

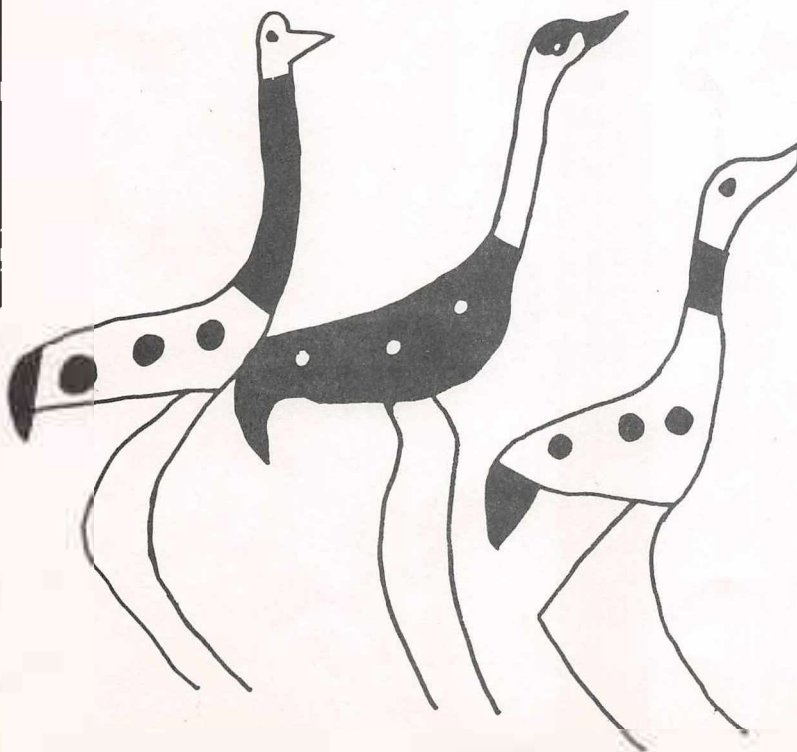
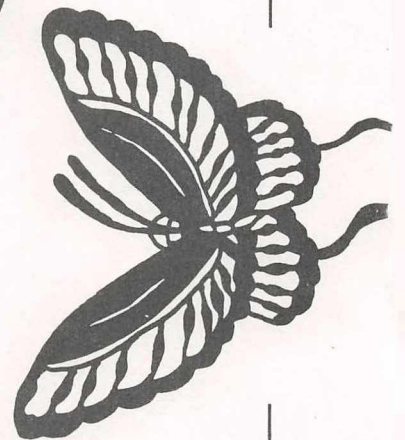
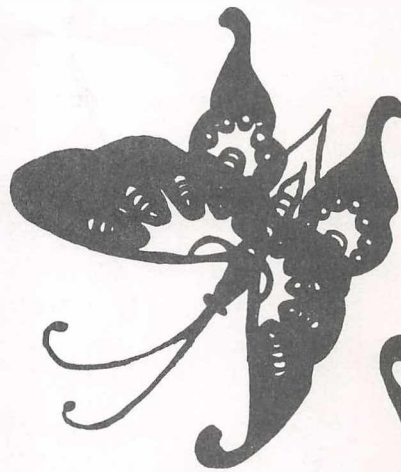


S F COMMENTARY

the independent magazine about science fiction

**Aldiss
& Zelazny**

**Melbourne
Easter 1978**



S F COMMENTARY 54
NOVEMBER 1978

2 F COMMENTARY

The Independent Organisation of the United Kingdom



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Easter 1978



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I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

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I
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PLEASE NOTE

This issue of *S F Commentary* was prepared in November, 1978, and was due to be released in the first week of December. Because of circumstances wildly out of control (see *SFC* 55½), this issue is being printed in June, 1979, and will actually be posted in July, 1979. *hrg*

This will be a short issue of *SFC*, mainly because it is too expensive to produce anything longer. You would think that I could have written the editorial long ago for a short issue.

Things have not worked out that way. I've been attacked by Inhibition. With so few pages to cover, what kind of deathless prose can I choose which is worth the scarce and expensive financial and material resources used to reproduce that prose? Writer's block, in other words.

What's the use of writing, anyway? Even such a perceptive reader as John Foyster misunderstands what I say (at least, in *Chunder*, Vol. 2, No. 9, 7 November 1978). In his review of *SFC* 53, he gives the issue as a whole a favourable review - but gives a puzzling interpretation of what I said in "IMBTMF" last issue. For instance, one of the things I meant to say was that my personal life had improved so much in 1978 that it had almost shut out *SFC* activities for the time being. John calls this "seeing the dismal side of every situation". If you say so, John.

But John is mistaken if he thinks that I am too worried about honours for *SFC* (although I don't like having a little blue and gold-spangled award given to me one day and taken away the next). What I am worried about is *money*. If I work hard and make money to finance *SFC*, I do not have time to write, type, print, collate,

and put into envelopes the latest issue of *SFC*. If I spend a week of my time publishing an issue, I am \$200 down the drain in lost income, plus \$200 down the drain in postage and materials costs. (That's if I do small, non-offset issues, of course.) Theoretically, I have an income for the magazine of \$200 an issue. However, I have not heard from my agents for a long time, and new subscriptions and renewals are not exactly booming here, either. Therefore, I am really \$400 down the drain every time I produce an issue. My personal income rarely exceeds \$600 a month.

Which is just another way of saying that the best way to keep *SFC* going is to send donations. Which is probably all I was trying to say in the editorial section of *SFC* 53.

Meanwhile, *Chunder* is currently the most active fanzine in Australia, and certainly the most entertaining (John does not appear to have Inhibitions). Eight for \$1 for John Foyster, GPO Box 4039, Melbourne, Victoria 3001.

For more staid, *Locus*-type news, try *Australian Science Fiction News*, from Space Age Books, 305 Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000. \$5 for 10; cheques payable to Mervyn R Binns.

** ** *

That feels good... There is an entire stencil sitting, typed, ready to go on the duplicator. Maybe I have beaten the evil Inhibition beast.

Not quite. I have a dreadful, shameful secret. It is almost too shameful even for that famous secret confessions magazine, *SFC*.

Yes - believe it or not - I confess that I Enjoyed Unicon.

Not that I have worked out why such an admission is so unpopular. About 450 people were at Unicon IV, Easter 1978, and 425 of them seemed to be having a fine time.

Unfortunately, the other 25 or so were fanzine editors and writers. Their reports since Easter have featured Blanket Condemnations and Universal Verdicts of Absolute Disaster.

Well, Elaine and I went there, and we had a great time. We were able to meet lots of people we had not seen for years. We found one of the most enjoyable programs at any Australian convention (except for my speech). We went on the Easter Egg Hunt, and I was even persuaded to enter the Masquerade competition. The hucksters' area/downstairs meeting room provided a useful congregation area for those who were not attending the program. The room parties I went to were enjoyable.

And I got to meet, for the first time since 1973/74, Brian Aldiss, and Roger, Judy, Devin, and Shane Zelazny. How marvellous! In their different ways, Brian and Roger have been patron saints to Australian fandom over the years. Brian has always been a supporter of Australian fanzines and s f activity. Roger and Judy have been hosts to several peripatetic Aussie fans, and Roger gave the "Australia in 75" presentation at Torcon. In my view, the success of the Convention was assured because the organisers were able to bring these people to Australia.

Brian Aldiss' Question-and-Answer session and Roger Zelazny's Speech appear later in this issue of *SFC*.

** ** *

I am still not sure what was supposed to have been so bad about Unicon, except for the notorious affair of the Ditmars. Not that anybody cares about the Ditmars until things go wrong. The year I organised them last (1976), everything went well, but few people nominated or bothered to vote. This year, lots of people voted, but justice was not seen to be done. The trouble was that the convention organisers took advice. Originally, the awards for 1978 were going to be jury awards. Then there was a change. And then another change... I still think *The Weeping Sky* should have won.

Many of the bitterest complaints I've heard about Unicon IV concerned the uncooperative management of the Town House. We did not stay at the hotel, so we escaped such hassles. Still, I do remember another convention which took place in an uncooperative hotel - Syncon 2 in 1972. That was the best Australian convention held before Aussiecon.

The great wall of complaint about Unicon IV reminds of the Loans Affair in 1975: nobody ever explained what the culprits were supposed to have done wrong, but they must have done something wrong since it was done by that mob. (Obscure Australian political reference here: the accusers in 1975 are now doing just what they accused Labor of doing then.) My interpretation of the Easter events is that the people who consider themselves Melbourne Fandom were outraged that another group of s f enthusiasts - in this case, the Melbourne University Science Fiction Association - was aiming to put on an ambitious national convention. Everything MUSFA did was derided as a matter of course; it was foreordained that Unicon would be a failure.

Well, it wasn't. It was a great convention of a particular type.

A recent great convention of a very different type was Anzapacon. ANZAPA celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, so lots of members and previous members and waitlisters (and hangers-on) gathered at the

Foyster/Bryce residence (a huge upstairs flat overlooking the St Kilda beachfront) and played darts and computer games and chess, and drank, and talked about everything, and typed one-shots, and collated the Tenth Anniversary ANZAPA Mailing (413 pages). Various people have tried non-programmed relaxacons before, but the only ones to succeed have been run by university clubs (Anaconda, Monicon, etc). John Foyster and Leigh Edmonds succeeded this year in putting into effect the sort of convention Leigh and I had in mind at the beginning of 1973, the best-forgotten BYOCon. A very enjoyable weekend.

** ** *

SFC was a sort of personal diary of my doings for awhile, and maybe readers expect me to keep going with that format. But a basically content Gillespie finds less to write about than any other sort of Gillespie. Elaine and I have some great plans - but they have not happened yet.

My freelancing work takes up most of my time. That has changed a bit during the year. I had several very boring jobs. I was glad to finish them, but was not quite sure where the next dollar was coming from (keeping in mind that lots of people still owe me money, to the tune of \$1000 or so). Then a little advertisement I had sent to the FAW Newsletter was printed. Since then, the phone has been ringing quite often. These are usually people who have inspiration and application, but do not know how to paragraph, punctuate, or spell. I can do these (and type as well) even if I never get around to writing my own novels. I have discovered though that some sorts of novels are being written in Australia for which there is a market, but no publishers. These are genre novels of all types - science fiction, of course; but also the standard mystery novel, which is a staple of British publishing houses, but not ours; and the adventure or historical romance.

Often I have to say, "Yes, this is publishable, and it could be a best-seller - but no Australian publisher wants to touch anything but general fiction or non-fiction." And it is easy to tell people to send their creations overseas, but a lot harder to pay the postage and wait all those months for books to circulate. Maybe the Alan Marshall Award, which has been designed for narrative, genre books, will do something to break the inflexible prejudices which publishers' readers have in Australia against such books.

The more I tell you about what I am doing for a living, the more it sounds like an advertisement. Quite so. Here is an actual advertisement:

Norstrilia Press intends to typeset its own books, but would also like a steady stream of other work, preferably from clients in the science fiction field, to help pay for the horrendous rental of the machine we are using. All inquiries: Phone: (03) 419 4797; by mail: PO Box 91, Carlton, Victoria 3053.

** ** *

The "Australian SF Issue" of SFC is still gathering ~~up~~ strength, but it has some gaps. Could somebody please write for it a detailed review of Cherry Wilder's *The Luck of Brin's Five*. I don't like the book, and I could not say much about it. But it should be written about, since it won the Ditmar.

