

S F COMMENTARY

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The most recent issue of *SFC* featured, among other articles, Andrew Whitmore's reviews of two books by Australian authors. One of those authors has replied with an article rather than a letter of comment—so that the comments might apply *generally* to sf critics rather than Andrew Whitmore in particular.

David J Lake HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER: ADVICE TO A WOULD-BE CRITIC

Let us suppose, Would-Be Critic, that you have some strong motive for attacking a certain sf author. In this situation, I would advise you to take the following steps:

- 1 Select the author's first novel, even though he may have written several, and his writing may have matured somewhat over the years.
- 2 At the outset of your piece, quote at length, relevantly or irrelevantly, from some German philosopher, such as Schopenhauer. This establishes your credentials as a cultured man, and is known in the trade as *Ethos*. ("I've read Schopenhauer—see!")
- 3 Adopt a sneering tone *at once*. It doesn't matter that by doing so you are begging the question, assuming what you ought to prove—that your victim is a worthless writer. Many readers of reviews will confuse assertion with proof, anyway.
- 4 Always attack your victim's *style*. "The style is the man himself," as Buffon said; therefore this attack is the most wounding possible. However, *one caution*: your victim may in fact write a good, clean, unpretentious style which leaves you nothing you can fasten your fangs into. There's a simple device to be used here: *don't quote a single line* from the book! See above, under clause 3: naked assertion, again. And many, perhaps most readers will again fail to note that you are begging the question.
- 5 Ditto about *characters* and *wit*. This is standard practice in the trade. If you say the characters are invisible and there's no wit, you are proclaiming a

negative, and therefore can't be proved wrong without extensive quotation on the other side.

- 6 Claim the plot is full of cliches. Here, I'm afraid, you will have to give a few examples; but don't worry. You will find them all right—because all plots whatever contain cliches. *Hamlet* is based on the corny old cliché of revenge for a murdered father; *The Odyssey* is based on multiple cliches—hero fights with giant, hero is detained by seductive nymph (that one, twice)—and the outcome is so predictable—"Guess who wins in the battle with the suitors?" Do *not*, repeat *not*, mention that in literature what matters is not the outlines of a plot, but the *treatment*.
- 7 To round off your essay, try your hand at a few personal insults. Attack the author's motives and integrity. Suggest he has "sold his soul" for two thousand dollars or a swimming pool or something. Do *not* allow for the possibility that the poor benighted fellow was simply writing as well as he could at the time, for the love of the game and his imagined world. Insults make much more exciting reading than simple clarity.

NB: One caution about this latter clause. I would *not* advise you to use insults or imputations of base motives if the author in question lives in your own city. For this treatment, select a victim *interstate*. Otherwise, you may find the man on your doorstep, inviting you to *come outside...*

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I Must Be Talking To My Friends



David Lake's piece on page 1 is a letter of comment of a kind—a letter to all us rotten critics, anyway. It gives some idea of the immediate response to *SFC* 55/56—that Andrew Whitmore's tirade was the highlight, or lowlight, of the issue. That's how it seemed to me when I was typing the issue. More of that later.

Lots of letters in recently, since *SFC* 54 has just reached most overseas readers. I will make things more confusing by including the letters for 54 after those for 55/56. (I could make things really confusing. I could mix in the letters for 51, 52, and 53 which still have not been published.)

Please don't write angry letters—reducing the size of *SFC* to 16 pages is the only way I can keep publishing it. Still costs \$250-\$300 per issue to print and post. But, after spending four weeks of my life duplicating, collating, and posting 55/56 (with lots of help from Elaine), I suspect the changeover will be worth it. You get lots more words in a 16-page offset issue than in a 32-page duplicated issue.

A disadvantage of "going offset" is that I will need cartoons and illustrations. (We're lifting them—legally—from one of Elaine's design books for this issue.) If you feel like contributing artwork, I'd be grateful... and will do my best to be prompt about returning pieces not used and originals you want back.

Printed by Copyplace, Melbourne.

Dr David J Lake may be reached via the English Dept, University of Queensland, St Lucia, Qld 4067.

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As I say, response to *SFC* 55/56 was rapid. Kitty Vigo rang to say that Elaine's piece was the only bit she was really interested in. Nev Angove rang from Canberra to tell me over the phone the contents of the letter he won't be sending. Rob Gerrand was offended by Andrew Whitmore's article. So was:

GEORGE TURNER
87 Westbury Street
Balaclava, Victoria 3183

Surely you cannot have been "entertained" by Whitmore's unhappy attempt on rounded nineteenth-century periods? The man hasn't the orotund precision of vocabulary needed for Olympian bolt launching. In fact, this tirade of insult harks back to the earlier period of the waspish Pope. European criticism—if that be the word for such unpleasantness—still employs this useless method of personal attack balanced on unsupported statement of opinion and unargued grounds signalled by "there would seem to be" and "if one does presume to credit". It is a method which offers nothing to literature, misrepresents the works under discussion and debases the useful employment of criticism. The attitude involved is not one of intelligent summation or understanding but a plainly egotistical, "Watch me get this bastard!"

The only circumstances under which such an attack, implying immoderate pretensions on the parts of the authors, can be justified are those whereon it can be shown that the writers have indeed given public vent to such pretensions. This can't be said of Lake or Harding. If it could, deflation

would be in order, but a better argued, more literate deflation than Whitmore's.

I would have little to say in favour of either of the novels Whitmore uses as stocks in which to pillory their writers but, as a critic who pulls few punches (there are occasions when one should pull them) on bad work, I would have better sense than to use the failings of a novel as an excuse for public insult—and many of Whitmore's remarks and innuendos are no more than that. Criticism should be lively if it is to be read, but liveliness depending on the *frisson* of open rudeness is no better than muck-raking.

Alerted by one of Whitmore's statements—"[Lake's] writing... is so unremarkable as to suggest that the author's relationship with the English language has been a brief and somewhat ill-considered affair"—I allowed myself the innocent pleasure of assessing Whitmore's relationship with the same. I therefore enclose his two "discussions", marked as for an end-of-term essay. Aside from misunderstanding of the requirements of criticism and of Victorian style, I have found in the first piece twenty-five failures of simple literary competence (such as grammar) and logic and in the second, eighteen. A more rigorous examination might disclose others.

Publication of this unfortunate "discussion" may have served a purpose: you have provided Whitmore with a cross on which he has obligingly crucified himself in full public view.

(12 October 1979)

I wish I had room to reproduce this "marking" of Andrew's essays. I've sent a copy to David Lake to cheer him up, and a copy to Andrew to cheer *him* up (he has a strange sense of humour, as some of us have found to our cost at various times). Elaine told me that "taxidermic" is allowed by the OED as well as "taxidermal", which is George's suggestion for the right word (p 44, *SFC* 55/56). Elaine can see the justice of George's complaint, but found some choice examples of recent criticism which sound a lot like Andrew's (the battle between Trevor-Roper and J A P

Taylor). Andrew based his style quite specifically on that of the *Edinburgh Review* of the 1830s, but not really on that of William Hazlitt (not "Thomas Hazlitt", as I called him in the introduction to the articles). Hazlitt wrote little literary criticism, but made lots of sharp digs at particular literary figures. He castigated Wordsworth for becoming a hidebound snob in middle age while Hazlitt remained the idealist of the 1790s. Hazlitt's commentaries on many issues of the 1830s were so brilliant that his ammunition can often be fired at targets of today—the swing to conservative politics, pandering magazines, writers who petrified into public figures.

