what that means is that I am long overdue for truly reading Russ's work for the *first* time.

I saw Joanna fairly regularly from 1987 until her retirement from UW and move to Tucson in 1994 — which means I saw her roughly six to twelve times a year, sometimes more, usually at the monthly Vanguard parties and occasionally at summertime Clarion West parties or other social gatherings. It soon became clear that she was suffering badly from chronic back and other pain, which she spoke of frankly and earnestly. What was less apparent, and something she didn't really talk about, was the fact that she also suffered from severe, at times debilitating, depression. But to see her at the parties was mostly to *not* see the evidence of the depression: her social energy, gregariousness, and charm were extraordinary. It was not uncommon for her to outshine everybody in the room, sometimes from a position lying stretched out on her back on someone's living room floor; the chronic pain often meant the only positions she was comfortable in were standing up and lying flat on her back. So she'd lie down in the middle of a party and converse with those standing around her with the utmost vivacity and passion, and she was so natural and unassuming about it that it didn't seem in any way odd that she was doing this. That was Joanna: she had an uncanny yet perfectly natural aptitude for completely owning her space, her actions, her words, no matter how unusual or unexpected. The tragic part of it was simply that the combined pain and depression effectively ended her career as a writer of fiction. She talked about how the painkillers affected her ability to think clearly; if she wanted to write, it had to be standing up, at a lectern, in pain, during a deliberately chosen, extended lapse in her medication. And she did write, slowly, a few treasurable volumes of essays and criticism.

Though we were never close friends, she grew noticeably warmer towards me during the last few years I saw her. In 1993, the year I published Incunabula's first two books, Samuel R. Delany's *They Fly at Çiron* and John Crowley's *Antiquities: Seven Stories*, I asked Joanna if I could someday publish her correspondence with Chip Delany, which Chip describes as constituting a stack of letters three feet high, and she laughed and said 'Perhaps,' but that there were other things she'd like to see published first.

I remember, some time later, coming up to her as she held forth to a small circle of people at Vanguard; she interrupted herself to greet me with an unexpected question: 'How is your writing coming?'

'Oh!' I said, taken aback. 'Fine, I guess. Slowly!'

And Joanna looked around the circle of people and said, 'Ron's a really terrific writer!' And then she looked back at me, looked me in the eye, and said: 'You really should write more. You're very good!'

Which fairly blew me away. (I was surprised that she had read anything of mine at all.) Much later, Kate Schaefer told me Russ really enjoyed encouraging young writers. At the very least, Joanna's words had been a great kindness; to this day I feel encouraged by them.

That was the last time I saw her. I regret that, after her move to Tucson, I never wrote to her. Now she's gone. Remembering Joanna, it's hard to imagine she could ever be anything other than brilliantly alive.

— **Ron Drummond**, 2 September 2013

Criticanto: Reconsiderations

DAMIEN BRODERICK is Australia's senior science fiction writer (unless Lee Harding starts publishing SF books again). Damien is also a popular science writer and editor of some 70 books. His science fiction novel *The Dreaming Dragons* (1980) introduced the trope of the generation time machine, his *The Judas Mandala* (1982) contains the first appearance of the term 'virtual reality', and his 1997 popular science book *The Spike* was the first to investigate the technological Singularity in detail. Damien and his wife Barbara Lamar live in San Antonio, Texas.

Damien Broderick

What is it like to wake up in someone else's body? Lee Harding's 'A World of Shadows'

Discussed:
A WORLD OF SHADOWS
by Lee Harding (Robert Hale; 1975; 160 pp.)

The Australian photographer and writer Lee Harding (1937–) was the first Australian sf fan to break into professional print at the start of the 1960s, with stories sold to John Carnell's British magazines *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy*. His first novel, *A World of Shadows*, came out when he was 38, from the UK publisher Robert Hale, who apparently made some significant unauthorised cuts and other changes that weakened the published text, but the original version has never been released. Despite these depredations, the book has an unearthly tone of horror and grief that conveys the dismaying dis-covery that a deep space explorer's consciousness has been transplanted into the body of his crewmate while his own is now comatose.

Humans have learned how to enter second-order space and travel faster than light to other star systems, but find there frightening ghostly creatures dubbed Shadows with the ability to enter bodies and minds. Large exploratory vessels release small scout ships, each carrying two crew, inside interesting planetary systems. Approaching the Canopus system, Stephen Chandler, an unprepossessing scholar, and handsome Richard Ashby, machine wizard, are trapped in space. Waking from stasis, Chandler is terrified to discover that he is now in Ashby's body, a prankish or perhaps fact-finding intrusion by the higher-dimensional Shadows. They are fetched home 180 light years to Survey headquarters: 'Without any fuss whatsoever, the *Polaris 3* reappeared in the sky a scant fifteen hundred miles above the northern Pacific ocean of Earth' (p. 29).

Chandler's wife Laura is naturally devastated, and watched closely by Chris Nolan, an 'alien psychologist' also victimised by Shadows and close friend of the Chandlers:

> The atmosphere in the room was thickening with menace. His eyesight wavered and it grew impossible for him to see clearly. Something cold touched the perimeter of his mind and he knew at last that he was no longer alone ... [T]he familiar chill crept through his limbs and fastened his hands to the sides of is chair. He kept still. They converged upon him like trailing wisps of oily black smoke scurrying around the periphery of his distorted vision. (p. 11)

So far, so Gothic — with a hint of Cordwainer

Smith's Space[3] and its terrifying indigenous menace the Rats or Dragons.[1] But the book, which declares itself an 'ontological thriller',[2] lives up to that terminology, and opens fresh paths in our quest for the nature of consciousness as portrayed in science fiction.

Officialdom, of course, doubts that the body of Ashby now instantiates the mind of Chandler, taking as their default that the new 'Chandler' is a fake, compiled by the aliens for their inscrutable purposes. Laura and Nolan become convinced that this is simple institutional paranoia, that the consciousness swap is real and persistent. Slowly Laura's love for her second husband returns and strengthens (she was widowed young, when her first spouse died in a vehicle accident). Luckily for the story, Ashby was not married; a strikingly handsome man, he played the field when he was not obsessed by machines. So there is no alternative wife to battle Laura for Chandler/Ashby's affections.

Nolan, once himself possessed briefly by Shadows, has specialised in their study, graduating as an 'alienist' (a nice appropriation of the late nineteenth-century term for a psychiatrist). He has previously disclosed to the couple, before Chandler's mind-switch, that the Shadows

> were disturbing the general consensus of reality. How one sometimes saw strange shapes moving across the sky ... At odd moments the sky would seem to become translucent and strange figures could be seen moving behind it, as though it were a piece of smoked glass. Was it only imagination, or was their familiar continuum undergoing a subtle change? (p. 102)

It seems clear that these transformations of reality are not created or directed by human intention. Probably human consciousness is being manipulated by the aliens. Simple folk, Nolan explains, are relatively immune to their infestation. Clever complex minds are far more vulnerable. And Chris Nolan's wife Eleanor, deeply depressed, had killed herself. These bad memories return as the three finish an excellent dinner prepared by Chandler in a first attempt to make himself known again to his wife. In a nine-page mental battle, something of a *tour de force* akin to Colin Wilson's similar scene in the Lovecraftian *The Mind Parasites* (1967),[3] Nolan and the couple are flung into a nightmarish virtual world, only to find after they are released that the Shadows have secreted inside each mind 'a dense coal of darkness an observant parasite keeping watch over their thoughts' (pp. 113–14).

The final, grievous ontological trap remains to be sprung. Once husband and wife are reconciled finally to their altered fate, joined at last in orgasm, the Shadows betray them yet again. Chandler's consciousness is returned to his original body, thousands of miles away. Nolan understands, finally: with Ashby's suppressed identity as Chandler set free, each man is once again conscious in his own body:

> 'They took a duplicate they had made of your husband's personality and superimposed it over the quiescent mind of Richard Ashby. The man we saw was *not* Stephen Chandler. We were duped, Laura: all of us. The man we thought was Stephen was only an ontological double, a psychic twin of the real person.' (p. 149)

Laura, now pregnant with the seed of a man who never existed, 'the personality that had grown and experienced [Nolan's] tedious interrogation' (p. 158), knows now that Nolan is her true lover. And for Chris Nolan, alienist, widower, perhaps set free like Laura from the poisonous dark stars secreted within them, 'life had opened up all around him like the petals of an enormous flower that had lived too long in the gloomy undergrowth of a rain forest' (pp. 159–60). Ontology, one might hope, recapitulates cosmogony. Except, probably, for poor bereft and *faux*-memory-wiped Ashby, stumbling in the darkness.