Carey Handfield has just borrowed my copy of *Other Worlds*, so I don't promise to include my own review of that book. Any helpers?

John Foyster was somewhat amazed ("stunned, bowled over, etc") by the review of *Rooms of Paradise*, a new anthology edited by Lee Harding, which I wrote for *National Times*. I will be writing a rather different review for SFC, and Henry Gasko has written already a review which is quite different from both of those. The writer for SFC 55 will not always be praising the Australian books they review.

** ** *

I'm getting a bit tired from writing stencils just for the sake of writing them, so I will hand over to the letter writers soon.

However, I should mention that I am still maintaining the fiction that this issue was written six months before it actually appears. All these stencils are typed in December 1978.

Meanwhile, as you are all aware, the Tenth Anniversary of *S F Commentary* will be January 1979. I am not begging for material, since I have about 300 pages of the stuff already, including a complete offset issue which I don't have the money to publish. However, you might have some thoughts to offer which would be most suitable for an anniversary issue.

An advertisement: I am seriously thinking of (in the sense of trying to invent the 48-hour day) reprinting *SFC* in bits. The first "bit" would be all of 1969's issues (Nos. 1-8) in however many volumes it takes to reprint them. Cost: at least \$10. Are you interested? Don't send money yet, but send a short letter if you want to order a copy. Initial print run will probably be only 200,

** ** *

And, at last, the letters:

FRANK PAYNE

once lived here at 10 Johnston Street, and has spent 1978 in Hobart, Tasmania. His comments about Tasmania are not printable, but he printed them anyway (in various issues of *Ovid in Tomi*). Here is his reaction to the cover of *SFC* 53:

Ishtar makes a good cover to *SFC*. I always knew that cat would make a name for herself in modelling. She has the looks and the style. Why not try to get her on tv in cat food ads? If she thought that there was enough attention in it for her, she'd cooperate. She's the archetypal bloody spoilt actress.

One good way to start a long conversation at our place is to talk about *cats*. Seems to be the same at most fannish households (except for those few people who do not like cats). We have four cats, as I think I have mentioned before in *SFC*. Ishtar is second in the pecking order, and definitely the prettiest of them. The drawing which Chris Johnston did for the cover of *SFC* 53 is based on a photograph of Ishtar which shows her in that pose. Ishtar likes to be noticed by people, and tickled, and stroked. She likes posing, as the drawing shows.

Solomon is first in the pecking order. Most of the time he pretends to be the elderly patriarch of the flock, and ignores undignified behaviour of man or cat, except at dinner time. He likes to sit on laps and sleep a lot.

Julius is the black cat which came from Carlton Street. Although he is now more than two years old, he still thinks he is a kitten. He is very enthusiastic, very hungry, and would like to be Top Cat. Solomon ignores such ill-mannered ambition.

(I forgot to say that Ishtar is of Persian - she began as a stray, like the others - and Solomon is tabby.)

Apple Blossom always finds herself at the bottom of the pecking order. She is black and white, affectionate, craves for milk rather than food, and often looks worried. Wouldn't you be if the other cats liked jumping on you and pushing you aside at dinner time?

This rag-tag family is not too much for us - well, hardly ever. They keep each other in line. They are all affectionate, in very different ways. Ishtar is the only wicked cat, but she annoys humans in order to get attention.

Sigh Now I will be flooded with readers' cat stories. Never mind. Elaine loves cat stories and will read every one of them.

** ** *

No issue of SFC is complete without a letter from:

ANGUS TAYLOR

Fleerde 34, Bylmermeer, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Funny thing, but I knew about the existence of Elaine before I received SFC 53. A couple of weeks ago, I met an Australian named Guido at the flat of an Australian woman friend of mine here in Amsterdam. It turned out that Guido liked s f, and knew about SFC, and furthermore knew the Real Reason why the magazine had not appeared for so long. He knew Elaine. Now, what are the statistical chances of the only Australian I know in Amsterdam having a visitor from home who knows your girlfriend?

I pretty well agree with your anti-nuclear-energy feelings. I'm not so worried about bomb material falling into the hands of terrorists; the real terrorists already have the bomb. And I'm not anti-science or anything. It's dumping the waste product that worries me. We're polluting the world dangerously and more or less irreversibly.

Austria has just voted against putting into operation the big nuclear power station being completed near Vienna. It will be interesting to see whether the Austrian government will bow to public opinion or not now. They've already sunk a huge amount of money in the project. In Sweden, it now looks as if the government is going to back-track and go ahead with its nuclear power program after all.

The changeover to a no-growth (or controlled growth) economy is not just a matter of dispensing with old myths about the necessity for growth (though that's important, too). And it's not a matter of the people who control the world not being "very bright thinkers". It's a matter of the logic of capitalism - as you should know from Harry Braverman's book. (Another book I'd recommend, which is specifically about the environmental crisis, is The Closing Circle, by Barry Commoner.) Capitalism means eternal growth in the pursuit of profit, and until you are prepared to deal with that, there's no use talking about small being beautiful. Science fiction didn't feed the ideas of growth to the people in power. Science fiction may help reinforce the myth that equates progress with capital accumulation, but the need for the accumulation of capital is intrinsic to our western socio-economic systems. (If you're really feeling ambitious, you might like to tackle Late Capitalism, by Ernest Mandel.)

I just got a postcard from a friend who's

been teaching in Australia for a few months. He remarks about Australia: "Physically a spectacular place, much like USA, but politically an unmitigated disaster." I know he thinks the US is also a political disaster. In this regard, it's interesting that the US mid-term elections, which were held yesterday, have been relegated to the end of the BBC World Service news broadcasts this morning. They simply don't mean very much. The level of political debate in the US is appallingly low. The difference between the Republicans and Democrats is the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Campaigns revolve mostly around personalities and, if there's something wrong in the country, the assumption is that the answer is to get better personalities to run the show. As in the Soviet Union, it is never admitted that the troubles may lie in the structure of the system itself. At least in Europe it is possible to find some debate on structural questions.

All is not lost, however. On Sunday night, Dutch television showed the best American movie I've seen in ages, and a very refreshing change from the usual Hollywood formula drive. The movie was Over-Under-Sideways-Down, made by a San Francisco film collective. It's about the American working class. See it if you can.

By the way, Harry Braverman died in 1976, at an unfortunately early age.

(8 November 1978)

The reason I have not conducted any deeper analysis of the environment/growth/capitalism connection is that I have not done enough reading in the area. My friend Charles Taylor (no relation) has done much of this reading, but so far I have not been able to persuade him to write long and interesting articles on the subject.

Australian politics, like US politics, tends to be based on the premise that the goodies will flow forever, and it's just a matter of deciding who will get which share of them. The contrast between Whitlam's ideas and Fraser's, however, is more marked than that between, say, Callaghan and Thatcher. What has been called "structural unemployment" is hurting just too many people to be ignored anymore.

I did not actually meet Guido, as he left Elaine's place of work in rather a hurry. And who believes in coincidence anymore?

The following writer's previous contribution was so long that I published it in a large chunk of *Supersonic Snail*. Undeterred by this setback, he has sent another short novel, disguised as a letter of comment by:

PHILIP STEPHENSEN-PAYNE

"Lindon", 1 Lewell Avenue, Old Marston, Oxford OX3 0RL, England

SFC 51 and the Silverberg Forum:

A good idea, but not brilliantly executed. I don't know how your professional sales of SFC are going since you went offset (better, I hope, than our, the BSFA's, attempts with Vector, which cost us a bomb before we gave up trying), but I'm afraid I wouldn't say that this collection would be worth the price.

Much of the trouble is the lead article by George Turner, "Robert Silverberg: The Phenomenon". In the past, as I recall, I have loved some of the things George has written. This time I thought his piece stank. On a purely commercial level, I would have thought it disastrous to dedicate an issue solely to one author, and then lead off with a piece that starts with the most personal piece of writing that author has done and lays into him for it. By all means include negative views of the author, though preferably better written and more clearly reasoned, but not as a lead article! You won't win readers like that.

Specific objections:

The snide personal comments interjected almost at random, like, "He didn't know it, still doesn't know it, but he spent his youth in heaven. I was also a Depression child.", or, "Obviously it does not seem to have produced a suspicion that he was as yet a lousy writer.", are totally pointless and destructive. They have as much value as a speaker at Speakers' Corner.

The piece on his early writing technique ("One absorbs this with a peculiar horror..") is singularly silly - not because it is wrong, but because it is a direct copy of things that Silverberg says himself later in his article. Turner is committing that favourite of human pastimes: waiting until someone is honest enough to admit a weakness and then stomping on him for it.

His comments on Thorns I could hardly credit. "The same old Silverberg with the melodrama toned down... Characterisation was and would remain a stumbling block." I try to be charitable, but can conclude only that Turner has either not read the book, is

willingly perjuring himself to make a point he knows is unjustified, or he really is an idiot. Much bad can be spoken of Thorns - the plot is rather farfetched and the ending melodramatic - but its one saving grace (which to me outweighs its faults) is its characterisation. Lona, Minner, and Chalk are three of the best-drawn characters in SFC, and certainly far above Silverberg's average.

Even personal value-judgments can be accepted as variable, however. Turner does not stop there, but goes on effectively to contradict his own arguments. He starts off objecting to "Passengers" because it got popular acclaim ("popularity votes are often incomprehensible to the reader with critical standards") and then goes on to condemn Son of Man because it did not ("his failure to satisfy readers with the books he himself values is rooted in an inability to see the work whole").

By this point, it is clear that, whatever Turner is doing, it is not giving a critical assessment of the man or his works but, for some reason, is an attempt to pillory the man. Why? I think the clue is in Turner's pompous, "I write in a species of cool anger - the anger of a writer who sees another 'throw in the towel'." Turner is explicitly putting himself, as a writer, on a par with Silverberg, which is plainly ludicrous. I have not yet read Beloved Son (and am now less enthusiastic about doing so), but neither have I heard much praise of it. Whatever you might think about Silverberg (and I have many reservations myself), he is in a different, and much higher class, than Turner. It looks very much like the classical case of an unsuccessful writer throwing vitriol at a successful one in a fit of pique and jealousy. I had thought Turner above that.

Nobody is better able to defend himself than George - but I really must say something at this point.

Part of the great strength of George's article was, to me, that George was and is so clearly the successful writer and Silverberg not one. It is George Turner who has won Australia's top prize for mainstream fiction, the Miles Franklin Award. Silverberg has never been noticed by mainstream critics or reviewers anywhere that I have heard of. It is George Turner who has never compromised his own standards of writing; Silverberg who spends a whole essay ("Sounding Brass, Tinkling Cymbal")

making excuses for a lifetime of compromise. Opinions differ about *Beloved Son* (see next issue for Sneja Gunew's review). There are Silverberg books I have liked better than *Beloved Son*, but there is a depth of viewpoint and feeling, and an attention to detail, in Turner's book which is entirely absent in any of Silverberg's books.

However, the book that I would place up against all of Silverberg's work to show how shoddy it is, is George's most recent non-sf book, *Transit of Cassidy*. It has everything I expected of *Beloved Son* and did not find; it fulfills all George's stated beliefs about the art and craft of novel-writing. In an odd way, it fulfills everything people have claimed for Silverberg's work too (but which I don't find): a tense, can't-put-downable style, vivid characterisation, and a sense of rich life. I will review it later in this issue, if I have room, or in next issue.

