



S F COMMENTARY

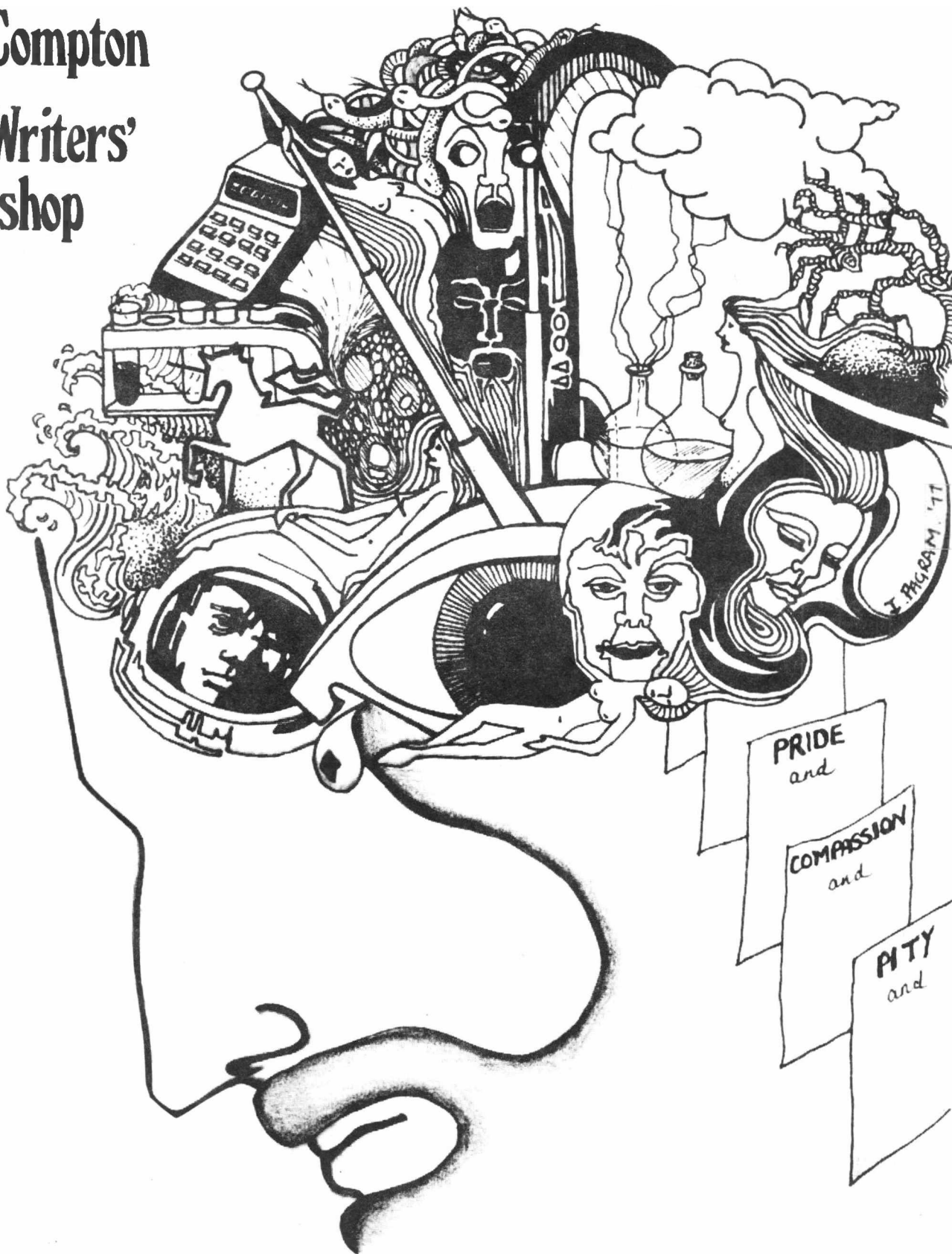
the independent magazine about science fiction

No. 52

JUNE 1977

D G Compton

1977 Writers'
Workshop





S F COMMENTARY

Australia: \$1.00
USA/Canada:
\$1.20 or equivalent



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Illustrations pages 8, 9, 11: Chris Johnston
Art Director: Stephen Campbell (& all other illustrations)

Editor and Publisher: Bruce Gillespie

Typesetting: Melbourne Typesetting 41 4502
Printer: Copyplace, 150 Queen St., Melbourne

Editorial Address: GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria,
3001, Australia. Phone: (03) 419 4797

Subscriptions: Australia: \$5 for 5 or \$10 for 10.
USA & Canada: \$6 for 5 or \$12 for 10
from Hank and Lesleigh Luttrell, 525
West Main, Madison, WI 57303.
All other countries: Remittances already
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... COURAGE AND HONOUR
AND HOPE AND PRIDE AND
COMPASSION AND PITY AND
SACRIFICE ...



Andrew Whitmore

THE NOVELS OF D G COMPTON

EDITOR: Andrew Whitmore has been attending meetings of the Nova Mob for several years now. He was a member of the Australian S.F. Writers' Workshop held in August 1975, has contributions in *The Altered I*, and has since finished a novel. After completing his honours degree in literature at Monash University, he is currently training to be a teacher.

This paper was prepared originally for the Nova Mob meeting of June 1976. It was not, and was never intended to be, a complete assessment of Compton's work. The books that are dealt with are not examined in the detail that they deserve, and I am all too well aware of the inadequacies of this paper. Books such as *Synthajoy*, *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, and *The Silent Multitude* (the last of which I had not read at the time of writing this paper) all deserve essays of their own. All I have hoped to do here is to raise some general points about Compton's work and to indicate why, in my opinion, they deserve more detailed attention.

In the Nova Mob circular preceding the June 1976 meeting, D.G. Compton was described as a "curiously neglected writer". Although I would argue with the word "curiously", there is no doubt that Compton has been "neglected" for a long time.

In the space of twelve years this first book was published in 1965), Compton has published nine novels. This may not be as prolific an output as that of some others in the genre, but it is still a significant production. At the time of writing this paper, five of the novels are out of print, including *Synthajoy*, his best work.

None of Compton's work has ever appeared on the final ballot of a Hugo award. In 1960, *The Electric Crocodile* (its American title) reached the final ballot of the Nebula award. (The Science Fiction Writers of America displayed unaccountable good taste that year. Tucker and Lafferty were among the other nominations. But it was *Ringworld* that took out the award.) *Chronocules* (1970) and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (1974) were both nominated in the preliminary ballot for the respective Nebula awards, but proceeded no further. Given the peculiar nature of the voting system, their appearance in the preliminary ballot was no great achievement.

A book entitled *Cliff Notes: Science Fiction/An Introduction* (1973) contains a "Bibliography of Science Fiction" which, although it is admittedly "select", runs for some 18 pages and contains no less than 115 different authors. Not one of Compton's works is included.

These three separate pieces of information, when added together, rather suggest that Compton is a "neglected writer". More than half of his novels have been allowed to go out of print, on both sides of the Atlantic. He has, with one exception, been totally ignored by those strange and ambiguous creatures, the Hugo and Nebula award voters. He has been excluded from a book that is aimed at supplying all that a student in one of America's many science fiction courses needs to know about the subject and which, one would assume, reflects adequately the content of the courses themselves.

Compton is by no means unique in this way. During the Nova Mob discussion where this paper was presented, the point was made that Brian Aldiss would not have obtained many nominations in either the Hugo or Nebula awards during the period that Compton was publishing. Nor would J.G. Ballard or Stanislaw Lem. Chauvinism is a major ingredient of these awards. But Aldiss has won his Hugo and Nebula awards, and Ballard has become a major figure in the science fiction world (thanks to the enthusiastic PR work of Michael Moorcock and Co.), and Lem seems to be doing quite well for himself on his own. It is also true that there are other glaring omissions in the *Cliff Notes* — for example, there is no mention of Thomas Disch. But Disch has also received his fair share of promotion from *New Worlds*.

To my knowledge, only Compton has been so comprehensively ignored by all sections of the science fiction world (although he has received some good reviews from people like Theodore Sturgeon and George Turner). Before looking at the books themselves, I want to see if I can establish why this should be the case.

In *S F Commentary* 44/45, I came across two references to Compton's novels, both negative, and they seemed to suggest why his work was not popular among science fiction readers. The first remark is a rather odd one:

... too often his (Compton's) books seem to be devoid of all emotion on the part of the characters.

I am not quite sure what is meant by this statement, although it does suggest that the subtle presentation of character is not always appreciated by the readers. The second remark is rather more useful:

... Compton's persistent avoidance of a "sense of wonder". In throwing out the bathwater of pulp s f, Compton has thrown out the baby of visionary qualities as well.

I think it was James Blish who said that the appeal science fiction has for its readers is its strangeness. I think this is very much the case, and it helps to explain why Compton does not appeal to many s f readers. He does, indeed, display a "persistent avoidance of 'sense of wonder'". In fact, Compton is perhaps the least strange science fiction writer to be found within science fiction. The Disch of 334 is perhaps as close as we can find, and it is significant that he is also a "neglected" writer.

It seems to me that a new breed of academic now springing up in America and elsewhere, discovering science fiction for the first time and seemingly bent on displaying their ignorance to as large an audience as possible, also finds this "strangeness" to be the genre's main attraction. These academics regard science fiction as a playground for technological gimmicks, set against exotic scenery, and displaying a basic detachment from contemporary reality. Thus we find them fascinated by Le Guin, Delany, Dick, and Ballard (to name only a few). Even Herbert provokes completely serious essays. It is just these qualities that Compton does not possess.

Technological gimmicks are virtually non-existent in his works. They are of no interest to him at all. Whenever he does use them, he appropriates stock s f clichés. He indulges in no exciting "extrapolations" of a technological nature. A list of what is to be found in his novels gives ample evidence of that:

1. *Farewell, Earth's Bliss* — exiles on Mars.
2. *Synthajoy* — artificially induced emotions.
3. *Chronocules* — time travel
4. *The Electric Crocodile* — computer messiah

5. *The Missionaries* — religious emissaries from outer space.

6. *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* (*The Unsleeping Eye* in USA) — death in a (near) deathless society — tv eyes.

Of course, these are not what any of the novels are "about". They are merely what would be gleaned from the novels by someone wholly concerned with technological gimmicks, or "extrapolations".

With the possible exception of *Farewell, Earth's Bliss* (and Compton's Mars isn't really all that exotic), all the novels have rather mundane backgrounds. In fact, Compton has established his own little "postage stamp of native soil", merely extending it slightly into another dimension. *The Missionaries* is set in a virtually contemporary society, while the others are located around 1980. All four are set in England. *Synthajoy* is one invention removed from present-day society. *Chronocules*, *The Electric Crocodile*, and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* are different in more ways, but still easily recognisable to us. Readers who enjoy exotic or alien backgrounds to their stories (and many do; see *Dune*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *Ringworld*, etc) will find little to excite their interest in Compton's novels.

It follows, of course, that there is little escape from contemporary reality in Compton's work. We see our own world all too clearly in Compton's "futures", and things are never much different from what we have to deal with every day.

I have attempted to point out a few of the things that the reader will not find in Compton's books, and I think that the neglect that he has suffered at the hands of the science fiction world is due to these omissions.

Now I want to look at what the reader will find in Compton. The answer is quite simple: people.

We are not used to finding people in science fiction novels. They seem to be vaguely out of place, an inconvenience really, getting in the way of all those wonderful ideas. Compton doesn't work that way. In *S F Commentary* 48/49/50, in the transcript of the Aussiecon panel on criticism, George Turner says that very few science fiction books are involved purely with the characters, then goes on to cite D.G. Compton as the only example that comes to mind of somebody who does. He has caught the emphasis exactly.

Compton is solely interested in the characters. Background and gimmicks are used to supply an area of interaction and conflict, but are unimportant beyond that. Also, Compton's characters exist as people, rather than as pawns to be moved arbitrarily around to work out some "grand design". They are not symbols either (people never are), which is probably another reason why academics find Compton unpalatable.

So I want to look at three of Compton's novels in some detail to demonstrate what I have said about his use of character.

The three novels that I have chosen are: *Synthajoy*, *The Electric Crocodile*, and *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*. These are, in my opinion, Compton's best novels, and there are certain similarities which are apparent after even the most cursory reading:

1. They present women as the major characters.
2. The societies in which they take place contain similar elements: "Karstacks" appear in *Synthajoy* and *The Electric Crocodile*; the "fringes" in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* seem to be

directly related to the "alienness" in *The Electric Crocodile*. In fact, the societies in the two latter novels are almost identical in the way in which privacy is being destroyed: by the government in one, by the media in the other.

3. The action takes place over a short period of time: eight days in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, and about the same in *The Electric Crocodile*. The action in *Synthajoy* is spread over six days, although Compton uses flashback techniques to cover a much larger time span.

Compton concentrates on only a few characters in each book, one in *Synthajoy*, two in the others. This is not to say that the other characters are merely cardboard props or spear-carriers. Compton is adept at drawing character with a minimum effort, and many of the "incidental" characters are extremely well defined (eg, Katherine Mortenhoe's husbands, the station manager from the same book, the reporter's wife; in *Synthajoy*, Thea Cadence's husband, her lover, and others). But the central conflict is confined to these main characters, and the "incidental" characters are presented through their perceptions. These characters who dominate the books are all isolated figures, with few outside contacts usually a family, but very few friends.

This is the sort of person that we come across time and again in Compton's books.

It is extremely difficult to say in a few words what these books are about. Compton, unlike most other science fiction writers, does not have the characters on one level and the meaning on another, and so the two cannot be separated without distorting them both so much that they are no longer recognisable. It is because of this that Compton's novels seem to be ambiguous. It is difficult for the reader to know how he is supposed to judge what is going on, and to decide where his allegiances lie. But, to put it extremely crudely, these three books all seem to be about people who are trying to retain their humanity in the face of relentless dehumanising forces.

SYNTHAJOY

Of the three, I find *Synthajoy* the most satisfying on an emotional level, and the most ambiguous on an intellectual level. It is an extremely self-contained book, in that all the issues raised lead back into the character of Thea Cadence rather than out into the world at large. I will come back to this point later and attempt to make my meaning more clear.

Thea Cadence herself is one of the most fully realised characters to be found in a science fiction novel. I can think of no other novel where the author's attention (and that of the reader) is so concentrated on the character rather than on the story that is being told. This is hardly what we have come to expect from science fiction. *Synthajoy* seems to me to be the kind of novel that you would have expected from someone like Doris Lessing. All the style is there, the restraint, the enormous sympathy.

As I have said, I regard *Synthajoy* as Compton's best book. In it, there is little effort wasted on building up the background: it is merely the everyday world with one slight modification to it. The "Sensitape" process (whereby emotions can be recorded on tape and then played back when required) is not rationalised, as Thea does not understand it herself. It is merely there, and provides the area of conflict in which Thea operates.

The other reason for the novel's strength is, I think, Compton's concentration on one character. There is a simplicity in this novel that is not found in Compton's other works, no matter what their own strengths might be.

Synthajoy is perfect in itself, wants nothing and I think this is something that is found only in a few books. We do not need to know anything more about Compton or his works to read it and take all that it offers us. The book exists on its own, removed completely from the man who wrote it. I can think of only two other novels for which I could say the same.

Take, for example, Thea's distaste for "sensitape." This is hard to rationalise, because it is so intensely personal (as is everything in the novel). It is most clearly expressed on pages 159-160.

"You've always been against Sensitape, haven't you, Thea? Right from the very beginning."

A remark as stupid as that could have only one purpose — to bait me.

"If I'd thought about it properly, Edward, I would have been. Not that it would have made any difference."

"People's needs, Thea, they're not an absolute laid down by gods or philosophers. We're stacked high and we're going to be stacked higher. Unnatural conditions produce unnatural needs. The world must be dealt with as it is, not as you'd like it to be. If we can't change the conditions, at least we can do our best to satisfy the needs."

... Against his rationalisations I could only range a deep, instinctive repugnance.

This "deep, instinctive repugnance" is central to the book. The female characters in all three of these novels display this kind of intense, irrational feeling.

This attitude towards "sensitape" is shared by only one other character in the book. This is Paul Cassavetes, an aged pianist, whom Thea's husband wants to record on "sensitape" so that the public can share what the pianist feels while playing his music. Cassavetes also ranges a "deep, instinctive repugnance" against Edward Cadence's impeccable logic (this incident also forms the basis for the only piece of short fiction by Compton that I have come across, "It's Smart to Have an English Address").

"My soul is my own, Dr Cadence. One thing not for giving away. Another is that I feel, that I know, when I play."

"Your greatest strength is Beethoven..." As if the old man hadn't spoken. "I suggest something popular. The Moonlight Sonata, perhaps. Issue the Sensitape and record together. To hear what you hear, Mr Cassavetes. To know what you know. Or perhaps you think ordinary humanity is not worthy."

"You pretend to serve humanity, you doctors. Your real hope is to be God." (page 45)

and

"Like Claxton, you too are an old man." Edward spoke as from a long way off. "You have a unique gift."

"And it shall die with me." Painfully vehement. He allowed a long pause. "As is the nature of unique gifts." (page 46)

and

"Dr Cadence, your talk is like a sickness." He muttered to himself for several seconds, unheard. "I must have nothing to do with you ever again. Your talk is sin. Sin I have no words for my horror at what you are doing." (page 47)

This is where I think that Compton is difficult. Is it Edward that Thea and Cassavetes are objecting to, or is it the "sensitape"

process itself? Or both? On one level, Cassavetes is a jealous old man and Thea is a sexually repressed neurotic (this is presented quite forcefully in the novel). On another level, they are both merely people, human beings who deserve our sympathy and respect, even heroic in their resistance to Edward and what he stands for. I think there is no doubt on which side Compton stands, but his justification for that stand exists only within the characters of Thea and Cassavetes. This is what I meant by saying that the novel is self-contained.

THE ELECTRIC CROCODILE

A similar situation occurs in *The Electric Crocodile*, which is, I think, a lesser book. The background is more complex, and intrudes more on the novel itself than is the case with *Synthajoy*. On some occasions, I had the feeling that Compton had forced himself into the position where he had to spend time describing his future world that he would much rather have spent developing his characters. Also, the book is told from a split viewpoint, and so is somewhat less of a piece than *Synthajoy*, even though the shifting from viewpoint to viewpoint allows for some interesting effects. The novel is one that I found to be much better on a second reading, as Compton's attitude towards Abigail (the central character) is rather more ambiguous than is his attitude towards Thea. (This might also happen because the split viewpoint allows us to see Abigail through her husband's eyes, as well as vice versa.)