1 In Smith's 'The Game of Rat and Dragon', *Galaxy*, October 1955.
2 This is the term employed on the inside jacket flap blurb, but was evidently proposed by Harding.
3 We can be sure of this, because Wilson himself tells us in a Preface to *The Mind Parasites* that his scene of battle with mind parasites is a tour de force.

— Damien Broderick

James Doig

Frank Walford's 'Twisted Clay'

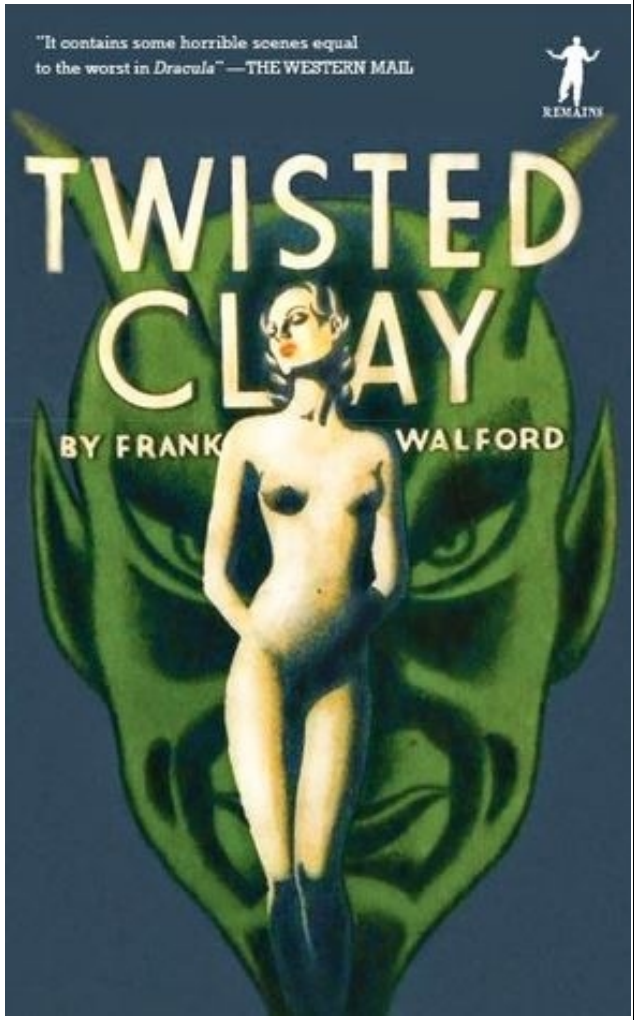
[First published in the journal *Wormwood*, founded in 2003, published twice a year by Tartarus Press, devoted to 'literature of the fantastic, supernatural and decadent'.]

Australian author **Frank Walford**'s novel ***Twisted Clay*** has the distinction of being one of the more bizarre thrillers published in the 1930s, which is saying something, given the excruciating excesses of R. R. Ryan, Harry Keeler, J. U. Nicolson, amongst others.

Walford himself bragged that the novel was applauded by the London *Times* as 'the best book ever written with a lunatic as a central character'. *Twisted Clay*, first published by Werner Laurie in 1933, was banned in Australia for nearly 30 years before the Australian paperback publisher Horwitz reprinted it in the early 1960s. They cashed in on its notoriety, declaring on the back cover: 'Just Released From The Banned List!'

The narrator and anti-heroine of *Twisted Clay* is Jean Deslines, a precocious 14-year-old in every way. Her mother died giving birth to her, which took place during a terrible storm, and she lives with her loving father and tyrannical grandmother in a 'bleak old house on the crest of the Blue Mountains'. Jean delights in causing trouble and innocently denying that she has done anything wrong. Early on in the book she describes how as a 12-year-old she led on a clergyman, drawing his hand around his waist and kissing him, knowing that her grandmother is spying on them through the window. She also enjoys sharing a bed with the buxom maid, but it is only when her savvy, university-educated cousin, Myrtle, tells her to read psychology textbooks that she realises she is a lesbian. At first she is appalled, regarding herself as 'something unhealthy, a gross abnormality which should have been strangled at birth', and she tries to kill herself by boiling herself alive in the laundry tub.

The textbooks inform her that lesbianism is caused by a deficiency of female hormones, and that she might excite her suppressed femininity by consorting with the opposite sex. She hits onto the bank manager's son and manages to get herself pregnant; confessing all to her long-suffering father, she has an abortion and dumps the perplexed boyfriend. Soon afterwards she has a dream that recurs through the novel: Jean, dressed as a



slave girl, witnesses the stabbing murder by barbarians of a Roman centurian who, when examined by a doctor, turns out to be a beautiful woman.

Events take a turn for the worse for Jean when she eavesdrops on a conversation between her father and the doctor who performed the abortion; they plan to take her to Europe to undergo experimental hormone treatment that they hope will cure her lesbianism and improve her personality. The only way she can see to avoid the treatment is to murder her father; one night she takes him to the local cemetery where a grave has been freshly dug, kills him by smashing his skull with a shovel, and buries him in the grave. Although the doctor suspects her of the crime, she is able to convince the local police that she is an innocent victim who is beaten and abused by her grandmother and the doctor.

When it seems that she has escaped all suspicion, she starts to experience intermittent bouts of insanity in which her father appears and implores her to perform specific tasks; her first task is to dig him up and stop up the hole in his head because his brains are slipping out! She accomplishes this over a couple of nights, and when suspicion falls on her she manages to deflect it onto the doctor. Meanwhile, her cousin Myrtle reappears on the scene and becomes infatuated with Jean; the two attend a fancy dress ball, Jean dressed as a slave girl and Myrtle as a centurian, seemingly suggesting that Jean's dream was clair-audient.

The doctor employs a detective to investigate the case. He sees through her charade of innocence. When in another fit of insanity she digs up the corpse of her father, he is on hand to apprehend her and she is placed in an asylum. Jean escapes from the asylum and finds that easy money can be made as a Sydney prostitute; however her hatred of men and her intermittent bouts of insanity compel her to become a 'Jill-the-Ripper' serial killer as she ruthlessly dispatches her clients. She is able to live in an apartment undiscovered until she murders Myrtle, with whom she has resumed a relationship, in the flat.

Once again she takes on a new identity and sets herself up as a beautician; she even seems to be 'cured' when she is seduced by 'scar-face' Harry Lees, a rough, masculine criminal and drug-dealer. The two go into business together and the partnership prospers. Unfortunately for Jean the detective reappears and she is forced to kill him; when she tells Harry what she as done he is horrified and deserts her. Disillusioned once and for all, she gases herself in the kitchen, leaving behind her diary for posterity.

So there you have it! Classic 1930s pulp. Sad to say, Walford's other works don't live up to the promise of *Twisted Clay*. His collection of short stories, *The Ghost of Albert and Other Stories,* includes a couple of supernatural tales, but they are fairly bland humorous efforts with little to recommend them.

And what of Walford himself? Born in Balmain, Sydney in 1882, he led an adventurous life in his youth, going to North Queensland as a buffalo hunter and crocodile shooter and living with Indigenous people to learn bush survival techniques. He sailed a schooner between Townsville and Broome with an Aboriginal crew. He settled in Katoomba, NSW, in 1919 to work for the *Blue Mountains Echo* newspaper, in which he published poetry by Eleanor Dark and Eric Lowe.

His first novel, *Indiscretions of Iole*, evidently sold 20,000 copies in Britain, and his short stories we regularly broadcast on Australian radio. In 1942 he won 200 pounds in a *Woman's Weekly* short story contest. He was active in the local community at Katoomba. During World War II he joined the Volunteer Defence Corps and roamed the Blue Mountains seeking out strategic locations for ammunition dumps and bases for guerrilla fighters in the event that Australia was successfully invaded. He died in 1969.

— James Doig, 2009

Graham Clement

George Turner's short fiction

A PURSUIT OF MIRACLES
by George Turner
(Aphelion Publications; 1990; 209 pp.)

A Pursuit of Miracles is a fabulously entertaining and thought-provoking collection of science fiction short stories. It maintains the exceptionally high

standards of **George Turner**'s many novels. Turner is arguably Australia's best ever science fiction writer and this collection shows why.

There are only eight stories in the collection's 207 pages, so they are mostly long stories. All but one of Turner's nine short stories appears in the collection. Turner preferred to write novels. Indeed, at least two of the stories in this collection were later turned into novels.