** ** *

I agree that my commercial sense is not good. Perhaps I had in mind building a reputation for bringing down the idols of the sf world; that's how the articles in *SFC 51* turned out. Anything but the adulation that Silverberg has received during the last ten years! At any rate, the new subscriptions did not roll in, and your assessment of the situation is probably accurate.

Don D'Amassa's piece on *Dying Inside* was, I thought, incredibly verbose. Your piece I preferred, but disagreed with. I disagree that Silverberg's pronouncement, while muddled-headed, should have made your job difficult. Clarke said much the same about *Imperial Earth*, and was just as wrong, as did Asimov for *The Gods Themselves*. It is particularly fatal if you end up arguing against what Silverberg was trying to do, rather than against the book. It is possible he was right in respect of what he wanted to do; your job is to criticise the book, ie, his success or failure, not his motives. ((*brg* I did not criticise his motives, but his structural sense; *Dying Inside* is set up like a sand castle that must dissolve when struck

by the first wave.*)) You say at one point, "It is very difficult to like David Selig". So what? Why should the hero of a novel be likable? Some of the best novels have detestable protagonists (the best example in sf is probably *Triton* and *Bron Hellstrom*). Later you say, "Would it be any real loss if Selig did lose his telepathic powers?" But what is real? His telepathy is the only thing to Selig that distinguishes him, and the loss of it is equated with a loss of identity, which is what the book is really all about. Which is probably why Selig must be unlikable. A likable hero would survive the crisis and stay whole at the end of the book - which would make a mockery of it all. To mean anything, Selig must be incapable of holding up.

To *SFC 52*:

I have read very little by D G Compton (I tried and disliked *The Silent Multitude*) though I have been meaning to read more since I met him at a party last year. On the whole, I quite enjoyed Andrew Whitmore's piece, though I felt it had a tendency to repetition and was a little unclear in objective.

Andrew and/or your readers might be interested to know Compton has written a sequel to *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, and the original is currently being filmed in France.

Pigeonholing the universe: In 1973 I agree with many of your comments, particularly on *Malevil*, though I was not too fond of *Frankenstein Unbound*, and did immensely enjoy *Time Enough for Love* (principles are made to broken).

1974 finds me less in agreement. *Cyberiad*: OK. *Memoirs of a Survivor* not read. *The Eighty Minute Hour* I disliked intensely both times I read it. I hope your "great review", as yet unwritten, will redeem the book, as I would like to think it my fault rather than Brian's (particularly after he has now produced his masterpiece in *The Malacia Tapestry*). *The Inverted World* and *The Dispossessed* I would invert in priority, as *The Inverted World* had a number of flaws in it ("the holes in the science are large enough to drive a city through"), while *The Dispossessed* was very satisfying.

Of the rest you had read, I have read only *Flow My Tears The Policeman Said*, which I thought a very good book, one of Dick's best. Of the ones you did not read, I would strongly recommend *The Mote in God's Eye* - a very good book. I don't know what Niven & Pournelle you've read to conceive your dislike of them, but they are very different together than when apart. If you doubt it, read *Inferno*, the best book they have written, and one of the best sf books in recent years.

1975/76: On the whole I agree,

particularly on where Late the Sweet Birds Sang and Man Plus (though Gateway is well worth reading). You are wrong about not reading Inferno (see above), and I agree with your complaints about Silverberg (in Shadrach in the Furnace), but do not agree that the book survives the flaws. Also, I far prefer Charisma to Hello Summer, Goodbye, but both are good.

I certainly agree on A Wreath of Stars, which had a lot of strong points, despite its weaknesses. "The Custodians" was the story which convinced me that there was more to Cowper than I had found previously in Clone and Time Out of Mind, and sent me back to reading him (specifically to the marvellous The Twilight of Briareus).

For me, Peter Nicholls was forgiven many of his faults (and he has many) for his role in producing Science Fiction at Large - a marvellous book, of which the highlights are certainly the Garner and Dick pieces. One day I will write a major piece on Garner - I only wish I felt confident and knowledgeable enough so to do. ((*brg*. If so, please send it to SFC; it will save me writing the article I've been putting off for a year and a half. *))

"Non SF Novels by SF Writers" is a superb notion for a column, and one I will support, as they have been a hobby of mine for some time. Other examples are:

Asimov: A Whiff of Death; Authorised Murder;

(More) Tales of the Black Widowers.

Clarke: Glide Path.

E R Burroughs: The Bandit of Hell's Bend; The Deputy Sheriff of Comanche Country; The Mucker; The Oakdale Affair; The Rider; The Efficiency Expert; The Girl from Hollywood; The Girl from Farris; Apache Devil; The War Chief; The Mad King; I Am a Barbarian.

Anthony: Kiai; Mistress of Death; Bamboo Bloodbath; Ninja's Revenge.

Wyndham: Foul Play Suspected (as John Beynon).

Moorcock: The Chinese Agent; Printer's Devil (as Bill Barclay).

Norton: about 20 novels.

Howard: hordes and hordes.

Van Vogt: The Violent Man.

Christopher: Scent of White Poppies; Cloud on Silver; Caves of Night; The Long Voyage.

Aldiss: The Brightfount Diaries; The Male Response.

Anderson: Perish by the Sword; Murder in Black Letter; The Golden Slave; Rogue Sword; Murder Bound; The Fox; The Dog and the Griff.

Ballard: Crash; Concrete Island; High Rise.

Blish: Dr Mirabilis; The Vanished Jet.

Brunner: A Plague on Both Your Causes; Good Men Do Nothing; Wonky in the Woodpile; Black is the Colour; The Brink; The Crutch of Memory; Guady Shadows.

Clement: Left of Africa.

De Camp: The Arrows of Hercules; The Bronze God of Rhodes; An Elephant for Aristotle; The Golden Wind.

Delany: The Tides of Lust.

Farmer: Love Song.

Harrison: Montezuma's Revenge; Queen Victoria's Revenge.

Koontz: After the Last Race; Hanging On; Shattered.

Kornbluth: The Naked Storm (as Simon Eisner); Half and Valerie (as Jordan Park).

Kornbluth and Pohl: Presidential Year; A Town is Drowning; Sorority House (as Jordan Park).

McCaffrey: The Kiltiernan Legacy; Mark of Merlin; Ring of Fear.

Pangborn: Wilderness of Spring.

Sheckley: Live Gold; Calibre .50; Time Limit; Dead Run; White Death; The Game of X; The Man in the Water.

Sturgeon: The King and Four Queens; I Libertine (as Frederick Ewing).

Not to mention Zimmer Bradley's gothics, Fred Brown's detective stories, Maine's mainstream novels, and so on. If you do start up such a column, I'd be quite interested in contributing. As a starter, I enclose a review I wrote of The Trial of Callista Blake for a Pangborn memorial fanzine which Steve Beatty was organising in the US. Last I heard, he was still organising it, but he was quite happy for the piece to be published elsewhere in the meantime.

(20 August 1978)

Thanks for the list, and the review. I'm still not sure that your list fits exactly what I had in mind. Most of the non-s f books you list fall into other genre categories: mystery, western, etc. I was thinking more of books like Gene Wolfe's Peace, books which are self-consciously "mainstream", to use an awkward word. Aldiss or Blish once talked about the genre umbrella; sometimes there is a need to go out in the rain and hope to get struck by lightning. (George Turner is different; he had a strong reputation here as a novelist, and tried science fiction as a challenge. Still, I might run the reviews of Callista Blake and Transit of Cassidy in the first of these "Non SF By SF Authors" columns.)

SNEJA GUNEW wrote. She has been at Melbourne University this year, but I have seen her once. She has contributed many reviews which I have not yet had opportunity to publish. Familiar story, alas.

(Continued on Page 24)

CHEERFULNESS KEEPS BREAKING IN

BRIAN ALDISS

questioned at
UNICON IV, Easter 1978

Transcribed by Bruce Gillespie

(Because of a technical hitch during recording, some of the questions are inaudible on tape. Recording made at the Melbourne Town House, afternoon of 24 March 1978. First published in *Yggdrasil*, No 3 1978.)

THE CURRENT ENGLISH SCENE

BRUCE GILLESPIE (Moderator):

What's happening in England these days? For instance, I've heard three separate reports about encyclopaedias or big books about science fiction coming out in England soon. I get the sense that science fiction has become quite "respectable" in England. More than respectable: science fiction is now making a lot of people a lot of money.

BRIAN ALDISS:

It is true that there are a certain number of encyclopaedias due to appear soon. For some reason, we seem to have cornered them in England. I can't think why. Since, for so many years, the Americans have been sending us all their old pulps, we've obviously read them with a great deal of avidity and are now recycling them into encyclopaedia form and selling them back to the United States, which seems only fair and just.

Recent volumes include Brian Ash's Who's Who in Science Fiction, which is now revised as a paperback. There's a very handsome beast which I see in Space Age, the Visual Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction. There's a Roxbury Press one coming, edited by Peter Nicholls and John Clute, which I think should be really good. There's one coming from Octopus Books, which is mainly visual, and that's edited by Rob Holdstock. Any more?

GILLESPIE:

What about the Oxford Guide to Science Fiction?

ALDISS:

I'd forgotten that... There is something called the Oxford Guide to Science Fiction, which I'm supposed to be putting together. I'm very cunning, you see, because I have five years to complete it in. By that time, all the others will not only have been published but I'll have read all the fanzines that follow, tearing them apart, and I will be able to do the definitive version without so much as lifting a finger.

I may say that I think that a lot of this activity was triggered by Billion Year Spree. People suddenly saw that you could write about science fiction for the general reader, whoever the general reader might be.

Then I went on to do Science Fiction Art, and that was for a firm of publishers called Trewin Copplestone. They are a very nice firm to work for. They are what in England is called an outhouse publisher (I gather in the States that means something else). They are one of the few examples of a publisher that actually came to me, instead of making me come to them: they would troop out and see me in the country. I tried to argue about that book. It is 128 pages - I'd say that this sort of book should be 260 pages. They were nice enough at the end to say: "You're right. It should have been 260 pages." Quite an extraordinary admission for a British publisher.

Then I said, "Let's do another one. Let's do one called Fantasy Art, and we can do the same thing all over again." They thought about this and said, "What we're going to do is a visual encyclopaedia of science fiction." Now, the trouble with being an outhouse publisher is that you do a package

deal. In effect, you do all the work, and then you go to one of the standard publishers and say, "Look, I have this package deal." (This is the way they sell films.) After a bit of haggling, the real publisher says, "Okay, I will buy, say, ten thousand copies at £1.50 apiece", which they then flog at £3.50 apiece or whatever. But the poor old outhouse publisher has to meet his ceiling price; he can't put it up. That means if you do a book like that, you are up against a deadline. So happily I didn't edit the Visual Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction.

Since then, any number of publishers have decided that this is the book that they most want to do. Quite extraordinary. I can think of at least a dozen publishers who have rung me and, approaching the subject rather cagily, unravelled the plan for a grand opus that was going to be just like the Visual Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction.

If you are asking me more generally about the state of science fiction, I don't think I would be able, in 1978, to come up with any concise sort of answer in the way that I would have done a few years ago, when I would have said, "We're all marching onward and upward", or, in fact, "downward and inward towards the stars". We are all afflicted by the energy crisis and the general depression which have led to a retrenchment. What this means in actual terms is that it is much harder to get a novel with a sense of novelty published. The publishers' overheads are too high for them to take the cheerful risks that they once did, and they were never very keen on taking too many risks. It has meant that firms like - and I don't see why I shouldn't name names - New English Library bring out endless names in series. I don't remember any of them, but they all are by chaps with strange names like Theodore Zonk, and characters called Hook, or whatever. They go on from bad to worse for as long as the public wants them. When one series dies, they switch over and start another series.