Enough of that. It doesn't matter which style I adopt for this magazine, I'll never have enough space for what I like talking about—politics, lit crit, etc.

ANDREW WHITMORE
PO Box 187
Sea Lake, Victoria

I see you changed your mind about printing my reviews—I just hope that they don't get you in too much trouble. The Harding one is a bit overdone, I suppose, but the Lake one is all right—I believe every word that I have written there is true. The Harding review, however, is more of a stylistic exercise. *Future Sanctuary* is a rotten book, but Lee Harding isn't necessarily a no-talent bum—it just seemed to fit in with the tone of the review that he should be. I hope people enjoyed them (I know Charles would have) and maybe you'll get some good letters out of it. Who knows?

I'm glad to hear you're happy and contented at last. Marriage isn't too bad, is it?

(10 October 1979)

Lots of people have sent nice messages to us since *SFC* 55½ ("The Wedding") went out. Thanks, Andrew, and to everybody else who wrote.

LEE HARDING
Sherbrooke Road
Sherbrooke Victoria 3789

Thanks for *SFC* 55/56. Has it really been ten years? Time shouldn't go down the plughole like that... and yet there I was, only a few days ago, celebrating—if that is the right word—twenty years since my first short story was accepted for publication (strangely enough, it was also called "Displaced Person").

George Turner's capsule history of sf publishing is the sort of article that cries out for reprinting in some handy format—hopefully with indices, etc—because it provides the information librarians and teachers are always asking for and never getting. Perhaps George—or a willing associate—could be persuaded to expand upon the idea? Perhaps Norstrilia Press could be persuaded to publish it? As a venture it would surely not be a financial loss, if handled properly.

Dear me: all that writing on Australian sf. I found myself once again bewildered by the variety of disagreement among the reviews—and I hope you won't feel offended if I say that this issue of *SFC* demonstrates yet again that, apart from yourself and George Turner, there are not many genuine critical reviewers in Australia capable of dissecting an sf novel. Of course there is always John Foyster and his own special brand of bias, if you're interested in extremes. However... in this issue I did find Andy Whitmore amusing, and Henry Gasko perhaps unintentionally so. I would like to thank you for explaining what *The Weeping Sky* was all about. You make it sound bloody marvellous. But, yes—when I think about it, your idea of it being about "what it is to be human", and survival in particular, does strike a responsive chord. And your image of Conrad being "outside humanity" makes me realise how snugly the book leans up against *Displaced Person*, which also seems to have brought a varied response (but why does Rob insist on distancing himself from his material by the vexing process of referring to me on each occasion as "Mr Harding"?; puzzling...)

I would like to correct a statement you make about *Rooms of Paradise*. At no time did I or my publishers consider publishing this anthology for the Australian market alone. While such a venture could and has been attempted by semi-professional publishers in this country who are quite happy to break even on a small print run, it just simply would not be on for a professional house with high overheads—and even Al Knight and Anne Godden's overheads are high in relationship to, say, Norstrilia Press and Void Publications. So: *Rooms of Paradise* was published for the British Commonwealth market. The book has been very successful indeed in England, where the initial release sold out within a couple of months. Apparently the reviews there were every bit as good as those which

have appeared locally and in the USA. To sell a couple of thousand copies of an original sf anthology on the Commonwealth market is a very happy event. To have done so *from Australia* is little short of remarkable.

Displaced Person—Thank you for appreciating the slight—very slight, mind you—satire on the upper-middle-class twit. I *meant* Graeme to sound pretty dumb, also the "edge of hysteria" in his voice. And you know, I've mixed with quite a number of late teenage kids who play jazz. It could be that the pendulum is swinging back in certain areas.

(10 October 1979)

Thanks for all the information, Lee. I'm glad you remembered to write about the *other* 70-or-so pages in the issue.

For what it's worth, the three Australian sf books which I would like to see reviewed in *SFC* are David Ireland's *Woman of the Future* (Allen Lane), Peter Carey's *War Games* (UQP) and Rob Gerrard's collection *Transmutations* (Outback). I'll review them myself if I have the time—but it would be good to have somebody else's voice heard.

SYDNEY J BOUNDS
27 Borough Road
Kingston on Thames
Surrey KT2 6BD, England

Congratulations and best wishes and the best of Australian luck to you both! I don't have to wish you happiness; that shines out between the lines of *SFC* 54 and 55½. And you're still freelancing too! And you have a house... and four cats. Next issue, I'll expect to see a photo of Elaine, right?

Wrong (I regret to say). Elaine had beautiful long hair until a few weeks ago, when it was cut for summer. Elaine looks just as good without it—but either way she won't have her photo taken.

Lee Harding's anthology, *Rooms of Paradise*, turned up in Kingston Library and I read it and rate it the best original anthology I've read in the last few years.

George Turner had a long article in *Arena* on Australian sf, and it was fascinating, too. I'm glad to hear that Wodhams has just done a long story;

he was always a favourite of mine and it's more than a shame he doesn't get published much now.

Don't forget us folk up top still like to learn a bit about the geography of where you are. Collingwood, I assume, is a suburb of Melbourne. But Wattle Park Chalet? I'm fascinated; I've never heard of anyone getting married in a park before!

(15 September 1979)

George's article in *Arena* was, of course, nearly the same as the article in *SFC*.

Collingwood is an old inner suburb of Melbourne, not yet trendy-fied like many of the other inner suburbs. We got our house cheap for this reason. Lots of small factories around here (many publishers or printers), and in those residences left, most people are established working people who've been here for many years, or more recently arrived migrant families, often from Greece, Turkey, or Yugoslavia. Quiet at the weekend, pleasantly down-at-heel, with occasional reminders that this was the roughest suburb in Melbourne for about a century. Wattle Park is a suburban park some miles from the centre of Melbourne. The "Chalet" has served as tearooms, a restaurant, and a reception hall for many generations of Melbourneans. We could forget the nearby highways there for awhile. Thanks for your good wishes, Syd!

DAMIEN WHITE
24 Oxford Street
Newtown, NSW 2042

I enjoyed George Turner's survey of Australian sf. Hadn't even heard of some of the earlier books and writers he mentioned. But I would like to point out one confusion over names. He attributed "a slim volume of short stories called *Packaging at its Apoptrophe Best*" to Damien Broderick. *Packaging* is in fact a series of my stories (not sf).

(15 October 1979)

Thanks, Damien. I thought that item was peculiar. Turns out that Damien Broderick's short story collection was *A Man Returned* (mid-sixties).

In a letter sparked off by *SFC* 54, Patrick McGuire anticipated the issue he will get in about two months' time (if the USPO is even as efficient as that):

PATRICK MCGUIRE
5764 Stevens Forest Rd, Apt 204
Columbia
Maryland 21045, USA

The Luck of Brin's Five has just come out in paperback in the US, after what would appear an unreasonable delay. I haven't quite finished it but, since the ending (I looked ahead) isn't very conclusive and I suppose we'll have to wait for the rest of the trilogy to give a final judgment, I guess that doesn't much matter. I enjoyed it a good deal, particularly for the warm family relations depicted. (What is Cherry Wilder doing in Germany, anyhow? Obviously not living on her writing income, given the living costs there. Study? Job? Accompanying husband?) (*brg* The last item.*) *The Luck of Brin's Five* would seem to be another contribution in a long string of novels about "going native". Most of these seem to be written by women, though often with male protagonists. Some C J Cherryh novels (*Brothers of Earth*, *The Faded Sun*) would also seem to fit in here. I guess the tradition goes back to the "scientific romance" phase of the late nineteenth century, but in the current phase there seems to be much emphasis on the virtues of pre-technological societies, especially ones with large households, and the heroes, rather than dominating such societies *a la* John Carter, or rather than establishing contact with human society (as in, say, some de Camp), settle down in the traditional society and take on many or all of their traditional ways.

