S F COMMENTARY

the independent magazine about science fiction

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SFC returns!

...again

...and again...

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S F COMMENTARY

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I
MUST BE
TALKING
TO MY
FRIENDS

EXCUSES, EXCUSES

or

WHY *S F COMMENTARY*
IS NO LONGER PRINTED OFFSET

This stencil is being typed in September, 1978. Most of the other stencils were typed in February. The issue is officially dated April (to keep librarians happy). And the issue could just as easily have not appeared until April 1979.

In the recent Australian film, *Newsfront*, the main character played by Bill Hunter asks the John Ewart character, "And what's your excuse for throwing in the towel?" Ewart looks pained, smiles wryly, says, "I don't need excuses; I've got *reasons*."

I haven't thrown in the towel - yet - but I have some valid excuses (or reasons) for doing so.

In the first half of 1976 was hatched the wild scheme of going offset with *S F Commentary*. It would be good to make it into a proper magazine, reaching a wider audience and, most importantly, coining enough revenue for me to spend some time on producing it. The first step was to break even financially. For awhile it looked as if all the wild schemes would work. I gained a loan to give me some capital for initial issues and advertising. I spent a fair bit on advertising and, with Stephen Campbell's help and encouragement from Euan Crockett at Copyplace, produced the first offset issue and placed quite a bit of advertising.

To cut the whole story short, nothing worked. Advertising produced few new subscriptions, although Lesleigh and Hank were now acting as agents in America. I sent out more than 400 sample copies, including issues sent to all members of the SFRA, and so far that has produced about 20 new subscriptions. When I started, I thought that the target - 300 new subscriptions - was realistic. Now I have shown that it is not. Since I cannot afford to spend any more on *SFC* than it derives in income, the offset idea had to be dropped after two issues. (Nobody, you may be surprised to learn, offered to donate $300 an issue to *SFC*; this would have also kept the offset edition going.)

What is left then? Umpteen contributions from brilliant people. Enough subscriptions to publish *SFC* in the form you hold in your hands - that is, 24-34 pages every two or three months. I've felt like closing down the magazine, but I cannot afford to pay back all those subscriptions.

What is mainly left is a sense of disappointment that thousands of people are willing to pay subscriptions for some of the other fanzines which have gone offset, yet there are not 500 people throughout the world who could support this one. I can only guess that the general view of science fiction has moved so far away from my own, and so far towards that expounded in *SFR* and *Algol*, that there is no readership left for

"straight talk about science fiction". There seem to be few people left who are interested in applying acumen and independent, disinterested intelligence to the science fiction field. All that seems to be left is self-publicists, publicity agents masquerading as writers, and fans who believe the publicity. The 1978 Locus Poll results for Best Novel seem to show a pig ignorance which would be hard to break through. But then the supposedly independent judges for the Campbell Award give their first prize to *Gateway* as well! There must be *somebody* out there to publish *SFC* for. Yes? No?

THE REAL REASON..

...why *SFC* has not appeared in any form for nearly a year is that everything else in my life has been doing well. (Touch wood; good luck doesn't happen to me very often.) At the beginning of 1977, I wrote a piece in *Supersonic Snail* where I described 1977 as I would like to live it. None of that wishdream happened during 1977, which was one of the dreariest years I've lived through. Then, in February 1978, some of my fantasies started to come true. **The result is that Elaine Jochrane and I have been living together now for more than six months, and it's been an enjoyable time indeed.** (Elaine is probably the only person who could stand living with me for more than six months, so I have been fortunate.) Not that sharing a life with Elaine has specifically stopped *SFC* production - although now there are lots of activities more interesting than sitting behind this typewriter preparing stencils. But early in March, Carey Handfield told me about an interesting assignment which he turned down. I didn't. The offer was good, and other offers of editing work kept appearing. I was able to leave VSTA at the end of April, and become a *freelance* again.

Not that I have yet won first prize in Tattslotto, which was the other part of my ideal 1977. My real ambition is to find some way to edit *SFC* as a full-time occupation. The only way to do that, as I've pointed out, is to win a major lottery prize.

For freelancing is a time-consuming occupation, even if enjoyable. My typical day runs something like this: yarning with Elaine until she goes to work; feed the cats; do the dishes; make the bed; do the first hour of freelance work. If that is interesting or easy, I **keep working. If it is the sort of job which requires** planning and thinking, I have cups of coffee and sandwiches for long enough so that I cannot do another hour before the 12.30 news. Listen to that, potter some more; work some more, put off working some more - and then Elaine is home. Then, with any luck, we go out, or somebody visits us, or I start reading a book. The result is that I don't really tally a respectable number of hours' work for the day. So the next day I go through the same routine until I've finished the task. By then another assignment will be waiting for me, if I continue to be as lucky in gaining work as I have been. The real effect is that I work six days a week, escape the house altogether when possible, and never quite get back to *SFC*. This style of life is pleasant enough, but of the loyal readers and contributors have been complaining. I hope you like the issue(s) which reach you this time.

LEFT OUT OF THIS ISSUE...

...are reports on the burning down of the old Melbourne SF Club at Somerset Place ... a long report on the convention held in August last year, a convention which I enjoyed all the more because not much else enjoyable happened in '77 **... and a dreary report (typed in January) on** dreary 1977... *Not left out of this issue.....*

EDITOR

MY FAVOURITE THINGS 1977

Nothing is more inevitable than that, at the end of each year, I will put in *SFC* my annual list of favourite books, films, and anything else I can think of. Here I go again.

1977 FAVOURITE BOOKS

I read a lot of good books during 1977 (mainly because I had nothing better to do). I had a lot of difficulty narrowing the field to 20, let alone 15. More than 25 books competed for the Top 10, so I've stretched the list a bit.

1 *World Light (Helmsljos)*
Halldor Laxness
(University of Wisconsin Press; 521 pp; original appearance 1937-40)

2 *A Fan's Notes*
Frederick Exley
(Penguin 14 003057; 351 pp; 1968)

3 *The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*
Thomas Mann
(Penguin Modern Classics 1320; 347 pp; 1954)

4 *Owls Do Cry*
Janet Frame
(Sun; 173 pp; 1961)

5 *Clara Reeve*
'Leonie Hargrave'
(Hutchinson; 442 pp; 1975)

6 *Intensive Care*
Janet Frame
(Braziller; 342 pp; 1970)

7 *The Autumn of the Patriarch (El Otono del Patriarca)*
Gabriel Garcia Marquez
(Harper & Row; 269 pp; 1975)

8 *Cider With Ros*
Laurie Lee
(Penguin 1682; 231 pp; 1959)

9 *The Owl Service*
Alan Garner
(Armada Lion C693; 156 pp; 1967)

10 *Red Shift*
Alan Garner
(Collins; 158 pp; 1973)

11 *The Mouse and His Child*
Russell Hoban
(Puffin 14 030841; 184 pp; 1967)

12 *Our Lady of Darkness*
Fritz Leiber
(Berkley/Putnam; 185 pp; 1977)

13 *A Game of Dark*
William Mayne
(Hamish Hamilton; 143 pp; 1971)

14 *The Glory of the Empire (La Gloire de L'Empire)*
Jean D'Ormesson
(Allen & Unwin; 356 pp; 1971)

15 *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz*
Russell Hoban
(Pocket Books 78392; 192 pp; 1973)

World Light was written by an Icelandic author, Halldor Laxness (he won the Nobel Prize in 1955). I bought this book at Nord Vest Books, Carlton. I suspect that Nord Vest is the only bookshop in Australia that has ever imported this book, and that perhaps it is the only copy ever imported. I like to think that, anyway. (Nord Vest is in Elgin Street, opposite the Post Office.)

World Light is the story of a misguided youth with an ability to get himself and others into trouble. He lives in a state of poverty in various parts of Iceland during the early twentieth century. The introduction mentions that many Icelandic readers of this book were offended when told how much poverty and wretchedness existed on their island. Physical tribulations don't really affect Olaf. He fancies himself as a poet, and tries to live the life of a poet. ("Some men became rich and had fine progeny and retired with dignity in their old age - but they had never made the acquaintance of poets. What was their life worth?") In fact, the best writing he can manage is high-sounding doggerell. He does have an over-inflated idea of the kind of person he would like to be. The power of the book comes from its strong, clear prose (rather like that of Knut Hamsun) and Laxness' own conviction that poetry is worth aspiring to, and that, in the long run, a person can be seen in the

light of his or her aspirations as well as achievements. Some of us look a lot better when it's seen what we tried to do.

A book filled with light, despite the dark, violent events of the story.

A Fan's Notes could just as well have been my No 1 for the year. It's the funniest book I read all year, and has much wisdom. Exley tells a kind of fictionalised autobiography of the years he spent as an alcoholic, in and out of bars and mental homes. The books has bursts of alcoholic inspiration ("In a land where movement is virtue, where the echo of heels clicking rapidly on pavement is inordinately blessed, it is a grand, defiant and edifying gesture to lie down for six months."). Exley tells of some wonderful characters, the kind of people that perhaps only a ferociously inquisitive wanderer like Exley would meet. The strength of the book is its rueful awareness of an alternative life - "ordinary" life - where people are perhaps not crippled by great dreams like his. On the one hand, he is disappointed by "people for whom the world has soured, creating in them the perverse capacity to measure everything and everybody in their own rancid image". On the other hand, he admits that the strength of his father, which he lacks himself, is the strength acquired "for the reasons most decent men grow strong: by meeting the needs of those people close to them". Some of Exley's aphorisms appeal to me in particular: "I was perfectly aware that I was a paranoic... though instead of imagining people poisoning me, I suffered the suspicion that people were always trying to make me see things in a less complexly morbid light than I was wont to see them."

The Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man is also very funny, but about as different as possible from Exley's fast-talking, feisty narrative. Mann wrote the first chapter of the book in the early twentieth century, and went on to complete it in the late 1940s. The style of the book remains leisurely late nineteenth-century. The book was unfinished when Mann died, which is a pity. The book tells the story of an attractive bloke who attracts confidence the way most of us attract overdue bills. Krull embodies other people's dreams, and enjoys all of life. The pages describing sexual rapture are some of the best in the book. A quaint book - a nineteenth-century book published in 1952 - and a work of great prose accomplishment.

Owls Do Cry is another book which shows clearly the splendour of fine prose, and sets down thoughts deeper than any I can think of for myself. This was the first novel by New Zealand's Janet Frame, and it is one of the few of her books set in New Zealand. We see a family "in the round", through the eyes of each member in turn. Frame shows what it is like to be a child, and how the impotence of childhood (as well as its innocence) can continue through life and cripple the lives of people (especially in the form of madness). Many pages are as good as Joyce's *Portrait*.

Clara Reeve is Thomas Disch's best book. A pity for him (and for the many people who will not have realised who the author is, and so will not have bought it) that he hid this fact under the pen-name of Leonie Hargrave. The book has not been issued in paperback, so I hope you can find a copy.

*Clara Reeve*is a nineteenth-century romantic novel which no nineteenth-century publisher would have touched. In a great flow of creativity, Disch pours out the whole 1800s world of innocence, consumption, exploration, complex and twisted sexuality, and shows ruthlessly the sterile springs of much of that world-view. The story is told in the first person by Clara Reeve. The ultimate innocent, she enters a strange marriage with her cousin Niles, and lives on the gargoyle world of Capri. Plots and revelations tumble over each other, as in the best nineteenth-century novels. The "solution" is brilliantly planned and presented - a solution which solves nothing. What sort of a person is Clara Reeve anyway?

And how far can innocence go before it becomes oppressively dangerous?

A book which makes John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* look like the work of a dull amateur.

Janet Frame is my Writer for 1977. Since I have six more of her books to read, she should be my Writer for the next few years as well. Patrick White said she is a "most considerable" writer. *Owls Do Cry* and *Intensive Care* are better than the two Patrick White novels I read during 1977 (*The Vivisector* and *The Solid Mandala*).

The problem that obsesses Frame - and Laxness and Exley and Mann and many other writers - is the uncrossable gap between the world "as it is" and the world as we would like it to be. Yet somehow the world "as it is" is no more than the sum of all the worlds-as-we-would-like-them-to-be. One person's ideal kills another person. This is a central theme in *Intensive Care*, which begins in 1917 and ends sometime in the twenty-first century. Tom Livingstone's ideal kills him - or prevents him living fully. He returns to New Zealand after the First World War, and lives out his whole life in the memory of a time in 1917 when he met an English nurse. Meanwhile members of his family corrode each other. A switch in time - and in the 21st century/remnant of a post-Bomb (or Plague, or something) NZ people can plan euthenasia as a way to "save" society. All that is left of Livingstone is the peach tree in the garden of his old place. Eventually even it is pulled down.

Intensive Care is a very sad book, but there is nothing glib in its sadness. The pain and cruelty in a book like this should scrape the reader, or the book is not worth the reading. At the same time, the reader should be able to see paths ahead, even if the characters run into dead-ends. Janet Frame is angry about the suffering people cause each other, as well as sad. She puts us all into perspective, if we want to read carefully enough.

And it's another in a long line of proto-sf books which science fiction readers have never noticed. (George Turner did, though; he praised it at a convention once.)

The Autumn of the Patriarch has the air of being a sequel to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a firm favourite of mine. It is well-written, vivid, and memorable. The sentences are very long (some more than a page long) but you get used to them.

A cruel and narrow-minded dictator of a Central American republic retains power because people expect it of him. In the end, everybody thinks he's still ruler, even though his bones have been mouldering in his palace for years. He sells off his country (Shades of Australia 1978: in one incident, he sells to the Americans all the Caribbean Sea surrounding the country's shores!) and murders his enemies. *The Autumn of the Patriarch* reads like one of those suffocating, inescapable dreams that you half-remember when you wake up and you're glad it wasn't true. (Maybe.)