The main interest in the novel is focused on Abigail's faith in "God. Against the background of government manipulation of society, and the lack of personal freedom, Abigail is forced to stretch this faith to the limit, and yet, it holds. The ambiguity lies in the question as to whether Abigail's faith is a strength, or mere delusion, the abrogation of all responsibility for herself and her actions. For example, this exchange between Abigail and her husband:

"It might mean jail."

"I'd wait for you." (Abigail)

"You romanticise."

"God loves me. We're never tested beyond our strength."

Matthew thought of the millions in mental hospitals. God loved them too. Unfathomably. (page 19)

Abigail seems to be detached from reality for much of the book. She is aware of this, but that doesn't make any difference. Through her husband's eyes we can see her as a woman whose faith is basically out of touch with the world, something that gives her a divine authority for her views (see page 159). She is a person who appears to be childishly optimistic, as she is when she displays such utter confidence that Matthew will reject the Colindale (a top-secret project that is manipulating what advances will or will not be made in the world by means of a giant computer complex) because it is obviously the "right" thing to do.

Thus she saw Matthew's quietness over tea in bed and then at breakfast as proof that her prayers were being answered. He was being helped to do what was right. It might not be easy for him, his niggardly reason might fight all the way, but the outcome was a foregone conclusion. (page 138)

The irony here is that the reader already knows that Matthew has no intention at all of leaving the Colindale. Abigail's faith also appears naive, even ridiculous, in its certainty.

When she had rung off she stood by the telephone and said two prayers, the first for Grandpa and the second for

forgiveness of her own neglect. Then she was cheerful again. (page 61)

Thus her arguments against Matthew often seem to lack strength, as they are rooted in her faith. In a way, we can sympathise with his point of view (he's no monster, and his reasons for doing what he does are sincerely held) when he thinks that Abigail's faith as being merely "reactionary" and illogical, while his own arguments are quite logical and apparently valid. But Compton shows us to be wary of logic, and when we find Abigail "thinking now with her whole body" (page 119) we are back on firmer ground. Deeper than faith, this is the instinct we see in Thea Cadence, the recognition of humanity as the overriding factor in existence.

However, Abigail reacts quite differently than Thea. She does not stop loving Matthew, she merely believes that he is wrong, rather than evil. She does try to betray him, however, but without success. At the climax of the novel, she takes no positive action.

For she who at that moment had the power to betray, to shout into the microphones what she knew, would do nothing, decide nothing, would be confused, insufficient. She had cultivated subjection according to the canons of her faith. She would be passed over, would passover herself, in what had to be still a man's world. Ultimate responsibility, even for herself, was not hers. (page 199)

In light of this, how are we to read the concluding lines of the book?

"My solicitor..."

"This is not a legal matter, Mrs Oliver. You're not a criminal. You have a schizoid personality. Please come this way Mrs Oliver."

"I am not sick."

"Please come this way, Mrs Oliver."

Mrs Oliver, wife of Matthew, widow of Matthew. She began to cry. Grief was that long overdue, an inward bleeding, secret. But God loved her and she'd survive. Nobody was tested beyond what he could endure. (pages 220-221)

Is there savage irony in Abigail's statement that "nobody was tested beyond what he could endure"? Is Abigail's thinking indicative of just how irrational her faith is (we must remember that her brother has just been shot dead, her husband killed in an explosion and she herself is about to be committed as "mentally ill", no doubt to suffer the same fate as Thea Cadence), or is it a measure of its strength?

I think that Compton means us to take this statement seriously, and it is because of this that I think the novel needs to be read at least twice. In light of the ending, Abigail's remark on page 19 can be seen as something more than the complacent aphorism of a person who has never known real adversity. It is the expression of a faith that gives her the strength to resist the tremendous forces that are raised against her at the end of the novel. Abigail endures. She is not free, but at least she is intact.

Few science fiction writers will have anything at all to do with religion in their work. Miller and Blish have used it well and gained strength from it, but they were very much the exception. Science fiction writers appear to distrust religion, possibly seeing it to be in some way antithetical to science, and thus to be avoided. How many futures have been represented in terms of religious dictatorships? Quite a number, I would say, but this conception of religion is basically silly and merely an opportunity for the select few to terrorise others into subservience. This is just about as far as science fiction writers are prepared to go.

However, Compton takes religion

seriously, and realises that it is an important part of man's relationship to himself and to his world. This seems to be something that has developed slowly through Compton's work. In *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*, the Martian prison colony is ruled by a system that depends heavily on religion as a sanction for its brutalities. The system is corrupt and hypocritical, without humanity at all, so that the religious views espoused by the colony are no more than a hollow sham, like so many of the so-called Christian societies of the Western world. *Farewell, Earth's Bliss* is Compton's most bitter book, the most pessimistic.

In *Synhajo*, Thea Cadence attends the "sensitape" recording of a priest who is dying, and who has allowed himself to be recorded so that others might experience the same peace when they are dying. Thea cannot understand how the priest can be so calm in the face of death. She sees the strength that faith gives him, but she cannot understand it.

Abigail, as we have seen, experiences this faith directly, draws strength from it. It is significant, I think, that Compton dedicates *The Electric Crocodile* to "Anne Marie, who showed me faith." Compton seems to have progressed from pessimism to some kind of guarded belief in the strength of humanity to endure even the most tremendous destructive forces. Part of this is due, I think, to his growing awareness of the part that "religion" (in quotation marks: in the purest essence) plays in life. This awareness is to be found in all good writers, from Faulkner to Baldwin (at least in *Go Tell It On The Mountain*), and it is what sets them apart from other, lesser talents.

Like Thea Cadence, Abigail is the victim of a system where humanity is expendable, if not openly discouraged. But, unlike Thea, she has something to oppose it with, her faith in a merciful god. Thea would not have understood it, and I'm not sure that I understand it, but Compton has made it exist, not as an easily detachable moral to the novel (tied along dotted line and discard container), but as an integral part of a person, of a human being. We see Abigail as she is, self-deceptions, weaknesses and all, but this in no way detracts from her faith.

THE CONTINUOUS KATHERINE MORTENHOE

The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe is somewhat different from the other novels, in that there is no real justification available for what is done to Katherine. Whereas "sensitape" and the "Colindale Project" could be justified on humanitarian grounds, the invasion of privacy by the media can only be considered with cynicism by those taking part in it. However, when Katherine is taken to see some patients at the hospital kept in a state of euphoria by artificial means, her reaction is the same as Thea's.

"Every one of these patients is happy, busy and — as their concentration permits — interested. Would you rather we left them to empty vegetation?"

Yes. Yes, she would rather they had left the patients to empty vegetation. But she couldn't say so. She couldn't justify. She could only feel. (Page 114)

Once again we have this instinctive revulsion to anything that reduces a person's humanity, to treating people as things, no matter how fine the motive. In this way, Katherine is similar to the women in the other two novels.

The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe doesn't require Compton to spend as much time justifying his technological hack-ground as he does in *The Electric Crocodile*, and so it seems to me to be less strained. The dual narrative is handled easily and without distracting effects, so that the book moves smoothly. It is also often quite funny.

"Harry?"

"Kate? Where are you?"

"Are you all right, Harry?"

"Of course I'm all right."

"I wasn't very nice."

"You couldn't help it."

"Of course I could."

"It's not a very nice situation."

"Harry — I'm sorry."

"What was I supposed to do, though — dance a jig?"

The plastic telephone mount had numbers scrawled on it, and obscene comments. She began to lose interest in Harry.

"If you were Chinese you might."

"If I knew what you wanted, then..."

"They dress up in white and dance through the streets. Or they used to, long ago, in the year of the four blue dragons."

"What are you on about, Kate?"

"Chinese funerals."

"If only I knew what you wanted."

"Harry, it says here Have cunt, will grovel. I think that's sad, don't you?"

(page 188)

Nearly all of Compton's other women are very restrained, typically middle class, not at all the sort of person to say, "Have cunt, will grovel" to their husbands on the telephone. Katherine has a spark of life about her that is lacking in the other novels. She is both serious and comic, as in the above quote, and very much alive. There is no excessive sentimentality. There is humour all through the novel, in fact. In the sections narrated by Roddie (the man from the television studio who follows Katherine around and films her through cameras surgically implanted in his eyes) it can be quite concise.

A quarter of an hour later the police had the students' car in sight. An arrest was expected any minute.

"That's quick," I said to the joe.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Computers," he said, as if that explained everything and without computers he'd have been a master of crime himself.

(page 108)

The best thing about Katherine Mortenhoe is that she is so human, so unimportantly human. This is Compton's strength. She is alternately weak, childish, noble, cunning, naive, brave, vindictive, stubborn, proud, impatient, compassionate, and a dozen other things. The important fact is that her faults do not detract from her strengths. As in all of Compton's works, the main thing is that she is a human being, and that she does not deny her humanity.

The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe is also different from the other novels in that it presents a male character who can appreciate the humanity which seems to come naturally to Compton's female protagonists. (If we exclude Paul Cassavetes (a very old man), the only male characters to achieve a "state of grace" in Compton's books are Mark (*Farewell, Earth's Bliss*), a homosexual, and, perhaps Roses Vargo (*Chronocules*) a congenital idiot. Even Rod doesn't come by this humanity easily. Only Katherine's death can bring this about. (This causes me to wonder just how significant it is that the action of the novel takes place over Easter. I am not, however, prepared to look at the novel that closely in this article.) The forces of dehumanisation that are brought to bear on Katherine are presented powerfully on pages 223-224 of the novel:

I left that pub even soberer than I had entered it. Colder and soberer. And wiser too... You see, beauty isn't in the eye of the beholder. Neither is compassion, or love, or even common human decency. They're not of the eye, but the mind behind the eye. I had seen, my mind had seen, Katherine Mortenhoe, with love. Had seen beauty. But my eyes had simply seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Had seen Katherine Mortenhoe. Period.

I couldn't even blame Vincent. He hadn't cut the footage for shock effect. He hadn't changed the emphasis. He hadn't even cheapened it with sob stuff narration or music over. The soundtrack was mine also. It was Katherine Mortenhoe as my eyes had seen her.

And my eyes had seen a dribbling, palsied wreck. My eyes had seen a ponderous, middle aged woman capering unsuitably about a beach. My eyes had seen her filthy clothes. My eyes had seen her lumpy, graceless body lumber naked out of a pretty-pretty stream and stop for her towel so that her breasts swung like pale, water-filled bladders. The sarcastic wolf whistles of my fellow drinkers are still with me. This is how they saw her. When she wasn't repulsive she was pathetic. I knew her to be neither.

But it was I and I alone who had assembled through the medium they tell us cannot lie definitive evidence that she was just that: either repulsive or pathetic, and often both. Evidence that had been seen and believed by maybe sixty million people. I loved her. If that was the word. And there was no other.

Perhaps all that Compton is talking about in these novels is dignity, the dignity that belongs to a person simply by virtue of the fact that she or he is a human being. Something which is not amenable to logic, but which can only be expressed in human terms, and can only be perceived by certain people, those who open themselves up to it. The mistake that Roddie makes is the same as that made by the other main male characters in these three novels. He persists in treating people as if they were merely objects which can be understood without taking into account their humanity. Roddie sincerely believes that he can present Katherine to the world as she is, and it is not until he sees the results of his efforts that he comprehends his mistake. Directly after this passage, he destroys the cameras in his eyes, rendering himself blind.

But it is important to remember that Katherine is no larger-than-life caricature of nobility amidst suffering. When Roddie tells her about working for NTV (who have been hounding her), her reaction is suitably complex. She is an ordinary human being, not especially noble or forgiving. Likewise, Roddie is not the great, self-sacrificing martyr. He is quite capable of weakness, selfishness, and stupidity.

The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe seems to me to be the most optimistic of Compton's books. Even though Katherine dies, she does achieve some kind of justification for her life, and she has proven her humanity. And Roddie survives. Compared to the other books things appear bearable, at least. There appears to be some kind of progression from Thea to Abigail to Katherine, an increasing optimism, a belief that man can not only endure, he can also prevail.

.....

I think that this is a fair summary of some of the things that Compton is doing in his novels, and why I think he is deserving of more attention. The conflict

between man and a society that is apparently bent on making him something less than a man is, I suppose, one of the most important themes in modern Western literature. Compton is one of the very few writers in science fiction who is continually worrying at this theme.

The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe was published in 1974 and, since then, there has been silence. Whether or not Compton is finished with science fiction remains to be seen. In 1970, he published a mainstream novel, *The Palace*, which has disappeared almost without a trace, proving that readers outside of science fiction are just as lacking in perception as the majority of those with in it. It is quite possible that Compton has decided to confine himself to the more lucrative occupation of producing radio plays, leaving science fiction to the likes of Clement Pyke, who appears in *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, boasting of how he produced 130 books in 20 odd years, and who can say:

"If SF's on the map today, you know who put it there." (page 102)

A man who "couldn't bear for his daughter to have anything, even a rare and fatal condition", and who killed himself after watching his daughter dance on a gray pebbly beach". I am not sure whether this figure is presented as a good natured jibe at some contemporary science fiction writers, or whether it represents some bitterness on Compton's part about the way in which he has been overlooked by science fiction readers and critics, while the Clement Pykes of this world have been occupying centre stage. If this pathetic old man is Compton's image of the successful science fiction writer, then there is little doubt how he feels about the genre.

I hope that Compton continues to publish. I think that he is the best of the science fiction writers, and the only one who has comparable with that of the best writers outside the field. There is a great deal of sentimentality in science fiction, but seldom any real sympathy. There is much foot-stamping, but little genuine outrage. There is certainly melodrama, but hardly anything that approaches an authentic tragic vision. Compton is the exception; and there can be no greater praise.

Andrew Whitmore
April 1977

EDITIONS OF BOOKS

REFERRED TO:

1. *Farewell, Earth's Bliss*, Ace Books, 1971
2. *Synthajoy*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968
3. *Chronocules*, Ace Books, 1970
4. *The Electric Crocodile*, Arrow Books, 1973
5. *The Missionaries*, Ace Books, 1972
6. *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, Arrow Books, 1975

Also:

"It's Smart to Have an English Address", in *World's Best S.F. 1*, edited by Wollheim and Carr, Sphere Books, 1971.

George Turner on the 1977 WRITERS' WORKSHOP



a murmur
of starling
or
an exaltation
of lark?

A MURMURATION OF STARLING OR AN EXALTATION OF LARK?

When the subject of literary workshops was discussed at a 1976 convention in Melbourne I was surprised at the number of speakers who registered doubt about the efficacy of these affairs and equally surprised at the nature of some of these doubts. Having at that time little faith in the ultimate value of such training runs, though for reasons very different from those offered by the convention attendees, I was in two minds when Kitty Vigo suggested that I should participate in the sf workshop at Monash University in February 1977.

I accepted for what seemed to me a good enough reason: that the only way to justify or overcome my distrust was to take part. So I became whatever it is one becomes under such circumstances — moderator? dutch uncle? ring-master? — for one week, sandwiched between Vonda McIntyre and Chris Priest.

Here, for what they are worth, are the observations of one who saw himself as a sort of senior guinea pig in a very experimental maze-run.

1

Taking the second week of the course suited me well. I reckoned that Vonda, as an old alumnus of the Clarion workshops, would operate in much the same fashion as Ursula Le Guin had done eighteen months earlier, and would hand over to me a reasonably cohesive group properly grounded in discussion techniques — to the point, that is, of being able to criticise frankly without being merely offensive and to accept criticism without the twin egoisms of resentment or despair. And that is exactly what she did, for which heaven be praised. Which brings me to the first tripstone of my distrust...

For those uncertain of how a typical workshop is conducted, the basic procedure is this:

Stories are written by the workshopers, xeroxed so that a copy is provided for every member, and then exposed to the mass criticism of the group. Members may choose to rewrite workshopped stories on the basis of the criticisms given or to use the knowledge and insights gained in the production of new work. The moderator may require certain types of stories to be attempted (I remember with glee the crash of jaws hitting the pavement of dismay when Ursula demanded an sf love story) or may suggest specific "exercises". Quoting Ursula's example again, she required a story solely in dialogue and obtained some interesting and ingenious results. The idea of exercises stuck in my mind, to emerge later in a different guise for a different purpose.

Back to my distrusts:

The matter of mass criticism was the first. Those who have read *The Altered I* will recall the record of the workshoping of Ursula's own story, and so do I, with the feeling that the book might have been a better impression had it been omitted.

Literary criticism, even of the most obvious nature, is no simple area for learners, and most, though by no means all, of our workshopers were learners. It is easy to decide that you like or dislike a story; for anyone with fiction in his writing fingers it should be easy also to discover not only what he likes or dislikes but why he does so. So you would think, but read a few fanzine reviewers to discover the number of quite intelligent people who handle the why less than competently. In fact the penetrating of

apparent simplicities to discern what is wrong and why it is wrong, within the parameters of the tale, is more than can reasonably be asked of beginners.

For one thing, it requires that the critic have a literary philosophy which allows the major relationships — plot, characterisation, theme, etc. — to be observed in their complex interaction so that a weakness can be detected with the direct ease of a Von Karajan pin-pointing a single wrong note in a Wagnerian ensemble. (Since there is no single received literary philosophy, no two critics will agree in toto, but this is not very important. What matters is that each must have a set of efficient literary tools which will allow him to move rapidly and cleanly to the source of a problem. A happy few are born with insight; it takes most of us years of reading and writing to achieve it.)

This proved less of a problem than I had feared. That I did not have to deal with criticism of the generalising, basically insensitive kind was probably due very much to the ground-breaking of Vonda, who turned out to be a no-nonsense lass of much practical application and no little ability as a moulder of individuals into a group. And also to the influence, showing very strongly in discussion, of such experienced workshopers as Pip Maddern and Ted Mundie, who could bring both classical method and inborn literacy to bear and do much, by their attitudes, to prevent group criticism degenerating into superficialities.

So I was able to move into fairly esoteric areas without courting misunderstanding — except in the matter of "characterisation", which is and always has been one of the great hurdles over which both critics and writers tumble in heaps. After one grumble of discontent from the workshopers I shelved it as impossible to sort out in a few short days, and filed in my mind the idea that a workshop devoted solely to the problems of characterisation (they are immense) might pay dividends.

2

It is worth noting at this point that plain workshoping of, each others' work, day after day, exhibits a decreasing intellectual hold on all but the uncritically enthusiastic. At the end of the first week the Monash group was feeling the need for a change of pace or the introduction of novelty. It was not that they felt the workshoping technique was unsatisfactory but that, having developed it to a point of routine, some new thing was needed.