The "going native" novel is to be distinguished from the "frontier" novel, where the hero, the sfnal version of an Englishman or North American Easterner, goes off to California/Australia to find the values of *his own* society affirmed in a purer and more vigorous society. Thus many Grimes novels, Cherryh's *Hestia* (an early work brought out of the closet, perhaps not to the advantage of Cherryh's reputation), etc.

While as works of art they may be excellent, I'm not sure I like "going native" novels as a cultural manifestation. They typically seem to bespeak such a rejection of Western culture. Are we really in such trouble as all that? Well, you'd obviously say so, Bruce, unless domestic happiness is going to alter your view of the surrounding world.

I heard an interview with Kit Pedlar recently. He has "gone native", in the

MISSED OUT ON BACK COPIES OF S F COMMENTARY ?

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sense of buying an old house in Wales and setting it up so that he can live in it self-sufficiently. He made the point that he is trying not so much to live against technological society, but to make the best use of technology. It is possible to use a one-candle-power stove; it is possible to recycle water constantly in the one house. By wasting of so much of what we value, we will run out. By wasting so much, there is the constant need to expand—grab more resources, corral new markets, etc. So my favourite "pre-technological" society (which isn't really) is that of Ursula Le Guin in the *Earthsea* series. *Earthsea* is constrained *not* to expand—its people must use its slender resources in a renewable way. Cherry Wilder's world is much less convincing since, as Henry Gasko pointed out last issue, odd bits of technology are let into the story only as a superficial stop-gap in the story.

My main objection to the "going native" story is that so often the author smooths over the facts of the ghastliness of actually living in the society presented with such nostalgia. Much more convincing is a book like the Strugatsky Brothers' *Hard to be a God*.

LEANNE FRAHM
272 Slade Point Road
Slade Point, Queensland 4741

SFC 55/56 was the best issue I've seen so far. Probably because there was so

much history in it that I found fascinating—your own, *SFC*'s, Australian sf's. I particularly liked George Turner on Australian sf. The thing that stands out is that there has been so little of it. So it's not surprising that eighteen months ago I hadn't heard of any!

The reviews were delightful—whether they were “for” or “against”. Andrew Whitmore's in particular I loved. The style is beautiful to read, never mind the content. That is, as long as I'm not the subject of one of them!

I'm not in favour of trying to review stories or books myself. It's far too easy to be clever, as Whitmore is, about books that are poorly done, and difficult to praise books that are good without descending to the level (or should that be “ascending”?) of Rob Gerrard's fulsome paean on *The Weeping Sky*. Then, too, I would hate to become so involved with searching for the “true meaning” of a work that I could confidently explain to the author what that true meaning *really* is as you have done.

I agree with you on the wonderful experience of the workshop situation. Did you know that Jack Herman is campaigning in Sydney to stop visiting writers from attending workshops, as he feels this takes time that the author could be spending with fans away from the fans? But then would anything in Sydney surprise you?

Lovely, too, to hear from Elaine. I think I met Elaine at Anzapacon, but I met so many new people I might be remembering the wrong person. Anyway, you sound nice, Elaine. I empathise with anyone who has trillions of books lying around unread. I keep buying them for something to do when I retire, and will have time to read them.

The only (very mild) complaint I have about *SFC* 55/56 is the layout; having to keep turning pages to read bits of articles. I wouldn't have minded if each article was printed on consecutive full pages, although I gather you may have felt that was a bit daunting, and wanted to break up the monotony a bit.

(12 October 1979)

I suspect I've run out of room. Lots of good letters still in file, from people like Bert Chandler and Roman Orszanski. A longer column next time? Best wishes—

Bruce Gillespie 21 October 1979

CRITICANTO

HOT LINE TO THE ABSOLUTE

by Angus Taylor

Angus Taylor discusses

The Fall of Chronopolis

by Barrington J Bayley

(DAW; 1974; 175 pp; 95c

Allison and Busby; 1979; 175 pp;

4 pounds 95; \$A11.95)

Time travel stories form, I suppose, almost a sub-genre within sf, with their own jargon, their own clichés, and their own devotees. Sometimes the time-travel element is really only a prop for something else—as in Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, which can more properly be labelled a parallel-world story, or a love story, among other things.

Then there are the time-travel stories *par excellence*—stories whose main theme is time travel itself, and the delicious paradoxes and absurdities that arise therefrom. To me, Isaac Asimov's *The End of Eternity* takes the cake in this class: it's a whole novel revolving dizzily, but very tidily, about circles in time, problems of cause and effect, and so on.

The Fall of Chronopolis reminds me of Asimov's novel at some points. But, whereas Asimov's story is cool and cerebral, Barrington Bayley's is frantic and indulgent. It belongs to that class of sf works characterised by Brian Aldiss as “Widescreen Baroque”: “Their plots are elaborate and generally preposterous, their inhabitants have short names and short lives. They traffic as readily in the impossible as the possible. They obey a dictionary definition of baroque; which is to say that they have a bold and exuberant rather than a fine style, they are eccentric, and sometimes degenerate into extravagance. They like a wide screen, with space and possibly time travel as props, and at least the whole solar system as their setting” (Aldiss, introduction to Charles L Harness, *The Paradox Men*, London: Faber and Faber, 1964). And the fact that there is strictly speaking no space travel involved in Bayley's book hardly matters, when he has fleets of battle vehicles fighting it out in the “substratum”, a kind of never-never space outside the normal space-time continuum.

The Fall of Chronopolis introduces us to the Chronotic Empire and its desperate struggle to maintain its existence. As in *The*

End of Eternity, we are presented with a society existing “simultaneously”, as it were, over many centuries, and observed or encompassed from an outside continuum. But where with Asimov we view events strictly from the detached point of “Eternity”, Bayley's characters are totally caught up as actors in the “real” world. Where Asimov gives us a closed, technocratic time-travelling elite of Computers, Technicians, and Sociologists, Bayley gives us a time-opera extravaganza of decadent aristocrats, palace intrigue, bizarre religion, fear-crazed common folk, and outlandish superweapons. Where Asimov's hero panics at the mere thought of possibly seeing his own earlier or later self during his time travels, Bayley blithely presents us at one point with Narcis, a member of the royal family who literally has an affair with himself. The simple “libraries” of Eternity, containing the records of previous “realities” of the normal continuum, become for Bayley the “Achronal Archives”. Where Asimov's Eternity maintains itself efficiently by drawing on the unlimited power of the exploding sun of the far distant future, the Chronotic Empire must pay in hard currency for its supporting paraphernalia, such as the “time blocks” that protect its historical territory against invasion. At one point, a worried emperor is informed that “the rearward Stop Barrier already consumes one-third of the imperial budget”.

The particular mood of Bayley's book may be gleaned from the following passage;

Mayer was embarrassed. “With all respect, Your Highness...”

“Oh yes, I know,” she interrupted with an impatient wave of her hand. “State confidence. Still, I know what it was all about. Daddy's enterprise against the heathen.” She leaned closer, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Will there be great battles in the substratum? Awful mutations in time?”