I can't say much about *Cider With Rosie* except - read it if you see it. It's "only" a memoir about a boy growing up in the English countryside. The life is Edenic, yet also cruel, poverty-stricken, and most people find ordinary life as difficult as anybody else does. Yet the book does have a sense of being surrounded by trees, bushes, and fields, of living a life that can never be recreated.

My Big Project for 1977 was going to be a long article about the novels of Alan Garner. But I didn't get much of anything done during 1977, and certainly no long articles. Now it is my Big Project for 1978, so I won't discuss *The Owl Service* and *Red Shift*. Yes, I know *Red Shift* is the better book of the two; I like *The Owl Service* better.

Many of my friends discovered children's books five or more years ago. I don't mean that they simply continued to read the same books they knew as a child, the way some people keep reading comics. Rather, when we were kids, there was Blyton and Biggles and Bruce (Mary Grant, that is) and not much else. During the 1960s, the genre of quality children's books

developed, so much so that adults now buy a high proportionof the new type of children's book. The average standard of writing is higher than that in most general fiction these days. It's sure a lot higher than in science fiction.

The Mouse and His Child is a good, surrealistic adventure. It also has wisdom and self-confident craftsmanship. It tells the story of a windup toy made up of two linked mice, which dance up and down when wound. They have no choice but to stick together. They go through some rugged adventures, and they are the "goodies" because of their patience and endurance. There's one episode where they are stuck at the bottom of a pond, rusting. All they father can do is stare at the label of a rusting can. On the can is a Bonzo label, with one of those pictures of infinitely receding dogs. The father mouse spends his time trying to find "the last visible dog". And what does he find? I'll leave that to your reading of the book. (Yes, the windups are rescued eventually.) My favourite character is the bluejay reporter who flies over the woods, giving a summary of events in the form of newspaper headlines ("EXTRA! SEASONS GREETINGS, FEELINGS OF INTENSE GOOD WILL EXPRESSED BY ALL" - which is how I felt when I finished the book.)

I was going to write a long review of *Our Lady of Darkness* for this issue of *SFC*. I keep putting off the review because I don't think I can do justice to the book. It's just so much better than most s f/fantasy books of recent years. Certainly the best s f book of 1977. Leiber puts himself into the book (as "Franz Western", who lives at 811 Geary, San Francisco) and the book seems to have been prompted by the death of Leiber's own wife a few years ago. How Leiber works out these dark themes in fictional terms makes enjoyably scary reading.

A Game of Dark - another "children's book" which could be described more accurately as a fantasy novel with a boy with the main character. A rich, edgy book. A boy lives among ordinary people in an ordinary English country side. But his father is dying, and he needs to come to terms somehow with his mixed emotions. In his "other" life, he is a warrior making a last-ditch stand against a giant worm-monster which threatens to wipe out a whole village. The tandem climax to the story is very good. Creepy, yet lyrical.

The Glory of the Empire is an objectionable book in many ways, but I can't get it out of my head. A must for people interested in classical history, historical novels, or readers of science fiction or books about alternative histories. D'Ormesson invents a fictitious Empire (somewhere to the east of, and perhaps after, the Roman Empire) and tells the story of its rulers and heroes. The catch is that the style sounds so hero-worshipping that it soon becomes wearying. But I suspect that is d'Ormesson's point. *The Glory of the Empire* could be an elaborate satire about a certain type of history-writing. The footnotes and bibliography (including Tolkien's *History of the Empire*) are as fictitious as they are elaborate. The anecdotes are told in fine detail and great flair, and sound more legendary than believable. But that might also be deliberate. (At one stage the author points out that his main contemporary source could also have been the emperor Alexis, and so the whole history of the Empire could well have been fiction anyway.)

Russell Hoban is another Writer for 1977. *The Lion of Boaz-Jachin and Jachin-Boaz* is told in that parable style of simple sentences and allusive meanings which Vonnegut made so popular. There's a lion, a map, a father, a son, travellers, and a modern country which seems like a dreamscape. The drama seems to fade in the second half, but the ending is trific.

RUNNERS UP:

The Aspern Papers (Henry James) 188?

The Solid Mandala (Patrick White) 1966

The Vivisector (Patrick White) 1970

Turtle Diary (Russell

Hoban) 1975
A Scanner Darkly (Philip K Dick) 1977
A Dream of Wessex (Christopher Priest) 1977
The Weeping Sky (Lee Harding) 1977
Very Far Away From Anywhere Else (Ursula K Le Guin) 1976
The Pushcart War (Jean Merrill) 1964
The Star Diaries (Stanislaw Lem) 1971
Briefing For a Descent Into Hell (Doris Lessing) 1971

Most of these books would have got into my Top 10 in most other years. Hard luck, Henry, Patrick, etc (although I must say that the two Patrick White novels irritated me in a way I didn't expect; must write an article about that someday). Reviews received already, or in preparation of *A Scanner Darkly*, *A Dream of Wessex*, *The Weeping Sky*, and *Very Far Away From Anywhere Else*.

NON-FICTION

I haven't published one of these lists for two years. It's just a list, and only in the order I read them:

1976
Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me! (Edmund Carpenter; 1972; Paladin); *Diary of a Genius* (Salvador Dali ; 1964; Picador); *Hell's Cartographers* (edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison; 1975; Weidenfeld); *The Far Side of Paradise* (Arthur Mizener; 1965; Houghton Mifflin); *Peach's Australia* (Bill Peach; 1976; ABC).

1977
Capitalism, Socialism and the Environment (Hugh Stretton; 1976; Cambridge University Press); *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Harry Braverman; 1974; Monthly Review Press); *The Schools* (Barry Hill; 1977; Pelican); *Science Fiction at Large* (edited by Peter Nicholls; 1976; Gollancz); *Axel's Castle* (Edmund Wilson; 1931; Fontana); *The Radicalisation of Science* (edited by Hilary and Steven Rose; 1976; Macmillan); *Collected Essays* (Graham Greene; 1969; Penguin); *Jobs and Energy* (Environmentalists for Full Employment); *Yoga Explained* (F. Yeats-Brown; 1937; Gollancz).

FAVOURITE FILMS 1977

I saw about 20 films during 1977, so this is hardly a competitive list. The two best films I saw during 1977 were *Singing in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly) and *Monsieur Verdoux* (Charles Chaplin), but I've seen them before and listed them in 1973. Of the films I saw for the first time, the best were:

1 *Bound For Glory* (Hal Ashby)
2 *Three Women* (Robert Altman)
3 *Clowns* (Frederico Fellini)
4 *Farewell My Lovely* (Dick Richards)
5 *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin)
6 *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen)
7 *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir)
8 *Star Wars* (George Lucas)

Bound For Glory is about people and says something for people. This is a change from most films of the last few years, which merely support the Great American Values of Ripping Off, Dressing Down, and Beating Up. Hal Ashby's film shows ordinary people trying to help each other in adversity, and that's a lot different from the prevailing artistic or political climate.

Hal Ashby is a confident and lyrical film-maker. His sun-filled and dried-out images of Californian fields, refugee camps, and trains are beautiful. David Carradine, as Woody Guthrie, is one of today's best film actors - a performance of puzzled honesty, humorous pragmatism, and passionate singing.

Marvellous secondary players. And real weight given to the generosity and mutual struggle which bound together those people who, during the 1930s in California, were oppressed in their own country.

The trouble with the other films on my list is that I cannot praise any of them entirely.

All the reviewers' praise for *Three Women* is justified, yet I can't help feeling that Altman was never quite sure of what he was doing. Perhaps it doesn't matter. It lacks the sure touch of *The Long Goodbye* or the best of Altman's other films. Still, a secondary Altman film is better than

most other directors' best. Shelley Duval and Sissy Spacek give most of the strength to the film - Duval as the all-American girl on the make who tries to be as ruthless as she is wooden-headed and deluded; Spacek as the silly shy girl who grows up suddenly. Altman says that he based the film on a dream of his, and the air of Ballard-like dream landscape is what one remembers of it. While I was watching the film, I was sure I had worked out what it was about. Now I'm not sure.

Clowns, released in Australia four years late (it is the gap between *Fellini Roma* and *Amacord*), is not really interesting until the last twenty minutes. It seems to be a documentary about clowns in Europe. Some of them are amusing; some not. Then, towards the end, Fellini removes the distinction between fiction and documentary, and shows one of his best set-pieces. And then there is a final scene which gives a real squeeze to the tear-buds. Fellini can make us feel nostalgia for things we've never known.

Farewell My Lovely is technically the best of the films on this list. It is a perfect recreation of the 1940s Bogart-private-eye movie. In some ways, Mitchum is more convincing as a Chandler hero than Bogart was. The smoky, washed-out-blue colour is right for a film that should have been filmed in black and white. However, as in most films based on mystery novels, the machinery of the plot gets in the way of everything else. Richards has everything going for him, but he has to stop all the time and provide Explanations. I realise this is a problem of the genre, but a much better film-maker (such as Altman in *The Long Goodbye* or Wilder in *Witness for the Prosecution*) can make the limitations work for him.

I could understand anyone accusing *Limelight* of being a drippy movie. The plot is ludicrous. Even worse are the saccharin lines which Chaplin gives to Claire Bloom. What is good is the *look* of the film (40s chiaroscuro, even though made in the early 1950s), the funny vaudeville and theatrical routines, and Chaplin's own role, which makes the film convincing in spite of itself. And Claire Bloom in *Limelight* is perhaps the most beautiful face ever to appear on film (except Audrey Hepburn, of course).

Annie Hall has been praised by everybody, given awards all over the place, and is a film loved intensely by several people I've met recently. It is a not-very-fictionalised account of the year that Woody Allen and Diane Keaton lived together. It's very funny. It's true (lots of the dialogue and the incidents seem to have been lifted from my life; how about you?). Yet it all seems a bit tentative and episodic. More like a sketch for some future, greater film. When the film finished, I still did not know what the affair meant to the participants; it had been put at too great a distance. I'm stuttering - I can't quite get down in words why I think this should have been a better film, when it's so good already.

Much the same to be said about *The Last Wave*. It's good, but it should have been much better. As Colin Bennett said in his *Age* review of *The Last Wave*, Peter Weir is the only one of the new Australian film-makers really interested in ideas or developing them. All of Weir's films have been fantasy/science fiction; the best of them is *The Cars That Ate Paris*. *Paris* was much better than *The Last Wave* because it had at least two people in it - the meek Graeme Blundell character, and John Meillon as the demonic mayor of Paris (New South Wales). Rachel Roberts dominated *Picnic at Hanging Rock* with her schoolmaster-witch role. Nothing like that in *The Last Wave*. Richard Chamberlain is plastic and ever so nice. The aborigine medicine man is good in a stereotyped role. Only Gulpilil gets the opportunity to make something of his role as the young aborigine in touch with the dream-world, trying to make sense of the forces around him. It all could have been better.

Star Wars. Um. What do you say about a movie about which everything has been

said? *Vector* devoted half an issue to this film. So did *Scintillation*. Both are magazines I like a lot, and they don't leave me much left to say. I could say, for a start, that *Star Wars* is about the most exhausting two hours I've spent in a cinema. The film moves very fast. The sensawonder stuff in the first half hour is very good. It's noisy as hell - take some earplugs. And it's really no more interesting than the old Republic serials that it resembles so closely. It is not a science fiction film (not a new idea in the whole thing), but a western or war movie. And I don't like westerns or war movies. Firing guns at each other is dull, and that's about all that happens in *Star Wars*. Not much real difference between the goodies and the baddies: they deserve each other.

But full marks to Lucas for keeping me on the edge of my seat for two hours despite my quibbles.

FAVOURITE SHORT STORIES

I didn't have room for the 1976 list in *SFC 48/49/50*. Here's two years':

1976

1 "The Night Wind" (Edgar Pangborn) *Universe 5*
2 "Running Down" (M John Harrison) *New Worlds 8*
3 "The New Atlantis" (Ursula Le Guin) *The New Atlantis*
4 "Late" (A Bertram Chandler) *Beyond Tomorrow*
5 "The Women Men Don't See" (James Tiptree Jr) *F&SF*, Dec. 1973
6 "The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya State" (Pip Maddern) *The Altered I*
7 "Conversations at Night" (Ursula Le Guin) *Orsinian Tales*
8 "An Die Musik" (Ursula Le Guin) *Orsinian Tales*

1977

1 "The Stone Book" (Alan Garner) Collins, 1976
2 "The Liar" (Henry James) *Complete Tales of Henry James, Vol 6*
3 "The Kozmic Kid" (Richard Smead) *Fantastic*, July 1974
4 "The Beach Where Time Began" (Damon Knight) *The Best of Damon Knight*
5 "Our Lady of the Psychiatric Sorrows" (Brian Aldiss) *Universe 7*.

Not much I can offer as commentary or excuse. I haven't read many short stories recently except run-of-the-mill science fiction stories. And some good science fiction stories. I've reviewed most of the s f already, or will do so. I've promised myself to do a long review of *Orsinian Tales*. "The Stone Book" was released as a book, but it is a short story in wordage. Fine work, too.

BEST SCIENCE FICTION 1974

I've fallen further and further behind in these yearly lists. The big drag is to read the magazine science fiction. It wasn't too bad during 1974, but there are a lot better things I could have been reading. I've lost contact with Barry Gilla , so I'm finding it very difficult to get hold of anthologies (still some for 1976 I can't get). Anyway, I did my stint for 1974, and here's the "Best Of" for that year as I would have liked to publish them. A pity Edgar Pangborn's no longer alive to receive the S F COMMENTARY AWARD 1974:

1 "The Night Wind" (Edgar Pangborn) *Universe 5*
2 "Mr Hamadryad" (R A Lafferty) *Stellar 1*
3 "The Stars Below" (Ursula Le Guin) *Orbit 14*
4 "Riding the Torch" (Norman Spinrad) *Threads of Time*
5 "Tin Soldier" (Joan Vinge) *Orbit 14*
6 "In the Lilliputian Asylum" (Michael Bishop) *Orbit 15*
7 "Live? Our Computers Will Do That For Us" (Brian Aldiss) *Orbit 15*
8 "The Kozmic Kid, or The Search for the Inestimable Silver Ball" (Richard Smead) *Fantastic*, July
9 "Getting Home" (F M Busby) *F&SF*, April
10 "The Slaves of Time" (Robert Sheckley) *Nova 4*
11 "Doctor Fausta" (David I Masson) *Stopwatch*
12 "In Memoriam Jeannie" (Josephine Saxton) *Stopwatch*

None of those got in the "Best Of" collections, did they? Nyah.