Turner was obviously a proud Australian, as most of the stories are set in a future Australia. He seemed to be fascinated with telepathy, which is the main theme, or in the background, of a number of the stories. Turner also seemed very much concerned with humanity's destruction of the environment. The collection was published in 1990 and the stories have not dated.

The collection begins with the title story 'A Pursuit of Miracles'. It's a story that snuck up on me as I wondered about the emotional intelligence of the scientists involved. It is set in a world were very few animals live. In a research lab, scientists are attempting to see if the animals that remain can be controlled by telepathy. But one of the co-workers, a damaged clone, shows that empathy with animals would have been a much better option to explore.

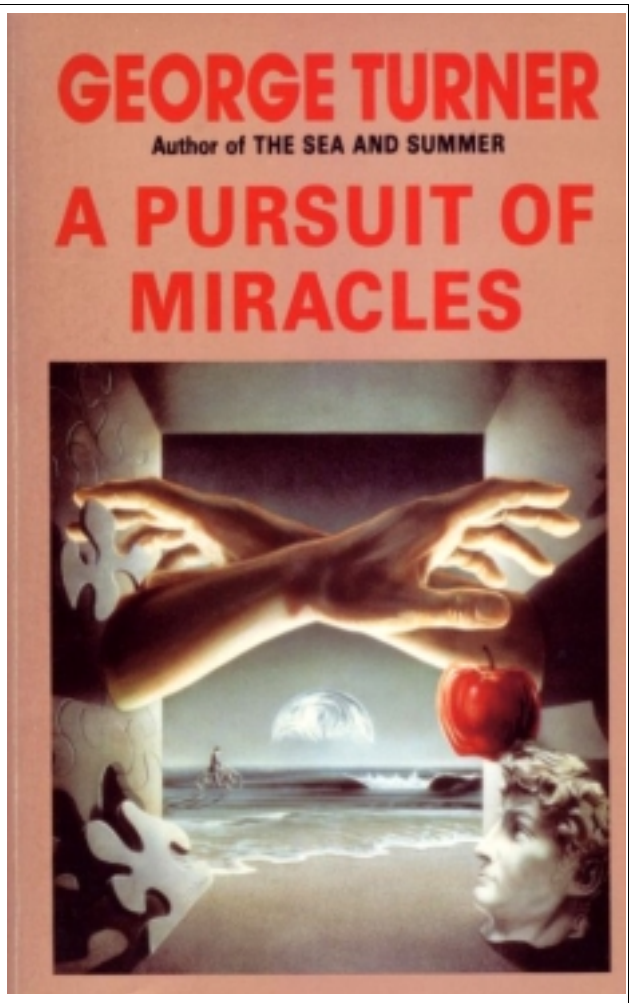
The second story, 'Not in Front of the Children', is a story about arrogance and ignorance. A privileged teenage girl, who lives in a world were ageing has been slowed, rebels against her parents as she tries to discover what death is.

'Feedback' is a rather strange story, with a very unexpected and weird ending. A hypnotist and a telepath are brought together by a rich pastoralist on an outback property. The pastoralist believes that together they might be able to enter his mind and go back to the beginning of creation. This experiment is watched over by a solipsistic cultist who believes that the universe is his own imagined creation.

'Shut the Door When You Go Out' later became the brilliant novel *Genetic Soldier*. One of the shorter pieces in the collection, it is set thousands of years into the future. Most of humanity had deserted Earth, leaving it to its former indigenous tribes. A spaceship returns, its crew wanting to resettle what used to be Australia. But this time, the genetically altered Aborigines object to being colonised.

In 'On the Nursery Floor' a reporter tries to find out what happened at a laboratory years earlier. The laboratory was used to genetically engineer super-intelligent children, who escaped. The reporter tries to track them down.

In 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs' an orbiting community sends the 'perfect' man down to earth to marry a rich heiress. He takes her back to his community's



huge space station that collects solar power and transmits it to an earth they no longer feel part of.

The collection finishes with 'The Fittest', which is the best story of the collection. It is set in a Melbourne slowly being inundated by the sea. Society is split into the Sweet, the 10 per cent of people who have jobs, and the Swill, the 90 per cent who survive on government handouts.The story revolves around a Sweet family whose father loses his job, forcing them to move to the Swill's slums. But one child is brilliant with numbers, a talent that makes him valuable to those who don't want to leave records on computers. 'The Fittest' later became *The Sea and Summer*, which is the best Australian science fiction novel I have read. It was nominated for a Nebula Award and won its year's Arthur C. Clarke award.

A Pursuit of Miracles is an extremely strong collection that would appeal to most readers of science fiction. If you are an Australian science fiction reader, you simply have to read it and discover how good Australian science fiction can be.

— Graham Clement

John Litchen

Reviving the sense of wonder

CHILDREN OF THE ATOM
By Wilmar H. Shiras
(Boardman Books; 1954)

Not long after the end of World War II, after everyone had seen the devastation wrought by the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan, a number of novels appeared that speculated on some of the possible outcomes of atomic radiation. Ignoring the plethora of books about post-atomic war devastation and destroyed societies struggling to recover, there were a few good books about the possibility of mutations caused by radiation. *The Crysalids* by John Wyndham was one; another was ***Children of the Atom*** by **Wilmar H. Shiras**. Published in Britain in 1954, it was probably published originally in the US in 1952 or 1953. There was usually a year's delay before the British edition, which would be the one available in Australia.

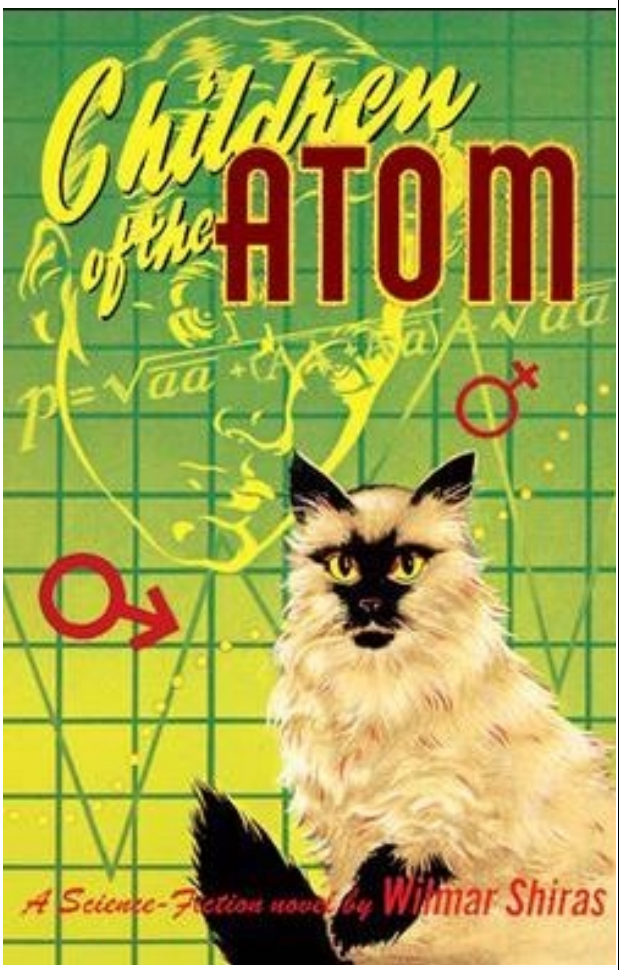
It's a quiet, subtle story that begins most intriguingly when a teacher sends a young boy to the school psychiatrist for examination. The teacher explains: 'I don't know, myself, that there's anything wrong with Tim. He seems perfectly normal. He's rather quiet as a rule, doesn't volunteer answers in class or anything of that sort.' She explains that Tim gets on well with the other children but doesn't have any special friends and his grades are always consistently B in all his work. 'There is a tension about him — a look in his eyes sometimes — and he is very absent minded.'

All this on the first page! Who wouldn't be intrigued?

I first read this book in one sitting and thought it was fabulous, but I was 15 at the time and could empathise with Tim, a boy who was different and who kept to himself.

At first Tim is reluctant to talk to the psychiatrist. These opening scenes of the first conversations between Tim and Dr Welles are fascinating as the two of them try to outmanoeuvre each other verbally. Tim is obviously much smarter than anyone at the school could have guessed. Initially Dr Welles suspects Tim's IQ to be above 200, but he is not sure. It seems way above anything that can be measured with the standard tests of the day.