“I fear there will, Your Highness,” Mayer said heavily.

She drew back in an expostulation of surprise. “Well, don't sound so gloomy about it. Look over there—that's Captain Vrin.” She pointed out a tall chron officer in full dress uniform—resplendent tunic, plumed hat, and waist-high boots belled at the top—who was talked animatedly surrounded by spellbound young women. “He's in the Third Fleet. He's just come back from a battle at Node Five. Isn't it exciting?”

Nothing could be farther from Asimov's clinical narrative, and Bayley's approach to things suggests the existence in his story of another field of concern. In addition to the obvious delight in all this elaborate nonsense of imagery, the author involves his characters in an emotional way with certain metaphysical problems of time and space. Take the following:

Like all chronmen he was fanatical in

regard to his duty; service to the empire was the chronman's creed. He felt personally affronted, not only by the intrusion into imperial territory, but also by the attempt to alter the relationship of the past to the future, a right that belonged to no one but their Chronotic Majesties the Imperial Family of the House of Ixian.

Anyone who can feel "personally affronted" by such a matter belongs in a Philip Dick novel, and indeed it is to Dick rather than Asimov that Bayley seems most closely related in this work. Bayley's storytelling is not as polished as either Dick's or Asimov's; in particular, his ending seems rather clumsy (something I've noticed in more than just the present story). What I want to point out here, though, is the way Bayley focuses attention on metaphysical questions. As with Dick, this involves the deliberate juxtaposition of incongruous elements, and has its decidedly humorous aspects:

The bridge crew numbered thirty-two in all, not counting the cowed priest who moved among them dispensing pre-battle blessings and sprinkling holy wine ... It had often amused Haight to think that, with the flagship undergoing full-speed test trials, a pilot who happened to glance back saw his commander as a massive titan hovering over him like an avenging angel.

What both Bayley and Dick do is to invest the most ordinary of events - and not just preparations for battle - with vivid existential significance. The secret is to dispense with all those experiences and actions that normally mediate between our consciousness and questions of the nature and meaning of existence - or at least to transform these experiences and actions into direct conduits to the confrontation with such questions. The imperial budget is not merely a matter of collecting and spending money, but involves a struggle to prevent the space-time continuum from disintegrating. The sensory effects induced by the operation of time-travelling vehicles are fraught with sinister theological implications. Bayley, like Dick, strips the everyday world of its *routine-ness*. An action or an experience is not simply an event dictated by the event preceding it and leading on naturally to the event following it; rather, it demands attention for *itself*, and brings us face to face with the question of existence.

In *What is Literature?*, Jean-Paul Sartre has observed that, in the bourgeois attitude, "The goal and dignity of a human life was to spend itself in the ordering of means. It was not *serious* to occupy oneself without intermediary in producing an absolute end. It was as if one aspired to see God face to face without the help of the Church." In *Nausea*, which is about as *Philidickian* a story as one is likely to come across, Sartre translates this perception into fictional terms, and it is perhaps worth quoting the following passage:

They come out of their offices after the day's work, they look at the houses and the squares with a satisfied expression, they think that it is *their* town. A "good little town". They aren't afraid, they feel at home...The idiots...They make laws, they write Populist novels, they get married, they commit the supreme folly of having children. And meanwhile, vast, vague Nature has slipped into their town, it has infiltrated

everywhere, into their houses, into their offices, into themselves. It doesn't move, it lies low, and they are right inside, they breathe it, and they don't see it, they imagine that it is outside, fifty miles away. I see it, that Nature, I see it... I know that its submissiveness is laziness, I know that it has no laws, that what they consider its constancy doesn't exist

It has nothing but habits and it may change those tomorrow.

This may recall to the reader *Time Out Of Joint*, or *Martian Time-Slip*, or indeed just about any and every Dick novel. Nature, reality, the pure fact of existence and the problems that attend it, lies everywhere, just below the insubstantial surface of the everyday world. Bayley's time-spanning society exists as the surface layer of a vast ocean of "potential time"; most of the book's characters are all too aware of the precarious nature of their existence, and even the actions and talk of those who aren't - such as the excited princess noted above - serve to draw the reader's attention to the very questions they ostensibly ignore. Like Sartre and Dick, Bayley involves his characters in the attempt, as it were, "to see God face to face without the help of the Church" - where "God" here refers either to the deity or to Nature with a capital "N", and the "Church" to the distracting mediations of routine life. The fact that an institutional Church is invoked by Bayley should mislead no one on this score; its all-pervasive influence in *The Fall of Chronopolis* serves not as an opium for the masses but as a direct conduit to the Absolute, just as it does in Dick's *Counter-Clock World*:

The Holy Order of the Chronotic Knights even organized deep-diving expeditions to try to find God, but they all came to grief. Later the Church's theology became more sophisticated and now it is taught that God cannot be found in any direction accessible to a timeship. Seeking for him by entering the deeps of time is regarded as a trap for the ignorant, for it harbors not God but the Evil One.

Although *The Fall of Chronopolis* hardly matches *The End of Eternity* as a time-travel story *per se*, it does have certain other rewarding aspects, as I've tried to suggest. Among these is the element of humour pervading Bayley's writing, one that will appeal to a particular type of reader and, no doubt, leave many others quite cold.

"Paradoxes," Aton murmured. "If you kill your earlier self, then you'll no longer be alive to kill yourself."

"We'll just have to let that sort itself out." Rilke juttied out his jaw rum-inatively.

I find these lines, for example, hilariously funny, for reasons I find difficult to put into words. It has to do with the way that Bayley pokes fun at a science fiction cliché, while simultaneously using it to express a feeling of metaphysical urgency. And how many authors would christen the flagship of their intertemporal armada *Lamp of Faith*? What Stanislaw Lem has said of Dick could also be said of Bayley - that he employs the trashy clichés of pulp s f while managing to transcend them. He doesn't always transcend them, but he comes out on top often enough to make him a writer worth watching - and reading.

Angus M Taylor
January 1977

THROWBACKS

by Sneja Gunew

Sneja Gunew reviews

Turning Points:

Essays on Science Fiction

edited by Damon Knight

(Harper and Row; 1977; 303 pp;

\$US12.50)

I have been trying to work out the rationale behind this rather expensive production, since quite a few of the articles are either part of larger, readily available works, or they are reprints of somewhat hoary, pioneering articles on the genre. The book is a bit of a throwback (eg, there are three Heinlein articles) to the days when, for most people, s f was Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke. Heinlein remains exasperating, but somehow charming - like a precocious kid whom one would like to admire for his achievements, but who keeps on lapsing into immaturities that remind one that he is a kid (who wrote *Starship Troopers*).

The book itself is divided into six sections. I will give an outline, because I'm not sure who the audience is meant to be, so you pay your money and takes your choice, if you want it. In fact, it is a book for all seasons, trying to please everyone with some morsel.

Section 1 supposedly grapples with the concept of s f, and is headed by a partisan essay by Heinlein which blows the trumpet for s f as a cushion against "future shock".

Asimov is next, with a related justification on a social basis:

It is my opinion that social science fiction is the only branch of science fiction that is sociologically significant, and that those stories which are generally accepted as science fiction... but do not fall within the definition...are *not* significant... (p 30)

That's ok, so long as you accept the premise that "sociologically significant" is the deciding factor in appraising literature.