Since I had some experimental ideas of my own, this indication suited my purpose, the more so in that my purpose arose in part from consideration of the second of my tripstones of distrust — enthusiasm, far too much of it.

I was horrified at the way in which Ursula's group tore into the work, producing fiction like those Hoe presses which print about 120,000 newspapers an hour. "It can't last," I thought then, but by God it did. To this day I have a suspicion that some of them took no sleep at all but zombied through their mass-production on incantations and psychokinesis. Certain it is that they beat hell out of their typewriters until the wee hours were themselves exhausted, yet turned up next morning not only on time but with completed stories and claws freshly honed for the opposition.

(This may be defensiveness on my part. My habits of work are so slapdash that John Iggulden once cried out, "But nobody can write a novel like that!" I had by then written five — which doesn't mean that he wasn't, in a deeper sense, right.)

I was not the only one who felt a danger in this. At the '76 convention in Melbourne

several speakers voiced the possibility that this surge of effort harboured a seed of quasi-hysterical motivation and that the result might be a crippling letdown of enthusiasm once the breakneck course was done.



Vonda

Something of this in fact happened after both Ursula's workshop and the Monash period, but not in any total sense. For one thing, Ursula's group made some effort to keep in touch with each other and with her, which says something for the spirit of the operation; for another, several of them turned up again at the Monash classes (if "classes" is the word), which argues that the letdown was only temporary.

My feeling is that the real writer, the one whose only diet is red-black ribbon, cannot be deterred, crushed, or blown out by anything short of the collapse of civilisation. Even then they'll be found elaborating new alphabets on cave walls.

But dedicated writers are not the sum total of literary effort, or even the whole of the best of literature, and the more sober talent is the one which may come to harm. These blindingly enthusiastic sessions can produce good work for only a limited period; on the other hand they now and then bring to the surface of of those tours de forces which spring to life on the page and are inexplicable in their issuance from the worst writers as well as the best.

With all this in mind I wished not to make too many demands on the physical endurance of my group, and was in consequence greeted early on with a wail of incomprehension, as though the brutes wanted to be lashed and beaten. But they realised before all was done that I had my own bastardries to offer and that there are literary brutalities other than mere drudgery into the dawn hours.

My approach to the job of moderator, wearing my other hat as ringmaster, was an all out assault on the problem of the individual "voice".

Those Australians who have written saleable sf have, with few exceptions, adopted the standard styles of the American or English magazines for which they were designed. This is true also of the work done at Ursula's workshop — the tales were original, often highly so, but the voice of the prose belonged overseas and too often the strain of imitation showed.

In a country with too little indigenous sf this is perhaps inevitable among the younger writers, who are mostly (they'll hate me for this) still in the uncritical-admiration stage of their literary experience. But it is unfortunate amongst the older ones who, if their eyes are too firmly fixed on the adventurous stars to observe the realities around them, will remain self-indulgent second-raters catering to a culturally poverty-stricken public. (For some this is satisfaction enough. Neither workshop nor other stimulus can do anything there; we can only regret and ignore.)

Before my week began I read some thirty stories from the twelve workshopers; most of them belonged in the stream of typical American or British sf, with a leaning towards the blandness of the English. There were exceptions. Two of these, crying aloud their individual notes, were by the oldest and youngest in the group.

The oldest, Ted Mundie, had published before and had plainly learned from models other than sf; he was not the best stylist of the group, but his work, sometimes patchy, was at its best the freshest produced at the workshop; in fact he turned out one story, not sf, which was not only uncriticisable in its own right but wholly unlike anything else I have read anywhere.

Sharon Goodman, the youngest, is the fifteen-year-old daughter of a country minister of religion, not very interested in sf or fantasy as such but passionately determined to write and to be among writers; her "voice", not fully formed and not flattened by imitation, was a small literary music. She didn't turn out anything marvellous, but "marvellous" is not the touchstone; it is the spark that one watches for, caught flying sometimes out of bad work whose very errors are its signs of promise. It was not necessary to tell Sharon she had it; in her heart she already knew.

Then there was that sophisticated Pip Maddern, far and away the best stylist to surface in these workshop sessions, whose work is already personal and recognisable. She will know what I mean in saying that her literary voice is not finally "placed" yet; but it is new and strong.

So, out of twelve there were nine to be chivvied into writing something neither American nor English; not necessarily obviously Australian either, but something not conditioned by previous reading.

To this end, after some harmless discussion to establish an amicable atmosphere, necessary because Micheline Tang had been freezing everybody's blood with tales of how this ferocious critic ate little writers two at a time before breakfast, I set an exercise which convinced some of them that Micheline was right.

It was this: There is an alien in your backyard. Write me the beginning of a story, showing how you encountered him/her/it.

Aliens, of course, are meat and drink to the sf writer; anyone can create a dozen a day without breathing hard. But the backyard bit was peculiar, no? Ah, well, you could always invent a suitably sf/fantasy backyard...

Oh, no, you couldn't. In this exercise it had to be your own backyard, the one at home, outside your back door. (How could anyone be expected to write sf about that dreary dump?) Furthermore it had to be presented alive. It was the ambience of the story-to-be, that backyard, and I wanted to be able to see it, smell it, almost touch it — cats, woodheap, vegetable patch, dustbins, rusty iron gate and all. Nobody would get away with "it was winter on the beach" or "autumn in the park" on the ground that everybody knows what the beach and the park look like (They don't, you know. It is surprising how many people have never seen the things they are looking at.)

To make it worse, this description had to be integrated, not just a "descriptive bit"; it had to be essential to the meeting. Sf is overloaded on the one hand with "descriptive bits" that don't assist the story (Clifford Simak, for example) and on the other with neglected, barely implied back-grounds which don't exist for the reader because the writer has never envisioned them properly.

The integration problem defeated at least half the class. Imagination put to work on a practical problem instead of being allowed to roam free suddenly showed as less than the effervescent talent sf loves to claim for itself. (It has always been my unpopular opinion that the average sf writer is singularly unimaginative; ninety percent of sf is cannibalisation of a few basic ideas.)

However, Pip Maddern solved the problem in the simplest and most direct way by making her alien look like a piece of washing on the clothesline, while Petrina tied it all up in a single bundle by making the entire yard an alien presence. But Bruce Barnes cried out bitterly that his place didn't have a backyard. This was very nearly true (I know that block of flats) but we were not in the sympathy business so I put on my "unrelenting" look — which children and small puppies tend to see through at once — and left him with it. So Bruce put ingenuity to work and had his protagonist locked out of the house and at the mercy of an alien. The attempts to find a way of escape showed just how much there is about the apparently featureless backwall of a block of flats that can be used to further both action and atmosphere in the right situation. And the back wall is part of the yard, isn't it?



The test of creativity and ingenuity was not popular with the class, and I did not labour the point that most of them had been found wanting in a matter basic to the art of writing — the appreciation and management of simple reality. Not even fantasy can exist on dreams alone; the appeal of *The Lord Of The Rings* is rooted in the fact that its wildest flights are always tied to the commonplaces of everyday life. That the class took the point without reminding was shown by their approach to a later variation on the exercise.

But where, anecdote aside, does the "personal voice" come in? It comes in with the selection of a real backyard as thematic centre. You simply cannot describe your own Australian backyard with an English or American accent and remain honest — and the writer who isn't honest in his work is a pre-destined teatime rater. As soon as you begin the description you are assaulted by the need for truthful rather than borrowed expression; you are yourself, looking through your own eyes instead of through eyes blinkered by the prose of Silverberg or Vance or Heinlein. Instead of a waste-disposal chute (which you lifted from somebody's story and never bothered to visualise) you have a plain old dustbin. Instead of the "gorgeously tinted blooms" of the high priestess's garden (which you couldn't describe because you've never thought about it except as a bit of cheap exotica) you have those bloody sunflowers that look as though a hungry goat has been at them and the nasturtium patch by the back gate, which you remember because Mum insists the leaves make good salad sandwiches. And were Gar Funkel would have sixth-sensed the alien presence and had his laser finger ready extended against trouble, you have only you, without even five senses fully used let alone a sixth for aliens, and not even a peashooter for protection.

You are back to telling the truth. And that is where a personal style begins. The personal style is your individual way of seeing and reporting, the one thing that makes your work truly yours. (If you are satisfied to plug along the paths worn by a thousand other pulp magazine twits, do so. But stay away from workshops, particularly mine; you will only be taking up the time needed for the writers.)

In general, this aspect of the exercise was a failure on this first occasion. At least half simply did not know how to describe familiar things.

But even the failures were in a sense a success. To learn that there is something essential which you can't do is more useful than attracting praise for something you do easily.

4

For the second exercise I forsook sf altogether. (And why not? Does anybody really imagine that the principles of good writing change from genre to genre? To write sf you must first be able to write.) What I required was a description, a section of a story, telling of a man or woman on the run (for whatever reason the writer chose to dream up) through that part of Monash University in which we were living and working i.e. from the diningroom to the sleeping quarters via a large partially enclosed garden court.

You will spot the essential difference, that the first exercise was in static description, requiring integration of background and theme, whereas the second was plainly concentrated on the running man while the background could be used only as it affected his movements. The first was an exercise

in integration, the second in selectivity. In both cases the writer was limited by reality, which was my method of pointing out that the strange is always with us, that we don't have to travel for synthetic kicks to the emerald cities of Polaris 3.

Again, of course, the personal "voice" was a built-in requirement, because none of the workshopers was going to believe in an "imported" treatment of the surroundings they could observe by opening their eyes.

(Digression: When at the 1976 Bofcon I raised this question of the Australian "voice" in a national sf, together with the necessity of using the real world as a means of adding a dimension of reality to fantasy, Bruce Gillespie supported me but in general we were treated to the peculiarly resentful silence of people who suspect that you are trying to take something from them, when in fact we were trying to tell them how much they were missing. Readers still want to escape to Old Barsom when they never really looked at the world they are trying to escape from. As for the Australian "voice", they simply couldn't see the point; they preferred even their dreams with a foreign accent. What's more, they saw no dishonesty in accepting the Australian Literature Board's financial support, then diverting the money to the second-rate imitation of a foreign culture. Sometimes I wonder about fans. . .)

Faced with this exercise, it would never have occurred to me to go further than my desk and, with the total ambience in mind, concentrate on the dramatic requirements of the task. I was surprised, though perhaps I should not have been, to see how many of the class actually had to go out and reconnoitre an area they had been living in for about ten days, to examine it as though they had never seen it before. And, of course, they hadn't really seen it before. (And perhaps the backyard exercise had undermined the confidence of some; it certainly should have done.) This matter of lack of adequate visualisation of one's own surroundings troubled me, but it was obviously not possible to attack it or even give it proper thought in the couple of days remaining to me; but if I ever again operate in a workshop it will be included somewhere in my plan of campaign.

The reconnaissance produced some unexpected results. The level of realism was much higher this time, though the idea of conveying speed of action by using "speed-sounding" words in stead of words which simply mean "speed" (i.e. "ran like a rabbit" is faster-sounding than "moved at a terrific speed") was disappointingly vague. The immediacy of observation was also better, though I recall a complaint levelled against Bruce Barnes's exercise, that nobody could take a certain flight of steps in a single stride, even with all hell on his fleeing tail. But Bruce is over six feet and about five-nine of that is legs; he not only could but did take the flight in a stride while researching his flight plan.

Another happy memory is of Micheline being widely surprised that she could manage it at all, and that physical description actually could be partly integrated and partly implied in her heavily internalised style, which tends to lean almost completely on the protagonist's view of his or her own "inner space". Her exercise was indeed one of the better ones. Other productions suggested that she was not alone in recognising an introduction to possibilities previously unconsidered.

That last is, I think, very much part of what Vonda and Chris and I were there for. Chris, as it happened, didn't approve of my exercises; but then, I never approve of what anyone else does in these affairs either.

Dealing with creativity is very much a wary progress through the dark — in psychological terms we don't even know what creativity is — and few of us feel our ways along the same paths. All we have in common is the sigh of relief when we find we have shoved someone else a little closer to the light.

5

One side issue to this exercise is worth noting. Ted Mundie restricted his "man in flight" to the diningroom, from the cash desk to the exit door, and offered a carefully re-created vision of the whole scene. It was visually effective, but his escapee wasn't moving fast enough, was being halted every few steps with a foot in mid-air while his next barrier was painted in with proper realism. The failure was, of course, in selectivity; there was too much detail, too total a realism of background for the action to struggle through.

Now, Ted is professional with some quantity of publication behind him and is capable of very good work indeed. I therefore decided to do something with him which I would not have attempted with any of the others as being too extreme a criticism. Instead of discussing his exercise with him, I edited it by the method I use with my own work when the length needs trimming. Rather than try to telescope scenes into each other or eliminate incidents, which can involve very extensive re-writings, I go over the copy and erase every paragraph, sentence, clause, and single word which can be removed without affecting the sense of a passage. The result is almost always a tightening of the prose and a more effective direction of the reader's understanding to precisely those things I wish him to concentrate on.

By this means I reduced Ted's exercise to about one-third of its original length (no changing of his words, mind you, only removal of the fat) and set his man running instead of merely progressing, meeting, and assessing obstacles in almost subliminal flashes and surmounting them in the moment of recognition. All I did was bring to the surface what was already written into the prose, waiting to be let out.

I returned it to him without much comment, having no intention of making such a rough handling public in the workshop. Nor would I record it here save that Ted was sufficiently impressed to hand it round the others himself, which pleased me a great deal.

Cutting to essentials is a procedure which should be familiar to every writer. It is not until you have the carcass spread, so to speak, on the dissection table with all waste removed that you know fully what you are about. Then you can judge with some accuracy how much decoration, atmosphere, and sidecomment the work can stand. Usually, if your statements have been properly made, little addition will be necessary, and indulgent addition will be a step backwards.

This also is a point worth thinking about for future workshops.

6

I did nothing unexpected aside from those two exercises, which I think succeeded in their intention and succeeded also with the workshopers once they caught on to the unaccustomed idea of imagination within limited parameters — so much more difficult that the "anything goes" mode of creation and so much more satisfying to the intelligent reader.

Aside from some routine workshoping, my only other chore — one undertaken mainly for my private purpose of trying to uncover the literary attitudes of these people who wanted, sometimes definitely

and sometimes irritatingly vaguely, to write — was the personal interview. (Whether or not Vonda and Chris conducted such private probes I did not ask; I see nothing to be gained by dithering over the methods of others while still concentrating on the rounding out of your own.) I called each of the workshopers in for private discussion, starting on the third day, when I felt I had sufficient information for the meeting to be productive.

These sessions do not rate the privacy of the confessional but were in a couple of cases conducted in sufficient depth to preclude any detailed report here. And there were a couple whose course was so plainly set that the meeting was a formality. Suffice it that there were two people whose manifest destinies required neither reassurance nor guidance, one whose destiny was also manifest but did need reassurance, three who will become professional writers if they are prepared to persevere despite inevitable rejections, and three more who will surely write successful stories even though they treat fiction as an occasional activity rather than one for dedication.

That leaves three, the half-handful one finds in every aspiring group, the little clique of intimated visionaries who recognise the function of limitations in art, a determination to follow personal aims which defy workshop pin-pricking, a literary style owing much to symbol and obliquity but little to syntax and clarity, and an opaque attitude to criticism which leaves one unsure whether it has been heard, let alone absorbed. They know from the beginning that their work will not be approved by the others (but are treated with a genuine interest which tends to disconcert them a little); they know better than to claim that you don't understand what they are trying to do, but little things betray the feeling (and in fact you don't understand well enough to take a positive stance); they do your obviously useless exercises in highly individual but obviously useless ways, produce stanzas of verse when you have asked for a story in prose and items of private literary philosophy in place of workshop criticism.

Reading their productions is the sweated-labour aspect of the job as you turn them over word by word, hoping a clue will scuttle from beneath. Occasionally it does, but in the long run you don't know what to say to a private vision which must erupt in its own fashion. You know from experience that most of them will wear out their interest or turn to some other medium of expression, but you know also that among them is possibly the unclassifiable talent which may one day burst through as a Lafferty or a Ballard, a Bradbury or a Cordwainer Smith. So you move quietly and carefully, aware of a possible talent obscured amid the sound and tumult of talent perverted.

The final summing-up must be that the class of Monash '77 contained six people who will be professional writers if they genuinely wish to be and six others who probably can be if they are prepared to drudge at the learning of the trade.

As for those whose dedication includes but also transcends professionalism, there were two present and a possible third. They know who they are and it is not yet my business to hold them up by name as the people to whom an Australian science fiction may one day be indebted. I must watch and wait and wonder (a little smugly?) if I had any significant hand in their beginnings.

Probably not.

The real writers take what they want of workshops, critics, admonitions, and praises and discard the rest without a backward



glance or a thank-you. And go their way, having used you and others, sucked you dry. Ungrateful? Graceless?

Of course.

But gratitude is the abasement of slaves, and grace should be reserved for the art rather than for its meddling missionaries.

They go their own way, and that is as it should be.

7. The \$64 question remains: Are literary workshops worth while?

My personal answer is yes/no with a whole slew of qualifications. Not very satisfactory.

If you ask the workshopers was it worth while, the answer will surely be "yes". If you ask in what way was it worth while you may not get such clear cut responses.

Well, what does the workshopper get out of it? These things:

1 A whale of a good time talking and fraternising with people whose cranky orientation is similar to his/her own. A sense of group-belonging.

2 A full attention paid to his/her literary output, an attention much more understanding and sympathetic than the kind but perfunctory interest of friends and family.

3 A surge of communicated enthusiasm, a reinforcement of the private belief that literature is the glory of life.

4 A perception that other writers, including the professionals, are wholly human with faults and blind spots — that one is, after all, not a mere literary minnow trying to ape a rainbow trout — that self-confidence is not only necessary but justified. (3 and 4 are probably the most important benefits as we run our workshops at present.)

5 Informed criticism.

That last requires qualification. The criticism given at workshops is informed, useful and mostly correct... It is not sufficiently informed or sufficiently useful or as far-reaching and effective as it could be.

It is amateur and superficial and deals with bits and pieces of individual stories instead of with the writer's problems. This is inevitable, given the present-day workshop method whereby the moderator guides discussion but must refrain from dominating it. And of course he must not dominate; he must not appear to be the teacher of a subject whose true and personal essence cannot be taught. To a degree he is limited to letting the workshopers have their say and doing his best (by suggestion and question) to head off obvious errors and critical dead ends.