The story is set in the near future (as seen from the early 1950s). It mentions an explosion at an atomic plant at a place called Helium City in 1958 that destroyed it and irradiated all the workers. They didn't die but went on as normal for a few years. Those of them who were married had children, usually one, and when the children were about one year old all the parents suddenly got ill and died. The various children went to live with relatives, aunts, and uncles, grandparents, but a few went to orphanages in the public system. Tim lived with his grandparents, who were fairly strict. When the story opens it is 14 years after the damaging



Original US book cover: Gnome Press, 1953.

atomic explosion. The year is 1972.

Tim was a genius. He taught himself to read at the age of three by associating the words on the page with what his grandmother was reading. He composed a symphony based on mathematical principles and wrote articles and books that were published under a number of pen-names. Tim thinks he is the only one like that and he doesn't want anyone else to know his accomplishments. Even his grandparents don't know that he has also completed by correspondence several degree courses at a number of universities … and all this by the age of 12.

When Dr Welles discovers there were other children who were born of parents irradiated at the same time during the explosion in Helium City he begins to search for them in the hope of bringing them together so they can live a normal life among others of their own kind. He finds a 13-year-old girl hiding in a lunatic asylum. She writes poetry and plays and has written a play that could be thought of as a lost work by Shakespeare. There are many others, each of them with a unique ability, each with an IQ that is immeasurable.

Dr Welles suspects that these children are mutants. Every one of the children is normal in appearance, but every one of them has the same mutation, which allows them the ability to use the entire brain. This seems highly unlikely, since radiation would have affected their parents in different ways. Each mutation would have been different, and some of them would definitely have been non- viable foetuses with a wide variety of obvious departures from the normal.

It is convenient for the story to have them all the same. If the children mature and have children of their own it is possible that each person's mutation may be passed on, and then again it may not. This is not something of a concern, since all the children by the end of the book are in their teens. There was no suggestion of them forming liaisons or having sexual relations that could result in pregnancies. They all seemed rather asexual.

A suspension of belief is needed to accept the premise of 20 or so children having exactly the same mutation resulting in super-intelligence, but once you have accepted that, the story is quite enjoyable, written in clear, almost old-fashioned prose.

A school is founded where all the children (who also invest their earnings from work produced under pen names to help finance it) can live together and interact with each other as equals. They no longer have to hide, but when people in the nearby town discover that these children are different they feel threatened by their existence. Fired up by a mad preacher, they surround the entrance to the school, throw rocks and bottles, and are about to riot and wreck the place when Tim, who knows all of them, and Dr Welles, who is also known from his work with children at the ordinary school, confront them to explain what is going on. Among the rioting townsfolk are school friends of Tim. They recognise that Tim is not dangerous, or the spawn of the Devil, so they all calm down. With the crisis averted the townsfolk return home and the Children decide that they should mix with everyone else at a normal school and simply keep their talents quiet. Integration is the key to acceptance. To try and remain outside of society is only asking for trouble. since no one likes an outsider, especially one who is so much smarter than they are.

I was intrigued to find out how well this book reads today. Being older now, I found the later part slow moving with too much waffle between the kids as they talk about what they are doing, but until that point it was still an intriguing and engrossing read. The ending I thought was too soft and understated, and not very convincing.

The mention of the children's conversations being recorded by 'recording wire' is a definite anachronism. It means the story was probably started in the late 1940s before being completed in the early 1950s. Recording wire on spools with reel-to-reel tape machines were used for a short period after the World War II. Recording wire is mentioned (p. 132). It is mentioned again as the adults set up a secret surveillance of the children. On page 142 there is a slip-up that should have been corrected. There is a mention that Dr Welles and his associate Dr Foxwell sometimes listened to the wire recordings but further down the page it says: for a few moments the tape recorded only the usual sounds of a room. After that, any further mention of recording is associated with the word 'tape'. Reel-to-reel tape recorders were widespread in the early 1950s and wire recorders quickly became obsolete. The description of the recording method should have been consistent. (I had a German reel-to-reel portable tape recorder in the mid 1950s. By 1960 I had switched to a Japanese Akai seven-inch reel to reel. Cassette tapes and solid state recording would have been unimaginable in the early 1950s.)

This book could be classified as a juvenile, as most science fiction was in the 1950s, but it is not the kind of juvenile story read today by young adults. The narrative is too slow and too quiet for their tastes. It has none of the ultra-violence they expect, having grown up on video games and action movies. But for those of us who grew up during the 1950s and 1960s it is an enjoyable and nostalgic read.

I do believe a new edition was reissued in the US some years ago. The editors might well have now removed the anomaly of the wire recorder and

recording tape. My copy is the one published in 1954.

It is a book I still would recommend because it stands out as a superior story of its type when compared to others of the same period. And it rightly deserves to be called 'a classic'.

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE
by James Blish (Ballantine Books; 1958)

The first part of **James Blish**'s ***A Case of Conscience*** was published as a novella in *IF Worlds of SF* in 1953. I read this as a paperback novel some 10 years later — more than 50 years ago.

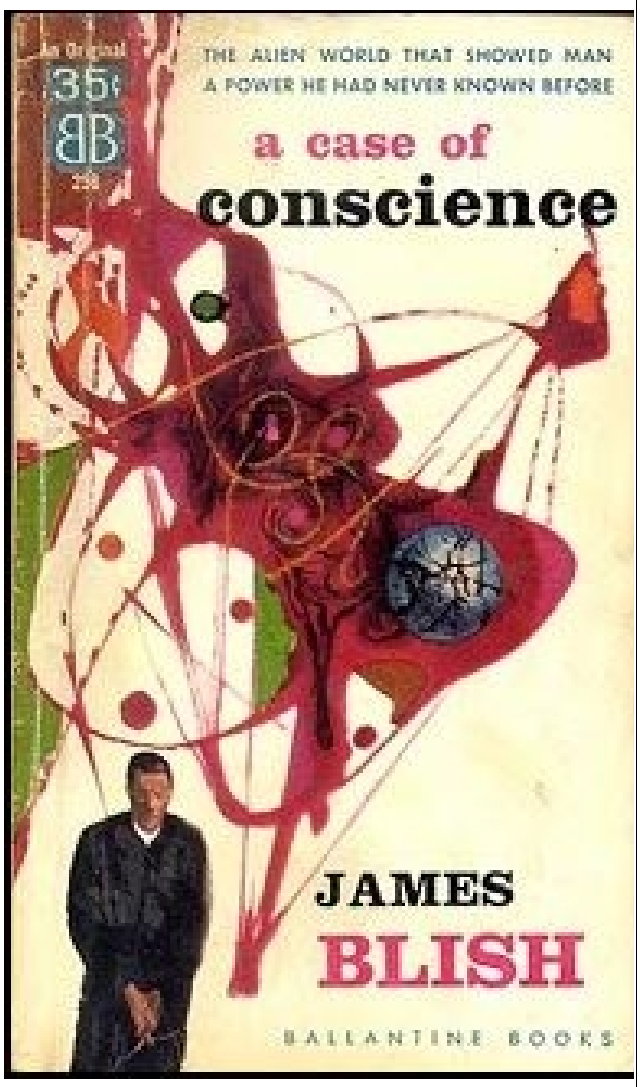
I approached this book again with the expectation that I would be disappointed, that my good memories of it would be coloured by time and nostalgia. I was 23 when I first read it and now I am 72. Would it still be a good read?

It seems just as fresh and exciting today as I remembered it being way back in 1963. Part 1 is set on Lithia, a planet in a nearby star system that resembles Earth as it may have been millions of years ago: a tropical planet, covered in jungles, with its continents surrounded by warm and fecund oceans. It has a diverse and rich ecology in which the dominant species is a large very intelligent reptile that is warm blooded and vaguely reminiscent of a kangaroo. Two teams of examiners have been sent from Earth to evaluate the planet. Their purpose to decide whether Lithia can be opened for exploration and colonisation (exploitation by humans) for trading purposes.

Father Ruiz Sanchez is a member of the team, and it is through his perspective that we see Lithia and its inhabitants. Ruiz Sanchez is a Jesuit priest as well as a biologist. He is puzzled when he doesn't see any youngsters or Lithian children, only adults. Are they being hidden from the Earthmen?

Two of the team are out in the jungle on another continent searching for useful minerals. The other accompanies Ruiz Sanchez. Their time is almost up when Ruiz's partner is bitten by a spiderlike creature ind becomes seriously ill. Ruiz acts as a doctor for him and sends out a call for the other two to return. Also, they must return because the starship is due any day to collect them and take them back to Earth where they will decide the fate of Lithia.