Knight's own contribution closes that section, with an attempt to separate definitions of s f from actual examples. He finds that a lot of the material is "sci fi", ie, junk literature.

Section II deals with the history of s f, and opens with a longish chapter from Aldiss' *Billion Year Spree* (maybe it's not so readily available in America) which ends with the rather stimulating assertion that s f is, to some extent, a continuation of the *conte philosophique*, ie, the novel of ideas (eg, Voltaire and Swift), as opposed to the novel of manners and human relationships, which has defined the genre in a mainstream sense. Unfortunately, he also labels the two forms "masculine" and "feminine", with no justification, and some day I will give myself the pleasure of analysing those last two pages in gory detail.

H B Franklin's "SF Before Gernsback" tells us that all major 19th century American writers wrote at least one s f work in

those halcyon days before the pulps took over.

Amis' "The Situation Today" rounds off the section, and is a reprint of a 1960 statement! Consequently, and not surprisingly, it is rather jaundiced about the bad writing in the field and the fannish adulation of it.

Section III deals with criticism and here, particularly, the cross-section is curious, not least in that it lacks an article by the editor.

The first essay by C S Lewis is, as one might expect, avuncular in tone, and ends on the lyrically optimistic note that s f is the liberation of the mythopoeic imagination, designed to provoke wonder and to widen the reader's experience beyond the known world.

Joanna Russ' "Alien Monsters" is a delightful expose of that supremely alien monster - the super-hero.

Blish's "Cathedrals in Space" deals with religion in s f by way of demolishing Heinlein's metaphysics in *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

Pierre Versin's "Contact" is an extract from a rather learned French encyclopedia which contrasts a Soviet writer's (Yefremov) and Leinster's treatment of the meeting of alien and human, in which the former emerges as too trusting, and the latter as the cynical representative of Realpolitik.

Section IV explores the science content in s f. John W Campbell proves that alien weapon duplication strains the reader's credulity overmuch when you consider the difficulties that 1920's scientists would have in understanding a guided missile.

The second article is an extensive debate by diverse scientific authorities, showing that science is becoming increasingly less certain about the existence of permanent laws, but to redress this liberalism also proves the existence of a reactionary scientific Establishment.

Section V is a workmanlike "how to write s f", and begins, once more, with a Heinlein contribution, with the master fitting most literary plots into three pigeonholes - quite a feat.

Poul Anderson gives a detailed account on how to create a planet without suspending too much belief.

Laumer talks about the joys (and traumas) of collaboration.

Finally, Knight's "Writing and Selling SF" explores some of the major elements in s f stories and ends with practical tips on how to prepare one's manuscript (it all sounds so easy).

Section VI, "SF As Prophecy", is another curiosity, which includes an essay by Huxley on his soma drug, comparing it with "modern" (1958) stimulants and provoking a rather meditative response from a reader in the midst of a 1977 drug-dominated culture - accurate extrapolation here.

Heinlein appears again, optimistic as usual, visualising a geriatric's paradise on the low-gravity moon.

Bester contributes a light-hearted *tour de force* on futuristic *haute cuisine*.

Section VI is simply titled "Confessions" and is self-explanatory, in that Sturgeon, Asimov, Clarke, and Richard McKenna tell of their experiences as practising writers.

So there you have it. As a low-key introduction to the many facets of s f, this is ok. But I'd suggest waiting for the paperback.

Sneja Gunew
May 1977

Peter Nicholls whips off the mask of sardonic observer and replaces it with its antithesis—the optimistic fan.

SIGNPOSTS

by Sneja Gunew

Sneja Gunew reviews

Nebula Award Stories 11

edited by Ursula K Le Guin

(Gollancz; 1976; 255 pp; 4 pounds 20;
Harper & Row; 1977; 258 pp;
\$US8.95)

Three articles in this collection set up a critical framework for the fiction stories.

Ursula Le Guin's introduction is a gentle and rather generalised encouragement to practitioners in the field, with a welcome injunction for them to avoid the morally trivial and to foster instead s f's greatest asset — a questioning spirit and "quality of openness".

Vonda McIntyre's defensive little piece on why she writes s f takes much the same line with respect to moral responsibility being the prime function of the s f writer — not so much a playing with one's technological toys as an attempt to delineate the sociological effects of such toys.

Peter Nicholls in a characteristically debunking vein speaks of the failure of self-definition in s f (odd from a man who supports the line of plotting the source of s f in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*) and posits an extended metaphor of a crumbling Empire led by cynical publishers. Towards the latter end of the article, however, he whips off the mask of sardonic observer and replaces it with its antithesis of optimistic fan, in that he finds room for hope in the very diversification and fragmentation of s f that he saw earlier as a sign of decadence. I am uneasy watching the Jekyll-Hyde transformation because it arouses the suspicion that Nicholls has himself fallen into that very critical quicksand that he had earlier been ringing with warning signs. So from these signposts can we apply them at all fruitfully to this collection? Do we in fact find elements of a greater moral responsibility? the effects of technology on society? and, on the negative side, signs of s f being indistinguishable from other speculative fiction? Yes, I think we get all these factors.

Fritz Leiber's "Catch That Zeppelin", which heads the collection as the winning story, holds up under quite a painstaking (deservedly so) scrutiny. The overall plot pattern is a familiar one, that of parallel worlds in which history has taken a different turn, in this case, that World War 11 never got off the ground because there was no Armistice and the Germans were utterly routed in World War 1. Consequently the humanistic rather than the militaristic side of the German mentality (seen in these traditionally schizophrenic terms, eg, how could the same men who loved Goethe and Mozart commit genocide?) took over. But what impresses me about the story is

not so much the handling of plot and the expository passages dealing with "what if" historical divergences (though these are treated in quite a witty manner, eg, Marie Sklodowska being raced off by Thomas Edison instead of Pierre Curie) as the creation and development of the narrating consciousness. And in this Leiber fulfills the two positive conditions referred to above, of moral responsibility and the sociological effects of technology.

The narrative voice is that of a middle-aged German engineer on his way to a date (I use the term deliberately) with his historian son. Both are involved in the Zeppelin industry — helium not hydrogen filled — and hence quite safe. With consummate skill, Leiber evokes the ponderous, pedantic verbosity that one finds so often in the German bourgeois novel (particularly in translation). eg., a love for statistical detail. In fact, the story begins with a spoof on the marathon German sentence — a marvellously weighty metaphysical credo replete with capitals for keywords. The flat-footed Teutonic mentality (would he really *describe himself* as goose-stepping, or is this Leiber's voice?) is admirably counterpointed by an image of its totemic archetype, King Kong, agilely struggling up that statistical masterpiece, the Empire State. In like manner, the spiritually ape-like narrator struggles upward to ally himself with the silver Zeppelins floating above a city full of unpalatable "blackamoors" and Caucasians. But in spite of his capacity for vision and his defensive affirmation of Germanic tolerance for all peoples, he is haunted by the spectre of a cadaverous "Hebraic" man. Overcome with the guilt of trying to subdue the "wicked submarines" (racism) of his subconscious, the narrator finally meets his son in an elaborately schmaltzy encounter. Finally, "Dolfy" (I was Hitler's double) exits precipitously trying to catch his Zeppelin/dream, hotly pursued by the vengeful Jew, only to find himself back in the familiar time-stream with a fading glimpse of another Fall as his totemic King Kong hurtles from the Empire State. The story concludes, not with American-German *entente cordiale* in a physically and spiritually unpolluted age of electric cars, Zeppelins, and German humanism, but with a rather weary emigre-narrator meeting a son who is thoroughly and successfully estranged from all things German.