76 stories got my **** rating, so my time was not completely wasted. But most of the best stories came from the anthologies, so much of my time spent reading the magazines was wasted.

Other contenders for the Top 10 were:

Anthologies:

"Pale Roses" (Michael Moorcock) *New Worlds 7;* "The Ark of James Carlyle" (Cherry Wilder) *New Writings 24;* "The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts From the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics" (Ursula Le Guin) *Fellowship of the Stars;* "The Legend of Hombas" (Edgar Pangborn) *Continuum 2;* "On the Street of Serpents" (Michael Bishop) *Emphasis 1.*

Magazines:

"The Tigers of Hysteria Feed Only on Themselves" (Michael Bishop) *F&SF*, Jan; "A Game of Vlet" (Joanna Russ) *F&SF*, Feb; "The Graveyard Blues" (Dennis Etchison) *F&SF*, Feb; "Bond and Free" (Pamela Sargent) *F&SF*, Jun; "A Full Member of the Club" (Bob Shaw) *Galaxy*, July; "Opening Problem" (J A Lawrence) *Galaxy*, July; "Cathadonian Odyssey" (Michael Bishop) *F&SF*, Sep; "The Same Dog" (Robert Aickman) *F&SF*, Dec.

So Ursula Le Guin, Michael Bishop, and Edgar Pangborn were the authors of the year, F M Busby most notable new author, and also Craig Strete ("The Bleeding Man", *Galaxy*, December). And whatever happened to Richard Smead, who wrote that wild, intense story "The Kozmic Kid"?

AUSTRALIA: FEAR AND LOATHING FOREVER?

When I began writing articles for *The Secondary Teacher*, I went to visit 3ZZ Access Radio at their studios in the very old Cyclone House in Hardware Lane, Melbourne. The article I wrote described the busy-busy, enthusiastic conditions which I found there, and gave some idea of the success of the station in putting into effect its difficult charter. (People say that the station was the brainchild of Dr Moss Cass, Minister for the Media in the second Labor Government. Certainly, the management structure of the station was complicated, with committees elected from concerned groups providing representatives to a Committee which directed the station, but all technical personnel were supplied and paid for by the ABC.) 3ZZ advertised that it was the station where "the people made the programs", and that's just what happened.

3ZZ even included a program about science fiction in its schedule, as you might remember from a paragraph I wrote in *SFC 52*. Don Ashby put a lot of work into those programs, which went to air in May and June. The trouble was that each week's program was scheduled at a different time from the program for the week before, so I don't suppose the "Australian Science Fiction Radio Show" ever built up a strong following. At least having something to do with that program reminded me again how valuable 3ZZ had become to Australia.

It is still not entirely clear why the Fraser LNCP (=conservative) Government decided to close down the station at the end of June 1977. The excuse was the "high cost" of the station - some tiny fraction of the ABC's budget. 3ZZ's popularity seems to have been the reason. The *Age TV-Radio Green Guide* reported that 3ZZ gained higher ratings than at least two commercial AM stations and the two AM ABC stations. An election in June for the Greek Language Committee drew several thousand electors, and Commonwealth Electoral Officers were asked to conduct the election. In other words, 3ZZ was no longer a minority station. It gained fervent support, something no other station in Melbourne (except 3CR) can claim. It was never mindless, like Melbourne's commercial stations. People from all over Melbourne, particularly people from Melbourne's many immigrant populations, had a voice for the first time, and lots of other people were listening. 3ZZ was a success - so it had to go.

The distressing thing about the 3ZZ incident is that it shows fairly clearly how Fraser intends to run Australia if he has to face any real opposition. (And after being re-elected 10 December 1977.) Fraser has never pretended to be dedicated to anything but the interests of the upper middle class plutocracy

(Continued on page 20)

SOMETHING ROTTEN IN MALACIA

John McPharlin discusses

The Malacia Tapestry
by Brian W Aldiss
(Harper & Row; 1976, 315 pp; $US 8.95
Jonathan Cape; 1976; 313 pp; $A 10.70)

Malacia exists under the "Original Curse" and was founded, or so the legend goes, by a man named Desport. While the city was still being built, darkness fell at midday and a great magician appeared, offering Desport one powerful wish. His wish was that, when the city was finished according to his plan, it would then remain unchanged forever. Strangely, the city was built as a monument to two opposing religions, an explosively unnatural situation but for the power of the Original Curse. Both religions agree that the world was created by the Powers of Darkness (Satan) and that he created/evolved humanity out of a lower order of animals (dinosaurs or goats). They also agree that God is an intruder in their universe. The Higher Religion, which worships the Powers of Light (Minerva and, through her, God) believes that, with humanity's support, God will wrest the Earth from Satan's grip and redeem them all. The Natural Religion, which is heavily based in magic and wizardry, believes that humanity should side with Satan,as God can never win. While their principals are locked in frozen combat, the two religions agree to disagree and peacefully co-exist.

The effect of the Original Curse is reinforced by the Supreme Council of Malacia, which governs the city/state in the manner of a renaissance Big Brother. Through a network of spies and informers, the council works to prevent any form of change by disposing of all dissidents and malcontents before they can cause trouble. Malacia has remained unchanged for countless thousands of years, and to speak of progress is to promote the vilest form of treason. The work of the council has been growing steadily harder over the years, not because increasing numbers of the population are coming to the realisation that what they had previously accepted as stability is actually stagnation, but simply because so many new improvements and inventions have within them the potential for great change. However, at present, those with the potential means to bring about change have a vested interest in keeping things the way they are, and those who do not have a vested interest also lack the means.

At first glance, Malacia appears to be a renaissance Italian city state, cut off from change and turned in upon itself. This is possibly wide of the mark, as the Malacian heritage seems to be as much Jugoslavian as Italian. In particular, the city of Malacia probably owes more to Zadar and Kotor than it does to Florence or Naples. I was especially reminded of the descriptions of these two cities in Aldiss' travel book, *Cities and Stones*, while I was reading of Malacia (and it is an interesting sidelight that Kotor once belonged to the Bosnian king Tvrtko I, who spends some time at Malacia's gates until his army is routed by plague). Quite apart from these trappings, there are many things

in and about Malacia which are definitely not of the Earth and history we know. Malacia is thousands (perhaps even millions) of years old, yet species of dinosaur and a few of the great mammals still survive. Satyrs exist, together with races of winged people and lizard-men. Magic works and astrological predictions come true with almost monotonous regularity. Within the context of the book, it is hard to decide which is the more remarkable - that which is alien and unworldly or the things which are more familiar and recognisable. It is our own familiar world seen through a distorting mirror but made all the more disconcerting because the distortions are not always immediately apparent.

The story is set around the time of the Feast of Buglewing, a three-day celebration in honour of a great battle. Although the narrator, Perian de Chirolo, cannot recall who defeated whom, when or where, it is clear from the narrative that this is a most important event in the Malacian calendar. In this particular year, it coincides with a Turkish seige of the city, and Perian's part in the celebration is instrumental in the lifting of the seige. This feat is not as heroic as it may sound, as it mainly involves sitting on a horse without falling off, but with this, as with another heroic act later in the book, he finds that in Malacia the rewards for heroism are paltry indeed. At the same time, it cannot be said that he has really been cheated, because both acts are the result of his desire for gain and personal advancement. In the first case, he is in no real danger and, in the second, he is supposedly protected, since the whole thing is the result of a magic spell that he himself asked for.

Perian is an actor, and the bulk of the narrative concerns his involvement in a dangerously new form of acting - the photoplay. Otto Bengtsohn, a disgruntled foreigner now settled in Malacia, has developed a form of photography and proposes to film a play as a series of tableaux. These can then be projected publicly, with an accompanying commentary designed to explain and enlarge on the action being depicted. Perian considers the play to be both simple and ancient, but his protests are ignored by Bengtsohn, who is an active "progressive". He sees his "zahnoscope" as a potent propaganda weapon and ultimately hopes to be able to use it to bring revolutionary ideas, suitably dramatised, to the downtrodden masses of Malacia. Of course, he first has to have the zahnoscope approved by the council, that jealous guardian of the status quo and final arbiter of what does, or does not, constitute change. The inoffensiveness of this first photoplay is therefore a ruse to gain acceptance of an apparently harmless form of entertainment, and the stakes are high, since failure to gain that approval means certain death.

Art, in various forms, is central to the book: art as an entertainment; art as a reflection of life; art as the key to life; art as a more significant form than life; art as a weapon. Nicholas Fatember, Malacia's greatest artist, is unable to capture his inner visions in his paintings and, feeling that what he does paint are only hollow imitations of life, he is able to produce almost nothing at all. But what is life to him? The little birds which so fascinate Perian's sister, Katarina, are only "winged rodents" to him, pests which he stamps out unmercifully whenever they venture accidentally into his workroom.

Otto Bengtsohn, on the other hand, paints with light (and, in a way, this is what Fatember would like to be able to do), but his interest lies not in the picture, a mere transcription from life, but in the use to which it can be put.

Consider also Giovanni Bledlore, the engraver whose miniature portraits of the hurdy-gurdy man's two grandchilren have proved to be so much more permanent than the fragile lives they depict. Perian is of the opinion that only Bledlore's mortality causes him to continue with his art, that through his art he

is building miniature monuments to himself.

Nowhere is the interdependence of life and art more clearly demonstrated than in Perian's affair with Armida Hoytola. In the "real life" of the book, he is just as blind and trusting as one of the characters he criticises in the photoplay. Long before things are explained to him, the reader has realised already that Perian is living out a part of the play that he had called banal and absurd. In the book, Perian chases after (and catches) three other women; one is married, one engaged, and the other is "spoken for", yet he still feels unfairly taken advantage of when his own lover is untrue. It is a sign of his own immaturity that he freely breaks his own unwritten code of ethics while still expecting others to abide by it. One feels that Perian's hurt will prove neither mortal nor everlasting. Though Armida is surely lost, there will be other opportunities for decameronesque adventures, and his zest for life and love is such that he will recover. In spite of his character faults, when his frantic social climbing appears to be leading him somewhere, he still has enough decency to be shocked and repelled by what he sees and learns of the secret machinations behind the tranquil facade of Malacia.

Four of the chapters in this book were published originally as short stories in *Orbit 12*, and they have been substantially rewritten for inclusion in the book. Some of the changes are minor; for example, I cannot see why it was thought necessary to alter the spelling of practically every name by one or two letters (was Prian too close to Brian?), and I notice that the anachronistic reference to a vacuum cleaner has been excised, although the phonograph still remains. Also, the specific reference to Zadar is missing. Of course, all of this is just nit-picking, but unfortunately I do not have the space here to discuss even the major differences in the two versions. If you enjoy the book, you may be interested to compare it with the individual stories that preceded it.

The book is less disjointed than the original four stories yet, despite, the continuity between chapters, they do still retain the feel of individual tableaux, detailed embellishments to the Tiepolo drawings which are interspaced throughout the text. The titles of the chapters unerline this feeling, and it is not difficult to imagine any of them as the titles of other, as yet unseen, Tiepolo drawings, although the most obvious one ("Serpent Burning on an Altar") has been changed (to "A Feast Unearned"). Aldiss evokes Malacia with an artist's eye for detail but, although the place has a strong feeling of presence, of reality, there is little or no sense of history. The flow of time could be almost cyclic. The Turks threaten to overrun Malacia from time to time, but fail to take the city. Inertia is their defence against invasion. There is no change within, and little sense of change outside. Lives are lived, people are born and die, yet few have left lasting trace of their existence since Desport (a despot? - Aldiss is greatly enamoured of word play, and I am never sure how far he intends this to be taken by the reader). Malacia itself is a still-life, though there is much going on within the frame and the analogy of a tapestry is used to emphasise this. Subjectively, time has ceased for the Malacians, and whether the population lives one day after another, or the same day over and over, it makes little difference. The dictionary defines "malacia" as both "a depraved appetite" and "a morbid softening of the body", either of which fits the direction of the novel. Change is surely coming to Malacia, but it is not the change that the progressives want or that the council fears. In its stagnation and decadence, Malacia is being eaten out from within by a poison of which the plague is only a symptom. What we have here is not so much a living city as a corpse which does not yet know that it is dead.

- John McPharlin
April 1978

FAITH, HOPE, WORKS - AND EMBARRASSMENT

Sneja Gunew discusses

Science Fiction At Large
edited by Peter Nicholls

Gollancz; 1976; 224 pp; $A17.50
Harper & Row; 1976; 224 pp; $US8.95

I have just spent an odd week. I was reading the Nicholls anthology, *Science Fiction At Large* concurrently with *The Radical Reader* (ed. Knight and Wilding), which professes to be a collection of articles indicating a new direction in critical approaches to literature. It is yet another attempt to break the stranglehold that the venerable "New Criticism" has had on teachers in this country (and elsewhere) for decades. You know the kind of thing: a poem, novel, etc, should be studied in a kind of scientific vacuum in which no biographical data, and certainly no kinds of politico-social awarenesses are permitted to cloud the pristine waters. At the same time, this week I have finished, for the second time, teaching a fourth-year seminar program on s f and modern fantasy.