The Lithians avoid the humans when one of them is sick, and only Ruiz's contact among the inhabitants remains with him. Having become reasonably proficient in the Lithian language, Ruiz finally asks why he hasn't seen any children. Why there are only adults in the settlements? His contact finally explains that when the females conceive they swim out to sea to disperse the fertilised eggs, which then hatch into small fishlike creatures that must survive endless predation by other dangerous inhabitants in the ocean. Those that survive begin to develop hard fins, which they use to crawl up out of the ocean onto the mud flats. On the mud flats they bark and cough endlessly to develop their lungs and the capacity to breathe air. The gills they previously used as fishlike creatures atrophy. Again, these juvenile Lithians must survive on their own. They must leave the beach and the mudflats, where they are easy prey, and move into the jungles where other predators await them. Their circulatory systems metamorphose from the cold blood they had as fish creatures into a warm-blooded system. Once that has happened they move into jungle. When the survivors finally emerge from the jungle they come out as adults and head towards the cities and settlements where they will be educated and taught language. They retain all memories of the identity



Original US book cover: Ballantine Books, 1958.

of their parents and the events of their maturation.

When Ruiz discovers this he is horrified, yet fascinated from a biological viewpoint. His dilemma is: because the children are born and develop outside of the mother, can there be original sin? Does this mean God is superfluous? Or is Lithia an elaborate trap set by the Devil to corrupt the Children of God? Ruiz cannot resolve his dilemma, and votes to keep Lithia closed. Two others on the team also vote to maintain isolation, but the final member, who has military connections on Earth, votes to exploit the mineral resources of the planet. He wants factories set up to build atomic weapons and stockpile them against possible future attacks on Earth by other aliens they might yet encounter.

Still uncertain of the final outcome, they are about to board the starship when Ruiz's Lithian friend comes up and presents him with a gift to take back to Earth. A vase made from every metal found on Lithia has been fused into a superb artefact that contains the gift — a fertilised egg, the giftgiver's son, or what would become the giftgiver's son if he is born. Ruiz can hardly refuse the gift. even though he doesn't want it or the responsibility it represents. He takes it on board and they leave.

This first half is beautifully written, Blish's imagery a delight as he conjures up the world of Lithia.

The second half of *A Case of Conscience*, requested by a publisher, is not as interesting as the first half.

Earth is controlled by the UN after decades of cold war during which everyone learns to live underground instead of on the Earth's surface. These people have a paranoid fear of being annihilated by the atomic bombs that every nation has accumulated in a desire for mutual destruction in the event of war. There is growing unrest between those who can afford to live underground, as millions do, and those who remain on the surface.

Ruiz and his colleagues raise the Lithian child, who very quickly learns English, being quite intelligent. When he is introduced to society, he sees through the hypocrisy that pervades it. For his own entertainment he foments a rebellion between those who live underground (the wealthy and the privileged) and those who live on the surface. When this conflict starts to get out of control, he smuggles himself on board a starship that is returning to Lithia, where Earth people have established a colony to exploit the mineral resources and stockpile atomic weapons.

Meanwhile Ruiz is blamed for all the problems initiated by his return from Lithia, and is excommunicated from the Church. He finds himself on the Moon, from where he can communicate with Lithia, only to witness the total destruction of the planet Lithia from experiments involving the stockpiled fissionable material.

Does this mean that Ruiz's original problem has been solved? Has the threat from the Devil been nullified? Is Blish saying religion always brings destruction? Is he saying that humans are beyond redemption, that they destroy everything they don't understand, or that doesn't comply with their ideals?

Blish leaves these questions open for the reader to decide. Even though the second half seems a little dated, the first part is as fresh and exciting today as it was for anyone reading it in the 1960s. In many ways this book is probably more relevant today than it was over half a century ago. If you haven't read it, go find a copy. You won't be disappointed.

WILLIAM BREIDING has had many occupations over the years, while making himself into a writer and editor. He is now the editor of *Portable Storage*, the hottest fanzine around.

William M. Breiding

The Anti-Libertarian Book Review

Libertarians are nothing but dope-smoking Republicans. — D. S. Black

Serf: A slave, esp. a member of the lowest feudal classes in medieval Europe, bound to the land and owned by a lord.

Peon: Unskilled worker bound in servitude to landlord-creditor.

Peonage: A system by which debtors are bound to servitude to their creditors until their debts are paid.

WINNERS
by Poul Anderson (1981; Tor)

If you read any amount of science fiction criticism, or reviewing, a term you'll often find used is 'elegiac'. No writer in the genre embodies that term more than **Poul Anderson** in this omnibus of award-winning novelettes. Each tale has a sense of sadness, longing, dusk before darkness, the lyrical. In each tale, whether earthbound, or among the stars, Man Has Fallen, but is toiling towards a glimmered future (and perhaps an essential component of much science fiction is to give comfort to a bleak present).

It's impossible for me to divorce myself from the politics of a writer. Try as I might, it's hard to dislike Poul Anderson. His vision of libertarianism is so romantic that he nearly makes me long for a return to Nordic barbarism. I have a pessimist's view of humans and therefore believe that extremist party-line libertarianism is a crock. And though they are fine fictions, I found 'Goat Song', 'The Longest Voyage', and 'No Truce With Kings' to be slightly repugnant. They are driven by an agenda that I find entirely bogus: if given complete freedom humans will do the right thing, as well as aspire to, and achieve, greatness. This just ain't so. All we have to do is look at corporate America, the big oil and coal corporations, and Wall Street, on down to sweat shops, the individual fishermen who tend to overfish for profit (or the sugar harvests in south Florida — check below for Alec Wilkinson's *Big Sugar*) to see greed at work, and its results. Humans are much too avaricious, ruthless, petty, and monomaniacal. If America were truly libertarian we'd be in even worse straits than we already are.

So: 'No Truce With Kings' is about an alternate and primitive California amidst a civil war; one side is seeking to maintain what Anderson calls 'bossdoms', basically feudal lordships with many serfs, but romanticised so that the serfs feel a part of a community, rather than like peons (yeah, right, give me a break!).The ambiguous other side in this war is reaching out towards a centralised government. Aliens have taken over San Francisco (and I suppose they have!) and do a stand-in for a democratic big government (the bad guys). Who will win? In Anderson's fantasy, hearty bossdoms rule, okay?

'The Longest Voyage' takes place on another planet. Humanoid Viking-like explorers sail the seas, encounter Oceania-type Islanders. The Islanders have among them a 'living god', who turns out to be a shipwrecked astronaut from Earth. The Viking-types have made further advances in metal working than the Islanders. It becomes apparent to the astronaut that he can escape back to space with their help. In exchange he offers the Viking-types tech advances and the possibility of world peace upon his return. Guess what? They destroy the spaceship.

In 'Goat Song' a computer is running the show in a pastoral far future. One man thinks this ought not be the case, and brings about certain destruction of the computer system even though it will result in chaos and mayhem.

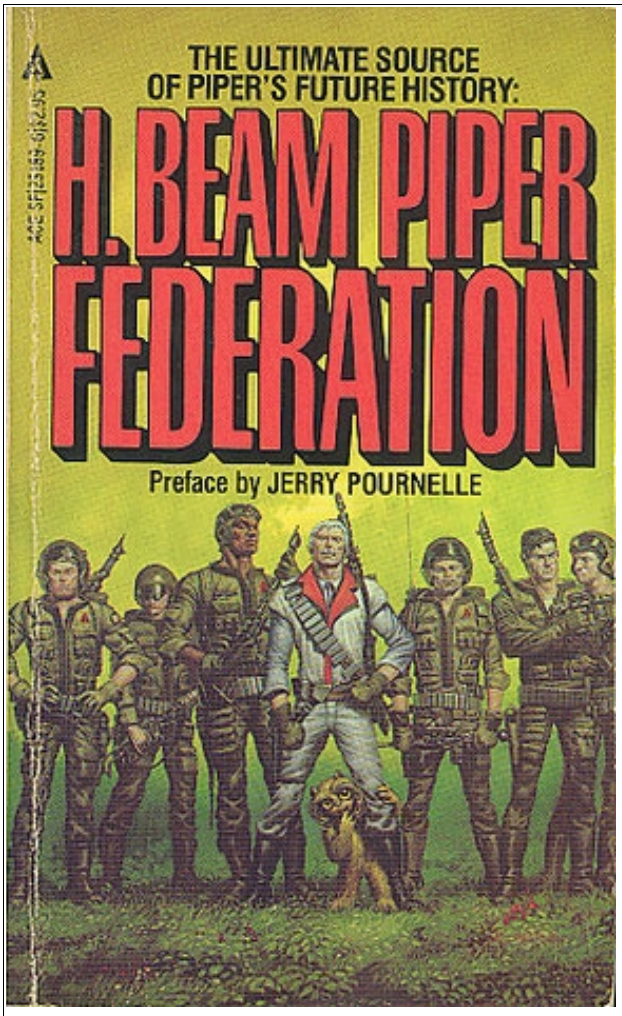
Sorry! I just can't buy into Anderson's vision that the primitive, warring society with small, strong communities led by tyrants are as exhilarating, lusty, and free as he's daydreaming about in these stories. These libertarian visions are romantic and unrealistic.