Joe Haldeman's "End Game" is a reasonably well-told (action-packed), if somewhat banal, *reductio* of the loneliness and alienation experienced by any troop-commander. Because of time-jumps, the narrator/comm-ander is a thorough anachronism to his troops. He loses on all counts: born of a woman, heterosexual, and schooled in the full range of historical combat tactics — completely outmoded. Pitted against a mechanistic, inhuman enemy, he proves to his contemptuous men that the elementary tactics and old-fashioned values (!) are the ones that ensure survival in a situation where the odds against it are astronomical. (Note that his name is derived from mandala.)

"San Diego Lightfoot Sue"—beautifully written . . . a poignant exploration of innocence meeting experience . . . a peripheral, but masterly inclusion of a homosexual relationship, all set in a dream city—Hollywood.

This could be Heinlein, except that it turns out to be a spoof on the Heinlein hero, because the war is shown to be utterly avoidable — the result of lack of elementary communication between humans and aliens. This is revealed to the narrator by the sole surviving clone-offspring of the last human who are, ironically, far more inhuman than the former enemy. One could say this is a story about degrees of alienation. This would be OK as a neat twist except that the macho commander, true to form, re-establishes contact with his long-lost mate and, in an outpost of exiled anachronisms, they produce a child — naturally! Certainly there is an attempt here to explore the effects of technology but, because of the stereotyped characterisation, it is rather difficult to relate to it seriously.

Zelazny's "Home is the Hangman", a novella, does a much better job. The story is an elegantly self-conscious variation on the Frankenstein plot, with the "monster" gaining the reader's sympathy in preference to its twisted creators. The narrator, as in the case of the previous story, is a man-of-action — Zelazny's familiar super-hero with touches of Bogart (he is a private eye) and a rather incongruous introspectiveness (two pages give you allusions to Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Mannheim). Zelazny uses the whodunit framework to build up suspense and a final reversal of expectations. Certainly the philosophical pot-pourri points to an attempt to evoke moral awareness but again the ending is rather glib.

Plauser's "Child of All Ages" is a rather heavy-handed propaganda-piece for kiddes' lib.

Harlan Ellison's "Shatterday", a story of a doppelganger of struggle between the Jungian Self and Shadow, is rather pretentious and too long. The only interesting element in this treatment of a well-worn theme (see Nicholls, pages 84-85) is that the Shadow, or usurper, becomes increasingly sympathetic so that the Self's demise is quite a relief. Self-knowledge is acquired at the cost of self-demolition!

Tom Reamy's award-winning novella, "San Diego Lightfoot Sue", partakes of the third condition referred to above. It is certainly difficult to call this s f under any conditions. But it is beautifully written. What we get is a poignant exploration of innocence meeting experience — older woman, young boy — with a peripheral, but masterly inclusion of a homosexual relationship, all set in dream-city — Hollywood. Hard to know what to say about the story in this particular context except that it has an aura of eroticism that reminded me of the marvellous Lola Albright film, *A Cold Wind in August*.

Craig Strete's "Time Deer" is a small jewel and the book is worth getting for this alone. It is a surrealist tale that I do not fully understand, because the symbols are the kind that hit below the conscious level, and this is supplemented by the incantatory style. But certainly there is a moral aware-

ness and certainly the insidious effects of dehumanising technology are explored:

And the old man watched the boy and did not understand death. And the young boy watched the door and understood beauty. And the deer was watched by all and the Great Being above. And the boy saw the deer for what she was.

Quite a discovery, and hopefully there will be more from this writer.

JOURNEYS TO NEW TERRITORY

by Sneja Gunew

Sneja Gunew reviews

The Exile Waiting

by Vonda McIntyre

(Gollancz; 1976; 255 pp; 3 pounds 95/\$A8.15;

Fawcett P3456; 1975; 224 pp; \$US1.25).

This is a novel clearly influenced by other writers, notably Ursula Le Guin, but this is not meant to be in itself a disparaging comment because Le Guin has opened up a new territory in s f writing — giving credible life to sophisticated extrapolatory psychological and socio-political concepts — and Vonda McIntyre is merely establishing a claim there. Structurally, for example, her novel recalls Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* in the way the narrative is punctuated with extracts from Jan Hikaru's diary, reminiscent of Genly Ai's diary and, in a more general sense, both novels are primarily concerned with outcasts, aliens, and levels of tolerance. Who indeed is the exile in McIntyre's society? There are touches, too, of Cordwainer Smith, in that we are dealing with an Earth whose surface resources have been laid waste so that surviving humanity has had to move underground, becoming stringently hierarchical in the process. The "families", decadent and in-bred, each responsible for the control of a life-staple (eg, the nuclear reactor) control a populace of merchants and slaves. At the very lowest and unacknowledged level are the mutants, those who deviate in any manner from the norm — shades of Smith's Lords of the Instrumentality and of his Underpeople.

The book begins with a laconic extract from Jan Hikaru's diary (a view from outside Earth) defining his self-imposed exile and introducing his friend and Homerically blind and dying poetess. In the montage effect we then focus on Misha (a view from within Earth) a young master-thief and secret outcast, not due to her criminal pursuits so much as her ESP ability to sense the

thoughts and emotions of others. This trait, which she shares with her whole family, allows them to be ruthlessly exploited by a crippled uncle who controls them by means of a mongoloid but highly telepathic sister — when Gemmi is hurt she screams for her siblings and they are forced to heed her call or go mad. Misha also carries the burden of fending for her dying junkie brother, Chris.

Into this decadent society erupt the off-world raiders led by super-race pseudosibs Subone and Subtwo, reared apart in sterile isolation but as alike as Siamese twins. They carry with them Jan Hikaru fleeing from a Japanese-style world and an oriental father who ineffectually attempts to re-enact the medieval world of the Genji epic and who cannot acknowledge his blonde and alienated son.

This is the basic set-up. Two themes dominate the novel: freedom in terms of the need for the individual to balance independence from family-ties with fellow-feeling or empathy for others; the recognition of the other. At one end of the scale of bondage are the in-bred families of Old Earth represented by Lord Blaisse and the Lady Clarissa, for whom there is never any chance to break out of their incontinent hedonism; at the other end are the figures of Hikaru's poetess and the mysterious shamanness. Misha must break free from her family by way of having to live Chris' death almost to the final stage. She is not truly liberated until she is able voluntarily to choose to go back to rescue Gemmi and is able to trust herself to someone outside her family — Jan Hikaru. Subtwo, desperately attempting to simulate normal emotions, must sever his destiny from Subone's, who is increasingly contaminated by the dissoluteness and power-hunger he encounters on Earth. It is a case of choosing not to be one's brother's keeper in the literal and restricted sense. Subtwo's movement away from his twin is paralleled by his movement towards Blaisse's robotic steward-slave, "Madame" who, a slave from birth, has almost lost any conception of freedom.