All these factors have tended to intermingle and to some extent illuminate each other, so this will be a review of Nicholls plus, which is in keeping with the framework of the collection, which was a series of talks on s f plus.

Let's take the last element first. Nicholls, in his breezy introduction to the whole collection and, in his prefatory notes to each talk, is able, rather smugly at times, to assume the existence of a group of highly intelligent, dedicated, and well-read listeners. Where are they here? (*S F Commentary* readers aside, of course) Possibly my class had that potential and were straitjacketed by the demands of the system, the overhanging doom of imminent exams. That's possibly why we never, or very rarely, generated that elegant toying with concepts, the mental gymnastics of fit and healthy minds that the Nicholls collection exudes. This I found infectious and attractive but, at the same time, there was another, less inviting side which smacked of the smugness already mentioned, a kind of elitism that Nicholls himself recognises and names in his diatribe against the Critics:

> We are the Smart Alecks. Our fault is the adoption of an elitist tone. We are witty and well read. We take our metaphors from all over... We do not shudder away from the ridiculous comparison... There is something self-serving and self-indulgent in our manner.

Ultimately, the disarming honesty of the collection is its finest attribute, and it's an honesty and soul-searching that I also encountered in *The Radical Reader*. It was, unfortunately, a quality lacking from the twelve-week teacher-student situation.

The best essays were, in my opinion, those of Le Guin, Garner, and Disch - each for very different reasons, which is in itself a tribute to the diversity of views embraced by the conference. At times, this catholicism did not pay off, in that it seemed to lead to diffuseness, as in the essays by Toffler and de Bono, who merely rode their respective hobby-horses yet again.

The Le Guin essay is another plea for good writing. In this case, the focus is on characterisation, a desire for characters who remain with one like old friends.

Borrowing from Virginia Woolf, Le Guin calls those types of characters the "Mrs Browns" of literature, the faceless, little people who are invested with meaning and life by the resurrecting eye of the true novelist. If the process works, the reader continues it after the end of the novel; the characters extend one's own experience, like people one meets and speculates about. Along the way there is a very funny resume of thirties s f - recommended!

Ursula Le Guin's approach is somewhat at variance with the rather fashionable view (dating from Aldiss' *Billion Year Spree*) of seeing s f as a continuation of eighteenth-century literature (rather than nineteenth-century) - the *contes philosophiques* dealing with conceptualised man, rather than the realist novel dealing with the relations between men. In other words, Le Guin is trying to put s f back into the nineteenth-century mainstream, making it part of the literature of human interaction, while Aldiss and several of the writers in this volume try to slot it into the literature of mind-games or intellectual puzzles produced by the Enlightenment.

De Bono and Toffler are a case in point. For the first, s f, like lateral thinking, is a way of escaping the pattern, the system of conditioning and programming humans are heir to:

> The basic parallelism between lateral thinking and science fiction is that both are *provocative* rather than descriptive or analytical... The purpose of provocation is to take people on a journey outside of their usual minds - but then to bring them back to the old things seen in a new way.

This, incidentally, reads like a paraphrase of Scholes' definition of "fabulation" as "fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way" (*Structural Fabulation*). The parameters are definitely becoming recognised and this sort of underlying agreement is satisfying to the critic in the field. Nevertheless, the essay is mainly about lateral thinking.

Similarly, Toffler's is mainly about "future shock" and, since this gem is copyright elsewhere, we get only the last golden words which relate directly to s f and which are, admittedly, quite useful. Toffler's contention is that s f prepares us for change by offering "no-trial learning", allowing one to experiment on the human race without having to reap the full dire consequences.

Nonetheless, one gets the sense, at times, that Nicholls has invited a series of powerful good fairies to stand godmother to the puling infant that is s f and that the gifts are sometimes two-edged. This illusion is sustained by John Taylor's contribution. Taylor is more interested in justifying fringe science to the world at large than spending time on s f, so he dismisses it as at best the sugar-coating on the pill, in that it is a good way of attracting children into science. The implication is that s f is the literature for the over-impressionable. It is an approach others enlarge upon in this volume.

For example, there are the contributions by Nicholls and Disch which, as Nicholls recognises, overlap to some degree. Echoing Tolkien's famous essay on *Beowulf*, Nicholls, in "Science Fiction: The Monsters and Critics", proceeds to lambast the critics and then the writers. It is an amusing and witty exercise but is also, in parts, rather tedious. Nicholls has a tendency to sustain his metaphors beyond the bounds of artificial respiration or even cloning. His essay ends, as does Disch's, on a note of praise and in line with the approach mentioned above, s f as "pre-eminently the modern literature not of physics, but of metaphysics". Along the way, he links it with eighteenth century satire. Fair enough!

Disch is somehow more palatable, even though actually far more savage, paradoxically, because his style is more restrained. Nicholls, in spite of his wit (the facility to draw together apparently disparate notions) still smacks at times of the "Gee Wow" school of criticism. Disch sees s f as both provincial literature and as a branch of children's literature, with the implication that both are naive or immature literature. One could question this assumption and, indeed, Disch himself begins to question it towards the end of the paper. But in the body of his talk, s f is the fare of those who are either biologically or socially children, not yet able to assume their responsibilities, and hence seeking wish-fulfillment as an escape valve for their frustrations. Children bask in superchild images while adults wallow in corresponding superman figures, compensation for the fact that they are forced to follow the dictates of a paternalistic system. I notice that Bruce Gillespie ("I Must Be Talking To My Friends", *SFC 52*) quotes such a passage and endorses it. I agree that there is a deal of truth in the charges, but I feel Disch carries the implications too far. He invokes myth and fairy tale as further examples of naive literature, and here we part company:

> Another prominent feature of s f that is surely related to the naive character of its audience is its close resemblance, often bordering on identity, with myth, legend and fairy tales. Throughout the twentieth century a large part of the American urban lower classes, from which the s f audience was drawn, were recent immigrants from what is commonly called the Old Country - that is to say, from the place where folk tales were still a living tradition... Thus, few of the first s f readers were more than a generation away from the oral tradition at its most traditional. Think of that sense of wonder that is the touchstone of the early pulp stories: could it not be, in essence, an analogue of the sense of wonder all country mice experience at their first view of a modern metropolis?

With respect, I feel there are quite a few questions being begged here. Given that one accepts his contention that the early readers were largely immigrants, the corollary of immaturity does not necessarily follow. Quite a few of those "Old Countries" boasted cultures far superior to urban America. Disch assumes that the oral tradition is automatically inferior to the written one (later does not necessarily mean better) and further, that urban is the highest lifestyle. A country mouse may feel curious without feeling wonder, at least in the profound sense that I take to mean "wonder". Myth does evoke wonder; urban civilisation is not inherently mythopoeic. Country mice have their own sophistication and Disch does concede later (still somewhat patronisingly) that myth and fairy tale are "fertile soil" in which to sink any fictional roots. Where s f creates myth, it is of a high order indeed. Where it merely celebrates urban technology or even urban social structures, it will always remain on the level of the "power fantasies" which Disch delineates.

The end of his essay raises an absorbing topic - the derivation of "fan" from fanatic: the cultist aspect of s f. "For a naive reader the imaginative excitement engendered by a new notion easily crystallised into faith." It is a them taken up both in pro and contra aspects by other writers here.

The irrationality and superstition of the dedicated fan is set out incisively by John Brunner. He gives numerous and painful examples of what the crusade for new faiths has produced and ends with a plea for s f as "the literature of the open mind".

Sheckley, on the other hand, sees it as valid for the s f writer to cater for

and to stimulate the appetite for the marvellous. "Fantasy, by its production of plausible but contradictory scenarios, by its acceptance of any premise, denies certainty and celebrates the vast horizons of the marvellous."

Harry Harrison gives workmanlike expose of alternate, or parallel, history as opposed to futures, giving that "guide to the s f game" that Bruce was wondering about. It is a low-key insight into how the "marvellous" is produced.

But it is the last essay, by Philip K Dick, which gives the most disturbingly subjective enactment of just that sort of mysticism-cum-superstition that the previous writers saw as the major "embarrassment" of s f. From s f as the literature of the New Enlightenment, we come at the end of the book to s f as the New Faith. Dick's style is apocalyptic, as Bruce has mentioned. One does become slightly embarrassed, not only in Disch's sense, but also in the way people tend to get uncomfortable at, say, Yeats' spiritualist writings. Great if you can dismiss them as storehouses for metaphors, but different if you have to grapple with the idea that he actually *believes* it all and wants to be taken seriously. Dick posits the existence of a collective energy-grid, composed of human brains, hierarchical, in that it is presided over by benevolent beings from outer space:

> We humans, the warm-faced and tender, with thoughtful eyes - we are perhaps the true machines. And those objective constructs, the natural objects around us and especially the electronic hardware we build, the transmitters and microwave relay stations, the satellites, they may be cloaks for authentic living reality inasmuch as they may participate more fully and in a way obscured to us in the ultimate Mind.

At the same time, this essay sparkles with energy, a gargantuan appetite for scientific facts, and one can see them (as in those transparent plastic anatomy models) feeding the creative imagination. It is a curious and moving experience, but a distancing one.

Alan Garner's essay, on the other hand, also a manifesto of faith, draws one in completely. Partly it is because the struggle against "unreason" is so devastatingly and honestly portrayed. Garner truly establishes the outer boundaries that transform s f, at rare times, into mythopoeic literature:

> Man is an animal that tests boundaries. He is "mearc-stapa", "boundary-strider", and the nature of myth is to help him to understand those boundaries, to cross them and to comprehend the new; so that whenever Man reaches out, it is myth that supports him with a truth that is constant, although names and shapes may change. From within us, from our past, we find the future answered and the boundary met.

Garner, too, feels possessed at times by myths greater than himself, but he resists them; Dick embraces that process.

I always read collections like these as potential handbooks or "secondary sources" and this one is certainly a stimulating example. You can't teach people, you can only help them learn - a truism, but difficult to practise. My students this year came away from the course, apparently, with a far stronger awareness of the "reality simulations" that is all literature, the transmutation (not always into gold) of experience. Perhaps that is an achievement. And, to some extent, because we had Le Guin and Vonnegut on the course, they were forced to turn back from their vantage point in displaced reality and contemplate the known world critically. The editors of *The Radical Reader* would presumably have approved, but I noted that there is no essay on s f in that collection. Maybe someone should tell them. As for s f's fairy godmothers, one wonders how the poor child will fare, torn between super-rationalism and super-fantasising.

* Sneja Gunew, University of Newcastle, November 1977 #

(Continued from Page 12)

(including those deriving their incomes from USA or Europe). Any signs of grass-roots democracy have been suppressed, if possible, during the last two years. Women's groups, workers' unions, migrant groups, far-sighted schemes like the Australian Assistance Plan - any effort by people to do things themselves for the common good - have been rejected. Shouldn't a c of 3000 people, the number of people who met at the Melbourne Town Hall in defence of 3ZZ, been listened to? They were treated with complete contempt by the commissioners of the ABC as much as by the Government. Two weeks later, Commonwealth police moved into the 3ZZ offices and turfed out the staff onto the footpath outside. A march through Melbourne streets gained nothing except horrified disbelief from the crowd (of which I was one). The ABC Staff Association did nothing.

The same man who would close down a popular, democratically run radio station with police has been re-elected for another 3 years of fear and loathing and mayhem. As Barry Jones, newly elected MHR for Lalor said some months ago, "The Liberal Party should be renamed the self-interest party because its voters can see the beneficiaries of Liberal rule by looking in a mirror. The ALP should be renamed the other interest party. Often we have to look out the window, sometimes with a telescope, to see the people Labor works to help... The Liberal Party mirrors with uncanny accuracy the shortsightedness, selfishness, snobbishness and fear of the unknown of a significant section of the Australian community."

My own view is that it is a poor thing that we need governments at all. It means that each of us does not take responsibility for all others. It is because, in an anarchy, some people will try to enslave and take advantage of other people that we seem to need governments. Therefore the government should be the place in the nation that takes responsibility for the well-being of everybody, whatever their circumstances. In particular, I think a government should be responsible for preventing dispar ties between the poorest and richest members of the community. I'm not sure that my view resembles that of the ALP. What is clear that the present government would like to transfer resources from poor and average income earners to the richest members of the community. These include many large-scale companies which send a high proportion of their profits overseas. It is Whitlam's opposition to this process which made him a nationalist and a politician of some vision in a country of the blind. For this, he paid with his political life.

Barry Jones' words are particularly accurate when we look at the way in which the LNCP campaign turned a potentially narrow loss into a comfortable win. Keith Windschuttle, in *Nation Review*: "At the end of November Labor was probably comfortably ahead. That things could turn around so dramatically demonstrates that the swinging voter has little allegiance to anything much and is easily swayed by appeals based on the sort of bullshit and fantasy that comes over the TV... The election defeat was very largely the result of a skilful manipulation of the media by the Liberals, based on techniques perfected by Dick Nixon, recycled by Jimmy Carter and imported for local consumption by Tony Eggleton." Specifically, the Liberal campaign promised minute cuts in individual income tax (as little as $3 a week for the average wage-earner) as some sort of compensation for the enormous real losses in wages suffered during the last two years. Since no groups in Australia except the richest have done well during the last two years, the Liberals had to wipe out the memories of the swinging voters. Which they did with TV.

The situation now is that people can fight the right by alternative means, to persuade Labor to take steps to win next time. Which means doing what the Libs do - purvey "bullshit and fantasy". And this while half a million people are out of work, and social services are being starved of funds. Australia: fear and loathing forever?

EDITOR

A WORLD MYTHED UP?

The trouble with Australian politics is that, for some issues, we cannot afford to throw our hands in the air and say things like, "The people get what they deserve", and so on. Even those people don't deserve the possible consequences of some of the present Government's policies.