The two remaining pieces, 'The Sharing of Flesh' and 'Queen of Air and Darkness' come close to being agenda free. 'The Sharing of Flesh' is an interesting systematic look at the causes of cannibalism in a degenerate human colony on a distant planet, written from the perspective of a woman whose husband has been munched by the village gimp's pre-adolescent sons. 'Queen of Air and Darkness' is, perhaps, a true science fiction classic, incorporating the realms of faerie and Nordic myth with Sherlock Holmes and alien encounter. Even with all its expository lumps showing there is enough mystery, ambiguity and beauty in 'Queen of Air and Darkness' to resonate after any number of readings.

FEDERATION
by H. Beam Piper (Ace Books; 1986)

Little Fuzzy is probably the first thing that comes to mind when anyone thinks of **H. Beam Piper** at all. Little Fuzzies are small, adorable bipeds with golden fur coats and big ears, two wide, round eyes and human-like rationality, to which readers apparently react in the same manner that the crew of the *Enterprise* did in the *Star Trek* episode, 'The Trouble With Tribbles'.

Piper's second claim to fame is the mysteriously titled time travel story, 'He Walked Around the Horses'. Like Lloyd Biggle, Jr, H. Beam Piper has a slightly amusing name that will be known only to someone deeply interested in science fiction. Biggle and Piper, though respected as craftsmen with a few minor masterpieces under their belts, are largely forgotten and only occasionally



anthologised, and that's too bad. I bought ***Federation*** despite the fact it had a preface by Jerry Pournelle. I read *Federation* despite the fact that Jerry Pournelle's preface indicated that he was the official inheritor of Piper's literary worlds and that he and Piper had first met in Poul Anderson's room at a convention; despite the fact that Pournelle makes it clear that Piper was a diehard libertarian. Despite all of these negatives I went ahead and read and enjoyed *Federation*'s five novelettes.

Unlike Poul Anderson's form of libertarianism, which has the cavalier fervor of Rush Limbaugh, Piper's form is simply manifest destiny and a lot easier to take, especially when Piper is so very careful to be inclusive of women, who carry strong roles in these stories (while not necessarily being main characters) and of race, which is not an issue in Piper's star-hopping future because Earth has truly become a melting pot, with the centres of power all in the southern hemisphere. (Montevideo and Sydney are frequently mentioned.)

Piper is at his most despicable in stories where humans conquer because it is manifest that they do so ('Oomphel in the Sky', 'When in the Course—'); he is at his best when working out alien anthropological puzzles ('Omnilingual', 'Naudsonse'). Only in 'Graveyard of Dreams' does he pit humans to solve human economic problems at the expense of no one else. These are bright and shiny baubles, in which humans tinker and build and technology makes everything square.

Like some other notable pulp writers, H. Beam Piper's competent humans were merely daydreams. He lived with his mother in small-town Pennsylvania working as a rail yard detective in Altoona. In 1956, depending on who's telling the story, he either quit his job after his mother died, or was made 'redundant'. Not too long after this his literary agent died. Apparently dysfunctional, he never figured out how to get another representative, and his career (and money) ebbed away. Because of his strong (idiotic, in my view) libertarian ideals, he was unable to ask help from anyone. In November 1964 he shot himself with a gun from his collection (did I mention he had a valuable gun collection he might have sold?) leaving a suicide note that said (to my mind, humorously): 'I don't like to leave messes when I go away, but if I could have cleaned up any of this mess, I wouldn't be going away. H. Beam Piper.' He did, however, hang a drop cloth on the wall and another on the floor before following his beliefs to the bitter end. You gotta love these spirited, independent-minded science fiction writers.

EMPIRE
by H. Beam Piper (Ace Books; 1981)

Five more novellas in Piper's future history. From these stories I get the idea that Piper had respect only for the lone gunman and the isolated research scientist. He has cynical portraits of teachers, universities, the poor, the enslaved, all political parties, and even the military, as nothing but varying forms of petty bureaucracy and parliamentarian futzing. Despite my distaste for Piper's politics and his reliance on force, he was a fine storyteller, and his belief in the strength of the individual is engaging, and very American.

BIG SUGAR
by Alec Wilkinson (Knopf; 1989)

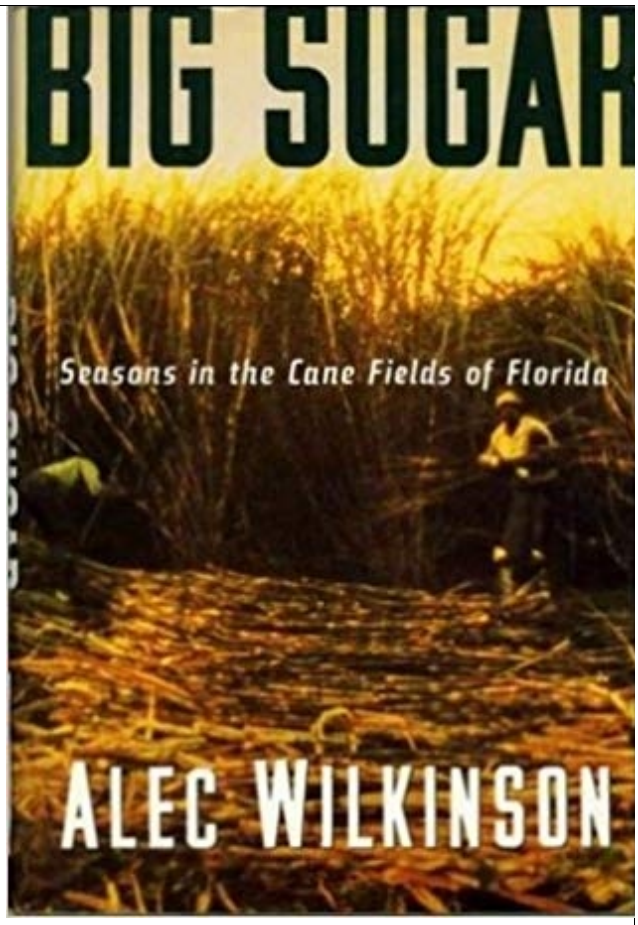
Alec Wilkinson is a *New Yorker* writer who always appears guileless. Of the four books I've read by Wilkinson (*The Riverkeeper*, *A Violent Act*, *Moonshine*, and *Big Sugar*), ***Big Sugar*** is the least composed. This book sprawls with countless details, crying for a sharpened narrative sense. The book, however, is a powerful testament to the hypocrisy of America and the evils of unrestrained, free-market capitalism ('corporate libertarianism').

Wilkinson's investigation into the sugar industry

of south Florida was prompted by headlines in the *New York Times* when a young college student was killed during a labour protest at a south Florida sugar plant. He spent much of the mid-eighties researching the Florida sugar industry as well as actually being present during the cane harvests, which are during the winter months. Sugar became a big industry in south Florida directly after the American economic embargo of Cuba, which had been our primary source of cane sugar until then. It is a labour-intensive crop to harvest, also a dangerous one, both because of the hand blades used to cut the cane and the leafy cane itself. A completely safely clothed harvester would look something like Mad Max of *Road Warrior*.