These journeys to identity and freedom of will, together with the acknowledgement of the existence of the other, are centrally realised in an archetypal and literal journey underground through the labyrinthine catacombs where the city has banished those it cannot afford to recognise — the mutants, and the dead. McIntyre has constructed an elaborately extended metaphor dealing with the repression of subconscious fears, both on the individual and on the social level:

Past her, in the water, Jan saw other forms, some dark, shrouded, and new, some old and decomposing, overgrown with piles of bones: skulls, entire, articulated hands; shattered, fang-marked leg bones. This was the final resting-place of Center's dead. The sour taste of bile rose in Jan's throat. He gagged, and reflexes overcame him: he retched drily, falling to his knees. Afterwards, he knelt, breathing heavily, drawing the products of corruption into his lungs, accepting, knowing he was their past, as they were his future. (page 215, Gollancz edition)

The group of those who have been branded as exiles and outcasts finally leave Earth having, paradoxically, found themselves or at least begun to accept themselves and each other. Earth itself is left in the hands of the mutants (the characteristic revolt from underground), the new reservoir of energy

and vitality. Repressions are therefore faced on both levels, resulting in a greater strength in both the individuals and society.

The book is valuable perhaps in that it is a forerunner, in the sense that it incorporates a new voice worth watching but, as it stands, it is flawed, top-heavy with abstractions insufficiently transformed into fully rounded characters. There is, for example, the remarkable and, sadly, rather brief appearance of a figure McIntyre had created powerfully and originally in an earlier short story ("Of Mist, And Grass, And Sand"), that of the shamanness, or female healer. Here, and in the figure of the crippled thief Kiri, are the signs that make me think that McIntyre, tentatively in this case, but perhaps more firmly in the future is staking out her claim in that new territory mentioned in the beginning of this review. Whether she will expose a more consistently rich vein remains to be seen.

Sneja Gunew
March 1977

FLASHES AND IMAGINING

by Van Ikin

Van Ikin reviews

Doorways in the Sand

by Roger Zelazny

(Harper & Row; 1976; 185 pp;

\$US3.95;

Avon 32086; 1977; 189 pp; \$US1.50)

Near midnight, as I was trying a new route up the cathedral, I thought that I counted an extra gargoyle. As I moved closer, though, I saw that it was Professor Dobson atop the buttress. Drunk again and counting stars, I guessed.

At first it looks like a satire of academia: apart from the cathedral-climbing acrophilic professor, *Doorways in the Sand* features a perpetual student and an academic who is dismissed "under the cloud of a scandal involving a girl, a dwarf and a donkey". Then it begins to look like some kind of comic/satiric novel that tries to make a few prophetic predictions about the future of our current mania for tertiary education.

But *Doorways in the Sand* ends up being none of these things. It is purely an "entertainment", crammed with a variety of styles, characters, gags, clichés, and punchlines, and its references to the academic world are in fact only one facet of the novel.

In addition to professors and students, there are alien plainclothesmen who pass as local fauna:

I was not completely surprised when I raised my head and saw a six-foot-plus kangaroo standing beside the wombat. It considered me through a pair of dark glasses as it removed a sandwich bag from its pouch.

"Peanut butter is rich in protein," it said.

** ** *

The wombat turned and sprang onto my chest. I began to scream, but he stuffed his paw into my mouth, gagging me. With my left hand I reached for the scruff of his neck and had hold of it before I recalled that my left hand was supposedly bound.

He clamped down with his other three limbs, thrust his face up close to mine and whispered hoarsely, "You are complicating matters dangerously, Mister Cassidy. Release my neck immediately and keep still afterwards."

So, as one might guess, the plot is wild and wacky.

Fred Cassidy — "a decent, civilized, likable guy" — is a perpetual student. His late uncle has left a fairly sizable fund out of which Fred receives an extremely liberal allowance for as long as he remains a full-time student working on a degree. Once Fred receives a degree of any sort, the allowance terminates and the balance remaining in the fund is to be distributed to representatives of the Irish Republican Army. (The uncle has had himself stored away by the Bide-A-Wee cryonics company and his is one of the few corpses to survive that company's rather unscrupulous practice of putting on ice only one out of every ten of its customers. But that's another story.) Not surprisingly, Fred decides that his allowance is a good thing and so he becomes a professional undergraduate, setting himself the task of finding loopholes in the university's by-laws — most of which have been devised for the sole purpose of shoving him out into the "real world".

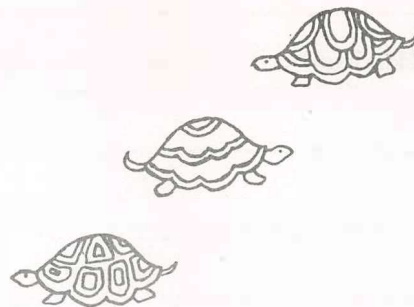
As the novel opens, the university thinks it has finally caught him on a mandatory graduation; as the novel ends, Fred is trying to elude a PhD that has been thrust upon him:

I turn my back, I go out of town for a little while and you slip me a PhD. Do I deserve that kind of treatment after giving you my patronage all this time?

But all of this is by the way. What really matters in the novel is the star-stone, an alien artifact that has come to Earth as an item of cultural exchange. No one quite knows what it is — it is described as a relic, a specimen of unknown utility (but most likely decorative), and it is said to be the oldest intelligently fashioned object in the galaxy. More importantly, no one knows where it is, for one of Cassidy's academic mates (not the one with a taste for donkey) has made several very good plaster models of the star-stone, and has then proceeded to mix them all up and lose most of them during a poker party. Everyone thinks Cassidy knows where the real star-stone is, and so he becomes a magnet attracting all those parties with an interest in the stone. He is forced to undergo the process of telepathic analysis (which turns out to constitute the indignity of suffering "assault therapy" as practised by a militant vegetable) and, as a final ignominy, he finds himself tangling with a nasty Rhennius machine and ending up reversed in his molecules.

The plot, then, is a gleeful grab-bag of goodies, baddies, and improbable situations.

The style, too, is quite diverse. As if letting his literary hair down a little, Zelazny seems to write (in this novel) with his eye on isolated individual effects rather than on the general tone of the work as a whole. *Doorways in the Sand* may be a comic novel, but it is not the sort of intense,



sustained comic work that is written by, say, Barry Oakley. Most of the Zelazny novel is written in the discursive mode, and thus its lowest common stylistic denominator is flat, serviceable, first-person narrative. Yet from the "mean" of this workaday prose, the novel often gears itself up to peaks of stylistic innovation and contortion. (Though I hardly think there is any longer anything really "innovative" about the following stylistic contortion):

Another blackness. Absolute. A parched, brittle thing/place of indeterminate size/duration. I was in it and vice-versa — equally distributed and totally contained by/in the nightmare system with consciousness at cⁿ and chill-thirstheatchillthirstheat a repeating decimal running every/anywhere on the projective plane that surrounded . . .

Flashes and imagining . . .

These stylistic variations become more interesting when Zelazny is obviously savouring the taste of words on his tongue — "Lying there, with my abrasions, contusions, aches and confusions . . ." — and they are most successful when put to comic effect:

All of which I offer as preamble to his comment, "Let's put him in the sun and watch him turn into a raisin," followed by several moments of silken brow-blotting as he awaited my response. Disappointed by it, they staked me out where I could wrinkle, darken and concentrate my sugars, while they returned to their vehicle for an ice chest. They took up a position in the shade of my shelter, periodically strolling over to stage a beer commercial on my behalf.

Thus the afternoon. Later, they decided that a night's worth of wind, sand and stars were also necessary for my raisinhood.

It's the comic effect, of course, that carries the novel. Encountering a political opponent with a genuine sense of humour, one tends to laugh and bury the hatchet, and similarly, with *Doorways in the Sand*, one tends to forget critical perspectives and join in the spirit of the thing:

"I take it that they are uninvited guests and that their names are something you are permitted to say. What do they represent?" (Cassidy asked the wombat).