Take the Uranium issue, for example. A much bigger issue than Australian politics. But there was talk in Australia during 1977 of allowing us to choose whether the country would allow the large-scale mining of uranium in the Northern Territory. Nothing came of that. Fraser decided for us.

The trouble is that so many people do not have the telescope view. Of course, any new mineral export will earn dollars for the country (but to internationally controlled companies, so do we benefit anyway?). And of course, somebody will sign pieces of paper saying that their country will use uranium for "peaceful" purposes. But the issue involves the future of the world - the telescope view which Barry Jones ascribes to the Labor Party (which is a late convert to the anti-uranium-mining side).

In the short term, the most telling argument against mining Northern Territory uranium is that the process of mining in that part of the world is an unjustifiable trespass on Aboriginal tribal lands. A fine article by Mungo McCallum in *Nation Review* last year gave a sorrowing account of the likely ruination of some beautiful and still secluded tropical territory. (If we believe *The Last Wave*, an Aboriginal curse will get its revenge.)

In the long term? My own view, bolstered and detailed by a fair amount of reading and research during 1977 for the *Secondary Teacher* Uranium Issue, is that Australia should have nothing to do with things nuclear. In fact, the world as a whole should withdraw from either the manufacture of nuclear armaments or the creation of power supplies by means of nuclear reactors. All forms of nuclear power yield by-products which stay around a long time, and make the Earth progressively more dangerous to live in. The nuclear industry's assurances about safeguards are spurious. Moreover, there is no such thing as the "peaceful atom". Nuclear generation of electricity is notoriously inefficient and unprofitable; it serves mainly to accompany the manufacture of byproducts for use in nuclear weapons.

Groups such as the Movement Against Uranium Mining in Victoria have tried to get this message through to people. One of the methods they have used is to stress alternative forms of energy production. In the last few months, I've looked through scads of pamphlets and books on solar energy production (available freely if a bit more R&D money is forthcoming), wind power, etc. There is an assumption in the material that our energy needs are fixed, and it's simply a matter of converting from one energy source to another.

This involves one of a series of myths which, I found, I still believed until I started doing a bit of reading and thinking on the subject. I suppose I still believed such myths as:

(1) "Third world countries need Australian uranium to supply their energy." This myth amounts almost to a lie, but plenty of lies have been believed through repetition of telling. Nuclear energy is suitable only for feeding through giant electricity grids. This is not the sort of electricity generation system needed by most third world countries. The fact is that Australian uranium won't go to the third world. It will go to USA, Britain, Japan, and other industrialised countries. And we can never accept any absolute assurances that it won't end up in nuclear warhead.

(2) "Industrialised countries can't keep up energy supplies without nuclear generation of electricity." But do the industrialised countries need the energy anyway? No, says an excellent book called *Jobs and Energy*, published by a group called Environmentalists for Full Employment (available in Melbourne: Friends of the

Earth; $1). The book argues that the US economy - and, by implication, Australia's as well - has been going through a continuous process by which energy has been substituted for jobs. Remember the warnings in the 1950s about the dangers of "automation", how machines would replace people? Well, it's happening. Of course we were always assured that workers thrown out of industrial jobs by automation would be absorbed into the service-industry economy. Not on your life, says *Jobs and Energy* (or words to that effect). Why should that happen? The idea is to derive the greatest possible profits by employing the smallest number of people. In place of people, industry collectively uses ever-increasing supplies of cheap power (subsidised by the taxpayer) for more and more automatic machinery. Unemployment has become the main lever for transferring resources from the largest number of people, the workers and would-be workers, to the fewest number of people, the owners of large industrial establishments. If we changed the basis of industry (to less "efficient", small-scale enterprise) we could use about a third of current supplies of energy, have full employment, and (as *Jobs and Energy* shows in exhaustive statistical detail) go a long way towards equalising incomes between groups in society - a major goal of good government, anyway.

Still myths - that more machinery = more efficiency = more wealth = more jobs. The myth that economics is sancrosanct, that it just happens to be the case that the rules allow the accumulation of more and more wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people (or countries).

Why not new myths? That we can change the economic rules to suit ourselves? That we can find out the dynamics of what is usually called these days the stable, no-growth society? (A misnomer, since the whole point is to make individual human possibilities the growth area, instead of spreading the acres of machinery and buildings.) Believethat all artificially created radiation hazards are suspect? That we are guardians of our own world?

It's utopian, you say. We don't control the world. But the people who do are not very bright thinkers. They do tend to follow fairly simple models of general action (Growth. Bigness. Amalgamation. Power.) Almost in spite of themselves, science fiction writers seem to have fed many of those simple ideas to the people who do wield power. It could be argued that the whole notion that atomic power would be limitless power for peaceful uses comes from many of notions put across by science fiction writers in the 1930s and 1940s. The point is that s f writers are supposed to think about the future. Some of of their futures have come true. They were the wrong futures. Other s f writers predicted dystopias. They were told that they shouldn't be pessimistic, and besides, things couldn't possibly turn out that bad. They did, and the pessimistic writers tend to be more right than the "optimists".

The essence of the uranium/atomic power debate is one's view of the future. If we believe that we have a responsibility to the future people of Earth, then perhaps we should do something about it.

But s f writers can also set people thinking a bit. (Okay, that's a banal thing to say; but nobody *does* it.) One person who's tried is Bill Green, an author from Victoria, whose *The Sand West of Mountain Mouth* is the most interesting science fiction novel to be published in Australia so far (except Lee Harding's new book; more of that later). Here's a review I wrote originally for a general magazine:

THE PLUTONIUM SOCIETY

Reviewed:
The Sand West of Mountain Mouth, by William Green (Cassell Encounter; 1976; 109 pp; $1.50).

What kind of society do you want to live in? Say, in the year 2000? Beware your own answer.

You might want to live in a society not much different from today's. Not so much pollution, of

course ., as few cars as possible, and we need some improved politicians and public services. But - on the whole - a society not too much different.

But what if it becomes impossible to continue today's material prosperity level without pushing up the price beyond our tolerance? This is much of what the *real* "uranium debate" is about.

Ginny, one of the teenage characters in *The Sand West of Mountain Mouth:*

"It was definitely weird to read the date 2000 in the old books and to know that you were living in that year and the old writers had pictured the time as something quite far off. To know also that they'd been wrong about it. People had simply begun to live in industrialized homes that were small and identical. The flowing shapes of buildings had never materialized in the suburbs. People had been driven to adopt a sameness of everything."

And even if Australian society is standardised to this extent, the cost of the energy it consumes will still be critically high by 2000.

In Green's Australia of the year 2000, much of the energy is generated by atomic power. But how will the country solve its waste-disposal problem?

Green's answer: it doesn't solve the problem. It hides the problem. In fact, it hides all its problems:

"The press were quick to highlight mistakes of the new bureaucracy, and people were eager to talk to the computers that collected this sort of news. There was no questioning now, only a mere phone call to a machine and it gauged the truth of the information from the emotional levels of the voice and the actual possibility of the occurrence. The government had tried to ban news, but the merest hint of it had set off argument over most of the country. So, in a quick reversal of form, they said they would have open government, and simply refused to comment on anything they were asked about on the grounds of national security. The population were lulled by this, for the alternative was to demand information, and to do this would have meant continual disruption to daily lives and the ability to make trouble. And anyway, the government offered so many pleasurable alternatives to enjoy that unless the issue, any issue, was of a black and white nature nobody cared if the freedoms disappeared gradually."

The year 2000? Or 1978 in Australia? *The Sand West of Mountain Mouth* shows that the atomic energy society cannot work without the substitution of technical bureaucracy for democracy, regulated propaganda for news investigation. How soon before all of Green's predictions come true?

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The Sand West of Mountain Mouth is about six travellers who meet on a remote strip of coastal desert somewhere on the south-western Victorian coast. Five of the travellers are teenagers out for a weekend jaunt, escaping the conformity of the town where they live. Ben Stendix meets them only as he is wandering by himself along the coast, exploring. He notes that the native fauna suffer from inexplicable aberrations of behaviour. The desert feels haunted: a naked foot sticks up out of the sand; there are skeletons of what seem like an entire tribe of Aborigines who have been clubbed to death.

Ben also discovers the "social function" of this desert area - to cover up an enormous atomic waste-disposal dump:

"A network of concrete buildings, windowless, spread over an area of several acres, and enclosed by huge wire fences. Transporters were carrying tons of rubble and dumping it on the west side of the compound. But the worst sight was the workmen. They were dressed in protective clothing, and it meant only one thing - radioactivity...

"He knew the sites of waste storage were kept secret because of the fear of rebels using the product, or the threat of blowing a dump up to cause a government to stand down, or to demand huge ransoms. This meant that security would be very tight and that they knew of his existence.

"But the size of his problem was clear to him.

If there was a radioactive leak he was dead, and so were the others in the area."

This is the story of the book - the discovery by Ben, who tells the teenagers, that they have been all exposed to fatal radiation from a leak in the disposal vats. No warning signs had been placed on roads leading into the area. There is no hope that they can gain help by giving themselves up to the workmen. As a security risk, they could hardly hope for a helpful audience.

Before the radiation makes them too sick to move, they decide to capture an automated radio station (the only kind left in 2000 - no people making the programs at all). But this society won't let them succeed. Guards at the station kill them before they can release any news of the atomic danger.

The ending to this book might seem too dismal for many readers. Is there no hope at all for us - especially as government ministers and international agencies decide the issues without asking us at all?

But the book itself is full of life. William Green shows the pleasure of the characters in finding a rare freedom in exploring the desert country. When they discover that they are already dying, they do not give up on the enterprise. They do their best to warn others of the danger.

So they don't succeed. They are beaten by an all-powerful, all-pervading movement - made possible, and necessary, by a uranium-based economy. But that's what the readers of *The Sand West of Mountain Mouth* might still prevent, if they hurry.

** ** **

To get my seal of approval (I keep it on a special typewriter key), it's not necessary that an Australian s f book be *about* something, but it sure helps. Next issue, unless there are the usual glitches, I'll look at the sudden flood of books of s f emanating from Australia. (If you want to review them, then don't let that stop you. Saves me some work.)

Meanwhile, at last, and at shorth, let's stretch back into the distant past:

DAMIEN BRODERICK
69 Phillip St, Balmain,
NSW 2041

SFC 51 Silverberg Forum: If I didn't know you for an honest, guileless fellow, I'd be convinced that the editorial hand had intervened to produce an interesting effect. As it is, it's certainly interesting how exactly your several contributors (each working at his own level of insight or stupidity) betray a consensus of estimate on Silverberg. Turner, par. 6: "...interesting stuff but still muddle..." Lem, par 1: "...an interesting phenomenon." Van Ikin, par 1: "...Silverberg's career has taken some interesting turns lately." Gillespie, last par: "The interesting question is..." Gillam, par 1: "The Cube Root of Uncertainty is interesting because..." Derrick Ashby, par 1: "...Silverberg is one of the most interesting..." And, Gillespie again, hacking straight in to it, par 1: "You must admit that Bob Silverberg is a clever bloke."

And that, alas, is of course the highest pitch of response which Silverberg's work is capable of eliciting. It's...interesting. And, inescapably and probably fatally, that estimate slides from the work to the man. He's made himself a laboratory preparation, a paradigm of pain which we scarcely register as a poignant human burden but increasingly as the demonstration of a theorem. I suppose Brunner is another of the same species, though no one to my knowledge has yet erected testimonials to The Pain of JKLB. It's obvious enough why s f is a net for snaring clever dicks who don't know much about people or the world. I'll be very bitter indeed if fans in 1997 aren't writing articles on The Baffled Pain of Damien Broderick: An Interesting Phenomenon.

It's easy enough to get brittle about all this, or jump around wryly in an ironic plastic mask. It's hard to speak the truth. In an access of drunken sentimentality, I stood close to Barbara Silverberg at Aussiecon and gestured inarticulately toward her doleful spouse. "If only I could express to you," I stumbled, "how much I want to go to that man - but by what right? on the basis of a reader's imagined intimacy, and self-serving projection? - and put my arm about him, and tell him how much I love him as a human in pain." So Barbara said, "Why don't you? If only people would," or words to that effect.

But I couldn't, of course, because I couldn't say that much without also telling him that his lifeswork seemed to me worthless, the refinement of woeful slick technique in the service of interesting

cleverness, of a perception so guarded that its real or apparent shallowness made Dying Inside, his best book, read precisely like the prodigious accomplishment of a 15-year-old who would never quite grow up to equal Roth or Malamud.

The impression was never stronger than during the excruciating minutes a day or so later when Silverberg read from Son of Man after declaring it his finest achievement. My sympathy drained away. What can you do with a man like this? Son of Man is the apotheosis of all that is ersatz, shoddy, dishonest, and mechanical in his work. It is unreadable in the way the worst pseudo-philosophy is unreadable - built up out of dreary abstractions which repudiate no alternatives, words cemented by proximity with no image of sense or reason generated from their concatenation, the dead mockery of imagination, infinite rows of monkeys cranking out sentences singular only for their tawdry adherence to some Principle of Concerted Nominal Incompatibility. And, as always, the moronic cliches for sexuality: the globes, the spheres of milky flesh.

And yet Turner and others continue to hail Silverberg's alleged virtuosity, his supposed technical bravura. What glittering prizes are there for a mechanic of affectless banality, the inane, arid contrivances of despair of The Stochastic Man, the self-loathing comic-strip sardonics of Shadrach in the Furnace? But I want Silverberg to become a writer, if only because, selfishly, he is to me a projection.

SFC 52: A duller issue, I fear. As always, George is good to read, and useful; I'm going crazy waiting for his novel. I'd like to hear what he (and you) have to say about the novels of M.A. Foster.

Compton I don't enjoy much ((*brg* Neither do I, but Andrew Whitmore does*)), though no doubt you'd pit his work against Silverberg's at just those points of failure I mentioned above.