I don't think this is at all good for science fiction. Ultimately, it's not even very good for individual authors. But that's the way it goes, and that is one safe way to make money.

But another way of talking about the situation is to say that in Britain now we have twenty science fiction writers who live by their typewriters. I don't say that they write science fiction only, but in the main they regard themselves as science fiction writers. They lead, on the whole, a pretty cheerful existence. They're happier than if they were digging the streets - let's put it that way and not any higher. It seems to me that twenty is a fantastic number. That isn't counting Ceylonese lads like Arthur C

Clarke, either. I think that there are not even that many independent writers in the States. If that means anything at all, I think it means that British writers are far more content to live just above subsistence level and live very much for their writing and feel that, in that way, they are fulfilling themselves and are dedicated to a purpose in which they believe.

That's it, really. I'm sure the wave of Close Encounters and Star Wars will have an effect in England, but probably less of an effect than it will have in the States. Although it's very nice to see that everyone is rushing in to see science fiction movies - and all of us remember the times when there used to be the rush from the movies when they were showing science fiction films - let's hope they come along with something absolutely magnificent, and unsellable for so long. One thing this will mean is that a lot of people will be busily writing imitations of Star Wars, which is itself not so much an imitation but a "homage", as they put it.

ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM

LEE HARDING:

I heard some time ago that you were no longer writing books about outer space. However, I have heard recently that you have written a book set in outer space. Why are you returning to an outer space locale?

ALDISS:

How I long to tell you the plot of my next novel, it's so fantastically good! However, for the sake of Nerv Binns, I will refrain.

GILLESPIE:

This brings me back to the second question I was going to ask: You seem to be having a very good year, both in books appearing now and during the coming year. That will include the marvellous outer space book.

ALDISS:

Well, what they are all talking about with hushed voices is a novel called Enemies of the System. Roughly speaking, Enemies of the System is set very far in the future - 1.9 million years in the future. Don't laugh - no one else has ever set a book 1.9 million years in the future. Have some sympathy; it's not easy, you know.

The idea is that the solar system has been by and large colonised and a utopia has been reached. When you begin the novel, everything seems very agreeable. You follow a party of very privileged tourists who are

allowed outside the System to a distant planet which was discovered a long time ago but has now been developed as a healthy resort particularly for the privileged of the Solar System.

As the plot goes on, you realise that things aren't so nice after all because, although this is a utopia, it is a communist utopia. There are some rather nasty creatures on this far planet, which is called Lysenka. They are kept rather at arm's length. It transpires - or perhaps one should say, it is made to transpire - that these creatures are the remains of a colonist ship which was forced to land on Lysenka about a million years before. That in fact was a capitalist ship full of dirty rotten American colonists. Because of the nature of the planet, they've been forced to occupy all the ecological niches there. They've killed off the native fauna and have themselves become a species of animal.

The novel is intended to be very double-edged because, after all, it portrays the communist half as the utopians and the capitalists as the animals. I hope by this cunning subterfuge to get the novel accepted in those happy lands east of the Iron Curtain.

So, as our anonymous friend in the third row intimated, it does sort of take place in space and it certainly sort of takes place in time, but whatever bullshit I handed out a few years ago about being sick of space was only part of the smokescreen behind which a writer has to operate. I think this novel reflects fairly closely my interest in affairs on Earth now. As you all know, this is the obvious device by which you should tell a science fiction story. Wherever you set it in space or time, you are trying to come to grips with something you see in the present day. You seek the best possible way to dramatise it.

One of the origins of this novel was my encounters with our fellow science fiction writers in communist countries, who also hold conventions, I may say not as friendly as the Melbourne convention, but certainly at least as interesting. The sessions consist of long setpieces - two-hour papers at a time - after which no questions are allowed or indeed possible. Such life as there is is in the evening, much like a western con. You all get into rooms and drink and tell the truth behind the lies that were told in the morning; that's quite good.

The speeches are translated. I wish I could give you an impression of what they say. I once had a notebookful, I was so fascinated. It comes over in a particular jargon that isn't any language that would translate as English. What they are saying

cannot really be translated into English because it is a specialised form of their own language - a sort of bureaucratic language. The reason for this is obvious: that it separates everyone, including the speaker, from what he is actually saying. For instance, they might say, "Well, our belief is very optimistic and constructive in the future of the human race when we shall have unity and reach towards those goals of which we now dream when the time comes when we will have solved all the political and sociological problems which we now see in the world and which are now having our attention."

Roughly speaking, this means, "We'll shoot you, and then it will be okay."

In some ways, I find this Melbourne convention is a surprising kin to a British convention, in that there's the same humour and the same sort of downbeat attitude. It's very refreshing at first if you go to Poland or a similar country, because all the speakers jump up on the podium and deliver these long speeches, and they are full of optimism about the future. And you think, "Well, that really is refreshing: here's someone who sees a great hope for the future of the race." Then he gets down and the next speaker comes up. He says exactly the same thing, although he says it in a tone which suggests that he is disagreeing with the first speaker. The third speaker comes up, and he makes it quite clear that this shoddy pseudo-optimism that has gone before is nothing to the real optimism that he feels when they have solved the current political and sociological problems that plague the contemporary world, etc, etc.

After a day of this, believe me, you feel so bloody depressed!

We sweated this out in this smashing building with its lovely equipment and a row of goldfish bowls along one side with all the pretty female interpreters and every seat with switching mechanisms so you can listen to the rubbish in French or German or whatever - all beautifully done... But on the last day there was a move made, mainly by the young French authors, especially Daniel Walther, to get up and take over the panel.

It's entirely different from the sorts of panels you have here: me sitting here with my stockinged feet and, you will note to your relief, due to be off here in an hour's time. Over there, they have a Presidium panel and all the members of Eurocon sit up there, and they have to sit up there and stay awake through all the speeches - it's their privilege. The speaker comes and goes but, for the rest, there is this phalanx of faces, one from every country. On this occasion, the French wrote me in, and one or two assorted bods, Spaniards and Italians

and Danes, whoever had managed to get as far as Poznan. They said, "We're tired of all this theory. Who are these people? Are they critics or are they truck drivers? Will you all get down and let the real writers speak!"

And so the Presidium all go into a sort of rigger huddle and the next thing is that they all stood up and trooped meekly off to one side. "Come on, boys, we've made the day!" (Hear "The Marseillaise" playing in the background.) The difference was extraordinary. All those big healthy clean-shaven men with double-breasted suits and ties and decent haircuts were replaced by all these horrible shitty chaps smoking Gauloises and tittering to each other.

We were going to sock it to them, you see, and take it over. We instantly said, "Okay, democratic processes. We'll each speak for five minutes and then we'll accept questions from the floor." This was something we hadn't had. So Daniel Walther made an impassioned speech. He had been attacked because he had written a story about the Arms Race pointing to the fact that the USSR and the USA were acting as peacekeepers in the Middle East and at the same time flogging arms to the Israelis and the Arabs. For obvious reasons, he had been criticised for saying this. It's very naughty of the USA to sell arms but, on the other hand, Russian arms are peaceful. He explained that this was not French pessimism. It was optimism because he thought that if questions were aired, people would think about it and would improve themselves.

No sooner was this piece of sophistry uttered than there was a question from the floor. Again, this was epoch-making, because it was from a woman. "Thank God, the female voice will be heard at last. Madam, the floor is yours." A little lady came out to the front. Below the podium, there was a place where you went to ask your question. She said, "Yes, I have a question. I am from the English Department of the University of Poznan, and I would like to address my question to the gentlemen who are at present occupying the dais." She felt rather deeply into her left breast, like this, and brought out her question, which she then read for two hours.

GREYBEARD

(Inaudible question)

Broderick and I were talking over lunch about the word "prodromic". I said I infinitely preferred it to prophetic. For one thing, it's so much vaguer,

The question was about Earthworks and Greybeard. Earthworks is not one of my

favourite novels. I can't remember now what exactly drove me to write it.

In the case of Greybeard, I recollect very clearly. I was living then not in Berkshire but in Oxfordshire, and I had the itch in me, like every other British science fiction writer, to write a catastrophe novel - no! the Great British Catastrophe Novel. Since I regard one of my mentors as Thomas Hardy, I decided I wanted to do a Thomas Hardyish catastrophe - if that's not too precise a term. I set it in the Thames Valley and I used to motor round the whole district with a 1 inch ordinance survey map, which is the one that marks the contours, laughing like a fiend as I drowned whole areas.

In fact, a couple of years later, I was house-hunting and I bought a place where I lived for twelve years, Heath House. When I looked at those old maps again, the next time I was turning out the clutter, I found that I was living ten feet underwater. It was a very prodromic sort of experience, if you'll pardon the expression.

GILLESPIE:

There seem to be two major elements in Greybeard: the great love of the Thames Valley, celebrated in page after page, and also the horror of a world without children. Would you agree that they were the main themes of the book, or were there other things as well?

ALDISS:

I've never quite determined it, but I believe that anguish is slightly harder to bear in beautiful surroundings, and pain is made more poignant by sunlight. It did happen that, at that time, I was very unhappy because I felt that I had lost touch with my children by my first marriage. In a way, one of the moving forces behind Greybeard was to express to everyone how painful it would be if you lost not two children but the whole damn lot. That feeling was very much there. I believe the book is what I have since learned to call elegiac.

A lot of things go into a novel. I did want to recreate what I felt was a beautiful landscape throughout its various seasons. Also, I wanted to have a go at Oxford. Oxford was, after all, my home town, and the colleges in Oxford are very beautiful and just a little comic. In particular, if you take a little boat down the Thames to Folly Bridge and get off at Folly Bridge, you walk slightly uphill. Ahead of you, to the right, is Christ Church. There's a lovely engraving of it by J M W Turner when he was a topographical artist, and it has this great wall of Christ Church, and it would make a perfect

medieval-type fortress, with guards at the top and everything. So it needed very little imagination to imagine that, with the collapse of society, the Oxford Colleges would form quite an acceptable nucleus for holding onto what was left. So that was what I did in Greybeard.

I don't think I answered the rest of the question: Did I enjoy it? Did I want it to happen? Something like that?

Well... I think we all feel ambivalent toward the technological situation in which we live. Perhaps ambivalence is one of the pleasures of the age. You can see the way we're ruining nature, or whatever we're supposed to be doing, and yet at the same time you see a certain inevitability about that. You don't quite know how you feel about it. There is a passage in Greybeard where Greybeard says to someone who has been whining on, "But just imagine how awful it would have been now if the technological circus had kept on until the 1980s."

When I was in Sumatra and we got up to Lake Toba, it's beautifully wild there. The Chinese who were in the party were saying, "My God, look how you could develop this place. Fantastic. We could have a lovely resort here - big hotels, piers, and speedboats on the lake. It'd be marvellous. What it needs is a little Singaporean enterprise and capital." And yet at the same time they were saying, "It's marvellous to be here away from the old ratrace." We all know how those two feelings go very close together. I think you'll find them both in Greybeard.

BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD

Q:

Has Barefoot in the Head been translated into a foreign language?

ALDISS:

It's in a foreign language.