So the dreary round of superficial comment goes on: The characterisation is flat, there's a flaw in the plotting, you've used a wrong word on page 3, the end doesn't seem right somehow, the bit where the robot's head falls off is ambiguous, no sensible girl would have fallen for that line, if the alien had sucker-discs it wouldn't have been able to use the typewriter, and so on.

All these criticisms are usually accurate and need to be made if the details of the story are to be set right — which is equivalent to sweeping the rubbish under the carpet. The story will still be a failure because no one has had the literary experience to perceive that the trouble is not in the details but in the overall conception, in the writer himself rather than the work, and that it is his total understanding of his craft that requires bolstering.

Meanwhile the moderator would dearly love to bellow just once, "Can none of you so-and-sos see that the twit has got halfway through the story, realised his plot won't work and gerrymandered a fake ending rather than rewrite that scene on page 2 that he's so proud of?"

He daren't do it. Within minutes he would be swimming in the murky depths of symmetry, balance, artistic integrity, symbolic parallels, thematic continuity, and God wot, while the stone-faced workshopers waited politely for him to drown — and let them get with their happy nit-picking.

It seems to me that somehow we must try to introduce the basic concepts of criticism; we must get round to discussion of theme and plot, background and foreground, the uses of such techniques as first person narrative and internal monologue and all the other tricks of apparatus that seem so simple but aren't and, above all, characterisation.

The last has always been the bugbear of sf and only in recent years have a few satisfactory solutions to its problems begun to appear. And how can you achieve useful criticism from people who are (for the most part) almost certainly unaware that there are half a dozen basic characterisation techniques available and that these can be fused and manipulated into hundreds of individual methods, that character grows from within the story instead of being imposed upon it, or even that there is a vast difference between characterisation and a list of personal traits?

Our workshopers are neither unintelligent nor pig-ignorant — far otherwise — but we must not expect them (particularly the younger ones) to come equipped with the weapons whose use has taken the rest of us a lifetime to learn. We should take the

opportunity to lead young writers right into the deep waters they must eventually navigate.

I see no reason why in the second week (by the end of the first week they will have mastered basic workshop technique and, as experience showed, be ready for new things) moderators should not broach these subjects in order to lead to deeper understanding of the real instead of the superficial problems of their fellow writers — and of themselves.

Lecturing is regarded as anathema at workshops, but this, like all other stock attitudes, should be periodically reconsidered to see if it has outlasted its usefulness. I feel that a fifteen minute lecturette followed by a free-for-all discussion of the points made could inculcate a damned sight more of the basic facts of fiction writing than a dozen workshopings. (The Melbourne Nova Mob uses this form successfully in literary discussion.) Didacticism must, of course, be avoided as the plague; every writer must feel totally free to accept or reject, so long as he recognises the existence of the depths of the subject.

Following this, by the middle of the third week (assuming three weeks as a minimum useful course) criticism in depth should be possible; not criticism of individual stories but of the writer himself as revealed in the sum of his work presented during the course. By this time his attitudes and approaches, insightfulness and blind spots, technical weaknesses and verbal habits, constructive and evocative strengths and ability to organise his material should be familiar to everyone present, with perceptions deepened by the critical considerations opened up in the second week. Such discussion of the generality of a writer's work, as distinct from simple correctable details, should send him home with a far more comprehensive view of the business of literature and of his problems within it than he can possibly achieve under the present method. He may well have discovered not only what he did wrong but how and why he did it and where within himself the capacity for betterment lies.

(With underhand cunning I omit discussion of the selection of suitable moderators. That could be a headache for someone. Kitty Vigo, perhaps?)

I am well aware that what I suggest is open to controversy. Si what? There are still people prepared to prove that the Earth is flat.

I am also aware of the difficulties of personnel selection, and for the moderators in preparation and presentation. But life wasn't meant to be easy, was it, Mal?

George Turner
April 1977



CRITICANTO

DELANY'S LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

Rob Gerrand

EDITOR: Rob Gerrand is an infrequent contributor to, but enthusiastic support of *SFC*. His efforts on behalf of this magazine and Norstrilia Press' *The Altered I* have been welcome. When not grooming himself and the electorate for a promising political career, Rob has been known to read science fiction, talk about it, play piano, and lead a hectic social life. He is a contributor of fiction to *The Altered I*, and hopes to add s f writing to his list of achievements.

Rob Gerrand discusses:
Dhalgren, by Samuel R. Delany
(Bantam Y8554; 1975, 879 pages, \$US1.95)

There is little doubt that Samuel R. Delany is a serious writer, less that he considers himself to be an artist, and no doubt at all that he is deeply committed to writing. His essays on aspects of fiction are powerful and stimulating, and indicate a man who has thought about the problems of communication. He is familiar with a lot of the ground gone over by the linguistic philosophers.

But intellect alone does not a poet make. And much of Delany's fiction is bad because it is wrong-headed. *Dhalgren*, for example, strikes me as being pre-eminently an intellectual exercise. Delany has demonstrated in the past that he can make connection with the poet in himself: in "The Star Pit", for example. In *Dhalgren*, however, he is tackling such a mammoth task that the poet has been smothered and has no chance to escape.

What is this task? Well, Delany has spent 879 pages trying to explain it; and it seems to me that the whole thing is so beyond analysis, rational articulation, that all I can say is the task of facing up to art, creatively, self-consciousness — that sort of thing. You know? Exactly.

What I want to talk about in this brief examination is not the novel as a whole, but Delany's use and mis-use of language: what I see as his language problems.

In Robin Scott Wilson's text book for budding writers and students of s f, *Those Who Can* (Mentor, 1973), Delany writes:

Here is an admittedly simplified description of how (the act of) writing strikes me. When I am writing I am trying to allow/construct an image of what I want to write about in my mind's sensory theatre. Then I describe it as accurately as I can. The most interesting point I've noticed is that the writing down of words about my imagined vision (or at least the choosing/arranging of words to write down) causes the quality of the vision to change . . .

First — the vision becomes clearer . . . (What was vaguely imagined as a green dress, while I fix my description of the light bulb hanging from its own cord, becomes a patterned, turquoise print with a frayed hem). The notation causes the imagination to resolve focus.

Second — to the extent that the initial imagining contains an action, the notating process tends to propel that action forward (or sometimes backward) in time. (As I describe how Susan, both hands locked, side-punched Frank, I see Frank grab his belly in surprise and stagger back against the banister — which will be the next thing I look at closely to describe). Notating accurately what happens now is a good way to prompt a vague vision of what happens next.

Well put. But you also have to know when to cut. Delany seems to be writing a

film scenario. Or rather, a transliteration of a film — which is not the same as writing fiction. There is an obsession with detail, detail which often has no bearing on anything else. Sure the detail is there in a film (but not in the film's script), yet when you watch a film and see, for example, a character putting on a pair of pants, you as viewer merely retain, "He put on a pair of pants". You are not interested in how he puts them on. Every detail of how he does it is there on the screen, but you don't care and don't remember that, unless it is a film in which the manner of dressing has some relevance, for example, in a comedy of a drunk trying to dress.

In fiction we dispense with unnecessary detail. It is distracting and misleading. We are used to the writer, by careful selection, making a pattern out of chaos. Yet Delany writes (page 6): "Grabbing his pants, he stuck foot and foot in them . . ." Why? Everyone knows that that is how you get into pants. The answer is that Delany has a habit — perhaps it is his design — of relating everything his attention catches. This habit tends to give equal weight to the significant and the insignificant. Consequently meaning is lost. In observing the trees, he obscures the wood.

It might be objected that the quotation of not even a full sentence is hardly fair. Unfortunately the book abounds with the cancer, so that the whole thing is overwritten to buggery. On top of this indiscriminate inclusion of detail comes a compounding annoyance: impression of observation. Let me explain.

Delany relies often on the description of the external, the physical, to convey the emotional states of his characters, which is as it should be. If handled well, it is an extremely effective way of involving the reader. Philosophically, the technique is attractive to those who wish to deny that there is such a thing as an inner emotional state. Even a behaviourist can convey what ever . . . it is that gave rise to the term "emotional state".

Delany's observation, while it is often pointed and effective, too often lapses into carelessness, so that the whole picture, even if not obscured by unnecessary detail, becomes muddled by that worse writing fault, imprecision. Here is an example from early in the novel (page 11). The protagonist has just hitched a lift, or rather just been given a lift, and climbs into the cabin of a Mac:

The driver, tall, blond, and acned, looking blank, released the clutch . . . Approaching lights spilled pit to pit in the driver's face.

Now it is night, plenty of shadow around and the driver is sitting down. How could he be seen as tall? Big, perhaps. What does "blonde" mean? A word so vague and overexposed as to be nearly meaningless. I mean, in the dark, what makes the hair blonde? Why would the protagonist notice it at all, rather than, say, its shape or texture? Answer: because Delany had an image of his truck driver — a vague image — and plugged it in, rather than go through his own process (as quoted from Eilon's book) and have his protagonist really see him. What does he mean by "looking blank"? The protagonist is meant to be a poet. And if Delany says that he has reverted to third-person perspective — though this might be the poet writing in this notebook later on, then in either case he, too, should know better.

And how does light spill? Pit to pit? It sounds nice, doesn't it, light spilling from

pit to pit. That is perhaps what seduced Delany to use that verb rather than the accurate one. It came first to mind; he was in a hurry; and, anyway, people will know what is meant. But he should write what is meant.

Mere pedantry, mere nitpicking? I think not, naturally enough. Unless these basics are clear in the writer's mind, then any edifice he erects on them becomes very shaky indeed.

I will conclude by quoting from Delany's most recent novel, *Triton*, and making some comments. In fact I'll quote a quotation that Delany himself has quoted (Bantam edition, 1976, page 345):

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical.

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this and that because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together". This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental *fabula*; heterotopias . . . desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

This quotation is, I think, Delany's way of saying that *Triton* is a heterotopia. More significantly, it illustrates Delany's essentially intellectual — even academic — approach to fiction. He is a great one for theories of art, and for producing examples to prove the theories. The fact that I think he is fundamentally misguided will cut no ice with him. Why should it? He will require a far greater nudge to get him to realise that truth, meaning, whatever it is that makes art, that keeps people returning to certain creations over the years, and never returning to others, is something that comes from the whole person, not from a theory. As I say, Delany won't be convinced by my contribution here. But, in the meantime, I wish the theories he chooses to take on had more substance than Foucault's empty categorising. Examining the literature will show immediately the inadequacy of such a facile attempt at saying something about the nature of fiction and language. The world is divided into porridge eaters and porridge loathers, too, and with good reason.

Rob Gerrard
April 1977

NEXT ISSUE:

Angus Taylor, Lesleigh Luttrell and Claudia Krenz on the Hot Line to the Absolute.
Philip K. Dick; Barrington Bayley

George Turner's long-awaited revised guide to Writing About Science Fiction

Lots of reviews, wit and wisdom

PRIEST'S LONG STEP BACKWARD by Philip Stephensen-Payne

Philip Stephensen-Payne reviews:

The Space Machine
by Christopher Priest
(Faber & Faber; 1976; 363 pages; Three pound 50/\$A10
Harper & Row; 1976; 363 pages; \$US8.95)

With the current craze for nostalgia that is sweeping the Western World, it is inevitable that its effects should be felt in the realms of s. f. Novels and anthologies have appeared looking back to the Golden Age and beyond, to the Victorians. And it is in this vein that Christopher Priest has produced his fourth novel, *The Space Machine* — "A Scientific Romance" of Victorian England.

The date is 1893. Commercial traveller Edward Turnbull learns of a lady commercial traveller, Miss Amelia Fitzgibbon, staying in the same lodgings. Anxious to show her his Visibility Protection Masks, Edward waylays her outside her bedroom one evening. Amelia, equally anxious to see his samples, invites him into her bedroom to talk. Sadly, the landlady — misinterpreting the pure commerciality of their conversation — evicts Edward from the house, but not before he has fallen madly in love with Amelia.

Thus an invitation from her to show his masks to her employer the famous inventor, Sir William Reynolds, is immediately accepted. However Reynolds, absent-minded at the best, hardly notices Edward or his wares, and soon vanishes towards London, leaving Amelia to entertain their guest on her own. Enraptured by her company, Edward loses track of the time and realises suddenly that he must dash to catch the last train home. Amelia only laughs at this, saying that Sir William has an invention to cure even such a problem — a time machine.

Somewhat intoxicated by the evening's drinks, the pair decide to take a trial ten-year trip into "futures" — and then take Edward to catch his train. In 1903 the laboratory seems deserted but, just as the machine begins its return journey, a figure bursts through the laboratory door. A gigantic explosion follows and Edward, untouched physically but shaken mentally, is left with the image of a tattered and bruised "future" Amelia, apparently just consumed by fire. Horrified at the thought of this happening to his beloved, Edward wrestles with the time machine's controls in an attempt to send them further into futures — to prevent the scene he had witnessed by "passing it by".

However, the machine cannot stand the strain; the control rod breaks and Edward and Amelia are sent speeding helplessly through space and time — for the machine doubles as a "space machine". After what seems like ages, the machine stops abruptly, catapulting its passengers into a mass of red weed. Before they can struggle free and re-enter the time machine, its "automatic return" is activated and it vanishes. Finally managing to free themselves, they begin to realise that they have strayed further than they realised — this surely cannot be England! The air is thin, the nights are cold, and the only human beings they see are of a curiously red hue and speak a totally unfamiliar language. But it is not until the couple see the two little moons speeding across the sky that they realise they are not on Earth at all, but on the planet Mars.

At this point the tone of the story changes abruptly. The first 120 pages are a

gay, light-hearted romp, but now, as the story begins to grind towards its distant but inevitable climax, the story takes on a more sombre note. Amelia and Edward discover that the "human" Martians they have met are only slaves to other, grotesque, tentacled creatures with fearsome tripodal fighting-machines and smaller, multi-legged worker-machines. Worse still, they learn that these monsters are planning an immediate attack on Earth in projectiles to be shot from a gigantic cannon. Smuggled aboard one of these, Edward and Amelia return to their home planet, where they fall in with a Mr Wells. With his aid, they build a new space machine, and start destroying the Martians from the air, until it becomes apparent that the Earth has her own defences against the invader.

After his previous three novels, Priest's *The Space Machine* comes as a great disappointment. He seems to have forewarned his talent for inventiveness and abandoned his competent character studies. The book starts as parody, continues as drama, and ends as plagiarism. The result is a somewhat confused book, unclear as to where it is going.

Yet, ironically, much of this could have been negated if Priest had stayed his hand and finished the book at about page 270 (when Amelia and Edward have just landed on Earth). Until then the book has been a patchy, but competent combination of parody of and homage to H G Wells (to whom the book is dedicated). In particular, the depiction of the enslaved Martian race is one of grim yet poetic beauty.

The aura of despondency was present in the room as Amelia and I first entered it, and it was probably this that was our eventual saving. The typical Martian I have described would be obsessed with his internal miseries to the virtual exclusion of all other factors. To no other reason can I attribute the fact that Amelia and I were able to move so freely about the city without attracting attention. Even in those first few moments, as we stood in anticipation of the first cry of alarm or excitement at our appearance, few Martians so much as glanced in our direction.

The despair of the "human" Martians colours the whole middle third of the book in bleak contrast to the gaiety of the opening chapters. As Edward puts it when they face the desolation of Earth after the Martians have landed:

On Mars I had dreamed of greenery and wild flowers; here on the blighted heath we saw only charred and smouldering grasses, with blackness spreading in every direction. On Mars I had hungered for the sighs and sounds of my fellow Earthmen; here there was no one, only the corpses of those unfortunates who had fallen foul of the heat-beam. On Mars I had gasped in the tenuous atmosphere, yearning for the sweet air of Earth; here the odour of fire and death dried our throats and choked our lungs.

Mars was desolation and war, and just as Amelia and I had been touched by it when there, so Earth now felt the first tendrils of the Martian canker.

For once the narrative pauses, and we see the real emphasis of the story in Priest's eyes. While on Mars, Amelia and Edward had been able to survive the desolation and depression around them, confident in the knowledge that this was another world and that somewhere, although they might never reach it, the Earth was still inviolate. As in Priest's *Fugue for a Darkening Island* and John Christopher's earlier *The World in Winter*, the narrator is forced to the conclusion that "it can happen here" — that no

country or world is an island any more.

But, unfortunately for Priest, this particular story has been told before, many years ago and in a much better book. By telling a parallel story, Priest inevitably describes scenes identical to those in *The War of the Worlds*, and a comparison of the two books shows how weak is the writing in *The Space Machine*. For example, the description of the final scene on Primrose Hill. From Priest:

There was a second battle-machine at the foot of Primrose Hill, and here the birds had finished their work. Splashes of dried blood and discarded flesh lay on the grass a hundred feet below the platform.

And Wells:

At the sound of a cawing overhead I looked up at the huge Fighting Machine, that would fight no more for ever, at the tattered red shred of flesh that dripped down upon the overturned seats on the summit of Primrose Hill.

And again, in their last thoughts on Prim-

rose Hill that day. Wells:

The torment was over. Even that day the healing would begin. The survivors of the people — leaderless, lawless, foodless, like sheep without a shepherd — the thousands who had fled by sea, would begin to return.

And Priest:

I kissed her passionately, and, with a joyous sense of re-awakening hope, we sat down on the bedstead on wait for the people to arrive.

Without the sombreness of the middle section, the book could have been a light parody of Wellsian s f. Without the last sections it could have been a pointed story — and a reasonable "prologue" to *The War of the Worlds*. But the three section together leave the reader with a bad taste in the mouth, and an unrelenting memory of all the other smaller faults, the plot inconsistencies and the character irrationalities.

With *The Space Machine*, Priest has taken a long step back in his writing career. Let us hope it is not a permanent move.

Editor: I would echo all of Phil's objections to *The Space Machine* and sum up my own objections in this way:

The first section of the book is quick-witted and complex sexual comedy. This tone of playfulness disappears when the travellers reach Mars. The Martian section is almost exclusively narration of movement. The two main characters hardly seem to react to each other again. This narration therefore needs to be independently interesting. It isn't, because we know "what happens next"; we know how it will all end. And it does — and Priest never quite returns to that interreaction between Amelia and Edward which makes the first section so much better than the rest. After one reading of *The Space Machine*, I would have to say that the book is about 100 pages too long, and has no independent viewpoint — or throws away the originality with which it begins. Readers' discussion welcomed.