The piece I liked best was Rob Gerrand on Delany; a nice equaliser to the fevered enthusiasm of Camilla Decarnin (though I agree much more with Decarnin; for all its hopeless prolixity, Dhalgren was an important book to me, and Triton a dreadful experiment which someone had to make).

(28 October 1977)

As I said in *SFC 51*, reactions in fandom and publishing circles to the Silverberg Forum are at least as informative as anything Silverberg has actually done. Gollancz has made a strong pro-Silverberg gesture, with two books of short stories published within the last year or so (the latest is *Capricorn Games*), a re-issue of *Downward to the Earth*, and the anthology, *New Dimensions 7*.

But only a few letter writers have, like Damien, got to grips with the issues raised by the Silverberg Issue:

BRIAN STABLEFORD
14 Eaton Crescent,
Swansea SA1 4QJ, UK

Although your Forum does not pretend to offer a balanced view of Silverberg's work but merely a haphazard assembly of reviews and opinions, I was surprised to find such a consistent lack of sympathy for a man whose achievements within the s f field have been very considerable.

I was rather disappointed to find that some of the criticism - particularly that in the opening article by George Turner - seems to be built not upon an assessment of Silverberg's actual work but upon a hostile and sneering response to his one-time economic strategies and priorities. Turner seems actually to be offended by the fact that, in the early years of his career, Silverberg consistently and unrepentantly wrote for money rather than in the service of some higher ideal. His outrage is such that it leads to a rather snide prejudgment of what Silverberg attempted to do in the final decade of his career.

Turner observes at one point: "How, knowing better, he continued the churning out, is beyond me. I not only say I'd rather starve but, on two occasions, damned nearly did for just that reason. It's a question of temperament on which one can't make a judgment." But Turner, alas, has made a judgment. His attitude is holier-than-thou. It is clear that he considers Silverberg's mass-production in the interests of making money to be morally reprehensible, and his entire consideration of Silverberg's work is coloured by this allergic reaction.

Such sneering is not uncommon in many fields of human endeavour, and literary criticism has always been cursed with the most vulgar and vicious backbiting in this respect. I recall that Stanislaw Lem, reacting to a statement made by Poul Anderson about economic competition and its constraints upon the s f market, summed up the position adopted by Turner most succinctly in declaring that "A poor standard of living is no excuse for bad literature." This may be true, but it is not the point at issue. The actual question is whether a reasonably good standard of living can provide an excuse (or at least a reason) for prolific hackwork. The idea is, to Turner, apparently repugnant - but this is a moral and emotional prejudice, a psychological reaction akin to a phobia which effectively distances Turner from all

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ARTICLE OF COMMENT

THE BETTER WAY: HAS SILVERBERG FOUND IT?

by John J Alderson

After having read S F Commentary 51, with its intriguing sub-title, "The Silverberg Forum", I am of the opinion (still) that the writers therein are still missing the point of Silverberg's "complaint", and more importantly, what he has tried to do.

His first complaint falls into two sections. The first, most easy to deal with, is that the non-fiction work on which he spent so much time and pains is not being reprinted and he (justly) feels a little put-out. One of these is The Realm of Prester John of which George Turner writes, "I stood and read the first two pages, then bought the book - because those two pages revealed that Silverberg, given proper preparation and ordering of material, can write the kind of prose that takes you and holds you at once..." This book, well researched and, as Turner says, well-written, broke new ground, and has not been superceded, and has not been reprinted. The pat excuse for this sort of thing, that newer authorities have superceded them (Science Fiction Review), is rot. These non-fiction fields are so scarcely cultivated that a work therein does not become superceded for many decades, and often, even when obviously out of date, has to be used because there has been no replacement written. Hence I now feel his disappointment when, with myself, he checked through the catalogue of the Victorian State Library and found but two or three of his works there. I had more myself! I don't know the reason that other essential works of reference are allowed to go out of print and are not reprinted, regardless of demand.

The second part of this complaint, however, is more immediate. Bob's complaint is that his major works of science fiction are not being reprinted, despite the obvious pains he has taken on them, whilst older works he despises are being reprinted. The obvious answer, that he is still a lousy writer, does not hold water, though it may explain why his more modern works are not selling. But it does not explain why his older work, even worse written, is still popular. This is a question not answered, or attempted, in SFC 51. The conclusion is inescapable that Silverberg knew what he was writing about early in the piece of "being fourteen years old in a universe of sixteen-year-olds...", and, as he has matured, he made the mistake of thinking his audience has matured, and it hadn't, and hasn't.

Well, what has he tried to do? Don D'Ammassa almost puts his finger on it when he says that David Selig "...is probably the most fully realised single character yet to appear in the genre...", but Bruce Gillespie cannot see it at all, and George Turner lets it evade him. Turner, in particular, has observed the trees carefully and has not seen the wood.

Go back to the title of Silverberg's essay: "Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal", of which Turner says Silverberg is a little unfair to himself, and wastes too many words messing around with the Latin roots of the English word used to translate a Greek word, whereas what he should have done is read the chapter immediately preceding the quotation, which gives a long explanation of what "charity" is. Now I suggest that before reading any further you read the passage 1 Corinthians 12: 27-31, and Ch 13, entire chapter. Paul has explained the gifts available to the Church, read that as you will as "science fiction writer", then says, "But I show you a more excellent way", and follows the quotation Silverberg uses, ie, Ch 13, 1-2. So Silverberg has realised that "though he has the tongues of men and of angels", ie, he had this terrible ability to write and sell, yet he was but "sounding brass and tinkling cymbal", that he was making a meaningless noise, so he began looking for the "more excellent way", and he sees that as outlined in that chapter. He has begun writing about the real troubles of man, not the imaginary troubles of spaceships. With some naivete, he began writing books about human problems, vaguely in the science fiction genre, and has not been the first, nor will he be the last, to discover that a prophet is not without honour, "save in his own country and amongst his own kin". So he has bowed out gently of a genre that he has outgrown and I needs must admire him for the way he has done it, for had it been myself I would have been muttering the advice given in another place, "Don't cast your pearls before swine, lest they turn and rend you," but then I've had more experience of casting pearls before swine than Silverberg, and I know quite a lot more about prophets in their own country.

Apparently Silverberg realises that the axe is laid at the root of every tree, and he must bring forth works therefore worthy of repentance. Now, with the virtual exception of Don D'Ammassa, all have agreed that his works are not worthy and I, with, I hope, the Christian charity I should have, am more interested in the effort of the man to write something great than in his failure. Because the point of Silverberg's success of failure to produce literature is not the real point at issue.

The cruel fact is that science fiction addicts are mental adolescents, with the

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of Silverberg's work, including that of later years, when the author's priorities were different. It does not come as a surprise to find Turner reading Silverberg's autobiographical essay and "muttering, churlishly and uncharitably" the while. The lack of charity is neither here nor there, but the churlishness is unpardonable when it dons fancy dress and masquerades as commentary and criticism.

I don't know why Silverberg has given up writing s f. I don't suppose for a moment that the reason is simple enough to be stated straightforwardly. But perhaps there is one observation I might make which is not wholly irrelevant. The community of s f writers and readers is uniquely close-knit, with a great deal more communication between members than any other literary enclave. The s f author maintains a much closer and more direct relationship with one section of the people who read his books than any other "type" of author since the decline of patronage. There is, therefore, a hard core of readers - the author cannot but think of them as the core of his readership - with whom the author is in continual contact, and whom he tends to think of as his friends.

But the s f community, though not quite unique in this respect, is one of the few communities in which there is relatively little in the way of etiquette and the standards of politeness and good manners are deplorable. S f fans, because of their close contact with kindred spirits and the writers who supply the field, feel that they are possessed of a licence to insult and abuse in a degree that would be intolerable in everyday social affairs. It is difficult to imagine that any writer could fail to be disheartened by a reaction to his endeavours that is, by and large, unfeeling and unthinking. In the vast ocean of relationships between writers in general and the literary public, negative criticism may hurt, but it is at least remote. In the s f community, it comes as if from one's friends. A writer is entitled to no special consideration from critics who are personal acquaintances. They, like anyone else, may dislike his work. But I think that he is entitled to expect that they will, at least, try to understand what he is doing. If he is not due charity, he is surely due a measure of sympathy. When so few people seem able, or even willing, to understand what it is that he is trying to do then he is, I feel, fully entitled to his disappointment.

Members of the s f community are often eloquent in expressing their love for science fiction. It is worth bearing in mind that love, untempered with a little common sense and a little common decency, is a destructive force.

(10 August 1977)

Anybody who has been reading *SFC* for any length of time would realise already that I disagree with Brian completely. I don't think the s f fans are too rude to the authors; on the contrary, I think they are too nice to them and praise them too much.

Not that that matters. The important thing is to praise or condemn them for sound reasons. And Brian misses George Turner's point completely. I take it that George asks in his essay, "Robert Silverberg the Phenomenon": Why isn't Silverberg nearly as good as he could be (and seems to think he is already)? Part of the reason, as George analyses it, is that Silverberg has picked up too many false tricks from those years spent doing hackwork. George's point seems to be that no writer can afford to do hackwork (of the type that Silverberg undertook) without having to spend a long time recovering from the experience.

Anyway, s f writers would probably do a lot better if they weren't regaled by adulation from magazines like *S F Commentary*. Fanzine editors and reviewers do it because they like to. S f writers would be best advised to seek out harsh judges...like George Turner when he's at his best.

Perhaps here are better reasons for having doubts about *SFC 51:*

ANGUS TAYLOR
Fleerde 34, Bijlmermeer,
Amsterdam, Netherlands

I have mixed feelings about SFC 51. It certainly looks handsome, and quite professional, and may just possibly bring you a Hugo some time, if that's what you're after. But it's also more impersonal than the old SFC, less distinctive, less interesting, less lovable. After my plug for SFC in the latest Foundation, I hope you will prove my current misgivings unfounded. Without your rambling editorials and the wonderful letter column of old, the latest SFC seems to be only half there.

Did you dare send a copy of this issue to Robert Silverberg? ((*Yes.*)) It certainly is a put-down of his work, and he will hardly receive it with joy. ((*brg* Probably he didn't like it, since he sent no reply.*))

While I am also one who is, in the main, disappointed with Silverberg's work - because it seems to me there is so much potential there - I

think your issue might have been a bit more balanced, and tried to probe a little deeper into why Silverberg so often fails to satisfy. At least George Turner's piece did this a bit at the end. Finally here is one article that gives hope that George Turner may some day fulfill his potential as a critic. (Is George Turner the Robert Silverberg of s f criticism? He usually has all these interesting ideas but fails miserably to make them a coherent, trenchant whole. I only wish Turner would write a lot less verbiage and would polish what he does write. Let us pray for the day when the polished, coherent Turner will review the novel of the polished, coherent Silverberg!)

I feel that Silverberg's main failing as a writer stems from his one-sided view of the world: for him the world seems virtually all mind and no matter. It has no materiality, no substantiality, no real inertia of its own. It's as if all Silverberg's characters only dream their ways through life, rather than encountering the world, struggling with it, changing it and being changed by it. This is particularly noticeable in Silverberg's presentation of sex, which besides being incredibly male-chauvinist is also quite without credibility in general. (Or if he's writing from experience here, I wish he'd send me his little black book.) There's an interesting article waiting to be written here: "The Zipless Fuck: Immateriality in the Stories of Robert Silverberg". Maybe I'll do it myself sometime, if I have the time. Just consider this little gem of a passage from Up the Line (one of the hero's friends has just died):

> I didn't weep, but I felt like kicking furniture around, and I did. The noise woke up Miss Pistil, who gasped and murmured, "Are we being attacked?"
>
> "You are," I said, and to ease my rage and anguish I dropped down on her bed and rammed myself into her. She was a little startled, but began to cooperate once she realised what was up. I came in half a minute and left her, throbbing, to be finished by Bilbo Gostaman.

Really amazing stuff, wouldn't you agree? But I find Silverberg compulsively readable. (21 July 1977)

George said something to the effect that Silverberg's characters "don't breathe air", which sounds rather like your point that they seem connected to the world only in a sort of a dream.

Your note about "balance" is true. B. I did not receive an article that fitted - ie, an article which applied as much skill to showing Silverberg's virtues as George Turner was able to apply to the "Silverberg-is-marooned" case. Brian Stableford noted that he had contributed an article about Silverberg to the new s f encyclopedia which is being put together in England. Maybe that's the sort of article I'd like to read.

There were lots of other letters about *SFC 51*, but they will have to wait. A common reaction was to decry an unwelcome change in the format of *SFC*. I thought it was common knowledge that I run special issues from time to time, where "I Must Be Talking to My Friends" is left out. *51* just happened to be one of those issues.

GEORGE TURNER
87 Westbury St, East St Kilda, Victoria 3182

SFC 52: Re Brian Aldiss' suggestion of an issue of SFC devoted to s f criticism: I, as an individual, would love it. So, I think, would John Foyster, if a recent conversation means anything. It would, one might hope, lead to some attempt at an aesthetic of s f and s f criticism, which could be a good thing (and might as easily be a disaster). Franz Rottensteiner made a beginning on it some years ago in an old SFC, but it was not taken up by others, and I think it would appeal more to the intellectual dilettante fringe than to the "average" reader who, bless his soul, "knows what he likes" and sticks by it. However, it might be a step in the right direction. Perhaps Lem could be persuaded to weigh in with something written with less than his habitual snarl of contempt for the inmates of the s f asylum - that attitude which merely raises hackles instead of stimulating argument.

It's time for an aesthetic to be attempted, but I don't propose to try it; my business is technical criticism, and I know my limits. Lem, Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Foyster, and one or two more might get somewhere, but I fear we might suffer a deluge from the self-conscious "artists" - the Delanys, Dozoises, et al - who obscure more than they ever clarify. And some of the work in Foundation demonstrates too openly the complacency of some of the newer British authors who write as though publication of a book guarantees them authority. (Or is it just that turning to the essay form drains the humanity out of them and they immediately begin to write with a plum-in-bum "literary" accent calculated to please Teacher?)