It was translated into Danish by my good friend Jannick Storm (who colonised Denmark). Jannick and I were in close correspondence, and we used to visit each other. One day the damn fool came to me and said, "I'm going to translate Barefoot in the Head and my company will publish it." So he worked on this thing, and I worked on this thing, and Jannick used to send me page after page of questions. I would send him page after page of answers. Eventually we got a big thick pile of correspondence which is actually twice as long as the book. If any enterprising Australian publisher would like to publish it...

Inspired by the success of Jannick's

book, because I believe it is very much better than the original, the Swedes decided that they would have a go. Jon-Henri Holmberg contacted me, and said, "We're going to translate it, too, Brian. If the Danes can do it, the Swedes can certainly do it. We've got a bigger language than theirs." They set about it, and they got into awful trouble. They had three translators on it, they sacked two editors, and the publishing firm collapsed. Eventually one copy was extruded from the presses. By this time, they'd given up. That copy now reposes in the home of Sam J Lundwall, bound in gold. A very rare item.

The French then approached me, and said, "Brian, we want to translate Barefoot in the Head into French", and I said, "No thanks."

LEIGH EDMONDS:

I would simply like to know: how did you write Barefoot in the Head?

ALDISS:

Where to start? Yes, I do remember. Boring back through the geological layers, something finally comes out.

I was, as they say, resting, and a remarkable friend of mine - God, how I'd like to tell you about him - Kyril Bonfiglioli - good old Bon - had taken over the editorship of what had been Science Fantasy. He'd been given it because he had one tremendous qualification: he loathed science fiction and fantasy in general. He used to sit in his little shop and drink his wine and grumble and say, "I don't know, I can't understand it. They're totally illiterate." He developed, as one of his talents as an editor, an absolute aversion to opening any envelope that he saw was going to contain a manuscript. A few years later, when Bon had to leave the country in rather a hurry, and his effects were gone into, it was found that he had two great big crates of submissions for Science Fantasy, or Impulse, as it later became, including, as I remember, unpublished stories from Sturgeon and Fred Pohl, among others. Bon just couldn't bring himself to open those envelopes.

He said to me, "Why don't you write a nice little story that has a smattering of science fiction in it? You're always travelling around. Write a travel story." I wrote him a little story called "Just Passing Through": about 3000 words long. I gave it to Bon. It seemed to me after that that I had wasted a great opportunity. It was like being on the edge of a spider's web. I could feel a whole something out there vibrating and I didn't quite know what it was.

Then I could see that there was a great drug novel out there. It seemed to me self-evident at the time that, if you were going to get into this freaked-out world, you couldn't enter it via academic English, that you had to travel on the line that everyone else had taken into that world. That was how it came about. In a way, it was a feat of empathy, because I got so taken over by those Acid Head war stories, as they were at first, that I did really live in that world to a remarkable degree. There are leitmotifs going through Barefoot in the Head. There's a very nice review in John Bangsund's one-shot fanzine by John McPharlin - super review - where he points out some of these leitmotifs that go through it. They kept recurring, and they kept recurring in my brain: the brown nearest black, and the new animal, and all these things. Eventually I found that I was experiencing them. In fact, I had to lay off for a bit and have a holiday, and then I went back to it and completed it. It was intensely enjoyable; it was rather like shutting yourself up in a Turkish bath for a couple of years. If you like that sort of thing, it's very enjoyable.

GILLESPIE:

It seemed to me that the stories in Barefoot in the Head, in the way that they appeared first in New Worlds, had a lot to do with what was happening with New Worlds magazine and everything else happening in English science fiction at the time - they tended to be the symbol of what a lot of other people were trying to do at the time.

ALDISS:

That's true, and the book is a symbol of the way things were in England in the days of what Time called "Swinging London". Things seemed very much like that. I wanted to epitomise that, and spread it all over Europe. People used to say to me, "It's a contemporary novel. It's not set in the future; that's the way things are."

I used to pick things up as I went around Europe. What really turned me onto the broken-down language was that we were travelling through France to Germany and you go through a bit of Belgium. It was dark, and we got lost in the back streets of some city. There, in twinkling neons, was a sign that said, "STELLAR ART". You know, the lager they drink there is Stellar Artois: it was a sign for Stellar Artois, but half of it had collapsed, and it seemed somehow a glowing symbol, "Stellar Art". Per lager ad astra.

THE GROWING POPULARITY OF SCIENCE FICTION

(Question inaudible)

It was a well-known English author, E M Forster, who said, "Only connect." It seems to me that what science fiction does is to connect what has hitherto been unconnected: one bit of a tendency of the modern world connected with another. It does this extremely well, at its best. When it does this at its best, it is absolutely irresistible, and the general public has woken up to the fact that this is what science fiction does and so it has become, to use what I think is a very dusty word, respectable. It's one of the winning horses in the race. It's the place where the life is. The novel itself was called the novel because it had novelty. Well, if you read the average novel now, the novelty has gone out of it. It's pacing up and down a much-travelled road. Perhaps George Turner would argue that much science fiction does the same. Even so, it has an air of novelty, even when it's a misleading air. This is why people want to read it.

DEFINITIONS OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

I can't sort out the differences between science fiction and fantasy. I don't want to, but I couldn't if I wanted to. For one thing, everyone bumbles about there being no definition of science fiction. It's very difficult to get a definition of fantasy, but I would have thought that most definitions of fantasy include science fiction.

At the same time, we're all aware in our minds that there is a sort of thing called fantasy that we separate from science fiction.

There's a very learned man in England whose name is Richard Kirby. He actually has sorted out this whole question of the definition of science fiction. Unfortunately, having sorted it out, he disappeared. So I would warn any of you not to sort it out. It's obviously a very dangerous taboo area. There are secrets in science fiction with which man should not meddle.

Part of his answer - although I won't get too near the subject myself or I might suddenly materialise in Tasmania - is: Let's not take science fiction, but let's take games. How do you define a game? To define "game", you've got to find a definition that will cover the Olympics, football, baseball, marbles, hide and seek, ludo, monopoly, cards, the whole lot. In the end, you're left with something that doesn't define anything at all. You have to do spot checks.

That lets us all off the hook for ever and ever.

SEXY STORIES

JOHN FOYSTER:

I wonder if you could comment on the changes in your body chemistry that occurred when you took off the science fiction funny hat and wrote things about Horatio Stubbs.

ALDISS:

You may have noticed it, but I didn't, because I'd written a lot of sexy stories before that, actually. I used to write them at school and get a penny a read for them, moreover. I was earning my cash very early in life, John.

I've done a lot of fool things in my time. There was a moment when I found I was making as much money from writing in my spare time as I was holding down a nine-to-five job, and so I quit. I promised myself I would have a year in which to prove myself and earn my living as a writer. This shows you just how timid I am. I had worked it out that, if I couldn't sell to anyone else, I could at least sell to dear old Ted Carnell and, moreover, at 2 guineas a thousand, I only had to write 189,000 words to keep my family above the poverty line. That was my plan; I had it all doped out. It meant writing 12,000 words a day or something like that but, of course, I was fresh and young and foolish then.

But on the very first day, I went up to my study with all this new-found freedom. I thought to myself, "Fuck it! I can't do it. It isn't in me." Instead, I went into the front room where the sunshine was and I took a holiday and I wrote two novels (not simultaneously, you know; there are limits to what genius can do!), one of which was later extruded from the press as The Primal Urge and the other, which was The Male Response. I forget what they were originally called; I had two other names. I wrote these for just a bit of mad fun. In those days, my idea of fun was rather odd, but still...

I sent both of them to Ted Carnell, and he was shocked. Ted didn't care for them at all. He thought they were both very rude. He didn't actually refuse to handle them, but his principles were such that he made it clear that he damn well wasn't going to handle them well. So effective was this holdback policy that, at the end of the year, I had actually published nothing at all. I had earned nothing. My pathetic little post office savings book was hovering around the empty tank mark. I think it was in the desperation of seeing myself back in that bookshop that I wrote Equator...

I thought, "Okay, I'll give myself a second year. This time I'll be better." In fact, during that second year, I'd got the nonsense out of my head and I did start writing in a more conscientious way.

Eventually, some idiots in the States took both those novels and they've been reprinted since.

I started off in the sexual vein, in a way, and the Horatio Stubbs novels were something I'd long wanted to do, but it wasn't possible to write them as I saw them until the mid-sixties, to put in the swear words and let people talk the way they really do talk. To me, it wasn't the difference it must have seemed to the outside.

When The Hand Reared Boy was published, I did get a lot of very nasty, anonymous letters complaining not so much about the filth in the novels, but about the fact that I wasn't writing science fiction anymore. In fact, there was even a very angry one from Rygate, signed "God".

HARDING:

I'd like to go back a bit to that first holiday you had, and those two novels, The Male Response and The Primal Urge. I do believe that Ted Carnell did actually serialise The Primal Urge under the name of Minor Operation. I'm wondering if the much-vaunted New Wave was not in fact created intentionally by McCracken and his acolytes but almost by default by the fact that the American publishers would not accept certain writings by yourself and J G Ballard and perhaps several others, and Carnell published them in his magazines and in some way laid the ground for the New Wave to develop. What are your thoughts on that?

ALDISS:

You probably know that Jimmy Ballard paid a very generous tribute to Ted Carnell at his death. It may be, as you say, that Ted Carnell did lay a foundation. For one thing, he kept those magazines going regularly, they appeared regularly, something that had never happened in the history of British science fiction before, and he paid regularly. It wasn't very much, but he paid on the nail; you didn't have to sue him.

In the case of The Primal Urge, it was accepted by Ballantine Books. After that, it was accepted in England. This encouraged Ted very much, because one thing Ted set great store by was running something in his magazines that was picked up later for book publication. He felt this gave him a great cachet. When he found that I'd made sales both sides of the pond, he hurriedly ran it as a serial. He thought, "Well, it can't be that filthy."

As for The Male Response: that was bought by a dreadful outfit called Galaxy Beacon. You remember those things? Marvellous cover with a little puff on it saying, "Every Woman in the City was His." Coincidentally, at that time Signet was publishing Non Stop and I was getting letters from Signet and Galaxy at the same time, one with Non Stop and the other, Male Response, and one was saying, "Brian, couldn't you clean it up a bit?", and the other was saying, "Brian, couldn't you dirty it up a bit?"

BILLION YEAR SPREE

Q:

When Billion Year Spree was advertised as coming out, it was advertised as being by both you and Philip Strick. What happened? What was Philip Strick's connection with it? How did it come about that either he didn't do anything, or didn't get his name on the cover?

ALDISS:

He didn't get his name on the cover because he didn't come through. It was a great pity. Philip's a brilliant guy. He lectures in science fiction at London University, and he is just marvellous at dealing with science fiction novels. But he makes a few notes, and he does it all more or less ex tempore.

I was first won over to Philip because he said, "Why don't you come down? I'm lecturing on Probability A next week and perhaps you could help us." So I went down. Philip was so brilliant: he made it sound so good. He saw so many things in there that I hadn't seen. I used to go back each week. Of course, he was much more interesting on my books than on anyone else's.

So I said, "Look, Philip. Let's divvy up science fiction between us. I'll take everything before Gernsback and you take everything after." That was the deal.

It was very sad about Philip. He'd bust a bracket, but the fact was that he was entirely a verbal performer, and he really couldn't get it down on paper. I've every sympathy for Philip. Don't mention Billion Year Spree to him if you happen to see him; just raise your hat and pass on.

I was left with half a book, so I finished it.