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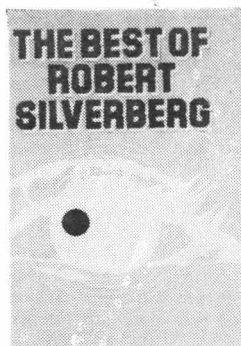
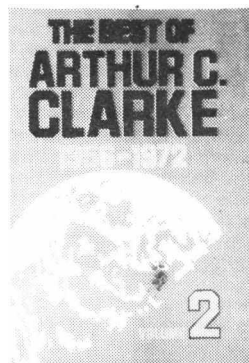
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I must be talking to my friends

Still Crazy After All These Years

* This year *SFC* celebrates its 8th birthday, and "goes offset". I must have gone crazy at last.

There's nothing crazier than spending \$400 an issue in printing and layout costs (and postage is extra), but with a lot of help from *SFC*'s friends, the venture might succeed. All we need is:

(a) Lots more subscriptions — so tell your friends how much they would like to receive this magazine;

(b) Enough advertising bought (and paid for) to fill up a few pages, relieve the layout, and pay for the umpty-umteen printing, layout, postage costs, etc.

Lots of people have helped already with their time and skills. Most important is Stephen Campbell, who is also still crazy after all these years. You might remember that he drew covers for *SFC* and helped to collate way back in 1969 and 1970. Now Steve is exercising his skills at Village Cinemas, and providing all the know-how and exciting layouts which make it worth me going offset. Stephen Campbell did almost everything for *SFC* 51, and he is the Art Director for this issue.

Micheline Cyna-Tang also helped a lot. Irene Pagam and Lee Harding gave a lot of helpful advice when I was first thinking of this venture. Lesleigh and Hank Luttrell are my hard-working agents in America. Bruce Barnes' financial help made it possible. Rob Gerrand's help makes it a lot more possible. The offset version also depends on the help of Suzy Cassio, who is responsible for the typesetting, and Euen Crockett and the other people at Copyplace, who seem to be the best printers for the job.

Back to the bad news. The offset issue of *SFC* can last only another three or four issues if subscriptions (at least 300 new subs needed) or advertising do not come rolling in. And I have no idea what effect new postage increases, promised for June, will have. If you have any ideas, or can help directly, or want to make large donations to the Floating Fund, the phone number is (03) 419.4797.

BEFRIENDED

* This is the sequel to the first bit of *SFC* 48/49/50. Yes, the bit about the Crushing Blows. Crushing Blow 1 left me permanently smasherood. Crushing Blow 3 was most easily mended. I now have what is still the most interesting of the various jobs I've taken during recent years. As half-time assistant editor of *The Secondary Teacher*, the magazine of the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association, I can barely pay my bills and have a bit of free time. It's good to be back with subject matter — education and politics — which interests me. Crushing Blow 2? See below.

But the unkindest blow of all came on April 28 this year, just six months to the day after all the other Crushing Blows. My best friend, Flodnap, the famous grey tabby cat, was hit by a car and killed. He was only 17 months old.

For the last few months of his life Flodnap had the company of four other cats

— Ishtar, Solomon, Apple Blossom and Julius. And the only place in Melbourne fandom where you could find five cats is 10 Johnston Street, Collingwood, where I now live.

Which is one way to introduce the sequel to *Crushing Blow 2*: describing what happened after I had to leave the house at Carlton Street.

I received the final final notice to quit Carlton Street in late January. I decided that I did not want to move into the house which was available to me, mainly because I would have been fairly isolated. After a series of fortunate coincidences, Elaine Cochrane and Frank Payne decided that they could put up with me and my cat, my books and records and record-player and typewriters, at 10 Johnston Street. This place is already well known as a fannish residence: Charles Taylor and Ken Ward lived here with Frank and Elaine for several years; Roger Weddall moved in when Charlie moved out; and it was only after both Ken and Roger moved out that I could fit in.

In geographical terms, Johnston Street is hardly a substitute for Carlton Street. Carlton Street runs along the north edge of a park, and all the houses facing the park are classy Victorian villas. Johnston Street is one of the busiest roads in Melbourne, and quite narrow. No trees around here; only wall-to-wall pollution. We have the only residence in the area; all the other buildings are small shops, small factories, or other businesses. The house is strange — solid bluestone, narrow staircases, an upstairs laundry and clothes-line.

But somehow we are making a home here. I did not think I would ever share a house with other people, but Frank and Elaine are tolerant. Also, we have the combined task of protecting the cats and protecting ourselves from them: unity in adversity. I'll let you know if anything else ever happens.

IS ANYTHING HAPPENING?

* 1977 is not likely to be an exciting year. I've written a lot, and read a lot, but other wise life pivots on my job, *SFC*, and this house.

Moving day was 12 February. It was the hottest day of the summer. We had moved the books and records the weekend before, but we filled a large truck, twice, with objects from my flat. The Don Ashby-Carey Handfield moving team went into action, helped unstintingly by Henry Gasko, Charles Taylor, Ken Ford, Frank and Elaine. The first load arrived at Johnston Street in mid-afternoon. Most items fitted through the narrow dorrways and up the narrower staircase. The only exception was the table which I had used as my work-table at Carlton Street. It would not go up the stairs. Somebody had a great idea — why not lift it up the outside wall to the upstairs balcony? Which we did. The table went through one door, then another. Then it stuck. It refused to go further — its legs stuck out at the wrong angles, the wood bevelling is the wrong shape. So that table

has been left in peace in a spare room.

Most other items protested at going up the staircase. We would lug each item halfway up the stairs, then tip it up over the banister on the upper landing. We had a problem with my heaviest book-case. Charley was at the top of the stairs. We swung the bookcase, he grabbed the other end, and we ran flat out up the stairs to help him with his end. The banister swayed. Charley swayed; he held the entire weight. If the banister had collapsed then, three or four members of Melbourne fandom would have been wiped out. We grabbed the other end of the bookcase in time, Charley sank to the floor, and the banister now jitters each time we walk past it. If/when we must move again, some items of furniture can just stay upstairs. We are less expendable than they are.

The rest of the year has been an anti-climax.

* Elsewhere, things have been happening. Vonda McIntyre and Christopher Priest visited Melbourne in order to take part, with George Turner, in the 1977 Australian S F Writers Workshop. (Kitty Vigo was the Administrator, nicely letting me off the hook.)

Vonda and Chris arrived in time for Monacave (a convention held at Monash University during the last weekend of January), and stayed during the time of the Workshop. The air-conditioning was rumoured to be working at Mannix College, where Monacave was held, but I could not notice it. After one day of heat and sweat, I disappeared from the convention. Those who stayed had a great time. I'm sorry that I missed the first full-scale Paul Stevens Show for some year, starring such luminaries as Chris Priest (as the psychiatrist), Leigh Edmonds (as himself), and Ken Ford (as everything else).

Vonda McIntyre was the Writer in Residence for the first week of the Workshop, George for the second, and Chris for the third. I've had favourable reports from everybody (especially from George, whose article appears in this issue), and it was good fun meeting Chris for the first time in three years, and meeting Vonda for the first time. Both our guests stayed nearly a month in Australia, mainly around Melbourne, and I hope they have recovered by now.

* A slew of fans, most of them from the Melbourne University Science Fiction Association, visited Adelaide for Unicon 3. There was a convention in Brisbane at New Year (very successful, I'm told), and a convention in Sydney, also at Easter (no reports yet). A Con, the national convention is due to happen 29-31 July 1977, at the Pier Hotel, Glenelg, South Australia. Attending membership is \$8 until 30 June, \$10 thereafter, c/o PO Box 51, Thebarton, SA 5031.

* Don Ashby has been threatening to produce a super-rinky-dink fanzine ever since I've known him, but he never has. Instead, he has discovered his true editorial talent by producing *The Australian Radio Science Fiction Review* for 3ZZ Access Radio in Melbourne. Two "issues" of this

"review" have been broadcast so far — on 11 April and 19 April, with more to come during May and June. Maybe we can do some programs with 3CR (Community Radio) as well. The first two programs had the Workshop at their theme, and I heard two stories read from *The Altered I*, with interviews of Micheline, Randal, and Rob. Fine radio voices they have.

* *Fanew Sletter* continues to be more or less the centre of fanish publishing activity in Australia (20 issues for \$4.40, from Leigh Edmonds, PO Box 103, Bruswick, Victoria 3056). Recent issues mention that *Void* and *Boggle* have been published.

Void is the first attempt for many years to publish a professional magazine of science fiction in Australia. It appears on lots of newsstands, and sold very well while it had good distribution. (The distribution monopoly in this country is a perpetual problem.) Despite an uncertainty about outlets, Paul Collins (PO Box 66, St. Kilda, Victoria 3182) has gone ahead with *Void* 5. The layout has improved a lot compared with earlier issues, and the fiction might have improved. (I'm not too sure; I'm four years behind on reading any of the fiction magazines, so I haven't caught up with *Void* yet.) *Void* is available on subscription: \$4 for 4.

I don't know what to make of *Boggle*. Neither does Leigh Edmonds. As he points out in the *Fanew Sletter*, the layout of the typing is very odd, with hyphens breaking words at the most unexpected places. Peter Knox (PO Box 225, Randwick, NSW 2031) is the publisher, and he is trying to foster Australian s f writing talent. He does not seem to have a newsstand distributor, and is relying on subscriptions: \$5 for 4. Good luck to Peter. I have relied on subscriptions for years, and have lost money consistently. Peter must be rich, or have access to a cheap printer.

* The two current Australian competitors for *SFC* are *Enigma* and *Epsilon Eridani Express*. I don't know how Van Ikin (Department of English, University of Sydney, NSW 2006) manages his fine visual effects with his magazine, but the system certainly works. The contents of *Enigma* should interest anybody who is interested in *SFC*, although you will need to put up with amateur fiction as well. Van's own reviews are the strongest section of the magazine. (\$4 for 4)

Epsilon Eridani Express 1 is printed offset, typed with an IBM Selectric, and is a pleasant magazine to hold and read. I was most interested in Heber Decknam's beefs about s f conventions as they are run in Australia. Neville Angove is the editor and chief writer, and his review of Michael Coney's *Rax (Hello Summer, Goodbye)* is here if you missed in in *SFC* 48/49/50. I like Neville's reviewing temperament a lot; I hope is successful. (\$4 for 4, from Neville J. Angove, Flat 13, 5 Maxim Street, West Ryde, NSW 2114).

SFC BREAKTHROUGH! the universe pigeonholed

* Angus Taylor's pithy note-of-comment on *SFC* 48/49/50: "It's not possible to read and pigeonhole the whole universe."

This is a challenge which must be met. Not the entire universe, of course. Better, that nice, neat, now-you-see, now-you-don't universe called science fiction. And I hand-pick my galaxies, stars, and planets to suit myself.

A bit of piegeonholing has become necessary. On my "Urgently To Be Reviewed" shelf are books like *Frankenstein Unbound* and *Rendezvous With Rama*. They have been gathering dust for 4 years. I still mean to review them properly, and still I have not done so.

The reason is simple, of course. To review a book "properly", usually I take a week to do the notes, and another week to write first, second and third drafts. It is

easy to put off reviewing any book.

I keep meaning to write two articles, one to be called, "The Best Science Fiction Novels of 1973", and the other, "The Best Science Fiction Novels of 1974". Then I said to myself — so what? There hasn't been anything worth reviewing in 1975 and 1976, has there? 1973 and 1974 have not dated at all, have they? 1974 is still the most recent year which had a "best".

I decided to test whether my suspicions were correct. How interesting have the s f novels in each of the last four years been? And how do my assessments compare with what Hugo and Nebula voters regard as "the best"? I went through the list of the s f novels I have read during the last few years. I sorted them into year of first publication, then classified them according to my four-star ratings (plus various half stars). Here are the results:

1973 MY LIST

Hard to be a God, by Arkadi and Boris-Strugatski (Seabury)
(First English translation)
Frankenstein Unbound, by Brian Aldiss (Jonathan Cape)
The Embedding, by Ian Watson (Gollancz)
Rendezvous With Rama, by Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz)
Malevil, by Robert Merle (Simon & Schuster)
Syzygy, by Michael Coney (Ballantine)

... 2

Breakfast of Champions, by Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (Delacorte)
There Will Be Time, by Poul Anderson (Singer)
Cemetery World, by Clifford D. Simak (Doubleday)

ACTUAL HUGO NOMINATIONS

The People of the Wind, by Poul Anderson
Rendezvous With Rama, by Arthur C. Clarke (winner)
The Man Who Folded Himself, by David Gerrold
Time Enough For Love, by Robert Heinlein
Protector, by Larry Niven

ACTUAL NEBULA NOMINATIONS

Time Enough For Love, by Robert Heinlein
Rendezvous With Rama, by Arthur Clarke (winner)
Gravity's Rainbow, by Thomas Pynchon
The People of the Wind, by Poul Anderson
The Man Who Folded Himself, by David Gerrold

1974 MY LIST

The Cyberiad, by Stanislaw Lem (Seabury)
Memoirs of a Survivor, by Doris Lessing (Picador)
The Eighty-Minute Hour, by Brian Aldiss (Jonathan Cape)
The Inverted World, by Christopher Priest (Faber & Faber)
The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin (Harper & Row)
Ice and Iron, by Wilson Tucker (Doubleday)
The Unsleping Eye, by D.G. Compton (DAW)
Strangers, by Gardner Dozois (in *New Dimensions* 4, Signet)
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, by Philip K. Dick (Doubleday)
Winter's Children, by Michael Coney (Gollancz)

... 1/2

Total Eclipse, by John Brunner (Doubleday)
The Dream Millennium, by James White (Sidgwick & Jackson)

Orbitsville, by Bob Shaw (Gollancz)
Fire Time, by Poul Anderson (Doubleday)

HUGO NOMINATIONS

The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin (winner)
Fire Time, by Poul Anderson
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, by Philip K. Dick
The Inverted World, by Christopher Priest
The Mote in God's Eye, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle

NEBULA NOMINATIONS

The Dispossessed, by Ursula K. Le Guin (winner)
Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said, by Philip K. Dick
The Godwhale, by T. J. Bass
334, by Thomas M. Disch

1973

Hard to be a God, Frankenstein Unbound, The Embedding, and Rendezvous With Rama dominate the list for 1973.

I've reviewed *Hard to be a God* already in the "Eurovision" section of *SFC 44/45*, so you know how good I think that is. If any justice had been done, it would have won both the Hugo and the Nebula.

So should *Frankenstein Unbound*, but it was published in England only during 1973. As we know, the Hugo and Nebula Awards go to books published in USA on the designated date, but the rules of the Hugo limit books to "year of first English-language publication". That's just part of the American chauvinism which rules such contests.

Frankenstein Unbound is literate and literary. It is about a time traveller who meets not only the creator of *Frankenstein* but also her creation and his monster. And then he discovers that the monster is really him. This tends to suggest that we are really the products of the minds of some philanthropic nineteenth-century aristocrat who dabbled in crazy literature. I'll look into such an idea if and when I ever get around to *The Review of Frankenstein Unbound*.

The Embedding is about that latest branch of magic-fiction — linguistics. That is, the type of linguistics which postulates that the roots of our thinking are common to all of us, forming a sort of giant telepathic chain around the globe, if only we could find it. In this book, there is a crazy scientist who keeps children separate from the rest of humanity to see if they will develop a language, and what form it might take. Then there is the crazy traveller from the Amazon who finds the secret of the universe among a group of Indians who are about to be drowned by the Brazilian government. And nobody's madder than Brazilian governments, it seems.

With this book, Ian Watson reintroduces fervour and passion into s.f. The book has real anger in it — an unusual quality. I still find it a bit hard to pinpoint what the anger is about, which is why I must take another longer look at the book sometime.

Between them, reviewers in other magazines have described just about all that can be said about *Rendezvous With Rama*. It is an exploration trip through a mysterious micro-universe, and the scenery is the whole book. As long as Clarke sticks to scenery, he is great. (In *Imperial Earth*, two years later, Clarke tries to show people as well. He does not succeed.)

Malevil is notable mainly because it takes the characters, and the readers, through an experience of what it would be like to survive an atomic attack. Of course, Merle has to put his characters in the deepest cellar of a solid castle for the experience to have any plausibility, but I think he succeeds. It is worth reading the book for the first half alone. The second half is interesting, but only just.

And *Syzygy* is light, firm Coney. We talked about Coney in *SFC 48/49/50*.

Compare this list with the "heavies" for the year: the actual Hugo and Nebula nominations. I must admit that I was so discouraged by reviews in other magazines that I never quite had the energy to read *The People of the Wind*, *The Man Who Folded Himself*, *Time Enough For Love* (which I avoided on principle), and *Protector* (which I might still have time to read in order to prepare a sequel to this article). *Gravity's Rainbow* looks enormous, and obscure. I still have it on my shelf, and I still mean to read it. John Brunner showed some courage in taking the trouble to review it for *Foundation*.

1974

Ah! What a year 1974 was. I can remember visiting Chris Priest at the beginning of 1974. He showed me *The Inverted World*, which I liked very much. I doubted if anything better would come along that year and Chris told me of all the exciting books that were already scheduled for publication. As 1974 proceeded, the fine books kept pouring onto us.

There were at least two reviews of *The Cyberiad* in *SFC 44/45*, and I've raved long enough about it for people willing to sit and listen. Perhaps *The Cyberiad* did not win kudos within the s.f. world because it seems a book for people who don't like other science fiction. I've heard two world-famed astronomers talking on the radio about Lem as if he is accepted automatically as the major s.f. writer. (These were American astronomers, too.) But the fans still don't want to know about him. Philosophers are the people most likely to get their kicks from these funny fables, which, in their inverted way, describe the full range of humanity's intellectual foibles. This is a perpetually amusing book, full of puns, word games, classical references, etc. And most s.f. books are left for dead by the sheer number and range of ideas in this book.