In any case I hope to get enough reaction to some of the more deliberate provocations in "Feast of Vultures" ((*brg* in the next offset SFC*)) to

keep technical criticism glimmering, at least in your letter columns.

Oh, dear, Ursula (Have at you, Lady!) yes. I have heard about the Lem article in NYTBR since I wrote the Scholes bit, but have been unable to catch up with a copy of it. I take your point - and sadly agree - that unimportant books being given prominence, and can only feel that it is better for s f if its unimportant books are not given prominence. It only gives the enemies of promise opportunity to razz without hindrance. Lem, for instance, is interesting enough to be worth the occasional treatment in depth, but being worth investigation is not a guarantee of literary value. An essay on what I think of as the "danse macabre" school (Ellison, Farmer, Delany, and so on) could be sociologically and psychologically fascinating, even valuable - and would probably show s f in a more pitiless light than anyone would welcome. And that kind of publicity, in TLS, Novy Mir, or even the Melbourne Age, we can do without.

The trouble is that there is so little s f worth raising a song and dance about. Having to read so much contemporary fiction as a reviewer with a foot in both camps, I am consistently dispirited by the amount of competently written s f which, at the first critical prod, disintegrates into pretentious melodrama without an idea in its 70,000 or so words. At least the average mainstream writer knows or bones up on his subject, which cannot be said for the average s f writer who apparently believes, with Gardner Dozois, that no special knowledge is required, and who not only ignores simple fact but is often too intellectually lazy to knead his imaginative creations into logical shape. A hungry market makes it too easy to sell junk and uninformed criticism makes it too easy for the junk-writers to believe that they are doing good work. I suggest a hard look at some recent critically praised novels, say Charisma, Medusa's Children, Triton, and the biological nonsense in the Faber selection, Supernova 1. People won't put up with such intellectually shoddy (insolent contempt of commonsense) in any genre except s f. Why should s f be not only excused its faults but praised in spite of them?

And good novels will be reviewed as good novels, irrespective of category, when publishers take the category labels off them - as with The Dispossessed (English edition, at any rate). Nor am I convinced that lumping the s f on one page, as in the TLS, is altogether downputting. Produce good s f on that page and segregation will be a niche of honour. The same is done almost the world over with detective stories and I've heard no whinges about ghettoisation from their writers. But then, Sayers and Innes, Hammet and Simenon, Wahloo and Chandler earned them their niche of honour years ago. S f has so grimy a niche in many eyes because too many of its noisy "artists" are plain shoddy tradesmen. If they learned their grade first, they might have something for their doubtful "art" to build on.

There is, in fact, too much justification for the Kind Implies Quality attitude, and it is s f's own fault. The attitude is unfair, but s f makes too much noise about its literary deserts without producing much that supports its claims.

We know that The Dispossessed is seminal in the genre - a new thing and a good one. Floating Worlds may turn out to be so. Ballard's work has been and so has Disch's. Wolfe, Aldiss, and a few more have produced the craftsmanship that every art needs in order to ensure its continuity (it can't afford to wait around for genius). But - what the s f "establishment" and a loud-mouthed fandom trumpet to the world as its great accomplishments are Dune and Dhalgren and the "Riverworld" books, which mainstream criticism treats with polite reserve. And that may be more than they deserve.

As for someone "to make a fair assessment of s f works for a non-sf audience: for the common reader", your final "I wish you'd do it" upsets me completely. I have tried and will again, but it won't help. It needs bigger guns than mine; I'm just a small-time reviewer jostling bigger names in the same columns; it needs somebody who really matters not only to readers but to editors and publishers.

However, there's hope for another try since Chris Priest made such a good impression on my editor (unexpected because said ed. is an s f philistine), who actually read The Space Machine and was bemusedly complimentary about it. (Small crack for insertion of pry-bar.)

Next Easter Brian Aldiss and Roger Zelazny will, I hope, make a bigger one, because they will be guests of the National Convention, not just of a little workshop. The Con will be held at Melbourne University, so they'll get news and tv coverage on the "establishment's" own ground. Much of the "establishment" is on our side anyway.

So perhaps, given opportunity, we may be able to do something in this small corner.

But you know what fans are. If we succeed in getting the common reader interested, some twit will promptly grab the silly-season publicity with a show of ill-drawn brawn-and-sorcery comics, a season of old Flash Gordon serials and some frenzied fannish nonsense right up the alley of a press which knows that a laugh sells more papers than reasoned praise, and knows also that the suckers will supply the laughs almost without prompting.

So if the common reader says, "Thank you, perhaps next year...", who will blame him?

The pressure, from within the readership, against getting a hearing, is immense - and look at the load of old lumber which annually makes the various award lists. Ally that with the fact that only a small amount of the most propagandised s f is in fact the class literature it is cracked up to be, and the game is definitely hard.

We need an s f that has something to say to the common reader, instead of a basic fantasy genre (Science? ha-bloody-ha) mostly intent on cannibalising past successes. We need more realism for the thinking reader and less wearisome blood and guts. We need some agreement of what s f is, so that at least the writing can be easily separated from the junk. We need some agreement among writers and readers about what matters in good s f. (If literacy were agreed to matter, that would put paid to three quarters of the award lists.)

Look through Bruce's lists for 1973-76 on pp 16-17 of SFC 52, and shudder for a genre whose best in four years rarely touches the second rate, and for a list which combs the field and is able to name not more than four books which have anything even remotely interesting to say beyond their escapist content.

S f should stop complaining and clean its house.

(6 October 1977)

George's comments remind me of the fact that some of us have had ideas, from time to time, of holding a "seminar" instead of a "convention" in Melbourne. And then we are chilled by the memory that only about 20 people turned up to the last "seminar" held at Melbourne University - the John W Campbell Conference (was it as long ago as 1971?).

What happens if we do want to talk seriously about science fiction? I could take a suggestion from George's letter. Make sure that a particular title is not labelled as science fiction. Put it in a pile of new fiction to be discussed by a group of people who like talking about books. (I don't know who these people might be...) Then listen to what they say. Maybe, in this way, we could get rid of the rusting superstructure of fannish thinking about s f books.

The other possibility is to get into discussion with just a few people I know around Melbourne. There are not many of them. Most of the people I know who read science fiction only want to rave about any particular book, or make excuses for it. I'd name a few people who actually like a good discussion, but I don't think they'd appreciate it. Anyway, that's not the point. It's just that perhaps any "seminar" such as I have in mind is always going to be a small occasion. But large numbers of people turn up to seminars on children's books, or films, etc. I wish we could find more of them.

Meanwhile...

NICK HOLMES
11 Osborne St, Williamstown, Victoria 3016

Your literary outpourings, though stimulating, often leave me feeling uneasy and inadequate. SFC does, anyway; Supersonic Snail makes me realise that everyone else is confused, too. I still feel threatened, though. Surprising, really, since you are one of the most relaxing people I know. ((*brg* Some people will find that statement surprising.*))

Having thought about it, I conclude that what you are threatening is my attitude to science fiction, or rather, my self-image as an s f reader. I am by no means a science fiction fan, at least not by comparison with the fans that I know. Though I have respect and affection for many of them, and have always been made welcome, I don't seem to have the same social commitment to fandom that the Ashbys, Handfields, and Edmondses display. I most certainly do not have my nose pressed against the glass - that window is open to two-way traffic and I like it that way.

I didn't start reading science fiction until I was eighteen; I didn't notice any "Golden Age" (am I too young to have done so at thirty-eight?) and the term "ghetto" confuses me. Who builds the walls or digs the burrows? No, whatever else I am, I don't regard myself as a fan. What attracts me to s f is not the literary merit or otherwise of the writings but the ideas they express. I have always thought that s f was the most effective approach to looking at man outside his social apparatus, separating humanity from the humachinery, as it were, and trying to reach some conclusion about the essential homo sapiens.

By chance, I read Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness soon after it came out. I liked it, without knowing a thing about the author or her standing in the field. What caught my mind was not the effectiveness of the writing, the flow of thought, or the control of language, but the ideas about human society. "Aha," says I, "What an interesting approach to the role of gender in society. So the concept of personal honour doesn't have to be sex-linked." Same thing with The Dispossessed, which I saw mainly as a

discussion of the extent to which an anarchic society must rely on a particular concept of the relationship between self and non-self. When Ms Le Guin described the book as being the story of a marriage, I didn't see what she meant. At first.

This tale hardly demonstrates my great literary perception, I fear; but then, some of us learn slowly. I had begun already to cotton on to the fact that one discovers precious little about man as an individual or as a species by removing him from a social situation. Changing that social situation may be illuminating and may help to define the constancies of human nature. But most of the other forms of literature can do the job almost as well. Merely living with people for long enough can provide some illumination. S f, it seems to me, can go a long way toward defining the particular nature of the industrial society as a framework for people, though it is a lopsided, partial view. Once, I thought it sufficient. Then I met you lot and started learning about your varied approaches to science fiction.

So what did I find? A coherent group of like-minded people, all sober, serious, and dedicated to the Truth? A coterie of cognoscenti, who knew the field down to the last jot and tittle? A bunch of gregarious imbibers who were concerned mainly with wine and women? A collection of eager beavers who were mid-way between model aeroplanes and wargames?

A mixture of each, of course. About the only coherent thing about fandom seems to be that its members like to hang about with one another - so I might make a fan yet. On the other hand, there doesn't seem to be much loose living about s f fans, which keeps me on the fringe. I cling most tenaciously to my small vices. What I didn't expect was a group of people who mostly took my favourite form of literature very seriously, who were inclined to analyse it, criticise it, and above all, think about it. And think about it in a positive, almost passionate way. It really was a bit unexpected; after all, s f is not noted for being a passionate form of expression. I had seen in it a markedly cerebral approach to life and so I reacted accordingly. Or had taken such an approach myself and had compressed science fiction into the mould of my desires. Take your pick.

Hence my feelings of inadequacy. What you and your contributors to SFC persist in doing is to rub my nose in a few unpalatable facts about my attitudes to science fiction and, by extension, my attitudes to a lot of other things. I am left with a strong feeling that to read s f (or anything else) without being critical or analytical is a very good way of remaining uncommitted. And a good way of missing much of what the field has to offer. I suspect that it comes, in the end, to Ms Le Guin's message at Aussiecon - if you do it at all, do it as well as you possibly can. Anything less is dishonest. There is another message, too, about the value of commitment.

So, I don't know whether to kiss you or curse you. No longer can I gobble up the ideas that I see at once and throw the rest away, since I begin to feel guilty at wandering through s f with my eyes half-shut. You really are a pack of bloody nuisances - I was all right as I was. Wasn't I?

(17 October 1977)

Um - yes, probably you were. Right enough, that what you say about your beginnings in reading s f explains lots of things about the s f readership which puzzle and annoy George.

But, what the hell - it's always good, and painful, to begin seeing things in a new way. When I was 21 I discovered classical music; at 25, girls. Discovering the first cost me lots of money; the second, lots of heart-turnings and mental anguish.

For you? is-covering a whole new way of looking at books seems like a good, substantial project for the next few years or so.

As for social fandom: well, we just can't discover too many other people who think our way. It's a defensive group, as well as nourishing. And it has variety as well.

Funny: s f has always seemed to me the most passionate literature I've read: because of all those romantic landscapes and freewheeling trips through time and space, I suppose. I think a lot of s f people would agree with my first impulse towards s f: that it provided an alternative to realistic - hence suffocating, anti-romantic, dispassionate - people and landscapes. I couldn't feel anything for or about the people around me, but I could about the people in s f, because of the great adventures they had and the places they went to. It's that desire to get away from ordinariness, mundanity, which seems to impel many s f fans I know. Yes, I know it's an inadequate response to the world, but it can be the only response for somebody of imagination who meets only blank stares from the people around him/her (well, that was me until I got into fandom).

One person who ha more to do with me discovering fandom and classical music than almost anybody else is:

LEE HARDING
PO Box 21, Ferntree Gully, Victoria 3156

Now that Irene and I are finally settled in our new house - a process which has taken us more than three exhausting weeks - I find that I have more time to attend to more important matters, such as answering letters and writing locs.

Congratulations on SFC 52: with this second offset issue you seem to have struck the desired balance: just enough solid criticism and a hefty slice of Yourself. The layout was worth all the bs&t that Stephen Campbell put into it. Hang on to him and keep him happy at all costs.

Andrew Whitmore's all-too-brief article on the novels of D G Compton (those he had read) was excellent, but irritatingly incomplete. I know, I know - he explains why in his first paragraph. But I can only hope that some day you can get him to write a follow-up where he can examine in detail The Silent Multitude, The Quality of Mercy and, hopefully, forthcoming novels.

Your list of "Best SF" for the years 1973 through to 1976 brought me one surprise: I was pleased but somewhat embarrassed to see my World of Shadows - an old novel which I wrote in 1969 - listed in your 1975 reading, and given ***½. I didn't realise that you found so much of value in the novel, particularly when I recall your grudging, growling dislike of the original, top-heavy ms. Anyway, thanks for reading, and liking, it.

Only a few days ago I received a long letter from Damien Broderick - he concluded with the remark, "Just read World of Shadows. Loved the people, hated the aliens. They were a bit, uh, shadowy for my liking. I know, early work. Press on."

Criticisms such as your own - and George Turner's - and the occasional unexpected comment from people like Damien help make the business of writing more worthwhile. If only a handful of people appreciate what you are attempting, warts and all, then that is enough. As long as the Great and silent Out There continues to buy your books, that is... (17 October 1977)

After reading George Turner's comment about my 73-76 lists, you might be asking yourself whether you want to be on it at all... But I've said in an earlier issue of *SFC* that *World of Shadows* has a very strong story (stronger than almost any Australian film made so far, for instance), and the less said about some of the writing the better. Now if the Harding who can write *The Weeping Sky* went back to *World of Shadows*... Well, why not?