From the 1930s through the 1950s sugar harvesting in Florida was done mostly by poor blacks from Florida's neighbouring states. The history of coercion is too lengthy to go into here, but basically the sugar industry canvassed the South for workers, promising free transportation to the cane plantations, free meals and board, and a fairly high wage. Once the worker was ensconced he found himself a victim of peonage. He was told his transportation to the fields from a state or two a way cost so much, his meals in transit were thus amount, the tools and clothing he would need for harvesting this sum, that his wage would be less than originally promised, and that he was now such and such amount in debt to the company and must stay to work it off. During the early harvest period the worker would inevitably need spending money and become further indebted. Only with great difficulty would he ever be able to pay off the sugar company, let alone get ahead. Countless men tried to run off; many succeeded, many did not. Those who were caught were threatened physically, sometimes beaten, and told that they would never escape, and if they tried again they would be killed. It was only after 20 years of complaints to the Labor Board that anything was ever done. The sugar industry was told to change its ways. Instead, they began importing workers from the West Indies, primarily Jamaica, and subjecting them to the same policies of exploitation. The Labor Board turned a blind eye, and is still turning it.

In the early 1980s the Jamaicans staged a strike and nearly all of them were instantly deported. To complete the cane harvest Big Sugar tried hiring Americans again. Within 12 days nearly the entire American workforce had either been fired or had quit. A little later the Haitians stepped in. By season's end they, too, were all gone. By next harvest the Jamaicans were back in place. I have little doubt that nothing has truly changed since this book was published (1989) and that the cane-harvesting seasons continue to be as wretched, demeaning, and despicable as ever. And Americans



wonder why we're hated around the world. This one small area of capitalistic hypocrisy is just the tip of the iceberg. (This was written right before 9.11; look at the world now.)

The basis of libertarianism — Ayn Rand's Theory Of Selfishness among other propositions — is incongruous to the well-being of others.

Voracious need is an all-too-common human trait that can lead to greed or avaricious behavior. Power acquired by the avaricious leads to all forms of slavery. While libertarianism suggests 'freedom', it means only 'freedom from' the larger body politic that requires giving thought to others. (And so whose freedom is it anyway?)

Poul Anderson necessarily romanticises his 'bossdoms'. To look squarely at what he describes in 'No Truce With Kings' is to view a form of slavery. He skirts this basic issue to concentrate on the 'bosses', who are fighting against a larger form of centralised government. Anderson understands that libertarian ideals are romantic ideals and cannot function in real-world situations. If Anderson had scaled his picture back to life, we could see the same principles at work: boss-as-big government, and revolution within the bossdom to gain complete freedom by the serf. A continual breakdown in this method leaves us with the fractured, ineffectual individual.

H. Beam Piper tackles corporate libertarianism. Actually, it's just unrestrained free-market capitalism; the very kernel of libertarianism and the Theory Of Selfishness. Piper was not a romantic, unlike Poul Anderson. In Piper's future someone is always getting fucked.

We come to the real world of Alec Wilkinson's book. Here we see the theory of selfishness and libertarian ideals at work in a corporate situation and the real world doing very little about it, because the subjugation of peoples on this scale amasses huge profits for the corporation and its shareholders.

Is the Libertarian world-view a realistic one for this society? How does it work in the real world? The link between personal liberty and personal accountability can't even be approached as realistic argument; we can't even agree on what the right thing to do is, so how can you have complete personal liberty without affecting another? If the government is scaled back to a bare minimum, where does that leave you? Nothing comes for free, right, including freedom? Sit back in your cozy chair, in your comfy house, in your nice neighbourhood and consider for a moment the infrastructure of the world in which you live. The only reason it exists is because you and your family pay for it. If you stop paying for it, it will eventually break down and cease to exist, this infrastructure you've relied on your entire life, that has made you relatively free to do and be as you will. Be glad you weren't born in China or Russia or Sudan or Libya or Burma, where you would be dead by now — not sitting there with your pipe full of dope.

— **Wm. Breiding**, 2011

Get to love your redneck

THE NEW AND IMPROVED ROMIE FUTCH by Julia Elliott (Tin House Books; 2015)

Roman Morrison Futch. The Futchman. Time's logical result of the high school hesher. Of a place (the South) and of a time (the 1980s). But universal. The hesher: A mulleted, leather-jacket-wearing teenager with a taste for heavy metal, head-banging his way across the landscape seeking sex and prime inebriation.

Mr Futch, now in his forties, his mullet mutated to partial baldness and limp ponytail, is drug-addled, drunk, a gone-to-pot GenXer, sitting in his shack accessing the internet obsessively. He's a potbellied taxidermist with a failed career, sitting in lawn chairs with a couple of good ole buds, petulantly sipping Miller Lite in the gloaming.

'Don't go there,' says Lee, referencing Romie Futch's constant fugue state, locked on to his ex-wife, Helen Honeycutt, every high school hesher's day dream babe ('I could almost taste Helen — booze and Bubblicious and a faint hint of snot'), and Romie's high school sweetheart, wife of a probable quarter century. Now she's moved on to find a better life (a nerdy new husband, of the attorney type, who certainly found a trophy in Helen).

Amidst the blurred drudge of his down-trending life a scrolling ad appears across Romie Futch's screen. He suspects Google has tailored it from his search trends, accessing his lame life:

> HAVE YOU EVER DREAMED OF BEING A GENIUS?
> Males between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five without coursework or degrees from four-year colleges or universities are invited to participate in an intelligence enhancement study at the Center for Cybernetic Neuroscience in Atlanta, GA … Subjects will undergo a series of pedagogical downloads via direct brain–computer interface. Subjects will receive $6000 compensation … Travel expenses paid. Room and board provided. Serious inquiries only.

This might be the future. ***The New and Improved Romie Futch***'s one science-fictional element is the bio-computer that uploads information by nano-biotic data transmission directly to the brain via wet chips inserted in the skull — but the book is most certainly placed now, and yesterday. There is a bunch of ironic handwaving going on here but that's to be expected from a very smart writer, whose hobby horses include cyborgs, androids, bionic limbs, and the whole nature of the post human-mechanical amalgamation.

Intelligence enhancement is a time-honoured sf trope. It can be traced back at least as far as H. G. Wells, into sf's Golden Age, on through the New Wave, and to the present. Whether **Julia Elliott** is aware of any of this makes no never mind: she's using it to her own purposes in this sprawling, phantasmagorical, hyperkinetic Southern Gothic novel.

The neuro uploads are administered by the classically handsome Dr Morrow, a self-absorbed hybrid Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg type, wiping bagel crumbs from lab smock, consulting micro pad as he goes. He's the perfect twenty-

first-century mad doctor. His Igor are two twenty-something trendies, here primarily for Elliott's droll observations on the current generation. (She has plenty of fodder as a prof at the University of South Carolina.)

The initial upload into the Futchman's brain is the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Roget's Thesaurus*, allowing the book to flutter immediately to life with fun, evocative use of words, sentence structure, imagery, and astringent, slaphappy street patios, entwining slang with formal theory and texts.

The contrast with the book's first 50 pages is not as great as it would seem. The pre-upload prose is of a not quite transparent style, and Romie Futch is no dummy. Elliott's verbal ticks are in place, just not pronounced, so when Romie emerges to light from the transmission process he finds his tongue wrapped in words that his consciousness rapidly tries to find meaning for, through intentional use of awkward dialogue that eventually follows through to complex ideologues. Language forms thought? Or thought forms language?

The pattern of the book is set for the next 100 pages. Romie submits to neuro-uploads, descends into darkness, then flashbacks of his life, mostly about his ex-wife, Helen Honeycutt, then wakes with an increasing labyrinthine thought train. He wanders down to the Richard Feynman Nano-technology Lounge (the cafeteria) and tests his newly implanted knowledge on the other Biological Artificial Intelligence Transmission (BAIT) subjects, all of whom are lowlife losers and drug addicts.

We learn that Romie Futch isn't your basic mindless rural redneck. As a teen he had the urge towards creating art, which can only mean a deeper inner life that his cultural environment squelched. He realises its larger implications after a 'convo' with Irvin, another BAIT session subject:

> 'Same skills, man. Funkabilly, hep hop, zamrock jazz. Whatever. Never did like labels. Fusion's the only genre that works for me on a semantic level.' [Irvin speaking.]
>
> 'I reckon there's something to that.' [Romie speaking.]
>
> 'Damn straight there is.'
>
> There had been times in my life when I'd briefly considered the artistic possibilities of taxidermy, though I'd always characterized anything falling outside the naturalistic tradition as a novelty stunt, and hence, not Art with a capital A. And this dichotomy had stifled the kind of artistic expression that might have saved my ass from the clutches of Bacchus. [Romie narrating.]