Still, in my awards for 1974, I would be tempted to give Equal 1st to *Memoirs of a Survivor*. None of Lem's playfulness here; this book's wit is concentrated in two or three metaphors which control the flow of language. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is about people attempting to stay alive in a city where the power has been turned off. Lessing does not "explain" the catastrophe; she concentrates on the experience of surviving it. (This is the way I wish all

1975

MY LIST

Helio Summer, Goodbye, by Michael Coney (Gollancz)
The Stochastic Man, by Robert Silverberg (Harper & Row)
Charisma, by Michael Coney (Gollancz)
The Futurological Congress, by Stanislaw Lem (Seabury)
The Forever War, by Joe Haldeman (St. Martin's Press)

• • • $\frac{1}{2}$

The Jonah Kit, by Ian Watson (Gollancz)
The Hollow Lands, by Michael Moorcock (Sphere)

• • •

A World of Shadows, by Lee Harding (Robert Hale)

• • • $\frac{1}{2}$

Imperial Earth, by Arthur C. Clarke (Gollancz)
The Shockwave Rider, by John Brunner (Ballantine)
The Exile Waiting, by Vonda McIntyre (Fawcett)
Stations of the Nightmare, by Philip Jose Farmer (in *Continuum* 1-4)

HUGO NOMINATIONS

The Computer Connection, by Alfred Bester
The Forever War, by Joe Haldeman (winner)
Inferno, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
The Stochastic Man, by Robert Silverberg
Doorways in the Sand, by Roger Zelazny

NEBULA WINNERS

From a very long list of nominees, the winners were

1. *The Forever War*, by Joe Haldeman
2. *The Mote in God's Eye*, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
3. *Dhalgren*, by Samuel R. Delany

1976

MY LIST

The Star Diaries, by Stanislaw Lem (Seabury)
The Clewiston Test, by Kate Wilhelm (Farrar)
Shadrach in the Furnace, by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz)

• • • $\frac{1}{2}$

Deus Irae, by Philip K. Dick and Roger Zelazny (Doubleday)
A Wreath of Stars, by Bob Shae (Gollancz)
The End of All Songs, by Michael Moorcock (Harper)

• • •

The Space Machine, by Christopher Priest (Harper)
Floating Worlds, by Cecilia Holland (Gollancz)
Man Plus, by Frederik Pohl (Gollancz)
Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, by Kate Wilhelm (Harper)

• • • $\frac{1}{2}$

Brontomek!, by Michael Coney (Gollancz)

• • •

And Strange at Ecbatan the Trees, by Michael Bishop (Harper)

NEBULA NOMINATIONS

Man Plus, by Frederik Pohl
Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang, by Kate Wilhelm
Inferno, by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle
Shadrach in the Furnace, by Robert Silverberg
Triton, by Samuel R. Delany
Islands, by Marta Randall

science fiction were written — as felt experience, not as chalkboard diagrams.) The main character of the book stays in touch through close relationships with a few of the other survivors. And she experiences a remarkable insight into the nature of the city itself. And then we wonder, when we read the end of the book — is the main character a "she"? Is he or she even a person? Or something more implacable, a spectator to the whole of life?

It's unfair to include *Memoirs of a Survivor*. I suspect that no more than a few handback copies were released in Australia in 1974; it became widely available in paperback only in 1976. It is one of those books from outside the s f ghetto which are much deeper and more moving than anything inside it.

I've become annoyed by the general attitude of distaste shown by s f reviewers to *The Eighty-Minute Hour*. It is certainly as funny as *The Cyberiad*, if not as packed. One day — spit on the ground and hope to die — I will write a great review which will redeem this fine book. Real soon now.

In his review in *SFC 44/45*, Gerald Murnane said most of the things I would want to say about *The Inverted World*. The crawling city becomes as much a part of the cipher as does Helward Mann, one of Chris Priest's unrepentantly misanthropic characters. There is an irony and implacable strength in *Inverted World* which will draw me back to it time and again.

I still like *Inverted World* better than *The Dispossessed* because the former book is more of a piece than the latter. Ursula Le Guin said on stage at Aussiecon that *The Dispossessed* is "the story of a marriage". Yes; when it is the story of a marriage, it is a great book. When it is about collective human organisations, its focus goes cloudy. A lot of the social stuff sits on the page and defies you to enjoy it. I will remain fascinated by this book because I cannot make up my mind about it. I'm certain to read it again — and add my own review to the many others.

I summed up *Ice and Iron* as well as I could in *SFC 43*, the Tucker issue. In its original version (Gollancz/Doubleday), *Ice and Iron* is all experience and very few explanations. (I still have not read the "explained" version, from Ballantine.) As in all Tucker books, the experience is both harsh and tender, a meticulous observation of real people trying to live as best they can. I would have been pleased if *Ice and Iron* had won an award.

Andrew Whitmore talks about *The Unsleeping Eye* (*The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoel*) in his article in this issue of *SFC*. I don't catch Compton's "humour", if it is there, which is why I find most of Compton's work stodgy and melodramatic. Compton has a neat way of pushing his characters towards disaster in every book. (If disaster and dissolution are fore-ordained as in a Dick novel, then the path downwards needs to be paved with some humour and a few twists and turns, but Compton lets 'em drop straight down, every time. You can only take life as solemnly as Compton does if you believe there is a chance of redemption — which does not appear in any Compton book I have read.)

But *The Unsleeping Eye* has fine detail and a sense of personal and social complexity which compensates for the book's soft centre. Like Andrew Whitmore, I cannot understand why Compton remains unread, when really dull writers pick up the awards every year.

I talked about *Strangers* in *SFC 48/49/50*. It's another work of intense experience and commitment. It shrieks too much toward the end.

Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said is un-put-downable while you are reading it.

but it does not stay in the memory, like so many of Dick's other books. There is something a bit too cut-and-dried in the book. At the same time, it is diffuse, probably because Dick changes his emphasis from one main character to another halfway through the book. George Turner, in *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, discussed this book much better than I can. So does Barry Gillam in *SFC 41/42*.

Chris Priest agrees with me that *Winter's Children* is a funny book. It's downright absurd. We seem to be the only people, except Coney, to see this. *Winter* descends onto the world. In a village now buried under snow, a small group of people tries to survive. The members of the group are ludicrously ill-equipped to survive a trip on a suburban train, let alone the rigours of winter, hunters, weird beasts, and everything else which Coney dumps on them. They survive anyway. Coney keeps tipping up readers' expectations, so the book is as much a joke on the reader as about the main characters. Reaction to books like *Winter's Children* and *The Eighty-Minute Hour* shows that it is all too easy for an s f writer to be cleverer than his/her audience.

ACTUAL AWARDS 1974

It's remarkable that either list agrees as closely with mine as it does. According to my records, 334 was released first in England in 1972, and therefore does not feature on any of my lists. If I followed the Nebula rules (first version available to American readers), 334 would be top of my 1974 list. Yes, even ahead of *The Cyberiad*.

I read *Fire Time*. It was tedious; it should not have read an award list anywhere. I do not have the courage to read 500 pages of Niven and Pournelle. I cannot read the works of T. J. Bass.

1975 AND 1976

1975 and 1976 are both years in which you really need to look around to make up any lists at all. For 1975 and 1976 together, I don't think I would award a definite winner except, perhaps, to *Hello Summer, Goodbye* (Rax in USA).

In *SFC 48/49/50*, Neville Angove described the virtues of *Hello Summer, Goodbye* better than I can. It's a very nice ending, but I have a question about it. Randal Flynn says that the meaning of the ending is that the lorin will resurrect everybody after the long freeze ends. My interpretation was that the lorin would rescue only the main character and his girlfriend, because they were the only people who accepted the lorin as legitimate fellow creatures.

At any rate, this is very satisfying fable about life and love and growing up and political ecology, and almost everything else. And not a word wasted in the telling. This is the sort of book you give to people when you want to show them how good-but different s f can be.

I talked about *The Stochastic Man* in *SFC 51*.

Van Ikin reviewed *Charisma* in *SFC 48/49/50*. Another very satisfying book, for either people like me who appreciate Philidickian metaphysical high-jinks, or for people who like science fiction as only the English can write it.

The Futurological Congress also has much in common with Phil Dick, but I like it less than some other recent Lem releases. Perhaps it is because the humour and the horror strain too much towards each other so, in the end, the reader is no longer willing to ride along with Lem. Maybe I will when I read it again.

Little can be added to what others have said about *The Forever War*. Certainly, it's an excellent book within the severe limitations which Joe Haldeman sets himself.

It sticks in the memory — firstly, for that image of the ultra-cold, ultra-deadly planet where the space troopers do their training; and then for the glimpses of a successively more alien Earth to which Mandella returns during the centuries. There is a real tragic concept here, a concept which Haldeman carefully avoids facing. I cannot understand why both the fan and pro voters lavished their largesse on this particular book.

The Jonah Kit almost got the **** rating. I've thought about its various strengths and defects, but in the end, I cannot take its ending as anything but cosmological farce. I don't think Watson meant it to read that way. George Turner gave an excellent treatment of this book in *SFC 47*.

In 1976, there are almost contenders for kudos. Even *The Star Diaries* is a somber book compared with *The Cyberiad*. I could excuse people who cannot rouse much enthusiasm for it. As in *The Cyberiad*, *The Star Diaries* has an endless variety of provocative and delicious ideas, and Ijon Tichy is as innocently bothered and browbeaten in *The Star Diaries* as Trurl and Klapaucius were in *The Cyberiad*. Perhaps the difference is that the robot inventors where in there kicking; Ijon Tichy just gets kicked around. *The Star Diaries* has some pieces which degenerate into grotesque catalogues.

In *SFC 48/49/50*, I commented on the difference between Kate Wilhelm's two 1976 contenders, *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* and *The Clewiston Test*. *The Clewiston Test* has the tang of a good thriller and the intensity of closely felt experience. The surface of the prose is apt to be threadbare, yet the whole book remains memorable.

I hope to have at least two reviews of *Shadrach in the Furnace* in future issues of *SFC*. This book shows more clearly than any other that the one quality which Silverberg still lacks is self-knowledge. There are ways in which Silverberg does not know what he is doing. For instance, his work, no matter how well-done, has an oppressive quality which, I'm sure, Silverberg does not realise is there. *Shadrach* works because Silverberg has no illusions about his main character who is, after all, in a ghastly line of business. He won't take personal responsibility for his position, until the end of the book, when he becomes what he hates most. Silverberg seems set to make a breakthrough in self-perception at the end of the book — and doesn't quite. I don't think it matters to us if Silverberg never writes another s f novel; I think it matters very much to Bob Silverberg that he write some more.

ACTUAL AWARDS 1975

The Forever War sweeps both awards — but I think there is more to s f than that book. I doubt if I will ever get around to reading *Inferno*. Nothing I have heard about it has made me eager to read *Doorways in the Sand*. Rob Gerrard's piece on Delany (this or next issue of *SFC*) convinces me that I can leave Delany for a few more years yet.

ACTUAL NOMINATIONS 1976

The Nebula nominations for this year point to a severe decline in the state of the genre. S f has been through such declines before, but voters still give awards. What about a lot more years with "No Award"?

I hope to run a review of *Man Plus* in a future issue of *SFC*. I think it is a woeful book, including everything that is worst about s f. It is merely a report of events; no real experience. The thrills of the book are connected with the technology of creating a human biologically altered so he can live on Mars. The "human interest" is every-

thing that such a cliché implies — a bit of contretemps between husbands and wives to fill some pages. The ending is ridiculous, repellent, etc. Its literary function is to make a "happy ending" of the most facile kind.

Shadrach in the Furnace is the only book on the list which I have read and like.

The main fault of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* is that it simplifies its message. The message is that, no matter what ecological and other disasters happen to the Earth, all will be okay as long as one person with the True American Spirit of Individuality survives the catastrophe. Anybody who survives any other way, say by collective effort, doesn't deserve to.

So s f is going through one of its periods of decline. I might be wrong, of course. But if excellent books are sprouting on the bookshelves all around me, they are not labelled as science fiction, and I might not catch up with them for a year or two.

Most of the books that other people are talking about (especially in fanzines) are only in my also-ran list. Publishers send me books so I read some of them. I enjoy quite a few of them, but I would not recommend them to anybody else. This even applies to *Deus Irae*, which lacks the real Phil Dick flare. It's a series of more-or-less funny, erudite, or obscure religious jokes. I've sniped at *The Space Machine* elsewhere in this issue. An author who has been going as well as Priest has to have a flop sometimes. *Floating Worlds* is long. And it has short sentences. If you keep reading it, you find interesting things in it. If you stop reading after page 20, you don't miss a thing.

* And *A Wreath of Stars* should be brilliant, but somehow isn't.

A Wreath of Stars

by Bob Shaw

(Gollancz; 1976; 189 pages; 3 pounds 50).

A Wreath of Stars intertwines several interesting s f themes in a consistently lithe and organic way. There is Thornton's Planet, an anti-neutrino world which passes close to Earth. A few people on Earth can see its motion only because they wear magniluct glasses ("When a neutrino enters a lens of your magniluct glasses, it interacts with protons and produces neutrons and beta-plus particles which excite other atoms in the material and in turn produce emissions in the visible region.") An invisible planet in an alternate, invisible universe can now be seen.

Not that the book is about the stray planet. Instead, it is about an anti-neutrino planet which lies "inside" Earth, but usually cannot be detected. The passing of Thornton's Planet causes great disruptions to the movement of Avernus, as it comes to be called, and aspects of its surface begin to intersect with isolated spots on the Earth's surface. People who happen to be wearing magniluct glasses watch the ghostly figures of anti-neutrino people float by.

One of these people is Gilbert Snook, a shy fellow at the best of times, who finds himself held virtually a political prisoner in the small East African country of Barandi. He holds the position of supervisor in a mine which, it seems, provides more-or-less the only foreign-exchange-earning item for Barandi. The workers in the mine, who wear magniluct glasses to see underground without lighting, object when the inhabitants of Avernus appear as ghosts underground. They go on strike. The rulers of Barandi do not take well to striking miners, so they put pressure on Snook. Snook retaliates by attracting the attention of the world's press, and UNESCO, and the rest of the scientific community.

Ambrose Boyce, a scientist, sneaks into Barandi before the rulers close the border. Prudence Devonald, of UNESCO, demands that they let her in. *A Wreath of Stars* is

the story of their encounter with Snook; and of his encounter with them, the inhabitants of Avernus, and himself.

This book has everything — a complex story-line, interrelations between believable characters, and some breath-taking visualisations of s f concepts. But this book does not have — and the same can be said of Shaw's other books — that kind of fervour which is needed to carry an s f book into the "memorable" category. This book is all too nice. The story is anything but predictable, but it sounds predictable while you are reading the book. The characters have individuality, but they could have stepped out of any one of a number of other s f books. And Gilbert Snook is one of those s f people who is provided with A Character. I cannot quite imagine him existing before or after the events of the novel. . . . It is easy to forget him altogether, although he is centre-stage through the book.

So I have misgivings about this book, without being able to pin down the difficulty precisely. Snook is so much of the traditional boy-scout character of 1940s, yet he pops up in a world of near-future power politics. Snook is too tentative a character upon which to rest the weight of the other events. (Bob Shaw would have been more successful if he made Snook into an Evelyn Waugh comic innocent who falls into success by hilarious mischances; Shaw is a funny writer — but not in his fiction.)

I don't like the bits of s f business which weaken the book. Snook just happens to have telepathic abilities — and that cliché weakens the other, more believable bases for the story. Too many of the events are solved by melodramatic confrontations (plus the completely unbelievable conversations between members of the Barandi cabinet). Snook doesn't get the girl — but this girl is a bit snooty anyway.

Minor weaknesses — but they add up to a pallidness of tone which takes away excitement from the rest of the book. Shaw takes no chances; he dove-tails all the pieces; he takes short-cuts so that everything comes out right for the reader. Not even the sombre, ambiguous ending gives the bite which this book needs.

But, all that aside, *A Wreath of Stars* is still better than all but one of this year's Nebula nominees.

The Custodians and Other Stories

by Richard Cowper

(Gollancz; 1976; 191 pages; 3 pounds 40).

The stories in this collection also tend to be tentative, but it does not matter so much. Cowper throws away the endings of three of the four stories, but still retains much power in them.

"The Custodians" is compact and, like so many stories of this type, should not have the ending revealed beforehand. The story scurries through several centuries in only fifty pages, but it gives the impression of happening all in one scene.

Various visitors come to the monastery of Hautaire which "had dominated the IX valley for more than twelve hundred years". In the thirteenth century the notable visitor was Meister Steinwarts. In 1923, it is Marcus Spindrift, who appears at the gates of the monastery as a researcher into the life of Steinwarts. He is shown the secret of the monastery the grotto which Steinwarts had built. Spindrift never leaves the monastery again. In 1981, a girl named Judy Harland sneaks into the monastery, disguised as a boy. Nearly fifty years have passed, and it is time for the next person to go into the grotto and find out the secrets of the future. I found the ending convincing, partly because it fits my own prognostication for the near future of the world, and mainly because Cowper has an intense power to make us live in and see through the eyes of his main characters. One of these characters is

the monastery of Hautaire itself.

The other stories are less interesting, but not for lack of trying. "Piper at the Gates of Dawn" is set in one of those future histories in which everything has definitely fallen apart. Very Pangbornian, this. Inevitably, it seems, Cowper resorts to a society where wizards are important, and where fear of the unexpected is expressed in cruelly rigid social rules. The young man, Tom, has a power to influence people and animals with his magic whistle. He becomes a side-show item, and then a sacrifice. The story makes a rather obvious reference to a crucified Christ. I suspect this developed as a secondary theme in the story, but it took over. Cowper's original theme, I suspect, was the relationship between the artist and society. Cowper lost his way, and so does the story.

"The Hertford Manuscript" is Cowper's contribution to a growing sub-genre: the adventures of Wells' Time Traveller after the ending of *The Time Machine*. Cowper deposits this Time Traveller in 1665, the year of the Great Plague. The author recreates the era in great detail, but does not let the Time Traveller return home. A very readable story.

"Paradise Beach" isn't much. What there is emerges only at the end.

Science Fiction at Large

edited by Peter Nicholls

(Gollancz; 1976; 224 pages; 5 pounds 95; \$17.60).

Science fiction may be "at large" — but book prices have escaped altogether. The local distributors want to charge \$17.60 for a quite ordinary-looking book of 224 pages! Nobody has that sort of money at the moment — not even libraries. But since I have been sent a review copy (which would cost me no more than \$4.10 if I bought it directly from England), I will make a few remarks, someone else will give it a proper review soon.

In his Introduction, Peter Nicholls writes, "This book results from a series of lectures delivered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, from January to March 1975. The lectures were part of an elaborate festival of science fiction which also involved a film/discussion series, a drama series for children, an art display and even a section devoted to futuristic fashion design."

The series must have been exciting to attend and participate in, but I wonder what to make of them as a single document. Take Thomas Disch's lecture ("The Embarrassments of Science Fiction"), which is based on the thesis that science fiction is a branch of children's literature (not so much the current sprightly genre of "children's literature", but books which could appeal only to some children).