CHEERFULNESS KEPT BREAKING IN

ROB GERRAND:

Two questions:

Is Kyril Bonfiglioli's novel a self-portrait?

The second: You seem very fond of word

play in your writing, and sometimes it sneaks in. Do you have a problem in keeping out a display of words for their own sake rather than what you are trying to do with the particular work in front of you?

ALDISS:

There's a lovely bit in Boswell's Life of Johnson, where Johnson is walking down the High Street in Oxford, and he meets an old pupil of his, rather down at heel, and he accosts him and says, "Ah, Francis, how is your history of philosophy going?" And Francis says, "Well, I was writing a history of philosophy but cheerfulness kept breaking in."

I think that I've often botched my writings by cheerfulness breaking in, when I should have been more serious. One example, a rather bad one, is in The Dark Light Years which, after all, is very serious in intent, although satirical in purpose. You know there is that awful pun when they're talking about the spaceship full of shit, and there's been a little chaos, and it says, "Law and ordure was restored." I shouldn't have done it, actually.

To answer your question more widely: You actually get fed up on some days when you sit before that typewriter. I never get fed up with writing, but occasionally I want a holiday where I'm not concentrating all my attention on that page, and I do something else. Some of you know that I've been writing some Enigmas. I've dropped that habit, but in a way they were free associations where I could play with words. I think some of the results were quite successful, but others were a waste of time, perhaps.

As for Bonfiglioli: What could I say about Bon? One thing I must tell you about him was that he was a great art man. He worked in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and he knew a great deal about painting and artists. He made a number of remarkable purchases. Eventually he set up his own shop and did quite well with that.

His coup came when he was in Reading, a town about thirty miles away. He was looking in a junk shop in the back street, which was closed at the time, and he saw quite a small painting. He looked through the window at it, and he thought, "That looks like a Giorgioni to me." He waited until the shop opened, and then went in and became intensely interested in a fake Ming saucer or something like that. On the way out, he said, "By the way... in your window, what's that bit of rubbish?" The chap said, "That's by Horace Smith, sir. Sixty pounds." So Bon looked at it very closely and he was sure it was a Giorgioni (or a Tintoretto - I forget - let's say it was a Giorgioni). He went back to

Oxford notfoot (if you can drive like that) and checked in his catalogue and found that it was, in fact, a missing Giorgioni.

So this was the calculation of the man: he left it a day, and then went back, so as not to appear to be acting suspiciously. He went into the shop again and said, "By the way, that Ming saucer you've got. I am very interested in that. How much did you say?" "Thirty bob, sir." And he bought that, and then said, "Oh yes, this painting in the window. How much did you say?" "Sixty." Bon said, "I'll give you forty." "All right, sir, since you're a customer." And he sold it at Sotheby's for forty thousand.

Doesn't that make you feel bad?

When I was working in an antiquarian bookshop, there was a chap there called Jack Joseph. He used to run a bookshop in the Charing Cross Road. He picked up a bit of early Americana, which fetches fantastic prices, and he kept the only copy known of something that had been heard about. The next time a rich American book-buyer came over, he showed him this. The American was all excited and said, "My God, yes. This'll put me ahead of the boys. I'll write you out a cheque straight away. How much do you want?" Jack Joseph said, "One thousand pounds and a penny ha'penny, please, sir." So the American painstakingly wrote out this cheque for one thousand pounds and a penny ha'penny. When he finished, he handed it back to Jack Joseph and said, "It's a curious sum. Why are you asking for one thousand pounds and a penny ha'penny?" Jack Joseph said to him, straightfaced, "I always wanted to make a thousand pounds profit on a book."

In connection with which, I must read you a letter which was awaiting me here when I arrived in Melbourne: "Care of Space Age Books". It's signed by John Cody, a director of Chatto, Bodley Head, and Jonathan Cape, Walker Street, North Sydney. The weight of the thing is to say:

I thought I might write ahead to ask you to suggest to any budding authors that you meet at your science fiction convention that I would be interested in seeing manuscript material if they are to send it to me at the above address.

Which is:

John Cody
Chatto, Bodley Head, and Jonathan Cape
121 Walker Street
North Sydney.

REPORT ON PROBABILITY A

DAVID GRIGG:

I've heard - it may be a rumour - that in Report on Probability A, the book was

originally written without any of the inset pieces about the watchers from outside. Can you tell me if that's so and, if so, in putting those pieces in, were you in any way compromising your original intention?

ALDISS:

You know that that book had a rather checkered history. It seems to have been slightly before its time. I wrote it in 1962, and sent it to my regular publisher, Faber and Faber, and they just didn't want to hear about it.

I then asked Ted Carnell, who was my agent, if he would submit it to France. I saw it as an anti-novel and I thought the French might be responsive. They didn't like it. It went all round the place. No one wanted to publish it.

When Mike Moorcock was taking over New Worlds, he was very desperate. He said, "Look, Brian, you must have some material that hasn't been used." I thought, "My God, there is Garden With Figures" (as it was then called). "I'll send him that." I sent it with apologies, saying, "Look, Mike, this is all I've got. I don't think it's very good. No one likes it." Mike wrote back and said, "Not only do I like it, but I need it."

So I looked at it again when it came out. I thought it was rather slight. It needed certain additions. The additions I made were, as you say, the bits in italics about the watchers watching the watchers, and all that. I believe I'm right in saying that I also inserted the dominant motif of Holman Hunt's "Hireling Shepherd". I don't think that was in the original.

By that time, five years had gone by and I did think it was rather dull myself, as many readers have found it, even with the improvements. I do think that using the Holman Hunt, with the moment of frozen time, gave a tremendous perspective to the meaning of the novel. I was very pleased with that. I wasn't so sure, and I'm still not so sure, about the other bits. They were designed for the same purpose, to make the whole thing a sort of telescopic vision. You remember the three watchers there - they all have a different mode of observation: one just directly optical, the other one through the telescope, and the other through the periscope. I could see that this endless watching thing would reinforce the cold detachment of the whole thing. That was the intent behind it, as well as the intent, as it were, to liven things up.

EH...?

KIRPAL SINGH:

Brian, would you care to comment briefly on a series of questions that are playing on my mind: the relationship between Icelandic sagas and modern science fiction, as perhaps an index of the times in which we live; and is science fiction presenting some kind of alternative response to existentialist literature? why do science fiction writers almost invariably end up writing cycles - series of stories, like Martian Chronicles, the Earthsea novels, and things like that, in cycles, trilogies, and whatnot? Ultimately, what is your own position in regard to Northrop Frye's classification of science fiction as belonging invariably to romance as a genre?

ALDISS:

well, um... If I could answer briefly: No.

I don't know that I would think there is any particular relationship with the Icelandic sagas, but it's an interesting linkage, to link those with existentialism. If you see these reflected... I mean, one of the attractions of science fiction is that you can see almost anything reflected there because, to some extent willy-nilly, what we have on our hands is a symbolic literature, just as you deal with Shakespearian drama. Shakespeare was very keen on setting his dramas in the nebulous past - Hamlet and King Lear - because it seems to give an extra dimension to the figures.

Also, in science fiction, by setting them in the future; you give them an extra dimension. If you read Harry Harrison's Make Room! Make Room!, the thing has additional impact because you can work out very easily

that he might be writing about your sons and daughters. If the science fiction is any good, I think it has an added lustre by the figures casting an immense shadow upon futurity. In this respect, I suppose it has a link with the immense shadows of the Icelandic sagas. You should throw that question to Paul Anderson, and see what he says - "Waal, in th' first place..."

In a lot of science fiction, there's an existentialist dilemma, the dilemma of existence. Writers on the whole attempt to seek meaning in material things, because they see no way out of the existentialist predicament in any other form.

I've forgotten what your other two dozen questions were... Oh yes, cycles of novels. I think, in a way, the cycle of novels is all part and parcel of the same intention, that it's a striving for grandeur. This, of course, is where the romantic intention comes in. I believe that you would say, in your terms, most science fiction was romantic. As you know, I claim in Billion Year Spree that it's all gothic, which is a bit dodgy, but is presumably very near to what you mean: that we are forever overshadowed by the past and the future while living in the present. I think it is very much a predicament of modern Man that, as I was saying in my formal speech, on Friday, in a way we're dwarfed by the discoveries of the last two hundred years. We find ourselves in a completely new setting. That is a dilemma with which science fiction writers cope, however inadequately. They try to express it through their writing, so that things like Dune, Son of Dune, and things like that become almost inevitable.

((BRG: In finishing, and thanking Brian Aldiss for appearing on the panel, I made a classic faux pas. It's on tape if you want to hear it. Damned if I'm going to print it here.))

A BURNT-OUT CASE?

ROGER ZELAZNY

Special Guest's Speech
Unicon, Easter 1978

Transcribed by Bruce Gillespie

Taped by Alan Wilson, Terry Stroud, Kevin Noonan, and other members of the Unicon Committee. To be published in Yggdrasil.

The blackboard and the sound projector and the dancing girls have not yet arrived, so I shall have to improvise. As I frequently do in matters such as this, I've made an outline and... I never follow them. It's the same way with books. The only trouble I ever ran into with a book was when I tried to follow an outline. I learned later that the publisher did not really care about the outline. He told me after I stopped writing for them that they always got an outline as a matter of form, so that they had a gentlemanly way of rejecting a book if they didn't like it. Rather than just saying that this was a dog of a book, they would pull out the outline, find some point at which an author departs from the outline, and say, "Well, old man, you really didn't follow your outline, so I'll have to return the book."

I found a way of faking outlines, of course. I had it down to a real system. Then I stopped writing for that publisher, and no one ever asked me for an outline again. In case you're curious, the system involved selecting one scene, and writing about ninety per cent of the outline as a detailed synopsis of that scene, and the other ten per cent just generalising the rest of the book. Then I could sit down and write whatever I wanted, as long as I inserted that one scene in the book. It saved a lot of trouble.

I am a science fiction writer by definition - at least, that's what my books are called. I have no desire to disclaim this title. It's a funny situation, because I don't really know what science fiction is. Every now and again over the years, I've gotten ambitious and tried to work up a definition. Whenever I come up with something

half-way satisfies me, immediately I've sat down and tried to violate it, just because I like to feel that science fiction is pretty much a free area, and myself free to do pretty much what I like in it.

Science fiction has been good to me, and I'm happy to be writing science fiction. Over the years, I've gotten to speak at conventions such as this and other places on the subject, and I have, only this past September, discovered an ideal in the way of convention addresses, toward which I might hope to aspire one day.

It was a convention talk which gave rise to a great deal of speculation and exercise of the imagination - a talk given by Philip K Dick in the city of Metz, France, a city sacked in the year 451 by Attila the Hun, and about which I knew very little else until such a time as they held a science fiction festival there and invited three science fiction writers - Harlan Ellison, Philip K Dick, and yours truly. It came to pass at the convention that Philip K Dick was the gentleman who was to give the address. It was a rather amazing address. I do not know what Philip K Dick said at this talk. I was not present; I was off at a bookstore signing books. The audience, however, at the Civic Centre, while Phil Dick was speaking, did not know what Phil Dick said either. So I do not feel slighted in this.

When I approached him on the matter later in the day, I discovered that Philip K Dick did not know what he said, either.