Although I tried to arrange this letter section carefully, I can't ignore the fact that there are some letters on an issue as distant as *48/49/50* which cannot be left out:

MICHAEL SHOEMAKER
2123 N. Early St,
Alexandria, Virginia 22302,
USA

Bring the Jubilee is one of the best. It has the best characterisation of any s f book I've ever read. Your review is exactly right. Especially pertinent is the dramatisation of the book's theme through the action. The book shows you instead of talking about it. Hodge's attempt to remain a spectator at Gettysburg fails and changes the course of history, so Moore demonstrates in action the impossibility of remaining a spectator to life.

Moore's history is fairly good. The slowness of Hood's men in attempting to capture the "Round Tops" is one of the two fatal incidents that caused the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg (the other being the hesitation of Ewell to attack Cemetery Hill). However, the chronology of events is a bit muddled. The inactivity in the vicinity described places the action in the story on the night and morning of July 1-2. Even if there were Confederate pickets in the hero's area, the body of Longstreet's Corps was too far away for the delay caused by the hero to have any effect. By the time Longstreet's men were in position, the Union soldiers had already occupied the wheat field. There are two crucial points to this action. Lee issued his orders late in the morning of July 2, and Longstreet was not diligent enough in pursuing the retreat of Sicles' men. These two factors are the crux of the delay. It has been a while since I read the book, but as I recall, I thought Moore's alternate history of the results of a Confederate victory was very well done. This is the only point on which we disagree.

The best twentieth-century novel written in the nineteenth century must be The Confidence-Man by Melville. It reads like a collaboration between the Joyce of Finnegans Wake and Kafka. Other contenders, which are in fact better novels, though not as prophetic in style, are The N----- of the "Narcissus" and Moby Dick. ((*brg* It was Ketterer's New Worlds For Old which led me to buy The Confidence-Man. Still not read it, though.*))

I'm afraid I can't take seriously any list of the ten best s f novels which doesn't

ODD LETTER OF 1977

came from

ROB GERRAND

whose address on this particular letter was Peking Hotel, China. (Rob's usual address is 863 Hampton St, Nth Brighton, Vic). And what deathless thoughts did Rob send us from the capital city of China?:

In Peking, after the cramming of my brain with sights, sounds, smells, information, I've been lying here, in siesta time, trying to read Larry Niven's Ringworld. I say "trying" because that's what it's doing to my patience.

I don't know whether being in an alien environment adds clarity to perception of the familiar, but certainly Niven's flaws have rarely stood out so bluntly. God, his English is so clumsy! I was, I suppose, willing to let him get away with the childishness behind his use of his invented ... "swear" word "tanj". But the threadbare characterisation, the shallowness of motivation - epitomised by the pell-mell style of narration - is another matter.

It demonstrates, to me at least, what's right with the s f I do like, as well as the far easier what's wrong with the bulk of the cretin school.

Anyhow, Bruce, I don't know why, in this amazing, enthusiasm-generating country, I'm writing to you only about s f - and not good s f at that. (Though, of course, I've committed myself to Leigh Edmonds for stuff about China.)

(14 July 1977)

((*brg* An advertisement for Rataplan indeed, though the China piece is not in the latest edition. But just in case Leigh doesn't want to publish it, Rob... *))

have a single Wells book. ((*Oops. Neither can I. One of those mistakes you can make when first-drafting onto stencil. Okay, of the Wells books I've read, The Time Machine as perhaps the best modern s f work, and The Island of Dr Moreau on the Top 10. Possibly The Invisible Man.*))

Nicholls ("Plumbers of the Cosmos") overrates the value of criticism. It's ridiculous to say that s f can't reach full maturity until its critics reach maturity. The whole history of literature just doesn't support his idea. He is putting the cart before the horse.

Turner berates fandom for his own misunderstanding. Few people have ever claimed fanzine reviews of books to be serious criticism. Just because fanzines look like the "little magazines", Turner no doubt judged them as such in his early days of contact with fandom. The comparison is invalid for the most part. Until recently, most fanzines were unelaborate communications with tightly controlled circulations. It seems to me that most reviews (certainly mine) make no pretence at being anything more than a conversation in print. Joe Phan would like to know what his good friend Noah Ward thinks about the latest Isaac van Silvermak novel. Unfortunately Joe lives in Burbank, CA, and Noah lives in Zuni, NC. They rarely get to see each other, the telephone is too expensive, and Noah doesn't feel like writing ten dozen letters to all his fannish friends. Therefore, Noah publishes his review of the book in some faznine. I don't see anything at all to criticise in all this.

Besides all this, most s f books just don't merit long, detailed study. Outside of Earth Abides and some of Wells, s f doesn't measure up to the rest of literature. But maybe the genre isn't really old enough yet to have produced any large body of classics. Personally, I think s f is innately inferior to mundane literature. Paul Walker got near the crux of the matter when he said (in Renaissance and his own magazine) "only a literature of character can achieve the dramatic intensity of great art". The imaginative element, which is the raison d'etre of s f, makes impossible the reader's complete personal identification with the story. Therefore the reader can never feel that "intensity of great art", which Paul speaks of. On the other hand, s f gives us something we cannot get elsewhere, and this justifies its existence. In other words, I like peaches better than pears, but if I feel like eating a pear, a peach will not be satisfying.

Nicholls again. Ho hum; he's so much worse than Turner in this. The point about Silverberg's output is that it put him in a secure financial position where he could do better work later. What's wrong with that? Would it have been better had he starved?

And his statement on page 45: most writers tend to "write their first novel over and over". Everyone has personal preoccupations; look at Dickens, Austen, Conrad, Melville. But I don't see anything objectionable in this anyway. It's interesting to see how an author develops his ideas over his career.

Camilla Decarnin claims to have read Dhalgren eight times!? She must be either lying, stupid, or mad. ((*brg* No, Camilla, I'm not agreeing with him - but I couldn't resist printing the comment anyway!*))

Contrary to what Randal Flynn says, the first realistic look at a planetary shipwreck was Rex Gordon's brilliant First on Mars. This long-out-of-print novel was reissued finally a couple of years ago in that Avon series.

Don Ashby's review of Grendel is very good. I've pulled the book (which I got for nothing) off the shelf and

I will read it on the recommendation of this review.

As a matter of fact, The Wanderer did not stay in print. It was out of print for many years after its initial publication, and I think this explains its neglect. ((*brg* But Penguin has kept it in print in its British edition.*)) I like The Wanderer a lot, but the multiplicity of characters makes it difficult reading. You get to the heart of what is good in the book.

The Wm Moore story in Epoch sounds exactly like a famous Kafka sketch in reverse. The Kafka sketch, "Before the Law", has the same situation, only reversed. A man is outside the gates of heaven, but the gatekeeper won't let him in. The man and the gatekeeper have a philosophical argument, and the story ends when the gatekeeper closes the gate, while intimating that the man could have entered any time he wanted, but that he lost his chance through inaction.

(20 December 1977)

Also I had some acrimonious correspondence with DON D'AMMASSA. This is a pity, since all my dealings with Don in the past (especially when I was still in APA-45) have been easy and pleasant. Don sent a letter saying that he was annoyed at a comment directed from me in *SFC*. Since Don's letter was sent in early May, I thought he was talking about something I said in *51*. (I had sent a contributor's copy airmail.) But, in fact, he had just received *48/49/50*, which I had posted in January! Anyway, he did not like the fact that I summed up his letter of comment (in the "I Also Heard From" section) and gave my uncomplimentary opinion of his opinion. Not fair, said Don, and I can see his point.

The upshot is that I will abandon my practice of summarising everyone else's letters at the end of the letter section. Instead, I'll print them all in *Supersonic Snail*, which you will get if you appear there or here. In that way, I hope to encourage more people to write letters, and no one need feel hard done by.

MY 1978

As I tried to show in the first two pages of this column, my 1978 has been a lot better than ever I could have expected in 1977. A bit of cosy domestic tranquility does the heart good, even if it doesn't goad an editor into publishing a magazine.

We've been a bit on the edge of fannish activities in Melbourne, but there doesn't seem to be a centre anymore. Perhaps it is the St Kilda area in general, where most people have moved. Few of us left north of the Yarra.. Some people are still not speaking to other people because of various aspects of Easter's Unicon IV. For instance, I don't have an official Ditmar, even though the results were quite heartening to me. Congratulations to the actual winners: Cherry Wilder, Van Ikin, Frank Payne, and Andrew Whitmore.

Stencils for pages 3 and 4, 13-15, and this page finished 10 September 1978. The rest date from January. See you soon.

THE BETTER WAY

(Continued from page 26)

fond belief of a sixteen-year-old that they have the solution of the problems of the world in the shape of science, and their fiction is the solving of imaginary bugs that may afflict the system. Or, science fiction is about mending holes in spaceships. Or, as Silverberg puts it, "...it was becoming impossible for me to take the stuff of science fiction seriously anymore - all those starships and andRoids and galactic empires..." Literature, on the other hand, is about people, trying to solve their very real problems, admittedly, sometimes in allegory, as in Dying Inside. Now this is the real point at issue: is science fiction going to grow up and start dealing with reality, ie, people, in a real way... not in the sugary philosophy of the adolescent - that everything's going to turn out lovely?

It is, of course, true that the New Wave tried to get away from this literature about spaceships, only to become even more remote from reality. It is also true that other s f writers have seen fit to treat science fiction with contempt, and they have insulted it and its addicts by writing sword and sorcery, reducing the absurdities of science to the exercise of magic. And most numbskulls have not realised that they're being made fools of, that these authors are laughing at their gullibility.

Personally, I believe that science fiction can still become literature, ie, that it can still produce worthwhile books that deal with real human problems. This is what Silverberg tried to do, and whether or not he succeeded or failed is beside the point. The real question is, Can science fiction grow up? I believe so.

John J Alderson
June 1977

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- George Turner in *S F Commentary*

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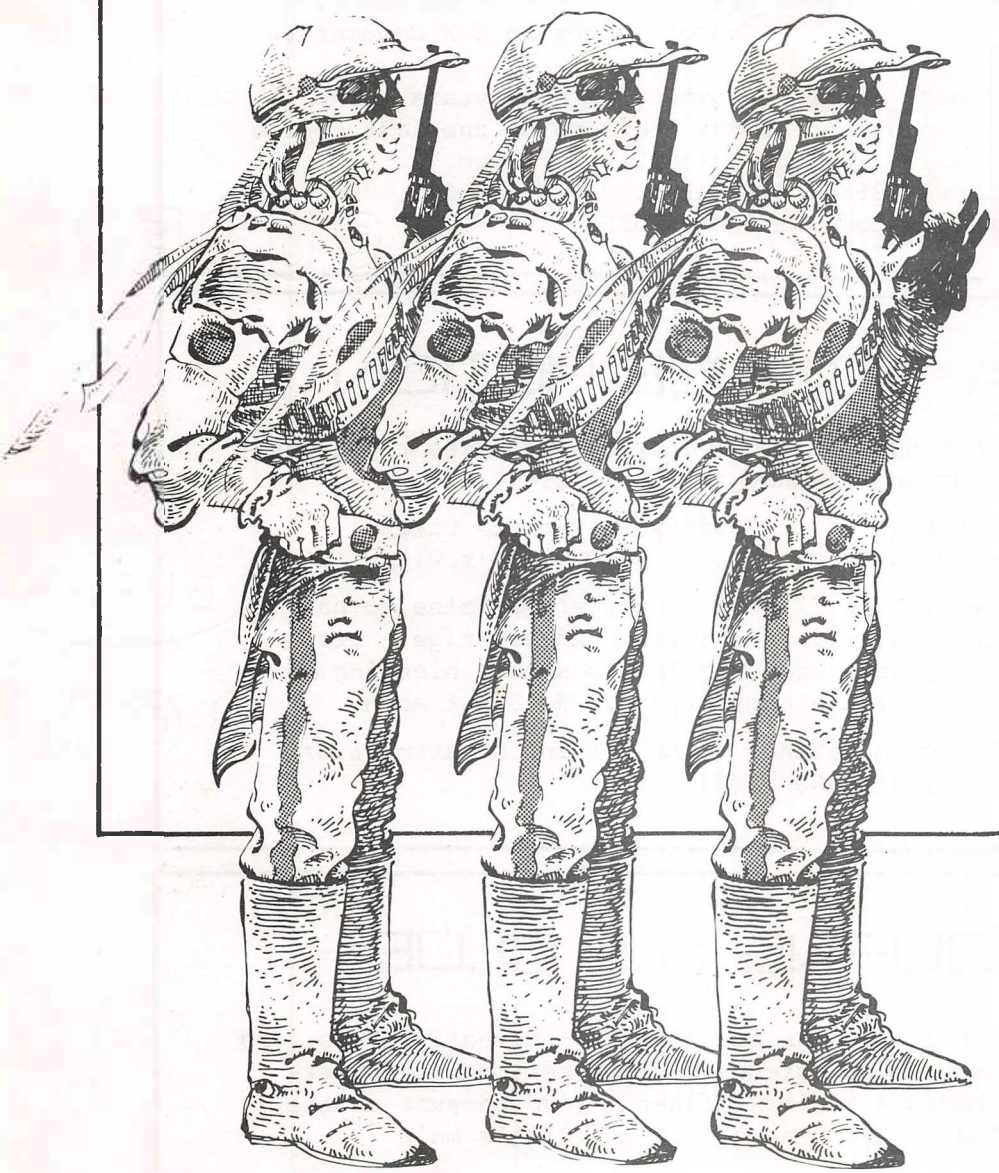
NOUMENON



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