There are, here and there, children bright enough to cope with the *Scientific American* or even the *Times Literary Supplement*, but crucial aspects of adult experience remain boring even to these prodigies. At the cinema children fail to see the necessity for love scenes, and if a whole movie were to prove to be about nothing else, then they would just as soon not sit through it. . . . Other subjects . . . are also presumed not to be of interest to s f readers, such as the nature of the class system and the real exercise of power within that system. . . .

. . . Evil is seen as intrinsically external, a blackness ranged against the unvaried whites of heroism. Unhappy endings are the outcome of occasional cold equations, not of flawed human nature. There can be no tragic dimension of experience.

Which sums up much of what I and other writers have been trying to say in *S F Commentary* for the last 8½ years, and in *ASFR* before that. However, these things

need to be said inside the field, rather than as a lecture to people outside it

S F Commentary for the last 8½ years, and in *ASFA* before that. However, these things need to be said inside the field, rather than as a lecture to people outside it

The best writers in the field, like Tom Disch, are embarrassed by such that appears as "science fiction", and rightly so. But I would guess that many of his listeners at the ICA Conference would not have been familiar enough with the field to know whether or not to agree with him. They would expect a guide to the s f game, and instead receive the referee's current thoughts on how the teams line up. (The same can be said for Peter Nicholls' own essay.)

A guide to the thrills of the game is needed. Robert Sheckley provides a humorous guide ("The Search for the Marvellous") but gives little sign that science fiction is as good as he would like it to be. People like Edward de Bono call science fiction a literature of "provocation", but really his lecture is just another excuse to tout his "lateral thinking".

Fortunately, the book begins with Ursula Le Guin ("Science Fiction and Mrs. Brown"). She is as sceptical about science fiction as Disch is, yet she holds up for inspection those features which are worth looking at.

Scepticism first — with an examination of why it is difficult to let a science fiction story grow out of a character rather than concept. Still, Ursula Le Guin believes that human s f is possible — and who can blame her for showing her point by tracing the genesis of some of her own novels? If there is despair here, it is for a contemporary civilisation which crystallises people, robs them of life, and makes nonsense of the idea of "character" in science fiction.

If there is hope, it is in the books she discusses at length — *The Man in the High Castle* (Dick) and *Synthajoy* (Compton) in particular. And when she talks about her own work, especially *The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, she shows why science fiction is worth the trouble of publishing *Science Fiction at Large*.

Not that Nicholls' book adds up to a major statement. The pieces by Le Guin, Disch, and Nicholls are excellent science fiction criticism, water for the desert inside the field. Take the pieces by De Bono, Toffler, and Taylor — and you have a group of general thinkers gambolling in fields which science fiction calls its own. It is these essays which will interest the general reader.

The two essays which have most interest to both groups are two very personal statements. Alan Garner (in "Inner Time") tries to show how creativity springs out of an entire human experience. It just tells about Garner's life during the period of time between "The Owl Service" and "Red Shift". Philip Dick sent a piece when ill health prevented him from attending the lecture series.

On the page, it reads like a Biblical prophecy, a marching foray through human enquiry of all ages, summarised in majestic, threatening images. I presume that it should be read as a sequel to Dick's essay, "The Android and the Human" (Philip K. Dick: *Electric Shepherd*).

I've left Peter Nicholls' lecture to last, because a section of it appeared in the "Plumbers of the Cosmos" debate (*SFC* 48/49/50). That's the part where Peter was talking about the various kinds of critics in the field. You may remember that Peter mentions Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, and even Brian Aldiss as part of a group which he calls the "Elegant Slummers".

LETTERS

Brian Aldiss

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The debate you publish ("Plumbers of the Cosmos") between George Turner and Peter Nicholls is very instructive. One sees the different qualities of the two men, one devoted to principles, one only interested in personalities.

It is foily to speak of Amis, Conquest, Ballard, and me as "elegant slummers". Among all my friends, I hardly know of two more inventive and compelling conversation alists than Amis and Conquest; the flow of their talk is perpetually enriched by fantastical s f ideas. They like the s f they like and are totally unselfconscious about it. Anybody who knows Ballard knows what his talk is like; his talk is a battleground of armoured paradox. All I can say for myself is that I have written s f for a long while and intend to continue so to do.

Nicholls calls my affection for Frank R. Paul's paintings another bit of slumming, talking of tears running down my face. Nonsense. I rather slighted Paul in *Billion Year Spree*, remarking on how those gaudy covers were "totally divorced from all the exciting new movements" of art in our century. However, I do respect Paul. The taste may be perverted, but I defend it in rational terms in *Science Fiction Art* (that big floppy volume which I hope reached Australia), whereas Nicholls dismisses Paul as "kitsch" and "a kind of camp". Even if one dislikes Paul, surely one can't call his work "kitsch"? The word is often misused, but doesn't it mean something like "pretentious nonsense of an imitative kind"? Paul is given to the grandiose, yes, but his work — its colours, its softly moulded figures — has an innocence which absolves it from pretentiousness. As for being imitative, Paul is an innovator in his minor-league way. The break with the larky Gothic and the chiaroscuro which went before him — and returned after him — is marked; while his Odeon Bauhaus-Byzantine architecture is his own. God knows, I've lamented most of the traditions of First Fandom, but I do think Paul is great within the meaning of the act. The "camp" charge is meaningless. A trendy insult, no more. Camp entails a display of obvious bad taste in a spirit of mocking irony, and that isn't Paul's scene.

Later, Nicholls talks about Arthur Clarke "making it financially". I do not see what money has to do with the topic the critics were supposed to be discussing, but it leads to this: "publishers will start treating s f writers as real people". An example is Brian Aldiss novel *Non-Stop*. That novel sold world rights for 60 pounds. Aldiss never got another penny out of that hook. Lies. Several kinds of rubbish in one. In the course of a long a checkered career, one does bump up against tricky publishers (not to mention tricky critics). But in the real world there is nothing of this cardinal distinction between s f writers and the rest which Nicholls supposes to exist. Sure, market forced influence a publisher; but personal taste and his view of his obligations as publisher also have marked effect. As George Turner says elsewhere, good s f has always been welcome, as has the good writer who delivers his material according to contract.

Nobody ever bought world rights in any of my novels, certainly not in *Non-Stop*, certainly not for 60 pounds. I resent the imputation that Faber & Faber, an honourable publisher with whom I would have rested easy to have had no contract at all,

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

would have grabbed world rights of the book they published, just because I was a new young writer. I know that other Faber authors, and my friends at Faber, would wish to see this impertinent piece of slander nailed immediately. It is without foundation. (Christ, it's no secret that last year I was GoH at Eurocon III at Poznan, and was able to travel there with my family because the Poles were paying me in zlotys for their translation of *Non-Stop*.)

* I heard this rumour when I first entered fandom about ten years ago. The rumour that *Non-Stop* had been signed away for ever. But I heard the reference to Digit Books. Not that I've ever seen a Digit edition of *Non-Stop* (but there was one of *Equator*, is this the source of confusion?), or even know for sure whether Digit ever published it. God knows where the rumour started, but it had been going a long time before Peter Nicholls heard it and repeated it in public.

A sort of rejoicing took me as I read the new polysaturated fat *SFC* 48/49/50. Reading it is like finding oneself in a populous market town; people come and go with great bustle; they don't all see eye to eye and they sometimes quarrel, but they recognise that they are fellow-citizens, and that their accent differs slightly from the strange city only nineteen kilometres down the road.

There is science fiction; there is fandom. You operate in an area inbetween, where opinions pass like cats in the dark. Much of your material, or much of what most caught my eye, is about, not s f, but s f criticism. Everyone says that criticism of criticism is incestuous, a feast for jackals, but it is necessary, and shown to be necessary by the sort of passionate dissection George Turner carries out in *Nebula Award Stories 10*. It is a pity about Robert Scholes' criticism; he is obviously a clear sighted and sensitive critic in many ways, as his book with the obstreperous title, *Structural Fabulation*, shows; but I fancy that his forthcoming OUP volume will greatly disappoint, simply because he accepts, whether consciously or otherwise, the great sanctified nonsenses of the field, like Gernsback started it all, Campbell was always right, the New Wave came and went, Who needs characters if the starship is big enough? etc.

I hate to suggest any further activities to your already fevered brain, but how about an issue on s f criticism? You'd have to take into account such items as *Science Fiction Studies*, edited by Darko Suvin. What does George Turner think of it? Is it not, despite creeping Marxism, gallantly showing that there can be impartial and creative criticism of s f? I'd guess that such criticism will never come from old s f writers who have ceased to create, were never really creative, and have now sunk back into some cushy academic backwater where bourbon and memories of First Fandom frequently overcome them. There are signs, which I believe that Mr. Turner also detects, that such old hands may infect the younger ones, so that a new orthodoxy is established, inimical to fresh work.

* That is my impression as well. But it is also my impression that former s f writers-turned-academics enjoy their perks after many years of unrecognised hard labour (and who can blame them?). They say what they believe at universities, and

presumably a lot of students believe them. But this process does lead towards a new orthodoxy.

It is difficult to write on books about science fiction. It requires much time and effort, and nobody seems to have much time at the moment. So I offer this idea to *SFC* contributors, but don't expect to be deluged with contributions. I thought that George Turner's "Voice of the Mock Turtle" (*SFC* 48/49/50) summarised most of the present pitfalls of current orthodox writing about science fiction.

PS: I can't resist adding something more on the subject of *s f* criticism. I hope you will be interested in a massive volume appearing from Bran's Head Books this year (that is the new publisher which has just published two important new Olaf Stapledon items and the slender volume on Ballard). The forthcoming volume is entitled *The Significance of Science Fiction*, it is edited by a brilliant man, Richard Kirby, who has already begun to make enemies, and the contributors to his symposium include many other interesting minds. Let's just cite Stan Gooch, author of the revolutionary *Total Man*, for one. What you may find astonishing about these men is that none of them have the usual connections with *s f*. They don't aspire to write it, they did not once write it, they do not publish it or edit it, they have never even been married to an ex-wife of a *Galaxy* author. They are in other disciplines and just happen to enjoy *s f* and find it... significant. They say why.

From what I've seen of the book in proof, it contains many good new things (and a bit of drivel too, admittedly, for roughage). It will be a bit more profound than de Camp's *Revised Handbook*. Kirby tackles and solves that old vexed question of the definition of *s f*, for a start. The inflation of minor reputations which some of your critics complain of is also avoided.

Speaking as an author, I find it is dizzy making to be on the roulette-wheel of reputation. One gets used to it, the tests of being scolded, being praised, being neglected, in turns. It's okay as long as you are actually writing your next book, knowing it will be good even while you know that knowledge may be illusion. At present, I fear for Le Guin, who gets so much attention; but she is clearly a modest and stalwart person. One thing that bothers me a bit about *s f* perhaps someone will come forward and convincingly persuade me I'm wrong, but isn't most American *s f* still about (even if the theme's concealed) conquest of an imperialist kind? The worry is not that this is what the USA secretly wants, though maybe it does, but that the idea of colonialism is so dead in the rest of the world. Of course, there is Soviet colonialism, but that is of a different mould, since the USSR's design is mainly to surround itself with buffer states, which is hardly first degree imperialism. But the history of the twentieth century is, in one aspect at least, the history of de-colonisation. Isn't it funny that most of *s f* (if I'm right) should play with this dated old idea, projecting it onto the stars? And if I'm right, isn't this another legacy from the thirties which needs discarding? (You see I've been thinking through my long-standing objection to over-reliance on FTL; FTL is the new weapon of stellar empires.) Even the fresh-minded Le Guin uses as shadowy background this Doc Smith superstructure of galactic empire.

Of course, I know she does many new and splendid things against that background. Indeed, her arrival on the scene is, *mutatis mutandis*, not unlike the arrival of James Bligh with his *Okie* series. There was another

fine intellect. He also used the galactic tale to fresh ends. My belief is that Le Guin's intellect would have militated against her rapid acceptance by the in-field, had it not been for her use of the old expansionist props. Just as I believe that the in-field's reluctance to accept Philip K. Dick is because he discards the old expansionist props. (5 March 1977)

Ursula K. Le Guin
Portland, Oregon, USA

It's been far too long since I took up the foils against the Great Plumber (I am not going to pursue that image at all). All right, George, en garde. (Damn, I did pursue it.)

You quote Mr. Scholes complaining that "major efforts of the recent past, like... *The Sheep Look Up* and *The Dispossessed*, were not reviewed seriously on the front page of the (*New York Times*) *Book Review*", to which you reply that "both books have received much the critical treatment that they merited... To have hailed even *The Dispossessed* as a novel of the first importance would have been a critical disaster as Mrs. Le Guin herself... would be first to declare."

Well, no. She wouldn't. If she had the brains of a lima bean she wouldn't say anything about the matter at all; but there is something wrong there in your reaction. Scholes is not saying that either book is a novel of the first importance; he merely asks, why is it that books like these are never reviewed on the front page of the *NYTBR* where (if you know the *NYTBR*) you know that a great many books of extraordinary unimportance are reviewed? He is lamenting the categorisation, the assumption that Kind Implies Quality, which does still prevent the discovery of good *s f* by people who read the *NYTBR* or *TLS* to guide their reading.

Now, rapidly to interject some facts. The *NYTBR* recently *did* run a front page, full-scale, intensely serious article on Stanislaw Lem's works, referring to him as "one of the profound minds of our age". I think it was (which Mr. Lem, in a letter to me, found very funny). It was a good survey of his works in English so far, and erred, to my taste, only in a kind of over-earnest, over-urgent praise ("profound minds" and all) which, I am pretty certain, results from the fact that the author knew nobody had ever heard of Lem, most of them had a bit of a prejudice against *s f* as kiddy stuff, and none of them would listen unless he shouted, anyhow.

I feel certain about this, because I recently did a piece on Phil Dick for the *New Republic* and, though I tried very hard not to get earnest and urgent and over-praise, still, I did; I wanted so bad for some of the readers to go read some Phil Dick. It's ever so much easier to be cool when you're writing for people who already read *s f*, you know. And that, precisely, is a sign that there is still "ghettoisation" in a *s f* criticism. If I could come out in the *New Republic*, now, and say that Dick's *The Man Who Japed* is a lousy novel and shouldn't have been reprinted, that would be freedom. But at this point the general novel reader would just say What? Who? Of course whatever it is is lousy; it's *s f*, isn't it? And then they would never try *Martian Time Slip* or *The Man in the High Castle* or *Ubik*...

The thing is, there still is an inside and an outside; there are still walls. I totally agree with you that over-praise and hyper-enthusiasm are deadly; probably deadlier than benign neglect; but I disagree with you — put it this way — that *s f* is reviewed and criticised where it ought to be reviewed and criticised, right along with the rest of

fiction. "Traditional *s f* will remain a genre"; all right, if you mean space opera by "traditional"; but "the mainstream is absorbing *s f*", you also say — in other words some of us are writing novels; so why don't they get reviewed, not as space opera, but as novels? The big Lem review is certainly a hopeful sign, but one swallow, even a Polish Eagle, doesn't quite make a summer. The over-enthusiasm, just as surely as the traditional contempt, merely signifies that no critic, journalistic or academic, has yet been able to make a fair assessment of *s f* works for a *non s f* audience, for the "common reader". It will come of course. I wish you'd do it. (18 January 1977)

* George Turner does his best. He has a science fiction book review column in *The Age*, but several times he has been able to sneak *s f* books into the general book review column which he also writes. If I remember correctly, he reviewed *The Dispossessed* in the general books column.

* I received another letter designed to squash rumours spread by Peter Nicholls about Brian Aldiss' *Non-Stop*. That was from Lee Harding, who also says

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I sympathise with Chris Priest re the "prologue" he was "asked" to append to *Inverted World*. I, too, would be happy if all intending purchasers of *Future Sanctuary* skipped the prologue and the final chapter, both were added to please a very strict editor.

I would also like to briefly chide Van Ikin for using such an ill-chosen metaphor as "The Patrick White starving for one's art approach (to writing)". Van must be one of the few people who is unaware that Mr. White has been a gentleman "of independent means" since his birth, and the need of money has never been a serious consideration in his life. Perhaps Van was looking for an "Ivory Tower" metaphor; if so, I wish he had cast his net more carefully.

* Van was referring, of course, not to Patrick White's own style of living, but to that of Hurtle Duffield in *The Vivisector*, one of White's major novels. Duffield is almost the epitome of the starving artist in a garret, with the paradox that his style of life declines at about the same rate as his income rises.

And while we're on the subject of "reviewing", surely it isn't asking too much that the reviewer at least read the publisher's blurb or editor's introduction to a book? Then you, at least, would not be so moved as to remark — in your review of *New Writings in SF* 22 "I wonder how Ken Bulmer persuaded Mr. Wollheim to write this story?" when Mr. Bulmer makes it quite clear that No. 22 was dedicated to the memory of the previous editor of the series, John Carnell, and that most of the stories were "commissioned" with that purpose in mind? Why, the jacket of the hardcover edition even has a nicely abstracted portrait of Ted, if you look closely.

Thanks for all those warm reviews of Aussie *s f*: it's good to see the local product getting some attention at long last. But one minor quibble: the trekkers in my *Frozen Sky* were not out to rescue "people" trapped on the Martian pole, but vital medical supplies. (24 January 1977)

Bob Tucker
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SFC 47 arrived about a week ago but was read only today. As always, a splendid issue. Are the reviews in this issue more bitter, more cutting, more damaging? It seems so. I can barely find a good word for any writer's book. Or is it that most s f really is trash and your reviewers are speaking bluntly? Well, I wouldn't have you change the tone, not for my books or anyone's. The blunt and honest reviews are the best ones and when your critics find trash, they should say so. I must rely on them to be honest enough to also praise the good ones, because there *must* be some good s f being published. The other ten per cent of Sturgeon's Law.

The only novel I've read recently (from my ghetto) was *The Boys From Brazil*, and I was sadly disappointed. A very good idea indeed, poorly written. I suggest there are several s f writers who could have written a dazzling novel using the same plot and theme.

You may be interested to know that John Bush (Gollancz) will reprint *The Lincoln Hunters* in 1977. I'm pleased about that. And there is some vague talk around Ace Books about reissuing *Year of the Quiet Sun*, but I'll believe that when I see it. (18 December 1976).

* I've heard, from a different source, that the Tucker issue of *SFC* had a lot to do with the decision to reprint *The Lincoln Hunters* in England. Which is good, since one of the main aims of doing that issue was to get Bob Tucker's books back into print.