I will delay for a moment, and tell you how I came to know Philip K Dick. Some years ago, Phil Dick, who is a very hot writer when he is on top of things, had agreed to write twelve books in a year's

time - a book a month. Apparently he delivered eleven of the books. It got to December, and the book was a thing called Deus Irae, for which he'd written an outline. I thought mine were pretty good when it came to faking the action and taking in the publisher completely, but this was a masterpiece. It was much longer than those I usually manage, but it said less even. It was basically a philosophical essay, quite lovely, and then there were fifty pages of copy. At that point, Phil Dick stopped. He was blocked.

There are some writers who, when they are blocked, have mental constipation that can go on for years. It was so with Phil Dick. Doubleday kept pestering him for the book, and he kept saying, "No, no, later, later." Finally they asked him if he would allow someone else to complete the work and divide the money. He said, "All right. I'm not going to finish it."

So they approached Ted White. Ted White decided he couldn't do it, but he kept the manuscript anyway, just for a conversation piece. It was at his home in Brooklyn for some months, and I happened to be visiting. While we were there, he brought out the manuscript and showed it to me. I really liked it. One of the things about collaboration is that you should learn something from it. It should be fun, and it should be something you would not have thought to do on your own. I read it over, and wrote to Phil, saying that I would like to try finishing this book. He said, "Fine. I like your stuff. You like my stuff. Let's do it."

So I wrote a few sections and sent them off to him. He waited awhile. We didn't look upon this project as anything to be completed in a hurry. I'd put it in a drawer and, a year or two later, Phil would remind me that we were doing a book, and I would write another section and send it back to him.

We moved from Baltimore to Santa Fe, New Mexico. About three years went by, and I had sort of forgotten this book in a drawer. A cat had gotten in and done something on the manuscript. Phil finally sent me a frantic letter a week before I was due to leave town, saying that twelve years had gone by and Doubleday was threatening to withhold royalties due him in order to recover the advance on that book if it was not in six weeks. So I sat down and finished it that day.

(You talk about artistic values and such, but I've never seen any correlation in my own work between speed of composition and quality of output. It's really a kind of laziness factor which makes me produce at the rate I do. I have written books very quickly.)

Anyway, that's how the book was done, and it was very enjoyable. Before I had undertaken this entire collaboration with Phil, I

decided I would make it a complete learning project. I would learn to write like Phil Dick. So I sat down and read twenty of Phil's books in succession. I wanted to feel them at the gut level, not just understand his reaction to ideas intellectually, but get so I could write in his style and also, hopefully, plot in his style. I felt that I achieved this; I believe that I can write exactly like Phil Dick if I want to.

But I chose, for my sections of the book, not to use that style. I chose a kind of meta-style, halfway between that and my own style, so my sections would be different enough from Phil's sections so the book would have a different tone to it.

As I was writing along like this over the years, I said to myself, "It's a shame to be able to write just like Phil Dick - even, for brief periods of time, think like Phil Dick - and not to do it, at least just once." So, in one scene I plotted it just the way I thought Phil would plot it. I wrote it in Phil's style exactly, and then the other themes in that section I wrote in the other style. I sent the entire batch of manuscripts off to him, waited a while, and received a letter back, "Roger, that was very good material you sent along, but this one scene you've written is sheer genius."

To return to Metz... This past September, Phil gave this talk which I'm holding up as a model before me for a moment invisible to all but my eyes - or perhaps to those of Palmer Eldritch, if he be present.

I was in a book store nearby. Harlan had wanted to commit one of his favourite stunts, which was to compose a story in the window of a book store carrying his books. Unfortunately, when Attila had sacked Metz in the fifth century, he had apparently done something to book-store fronts, because there were no book stores which had the sort of front windows, as American book stores have, for displaying authors in the act of composition. Harlan had to take his act to a local newspaper office, where people apparently took him for an employee. He said he was asked to notarise a document, or something like that. He was a little disappointed.

But he missed Phil's talk. I missed Phil's talk. I was sitting there signing books. Several hours after the time the talk was scheduled, people began drifting in from the hall where Phil had been speaking. A man came up to me with a book and said to me, "Monsieur Zelazny, you have written a book with Monsieur Dick. You know his mind. I have just come from his talk. Is it true that he wishes to found a new religion, with himself as Pope?"

I said, "Well, he has never mentioned that ambition to me. I don't know how these things come through in translation. He has

a very peculiar sense of humour. It might not have carried through properly. But I don't think he meant it to be taken literally."

The fellow who was behind me said, "Non, I think you are wrong. I rode back to the hotel in a taxi, and Monsieur Dick gave me the power to remit sins and to kill ~~flows~~."

I said, "I'm sure this was meant to be taken with a grain of salt. I wouldn't be too concerned about it."

A little later, another fellow came in and said, "Monsieur Zelazny, do you believe that there are many parallel time tracks and that we are on the wrong one?" I allowed that this was a common idea of some science fiction stories. I personally felt happy where I was, but I asked him where he had gotten this notion from that I subscribed to it.

He said, "Well, in the lecture he said that there are many parallel time tracks and we are on the wrong one, because of the fact that God and the Devil are playing a game of chess and every time one makes a move, it reprograms us to a different time track, and that whenever Phil Dick writes a book, it switches us back to the proper track. Would you care to comment on this?"

I begged off. A little later, Phil came into the store to sign some books and sat down beside me at the table. When I had a free moment, I leaned over and said, "Phil, what the hell did you talk about this afternoon?"

Phil said, "I don't know. It was the strangest thing. You know, I don't speak French, so I was asked to write out my talk. I provided a copy of my talk and then the fellow translated it into French. I was to read a paragraph and then he was to read the translation, and so on. Right before I was to go on, they told me that the talk had to be cut by twenty minutes. So I went through crossing out paragraphs, and so did the translator, but we got mixed up along the way, and he crossed out all the wrong paragraphs. So I don't know what I said."

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Just the notion of that talk has always remained with me. I bear it before me at this moment because; whenever I am asked to give a talk anywhere, I tend to look back over my professional writing career and see whether there might be something new learned that I hadn't thought of before from the activities of that sixteen-year period. I tend to feel rather like the Buddhist novice who went into the monastery knowing that the trees were only trees and the clouds were only clouds and the mountains were only mountains. Forty years later, when he was a full-fledged

Buddhist monk, he knew that the trees were only trees, the clouds were only clouds, and the mountains were only mountains. But then he knew it wisely.

I don't believe that I know very much more now than I knew sixteen years ago. I'm not even sure I know it wisely, but at least I seem to have rearranged the items a bit, so that I know it a little differently. So, attempting to extract whatever wisdom might be involved in this, I thought back to a few other times in my life when I examined what I'd been up to, and it occurred to me that I had come to a few small conclusions about what I was doing.

I remember that, when I began writing, my intention was to sit down for a couple of years and just do short stories, because the mistakes I made would be much briefer than if I just did novels, until I learned something about the trade. I would set myself different problems in each story so I would stand to benefit from learning from this. I did that. After about two years, I finally did a novel.

I asked myself, what are the real difficulties involved in writing science fiction? If any, what are the benefits? Not in terms of intellectual freedom or imagination being exercised, but purely from a work standpoint as a writer, what are the problems?

It struck me that -- and I hadn't really considered it, which is strange, because my background is in literature -- that while you learn all this critical analysis while you're going to school, it is not really a reversible process. You don't put together a story in the manner in which you learn to take stories apart in school. It's simply a blank piece of paper before you in the typewriter, and everything else goes out the window.

It occurred to me that the biggest problem I faced was that the distinction between a science fiction story and a general fiction story lay in the fact that, by virtue of its being set on another planet or in the future or on a parallel world, the real problem lay in the setting, the background, the fact that you had to provide more of it to show the reader where the hell all this ~~is~~ taking place and what's going on. If you mention New York in the 1960s, that's pretty much a shorthand for what a major urban centre is. As I discovered later, when I taught a few writers' workshops, the big error of beginning writers is to provide a couple of pages of copy right at the beginning describing all this background. By then, the reader would be hopelessly bored. The biggest thing I learned from this period is that all the background should be cut from the beginning, broken into small parcels, and distributed judiciously through the rest of the text. That did seem to be the hardest thing I had to learn.

The greatest freedom for me, strangely, was also a kind of trap. At the beginning, everyone said to me, "You should write what you know." So naturally I wrote about gods and demons and supernatural and mythological creatures, because I was very familiar with them. I did come from a peculiar background where I did have a lot of information on mythology. I began using this material because it was there, and easily done for me, while I ran around frantically plugging up other holes in my background so that I could write other things eventually.

I never made a connection between something I had read in literature classes until several years had gone by, at which time I was already beginning to feel uncomfortable that about every science fiction convention I attended, they set up a special panel called "Science Fiction and Mythology", and put me on it. I realised: it may be possible that I am being categorised.

Northrop Frye, if I may steal his vocabulary for a moment, set up four modes of characterisation, with four names which mean simple things: the mythic mode, the high mimetic, the low mimetic, and the ironic.

The mythic mode includes characters who appear in scriptures, in mythological writing, in the Iliad, the Bible. They're gods; they are creatures who are greater than Man and greater than their environment. Yet they do appear as characters in this form of writing, which admittedly is not being done too much these days.

Then there are the high mimetic characters, who are basically the figures in classical tragedy, who differ from other people by virtue of the fact that they are greater individuals: a Hamlet, or an Oedipus, or a King Lear. These figures, in falling, have to be figures that you can respect, and therefore know pity and fear when you see them fall.

They are the top two categories.

The low mimetic is the character who inhabits the realistic novel, the modern novel, the product of all the democratic revolutions, the character who's just like everyone else.

And then there is the ironic mode. This is the character who is not just like everyone else. He's not greater, he's not a little bit greater, he's not like us; he's less. He's the Charlie Chaplin figure, he's the character in Kafka, Ionesco, or Beckett, who is less than his fellow man. He's an ironic figure, yet in some strange way, this whole thing goes round in a circle. There are echoes in him of the mythic mode character, by virtue of his being a butt.

It struck me that all of modern literature is the bottom two categories, and that it really fell upon science fiction alone - and

a few poets with their private mythologies -- to exploit the higher modes of characterisation. Whether you approve or disapprove aesthetically, they are available in science fiction. One can create figures who are on a par with the gods of the mythic mode, or the tragic figures, whether one is writing a tragedy or not, of the high mimetic mode. One does this with aliens, mutants, robots, computers.

This is, for me, on the other side of the equation from the difficulties and constraints of providing all the extra background material. It balanced out. I managed to surmount the background problems to my satisfaction and to that of the editors, and I explored character, to some degree, by using these higher modes.

I suppose I should have let it go at that, and I did for a long while. I had learned something to form the substance for a talk for whatever convention I was going to at that time.

I did not think about it for a long while - but at the same convention in France, I was talking to Phil Dick again. There's an amazing phenomenon associated with both Phil Dick and Harlan Ellison (and they invited both of them; but then, they didn't know any better). In the presence of either man, the interface between reality and fantasy begins to wear rather thin. When they are both present, surrealist things do tend to begin happening.

There was a very strange party the same day that Phil Dick gave his memorable talk (which nobody remembers). We were all dragged off to the City Hall. It was John Brunner's birthday. John Brunner had popped up from Italy, where he was vacationing, and we had dinner with him. He was not really a guest of the convention, but just happening by, so he was not as constrained as the rest of us to be there on time, so it caused some delay in getting over there. Philippe Hupp, the fellow in charge, was quite upset at the authors not showing up at this party being given. I was trying to get away. Harlan, I learned, was still sleeping back at the hotel, and they sent some strong-arm type to drag him over.