Julia Elliott's book is rife with touchstones and hotspots for me. Its characters are all modern high-tech rednecks, not one among them particularly likable, and they come in every flavour: the woodsy hermit (a frequent denizen in literature, often spouting humor and prophecy, and well used here); the ATV-selling, extroverted redneck Romeo; the introverted sidekick; Romie, himself, a

bamboozled non-self-starter stymied by his past and his environment, never able to quite leave his roots behind; Romie's dad (mom's dead after falling into dementia), who has moved on to finicky suburban grouchiness with another woman (it's his taxidermy biz that Romie has taken over), and others.

I come from such stock, West Virginia being the home of the extroverted, overweight git-er-dun redneck, and the introverted, empty-eyed, jaw-hanging, recessive-chinned hillbilly. Julia Elliott hales from a similar southern background. I cannot stand such vermin, finding them neither interesting nor funny in their daily existence. Julia Elliott has found a way to warm her heart (but not mine) towards them, and to write an entirely surreal dystopian novel about rednecks.

Perhaps this is the future of America: The Marching Moron. Redneck culture on the rise. The rude, arrogant, entitled rural and suburban honky redneck is who voted for Donald Trump (as well as the thoroughly misguided, who knew better, and voted for him anyway).

They saw in Trump a kindred soul, narrow, ignorant, angry, and misogynist, with zero impulse control. A good ole boy with a billion bucks who would float them all to the top, blue balls swinging from the rear of their monster trucks, proud to be an American when they have no concept of what it means to be an American.

Julia Elliott has written a brave book far removed from her own current chosen lifestyle. A woman steeped in the Arts and Humanities curriculum; a respected author and wordsmith; the co-founder of a music collective. She is the professor of English and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of South Carolina. She is completely, complexly erudite; dark and sexy.

Elliott chooses to write about the intelligence enhancement of the redneck male. The redneck woman is another ball of fur completely (as well as the black redneck, but let's not go there).

The women in Julia Elliott's *The New and Improved Romie Futch* are gauzy, lush, pulchritudinously boisterous, desirable, recognisable contemporary feminine archetypes. They have no great part in the book, but act as engines of desire. The male gaze Julia Elliott assumes is neither mean nor disrespectful, actually quite romantic, and oddly realistic.

And, I suppose, the whole notion of intelligence enhancement of the redneck is also an arch, wishful, romantic notion. Listen to this oddly realistic conversation among the BAIT subjects.

> [Thomas] Bernhard's entire oeuvre had just been uploaded into our brains. And we were digging the dude. In addition to laughing our asses off at his dark humor, we enjoyed his musical verbal motifs and antinationalist rants. We thought Bernhard kicked Thomas Mann's pretentious swollen ass up and down the street.
>
> 'Knocks his fuckin' bourgeois mustache off,' I said.
>
> 'Wanted to haul off and slap that dithering old bitch in *Death in Venice*,' said Trippy. 'And not 'cause I'm homophobic either, dog. Lolita did the whole obsession with youth thing much better, went way beyond flirting with taboos. Homie can spit. Probed the whole titillating nightmare. Got down into the pink throbbing horror with black humor and spasms of genuine despair.'
>
> 'Yeah, but Lolita ain't homoerotic.'
>
> 'True that. If the nymphet had been a catamite, that shit would have never flown.'

The long, dominant middle section of the book, post-release from the Biological Artificial Intelligence Transmission experiment, is what defines Julia Elliott's book as one of pungent realism. While Romie Futch and his BAIT cohorts have brains stuffed with the Humanities curriculum, and have new or revived interests in their creative drives, their basic personalities and inabilities have not altered. Romie and his BAIT-pals remain drug addled, alcoholic, down at the heels, shiftless, and depressed, if not downright mentally ill. So. You can be smart but that doesn't mean you can lead any better sort of life because of it. It can, maybe, make it even more difficult for the knowing.

Romie Futch resumes his life as a ne'er-do-well, trying to be a good boy. But he had never been completely sober, even during the BAIT experiments, and quickly succumbs to his old ways with Chip and Lee, his fellow high school heshers, who fumble about and wonder at the strange things emitting from the new improved Romie Futch's mouth.

Herewith enter Hogzilla. He of mythic proportion, wandering the deep woods. Wild pigs (domestic eatin' pigs gone feral) are a mounting problem in the American south. It is estimated that millions roam the woods, rooting up the forest floor.

Romie is tantalised by the rumor of Hogzilla, the thousand-pound porker, and decides he has to bag him for his new taxidermy-based diorama art project. He embraces the zen and art of hunting, becoming one with his rifle.

His Gothic animatronic dioramas are peopled with the mutants of his native forest, at first attributed to a nearby Safety Kleen dumpsite. As the local wildlife become more bizarre it's clear that something sinister is going on. When Romie finally gets a sighting of Hogzilla the enormous pig appears to have a set of wings, and an enhanced intelligence, one of the many genetically modified animals to

have escaped the nearby medical-pharmaceutical industrial complex, GenExcel, experiments gone wild, one of which is likely our Hero.

Romie begins to obsessively troll HogWild.com, tracking Hogzilla sightings and theories. He meets Hog Killer here, whom Romie fantasises to be a sexy Amazonian pig hunter, but suspects is actually an adolescent teenage boy using a sexy avatar, or perhaps a Man In Black, keeping tabs on his movements and thoughts.

Romie's quest to kill and stuff Hogzilla, and to create astounding dioramas with his taxidermic arts, is mostly a bid to win back his ex-wife, Helen Honeycutt. (The Darwinian fight to win the female: Art vs. Money — which will win? You know the answer.) The book moves through a series of madcap incidents that lead to Romie's art gallery opening, finding Helen pregnant and uninterested (in anything, perhaps), and an amusing showdown with Dr Morrow and crew, ending in a coda that falls mildly flat, but stinking of real life.

If you've made it this far with me you are probably wondering what my final denouncement will be, and I'm unsure that I have one.

The book is a captivating achievement. I rarely feel compelled to write about books in depth, but this one insistently harangued me for an interface to disentangle my responses of repulsion and eagerness. When I set the book down I would avoid returning to it, repelled. But eventually, with renewed interest, I would come back to Julia Elliott's book, eager to be subsumed by her seductive prose. The lack of a likable character was a problem for me. The characters are nonetheless weirdly engaging, if not sympathetic, and deserve your attention.

Much like Romie himself, all during the reading of this book I accessed the internet, reading reviews, author interviews, gleaning further information about the real-life Hogzilla situation in the south.

The professional reviews of *The New and Improved Romie Futch* (*Kirkus*, *NY Times*, *Publisher's Weekly*) were good, but vague, focusing on Elliott's genre-bending and incandescent dialogue; her mashup of street wisdom and artistic, literary, and philosophical deconstruction; the dystopian harangues of the dark corporate takeover that is now in process.

The amateur reviews I came across (vlogs on YouTube) were raves, but more honest, I think, in stating they were nearly incapable of explaining what the book was actually about, or trying to, but unable.

Elliott's genre-bending may be partly at fault here. Her book is a mortar-and-pestled synthesis of fairytale, magical realism, science fiction, the epic quest, the tall tale, and the everyday grey of the modern realist novel of Big Ideas. The admixture is pungent and smooth, dressed in a soaring language, a sentence-by-sentence wordplay that is beautiful, funny, and somehow tragic.

I doubt that my words of wrestling response and talk-back with the book have created a clearer picture of Julia Elliott's achievements and failures in this sprawling picaresque, or that I have been better able to explore its depth. But I want to assure you that this book is a genuine piece of Art, with a capital A.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with some final words from other reviews I came across.

- 'Elliott's work, in its own snarling and unruly way, contains brilliance' (*Kirkus Review*).
- 'The novel's neatest trick is aligning Romie's distress over his own future, which once seemed so boundless, with broader anxieties about what environmental and technological monstrosities the 21st century may bring' (*Publisher's Weekly*).
- 'At times the sad beating heart of Romie's story is lost in all of this escalating absurdity. But so what? The art of taxidermy is turning dead flesh into a facsimile of life, and the art of fiction is turning ink on wood pulp into something terrifyingly alive. Despite its blemishes, Elliott's rambunctious tale snarls and growls on every page, aiming to plunge its lovely, gnarled tusks right into the reader's heart' (*NY Times*).

For a lengthy, interesting review with an axe to grind, check out Elizabeth Byrne's piece at *The Rumpus.net*. Byrne's axe is academia, mine rednecks. This is a big inclusive book and you, too, will be able to find your own axe to grind. Thanks, Julia.

— William Breiding, 2017

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Denny Marshall: 'The Planting'.