You can see from my piece at the start of "I Must Be Talking To My Friends" that some years Sturgeon's Law cuts deep indeed. Other years, like 1974, it does not work, and every second book is a winner. Publishers send me books and I send them to reviewers. We do our best with what we get.

Patrick McGuire
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One interesting point about your comments on my article about "The Queen of Light and Darkness" (*The Many Worlds of Poul Anderson*) is that I think I agree with most of them. It's just a question of how much value one sets on the various parts. "Vivid writing" is evidently more important to you than to me. What got me interested in Anderson in the first place was the fact that there are all sorts of interesting and subtle things going on "below" the stylistic level. In particular, there are all sorts of echoes and connections among his stories, and some interesting ties to the outside world. Once you realise this and start looking, Anderson seems to be a much better writer than one had first thought. The thrill of this discovery (which I made about six years ago) has by now somewhat worn off, but at the time it was enough to make me something of a monomaniac on Anderson.

But the fact remains that too often he's too sloppy or "lazy". (Quote marks because the fact that a story looks sort of weak tells you little about the labour that may really have gone into it). I once commented to Sandra Miesel that it seemed there were many more Anderson stories that she could enjoy as individual pieces than there were that I could. I can find many things to complain about in all but a few Anderson stories. (In part, of course, repetition is the problem here, and it would disappear if, over time, much of his production is not much read.

In any one story, the rather flat excuses to bring in the background-filler lecture, or the romantic personal problem which is resolved only partially by the solution of the scientific problem, would not be much of an annoyance). Actually, it's rather like Tolstoy. Sometimes his short stories worked, but any individual passage from *War and Peace* is likely to seem flat. It's only when you put all 1500 pages together that you get a Gestalt worth reading. The difference is that the economics of s f publishing make it difficult to write a *War and Peace* all at once. So Anderson has been filling in various "universes" over twenty-five years, and they are now reprinted in such a manner that the reader has either to be very perceptive or to have access to a good bibliography to figure out what the Big Picture is. I'd like to see all the works in the League-Empire-Commonality series brought together in internal chronological order, for instance, and then severely edited, with a number of dud stories thrown out entirely. Once you saw the compass of the whole thing, I think you might be more ready to forgive Anderson for the fact that his style is usually only adequate and his dialogue is often even pretty bad, and even that he has standard plots he falls back on when he can't think of anything better. (12 December 1976).

* But I have read Anderson when he is good, and I have read him when he is bad, and I like the former so much better than the latter that I do not feel like reading the bad. In Anderson's good stories, things happen, and they are shown lucidly; people interact, instead of merely arguing. In his best work, Anderson is inside the story. In most of his recent stories, Anderson seems to sit outside the story; he uses it merely to illustrate some all-embracing point he wants to make. I don't like Anderson's work when he sounds complacent. Part of *There Will Be Time* are good; I'm told that *Midsummer Tempest* is worth reading; that Orpheus story wasn't too bad, except that it was just another Orpheus story.

Angus Taylor
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Netherlands.

When I read in True Confessions (*SFC 48/49/50*) of Catastrophe One I fell down, beating my fists on the floor, gnashing my teeth, and wailing, "Not again! Not again!" But, as I've said several times before: don't give up hope yet. I realise full well that a multitude of friends are no substitute for The One — but they're a lot better than nothing, and you *do* have a multitude of friends, all over the world. You undoubtedly have a lot more friends than most people do. (Sign in a washroom by a New York state thruway: "When I was down and out and feeling everyone was against me, I heard a small voice saying, 'Cheer up, things could be worse'. So I cheered up. And sure enough, things got worse"). (25 January 1977).

* I have a theory. It's all Beethoven's fault. Beethoven is my favourite composer. The 9th, the 7th, the *Missa Solemnis*, the "Emperor", are all pieces I could listen to once a day every day and not get sick of. But if I put a Beethoven piece on the record player and play it, Things Happen. Awful Things. This year Beethoven saved it all up, all his thunderbolts, then struck down my cat when I least expected it.

All right, don't believe me. But doesn't the portrait of Beethoven look fiercer than that of God?

Dave Piper
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6BZ, England

(In *SFC 48/49/50*) the bit that I laughed out loud at was Leigh's:

Gloom
More Gloom
Total Gloom
More Total Gloom.

I'm sorry, but I've just chuckled at I typed that. Gee, I'm bloody heartless I am!

It seems strange to me that in an issue where you, quite lavishly, praise Pangborn, George should be saying that "only Gene Wolfe has seemed deliciously triumphant with *Peace*". Much as I view with trepidation actually having the nerve to disagree with George, I would like to mention *The Trial of Callista Blake*, by Edgar Pangborn... which I think is a lovely book; full of memorable character and beautifully written. As is all of Pangborn's stuff.

The best line in the whole fluggerly-fifty lines in the issue was Chris Priest's: talking about *Inverted World*... "was an exhilarating book to write (and some of the euphoria still picks me up even now, three years later)". Well, OK, 2½ lines then, communicating more of an insight into a writer's... um... urge? to write than half-a-hundred long articles. It's funny, isn't it?, how just a little tossed-off remark like that can sometimes strike a chord in a reader. Funny, that.

* Maybe it is lines like that which justify printing all the other fluggerly-fifty lines.

I have never heard before of *The Trial of Callista Blake*. I will buy a copy if anybody owns a copy and wants to sell me one. This will help me begin yet another column for *SFC*: "Non S F Novels By S F Writers". A few contenders: *Clara Reeve* (by "Leonie Hargrave"/Tom Disch); Aldiss' *Stubbs novels*, *The Hard-Reared Boy* and *A Soldier Erect*; Le Guin's *Orsinian Tales* and *Very Far Away From Anywhere Else*; Dick's *Confessions of a Crap Artist*; and, of course, another review of Gene Wolfe's *Peace* (and he has a new "young adults" book, *The Devil in a Forest*). Any more suggestions? Any contributors? * Two more appreciations of Leigh Edmonds' version of my 1976:

Syd Bounds
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Leigh Edmonds' piece on Gillespie: he does it so much better than you! Not only funny, but enlightening. "... Bruce describes the disasters of his life. Of course, it is only Bruce who thinks they are disasters". And how true this if of some people I know; and how it brings you off the page and to life. (26 March 1977).

Robert Bloch
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California

Much as I appreciate the thousands of man- (and woman-) hours which went into the preparation of the reviews in *S F Commentary 48/49/50*, my favourite item remains Leigh Edmonds' "Bruce Gillespie's 1976". It was a delight to read, and an antidote to all the sercon. All of which won't stop me from referring to the issue whenever I want to check up on an item regarding hardcover or softcover output during the past year: a lot of the titles listed are completely unknown to me... I can hardly wait to see "Bruce Gillespie's 1977". (17 March 1977).

* There is the slight problem of getting to the end of 1977 before writing about it. Not to worry. I wrote a fantasy version of my 1977, called "1977 - The Way Would Like to Live It". I attached a very different piece, "1977 - The Way I Expect To Live It", and ran them both in the most recent issue of *Supersonic Snail*. Now Steve Campbell has written an alternative version of an upbeat 1977 for me. Probably none of them will have anything to do with the real thing, which is nearly half over. Next January I will get Leigh and Valma to write about their 1977, not mine.

John Brosnan

Flat 5, 8 Abercorn Place, London NW8, England

I never thought the day would come when I had something reviewed in *SF Commentary*! I have indeed reached the dizzy heights. And it was a good review too (I'm referring, of course, to your review of my story "Antigrav". Apart from that, there were a few other things that I enjoyed reading in *SF Commentary* 48/49/50 - such as Leigh Edmonds' hilarious piece on your 1976.

Sorry to hear that you've had to get a job and have been forced to move out of that comfortable flat that I remember from my 1974 visit. Having to go back to work for a living is one of my constant nightmares, along with finding myself on a crashing 747.

I'm still hanging on in there as a free-lance, but I don't know for how much longer. Working on a book on *SF* films and their makers for my usual publisher, but film books have become so incredibly expensive to produce, due to the cost of illustrations, etc. There is a good chance it may never appear, particularly if the pound takes another sudden drop between now and middle of 1978, which it is quite likely to do. British hardcover publishing is in a bad way, thanks mainly to rising production costs. Secker and Warburg want me to do a history of humour in the cinema but they can't go ahead with the project unless they can find an American publisher to share the costs, and so far they haven't. (The Americans have complained that my approach is too "English!" What an insult!).

Collaborated on two film scripts last year, but neither has yet taken off the launching pad, though one came very close. (The British film industry is in a worse state than British publishing). My collaborator and I came up with a great idea for an *SF* film and I spent weeks working on the synopsis... and then along came *Welcome to Blood City*, which has too many similarities with ours. Back to the drawing board, with a long detour to the pub.

Inspired by your description of how swimming turned you into an athlete I followed suit last year and almost killed myself. I've detailed all the gory after-effects in an article for Terry Hughes that he's publishing in *Mota* in June or July. Just remember as you read it that it was all *your* fault.

* So what happened after you read Leigh Edmonds' bit about my attempts at yoga? Just another "It's All Bruce Gillespie's Fault" article, I suppose.

What's the news from Melbourne? What's up with the likes of Robin Johnson, Peter Darling, Ken Ford, Lee Harding, etc? And,

the big question, whatever happened to John Bangsund? I haven't heard from him, or even anything about him for ages. Has anyone? (3 April 1977).

* I will answer this question in a letter which I mean to write... well, read soon now. People who would like John Brosnan to know their side of the story should write as well.

Terry Carr

11037 Broadway Terrace, Oakland, California 94611

I'm glad that you said so many nice things about Edgar Pangborn's work in *SFC* 48/49/50, even though he isn't with us to read them now. He was, in my opinion, virtually the only writer in science fiction who wrote about real people. Others who've been praised for their characterisation have usually delved into only the pain in people, but Edgar could evoke their joy too, and that's a much greater achievement. Why is it, do you think, that so many otherwise intelligent people seem to think only the negative aspects of life are "important" enough to serve as the basis for literature? Surely it's more important for us to understand the workings of joy than of sorrow... and anybody who'd done much writing must realise that it's a hell of a lot harder to make joyfulness convincing, too. Maybe most writers just aren't happy people: maybe writing really is a process of self-purging. But if that's the case, I don't think it should be, or needs to be. Edgar Pangborn lived through a lot of disappointments and cruelties, but he was a joyous man. His fiction reflects the man very truly.

Regarding your comments about my own work: I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean when you say (page 113): "When will somebody give him a contract to let him write regularly again?" I've never had any trouble getting assignments to write stories - most of those you single out for praise were written for editors who had commissioned them - and I sold my first full-length novel for a goodly sum on the basis of nothing but my byline - no sample chapters, no outline, not even a title. (The novel is titled *Cirque: A Novel of the Far Future*; it'll be published in April by Bobbs-Merrill, and next year in paperback by Fawcett, who paid \$10,000 for it). I have no complaints about the treatment I've had from *SF* editors; I've sold literally every story I've written for sixteen years. I haven't written more simply because I write very slowly: my standards for myself are as high as the ones I have for authors in my anthologies, and if I don't reach my standards, it's not for want of taking pains. (5 April 1977).

* I wrote back to Terry saying that I suspected some writers concentrated on the painful emotions because they were easier to write about. They are also easier to evoke in the reader. Someone once said, "No one ever wrote a true novel about happiness". Perhaps no one ever wrote an entirely true novel about pain, but some have got close. Really great writing, of course, has in it all the emotions, conveyed intensively. Certainly Pangborn's best stories (especially "The Night Wind") tell of essentially painful situations, from which joy arises. (Also Le Guin's best, Aldiss' best, etc).

Not many Terry Carr stories hit my desk, so naturally I assumed that he had trouble selling them. Glad to hear the real story. Terry Carr's short story collection, *The Light at the End of the Universe*, is currently available in Melbourne bookshops.

Camilla Decarnin

1667 Haight Street, Apt 302, San Francisco, California 94117, USA

It's discouraging to work carefully on even a brief review like the one I did of *Triton* (*SFC* 48/49/50) and then see it appear in print with the (or a) central point deleted by the editor. (And it's humiliating to know people will read that review thinking that it's as I wrote it, since it appears under my name, with no indication of the changes you made). To an editor, these changes may not appear important; to a writer, though, they mean a lot. The small changes in word order, etc., subtly change or obscure the meaning here and there but that would not have bothered me if the thread of the thought itself had remained intact. The piece you cut from the *Dhalgren* commentary, for instance, was not particularly important, and I can see your reason for not wanting to print it. The segment from *Triton*, on the other hand, was non-volatile, and necessary to the sense of what followed. It's not very long, so I enclose it here in the hope that you'll print it, as part of this letter; it will just make me feel better!:

All this means that a Defany story is much bigger on the inside than on the outside, like Rufo's little black box. And science fiction needs these added dimensions more than any other fiction form. The reason is simple. The difference between *SF* writing and straight writing, at any level of quality, is that where the straight writer constructs a character, a room, a mood, the *SF* writer must, in exactly the same cramped space, construct a world; not only a subjective "world", with quotation marks, but the actual planet, with its land masses, oceans, atmosphere, nations, cultures, languages, and the slang of those languages and catchwords of those cultures and symbols of those nations. If we want (and I do, very much) a science fiction literature comparable in strength and sensitivity to the classics of straight literature, we have to find ways of getting more meaning into the words. Essentially a packing problem, to be solved by inspired folding. (26 January 1977).

* I have no defence but to claim editor's privilege. I thought the rest of the review made this paragraph unnecessary. Also, I try to discourage general statements about What *SF* Should Be Doing or How Great Science Fiction Is. Usually, I have no qualms about tightening up the work of contributors, but some are less edited than others. If you believe that every word of yours is sacred, and you are a potential contributor, please discuss this with me first.

I Also Heard From

... a lot of people who have sent in interesting letters. The following is not an adequate acknowledgement, but I don't have much extra room in this format.

The most extraordinary letter was from Philip Stephenson-Payne. He commented on *SFCs* 46, 47, and 48/49/50. The letter takes up 23 closely spaced pages. It's all good stuff, saying many of the things I would say if I wrote letters of comment to my own magazine. At least one section makes Mike O'Brien's letter (*SFC* 46) look reticent. But the whole letter would take up this issue and the next if I printed it, and I do not know which to choose from it. Thanks Phil.

Patrick McGuire sent several more letters, including a long one about *SFC* 48/49/50.

Other letters are from:

Mae Strelkov (Argentina), who includes an essay about happiness and getting along in life, which refers to my review of *View From Another Shore* (*SFC* 44/45) I'm pleased to say that there will be a paperback of *View From Another Shore*, which should be on everybody's bookshelf;

Don Ayres (Hollywood, California), who draws my attention to several major errors (according to Don) of Stanislaw Lem;

Patrick Balckburn (Hamilton, N.Z.), who finds it disappointing that *SFC* uses space to discuss Larry Niven at all;

Doug Barbour (Alberta, Canada), who defends some aspects of Heinlein against Peter Nicholls' attack (*SFC* 47);

Paul Harwitz (California, U.S.A.);

Bernd Fischer (Koeln, West Germany) who sent some more interesting lists, including Films: 1 *Nashville* (Altman), 2 *Duels* (J. Rivette), 3 *A Day at the Races* (Marx Bros.), 4 *Fantastic Planet* (Topor), 5 *Black Moon* (Malle), Books (General): 1 *Die erdabgewandte Seite der Geschichte* (Nicholas Borne), 2 *Blue Hammer* (Ross McDonald), 3 *Der Stowar* (Liam O'Flaherty); Books (S.F.): 1 *Dr Bloodmoney* (Dick), 2 *The Simulacra* (Dick), 3 *Imaginary Magnitudes* (Lem), Music: 1 *Desire* (Dylan), 2 *Man of the 20th Century* (Kevin Johnson), 3 *The Pretender* (Jackson Browne), 4 *Chicken Skin Music* (Ry Cooder), 5 *T-Shirt* (Loudon Wainwright); and, beside the lists, lots of interesting stuff about his recent trio to U.S.A.;

Eileen Lanigan (Yorks, England), who sent me a card at Christmas showing a picture of "Echo and Narcissus";

Roman Orszanski (Adelaide), who promised to write about his exciting summer, but never got around to it, and also gave hints about pasting up offset magazines;

Jon Noble (Broken Hill, N.S.W.), who says that "wearing one's heart upon one's sleeve I can understand, but wearing it upon Leigh Edmonds?" (Leigh Edmonds has a strong sleeve);

Richard McKinney (Fack, Sweden), who says lots of nice things about cats;

Terry Green (Toronto, Canada), who keeps in touch;

Don D'Amassa (Rhode Island, U.S.A.), who says that he had a relatively low opinion of Poul Anderson's fiction until last year "when a re-reading of virtually all of his fiction led me to conclude that I had been misunderstanding him";

Michael Shoemaker (Virginia, U.S.A.), who sent a very long letter, most of which he would not want me to quote or allude to, and who makes lots of interesting comments about non-s.f. books and music;

Don Boyd (Mosman, N.S.W.), who has lots of ideas about the shape of the future, the possibilities for Australian s.f. and other topics which don't fit into this issue of the magazine; and who also offered hints about setting up an offset magazine;

Ian Williams (Tyne and Wear, England), who had some really interesting comments about the development of Bob Shaw's fiction;

David Griffin (London, England);

Alan Sandercock (formerly Adelaide, recently London; now in Braunschweig, West Germany), who is enjoying his travels in Europe, and who quite spoiled my week by confiding that he is travelling with an American young lady companion;

Warren Nicholls (Burwood, N.S.W.);

Petrina Smith (Glebe, N.S.W.), who told me all about the recent Writers' Workshop (the same one that George discusses in this issue) and various attempts to hold a sequel in Sydney;

Andrew Weiner (Montreal, Quebec), who had this odd idea that, just because I was conducting a "Silverberg Forum" in *SFC*, I might have come around to liking most of Silverberg's fiction (he's a great anthologist, Andrew);

and . . . that's the letters I had received by early May, and which had reached my Letter-of-Comment file. There has been a strike which has grounded all air traffic into the country, so perhaps your letter has been stuck in mid-air. Also, this column will be set some weeks before being printed. It's not the old free-and-easy way of doing things (type a stencil and stick it on the duplicator), but it looks good in black and white. See you in September.

Bruce Gillespie
12 May 1977

"To build its own future, each generation must learn both to utilise its past and escape it."



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