Anyway, we did get there on time. Philippe was standing outside like the White Rabbit, saying, "You're late! You're late!", as everyone came back. The lady gave a nice little talk about being happy to have a science fiction convention in that city. Meanwhile, a folk band began playing wild music and John Brunner was asking me if I knew whose portrait was hanging on the wall. I said, "That was Montpelier, the first man to go up in a balloon; he's from Metz", while somebody else was asking me why they wouldn't let the Concorde land in the States. Then

a bizarre folk dance began weaving through the room, and somehow got involved in it. (He had appeared.)

Then, in the distance, across this room, Phil Dick was standing there like Mephistopheles, gesturing to me. I began walking toward him. He kind of waved his cloak and Robert Sheckley was standing beside him. I didn't know Sheckley had been there. I hadn't seen Sheckley in about three years.

Phil Dick said, "Quick, Roger. It involves money." I made my way over and he said, "I've got it all worked out, Roger. We're going to make a bundle on this. It will be a three-way collaboration - you, me, and Sheckley. You see, the world really consists of three time tracks. We each get one, work it out, and then we switch. We each write a third of the book, following the others' time tracks, and their interrelationships when things begin to break down. It's all very careful..."

He stopped and looked up. "By George, there's Harry Harrison. Harry! You want to make a bundle of money? Okay. Never mind. It's going to be four time tracks."

Then Phil, in a profound moment afterward, said, "Roger, a strange thing happened to me..." which is not really unusual, because strange things always happen to Phil. I nodded. "I have this book, A Scanner Darkly. I have these characters who have been on hard drugs for a long time, and they're burnt out cases. I wanted to choose a scene which exemplified the extent of their mental deterioration. I had them attempting to figure out the functioning of the gear shift on a ten-speed bicycle." (Phil always chooses good examples for things.)

So he had written this up and indicated that they were wrong, because this is how the gear shift on a ten-speed bicycle really works. His editor called him: "Phil... A funny thing in this manuscript of yours. I happen to own a ten-speed bicycle. I went out and looked at the gear shift, and - um - you've got it wrong yourself."

Phil said, "My God, you know what that means? Roger, how do you know when you're a burnt out case?"

** ** *

Perhaps I should not have taken that so to heart, but I did begin thinking about it. How do you know when you are a burnt out case?

This is interesting. It raises a great philosophical question for me: that is, who can you trust?

I began writing as a very naive person. I trusted everyone - editors, critics... I became wary about critics and reviewers after a time, though, when I noticed that when I

began writing, they did not like my stuff a great deal; when I stopped writing the mythological sort of thing and shifted into other things, they said, "It's a shame Zelazny's abandoning all this fine mythological material he used to work with"; and when I did something else, they would hearken back and say, "Zelazny's retrogressing again back into his old ways."

The only consistent review I got was when three different critics, independent of one another, came up with the same sentence, "This would be a good book if it hadn't been written by Roger Zelazny." I was never quite certain what that meant.

Then it occurred to me to take all the critical opinions and reviewers' opinions, lump them together, and divide by the number. It came out to a sort of uniform consistency resembling lime jello - a kind of pale sickly green in colour. It seems that they follow a bell curve, with the favourable reviews on one end, the unfavourables on the other, and the neutral ones in the middle. They balanced one another out to such an extent that I couldn't particularly trust any critic over any other. I could find a counterpart in the other direction for anybody.

So I stopped reading reviews and criticism. For awhile, I grew quite cynical and said that the only critical comments I cared to read were royalty statements, which I would never say now. I'm more guarded about these matters.

** ** *

So I said, "Well, at least one can trust one's editors." I don't know whether anyone who specialises in these matters might notice, but in my book Lord of Light, nowhere in it will you find the word "which", because an editor decided to scratch out "which" everywhere it occurred and substitute "that" which is all right: it doesn't make anything incorrect. But I do know the difference. Doubleday, perhaps, has a style sheet which requires this sort of thing... that sort of thing. I let it go. This was my first hardcover sale. I had had three paperback books before, but now this was Doubleday - a big house. I decided I really should go along with all the changes they had made.

But then they came to one scene in the book which was dear to my heart (I forget which one at the moment). They wanted to cut it entirely: "This scene does not serve any useful purpose in the book", or something like that.

I was going to New York the following weekend, so I just took the manuscript with me. I went to Doubleday's office, and saw

their senior editor, Larry Ashmead, and said, "whoever did this wants to cut this scene, and I rather like it. I'd like to leave it if it's possible."

"Sure. Just write stet," and he signed his name beneath it. "That's all there is to it. Don't worry about it."

"Aren't copy editors important people?"

"No. Just some kid we hire out of college."

"Oh..."

Actually, some years went by before I went through an entire book and wrote "stet" beneath every single thing that had been changed in it. That was one of the Amber books. I do it more and more frequently.

It led me to look for other people's experiences with copy editors. I came across a couple of interesting ones, which I will share with you.

One was that, in Churchill's History of World War Two, a copy editor had written in the margin, "I have taken the liberty of recasting this unfortunate sentence because you ended it with a preposition." Beneath which, Churchill had written, "Up with this I will not put."

Raymond Chandler, in one of his mystery novels, got it back with a little transposition mark and the abbreviation for "split infinitive" off in the margin, beneath which Chandler had written, "When I split an infinitive it goddamn well stays split."

This was interesting, but did not help me to find anyone who could tell me whether I had become a burnt out case. I was growing worried about this, because I had been talking with a writer I respected about another writer, who shall remain nameless (a big name writer whose books sell quite well) and we pretty much agreed that this fellow's last few books had not been up to snuff. He said, "You know, his last few books were very flabby. They could have been cut quite severely and they probably would have been better books as a result. I think that what he really needs is a good editor. They're afraid to tell him to do anything about it, because his books are going to sell well, whether this is done or not. They don't want to lose him as a writer, so no one has guts enough to tell him what's wrong with his stuff. He's become a victim of the Great writer Syndrome."

At the time, it struck me as possibly true. But my experience with good editors is that they are very few and far between. I've met a few people I consider good editors. It is difficult. I can see the nameless writer's position: probably he does not know who to trust.

I don't know that there is an answer to this.

** **

I learned another thing only after several years of writing. To show how naive I was, I did not know that other writers plotted their books. I didn't know this until I was asked for a plot line, and I realised that I couldn't do one.

Basically, my approach to writing a novel is to construct a character. Once I have a character, I try him out in several situations just to see how he reacts. Then I take two situations that strike me as interesting. I begin somewhere near one of them and write my way through, almost free-associating, to the second situation. In the course of this progress from the one to the other, secondary characters necessarily occur and a certain amount of the background is sketched in. By the time I have travelled from point A to point B, I have some of the secondary characters become major characters. I can see some direction in which to go and I simply begin moving. Then there comes a point somewhere along the way where I see the entire book laid out before me.

If I had known this wasn't the way you operated, I probably never would have started this way. But I am basically a subconscious plotter. I can feel when the story is present in my mind, and I don't bother dredging it all out to the conscious level until I need it. The fact that it works for me has caused me to rely upon it.

I have done a few things the other way. I do know how to plot a story if I have to, but it's hard work. Usually, if you do something at a mystery level, it's better to work things out. In the stories in My Name is Legion, I've used the conscious plotting device. But when I first heard from Gordy Dickson that he had an outline so that he knew what happened in each chapter before he sat down to write, I was amazed. Larry Niven told me, "Of course you have to have an outline. Or how you going to know what you're going to do? How are you going to know how the book ends?" I never know how my books will end until I get there.

My only hope, as I see it, is the fact that I rely on my subconscious. I will continue to trust it. If it lets me down, I guess we'll sink together. That's the only person I trust at this point. If anyone has any suggestions, I'd be happy to hear them.

It seems to me that the only thing I've really learned over the years, outside of picking up speed for when I need it, is that writing seems to be more and more a process of learning what you can get away with. I still like to work with characters. If I can get in an outrageous sequence every now and again, it does something for my amusement, if not my aesthetic sense. If there is just one story in the world, and a writer got to write only one story outline, I'm

sure it would be ample for everyone's one story, because I don't believe any two writers can tell the same story the same way, even if they set out to do it. I'm comforted in that thought.

It's like the story of Henry James's Trilby. George Du Maurier, Daphne's uncle, was a noted story doctor. Many writers would call him in for consultation every now and again if they got into a problem. Quite often he would write a chapter for them to get them around some road block. One day he came up with a stirring idea for a novel. He thought who would be the ideal person to write it, and he took it to Henry James, who was a friend of his. "Henry, have I got a story for you. It's about this girl, singularly undistinguished in all aspects of her existence, save for the fact that, under the influence of hypnosis, she could become a great opera singer." James thought about it, and said, "It doesn't really do anything for me. If you're so convinced it's a good idea, why don't you write it yourself?" Du Maurier said, "Yes, maybe I should." So he sat down and wrote Trilby, which outsold the sum total of everything Henry James ever wrote. I doubt whether anyone other than Lester Del Rey would argue about the respective merits of Henry James and George Du Maurier but, nevertheless, Du Maurier contributed a word to the language: "Svengali".

It makes you wonder. There are certain stories that I don't feel comfortable writing. I don't know whether it's a sign that a writer is not growing or doesn't have a total world view, but there are some sorts of things which I enjoy writing more than others. I did enjoy handling mythological materials, back when I was doing it constantly. I will still hearken back to it. I do want to do other things - of the hard science type, of pure fantasy of the non-mythological sort - a great number of things I want to try.

Everyone has his own angle of vision. There are conscious writers, conscious plotters, unconscious plotters, fast writers who can hack out a story in a hurry without affecting the quality of the writing a great deal...

For instance, Dumas pere was a noted fast writer. He could whip off a story in a great hurry, in a flamboyant creative act. Still, the stories were romantic fun, but classified as classics.

His son was just the opposite. Dumas fils was very slow, painstaking, a meticulous writer who massaged his words, let them talk to one another. At one point in his career, he had spent three months writing one paragraph. He hadn't quite finished it. The book he was writing happened to be Camille. He was working on this paragraph one evening.

There was a knock on the door. It was his father, whom he hadn't seen in a long while. There was a lady on each arm - he was a flamboyant writer. His son invited him in, and went off to get him some refreshment. His father was pacing around the room, walked over to the writing desk, looked at the manuscript. After a while, he sat down and finished the paragraph. He waited a little longer; finished the whole chapter. A little longer, and he outlined the rest of the novel. His son hadn't come back yet, so he went upstairs and made love to both women, came back downstairs just as his son returned, borrowed 2000 francs from him, and disappeared into the night.

There's a moral to every story. My son has told me that he thinks he might like to be a writer - when he grows up. I hope he's not the slow, painstaking, meticulous sort. But if he is, I hope he keeps some money around the house.

** ** *

I came in as a novitiate here. Now I feel like an old monk. I know, after sixteen years of writing, that the trees are only trees and the clouds are only clouds and the mountains are only mountains. I also know that there are probably an infinite number of ways of regarding them all. I think that's what writing is all about. I think that that's what science fiction is all about. That's one of the reasons I write it, and one of the reasons I love it.

I also see that the slide projector, the blackboard, and the dancing girls still have not arrived, but I'm about finished with my improvisation, and I thank you for your attention, and I particularly want to thank you for bringing me here, to all those involved in putting on this convention for all your kindness and courtesy and generosity you've shown. I want you to know that I've enjoyed talking with everyone I've talked with and I hope to talk with some more of you. Adieu.

c 1978 Roger Zelazny

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