"They are doodlehumms."

"Doodlehumms?"

"Antisocial individuals, intentional circumventors of statutes."

"Oh, hoodlums. Yes, I guessed that much on my own . . ."

The novel is an entertainment, pure and simple. A more "serious" purpose could not possibly justify its stylistic unevenness, the sheer irrelevance of much of its content, and the utter implausibility of many of its scenes. *Doorways in the Sand* is meant to be read, chuckled over, and forgotten. But its salvation is that this is *meant* to be.

Harrison writes about microcosms . . . as if he were writing about the area lit by a single street-lamp.

A SINGLE STREET-LAMP

by Neville Angove

Neville Angove reviews

The Best of Harry Harrison

introduced by Barry Malzberg

(Pocket Books; 1976; 302 pp;

\$US1.95)

It gives one a feeling of satisfaction to read a collection of stories labelled "best of . . ." and find that the title is an honest one. Too many anthologies claim to contain the cream of the crop and then fail to deliver the goods.

I have never been a great fan of Harrison. Much of his writing has seemed either incomplete or mediocre — I still consider his second-best novel to be *The Technicolor Time Machine*. But this collection has recalled to mind some of the best short stories I have ever read — stories like "The Streets of Ashkelon", "Rescue Operation", and "Mute Milton". The drama of these is balanced by the comedy of "An Honest Day's Work" and the pathos and frustration of "A Criminal Act". The number of the stories in this collection (twenty in all) does not allow detailed individual treatment, so I must confine myself to generalities: in general, the stories are excellent; in general, the stories show the broad range of subject matter with which Harrison is a capable craftsman; in general, the collection is well worth reading.

Harrison writes about microcosms. His plots seem somehow separated from the action of the real world, as if he were writing about the area lit by a single street-lamp. Little reference is ever made to anything beyond the immediate locale. This treatment forces the reader to concentrate on the characters involved in the plot, and on the meaning of their actions. The reader cannot easily identify and then ignore the characters, but needs to pay attention to them to understand them.

Not all of Harrison's stories have deep meanings, however. Or any meaning at all. The best that can be said of those which are more than an exercise in comedy is that they examine the human condition. Although the characters are real, occasionally they seem to be examples of certain classes of behaviour rather than individuals in their own right: the priest in "The Streets of Ashkelon" is a typical do-gooder and has rather clichéd reactions, for example. But the human condition is not examined alone, but in relation to certain concepts and specific circumstances: advertising, alien invasion, automation, and even receptivity to new ideas. The result is a story which is satisfying to read, but at the same time generating some disquiet in the reader — not in the conclusion of the story itself, but in

the outcome of the *real* situation presented in the story.

Three stories in particular deserve special attention, if only for the circumstances surrounding them. "The Streets of Ashkelon" was rejected originally because it had an anti-religious theme. But it does explore a question which has been the focus of attention for many theologians for several years: what do you do if you find intelligent aliens, especially if they think "differently" from us? Do you present them with a copy of the Bible, and hope they do not take it too literally, or do you leave them alone?

"Rescue Operation" was written after a visit to post-war Yugoslavia, and its attempt to show how a "backward" people might react to alien visitors succeeds in showing the similarities between all human communities.

"Portrait of the Artist" concerns a cartoon-strip artist, drawn from real-life experiences. Even a worker in such a maligned profession deserves respect for his craft.

The collection is good, and although it contains many stories which have been anthologised elsewhere recently, it is worth the reading, if only for Harrison's introductions to each story.

Nev Angove
January 1977



THE MOST INCREDIBLE SHOW NEVER SEEN

by Neville Angove

Neville Angove reviews

The Starcrossed

by Ben Bova

(Chilton; 1975; 197 pp; \$US6.95)

Imagine Arthur Hailey; imagine what he might do in a story about the production of a television series; then remove all the meat and add off-beat humour with a science-fictional element. The result *might* be *The Starcrossed*. But you have to be wary of assuming this result automatically. The magic ingredient is Harlan Ellison. It could not possibly happen unless the mini-Mongol was involved.

Back in February of 1973, Harlan

Ellison received a phone call. Six months later, the series that made *Lost in Space* look like *s f* was aired by US television. If you want the gory details, they are in "Somehow I Don't Think We're in Kansas, Toto" (*Amazing*, July 1975). But Ben Bova uses these same details (re-manufactured to protect the guilty) as the plot of *The Starcrossed*, doing to tv what Harry Harrison's *The Technicolor Time Machine* did to the cinema.

Titanic Productions is bankrupt, but its rapacious boss, Bernard Finger, secures the rights to a new holovision process and the money to produce an *s f* series using the new process. But the only writer he can get is Ron Gabriel, an under-sized, over-sexed "punk" who insists on insinuating realism into his scripts, and who becomes violently argumentative whenever this is challenged. In order to solve a personal problem, the series' executive producer transfers the production to Canada, and appoints a new executive producer (Gregory Ernest) because Gabriel gives him ulcers. Meanwhile the boss, Finger, milks most of the production funds so he can bet on pro football, and save the studio that way. Meanwhile Ernest learns quickly to loathe Gabriel, and sabotages him at every turn. He also does the same to the series, but is too busy seeing his name in lights to notice. Meanwhile the engineer who developed the holovision process is signed to the series as scientific advisor and falls for Finger's daughter, while Gabriel falls for Finger's whore, while . . .

The plot is too complex to be described without telling all of the story. There are empty-headed actors, art-full (as distinct from *artful*) designers, incompetent technicians, and weasels for executives. All these interact to produce the most incredible show that television (holovision?) never saw. Bova touches on all the various factors which can make or break a television series, including critics, sponsors, censors, and viewers. Even *s f* fandom receives a few low blows. How closely the incidents in the book match what really happened is a matter for conjecture. Only the characters involved know, but only Ellison is talking.

The Starcrossed seems to be more than an attempt to satirise the production of a certain television series. It seems to be a general comment on the translation of *s f* to the small screen, and why this translation is rarely successful. Although it is a comedy, there are a few dramatic moments. The comedy is obvious, often too obvious. The drama is revealed in dribs and drabs — a director wanting to produce a good show but hamstrung by the producers; an engineer trying to maintain his sane little world but dragged from it by the rapaciousness of others; and the writer wishing to say something to his audience, but getting screwed around instead. It is these little tit-bits which stop the story from degenerating into an impossible farce, and at the same time provide some attempt at realistic characterisation.

I cannot help feeling that Bova could have turned this novel into either a better comedy or a better drama. As it stands, it is an enjoyable novel, especially if you are familiar with the background events. It is not a great novel in any sense. It wasn't meant to be.

Nev Angove
February 1977



WHAT DOES THE PIT SIGNIFY?

by Sneja Gunew

Sneja Gunew reviews

The Gamesman

by Barry Malzberg

(Pocket Books 671 80174; 1975;

188 pp; \$US1.25)

My first response to *The Gamesman* was that this was a reductionist fable for our time rather than being a futuristic extrapolation. My second response was that, given the first, both Kafka and Borges had done all this in a much more substantial and earth-shattering way in their own fables of man caught up in a malevolent and unfathomable labyrinthine model of the world. I use the word "substantial" deliberately, because this is what the book seems to lack most obviously — a feeling of substance, of density, or a palpable reality. The second most obvious fault, in my eyes, is that the book, as the creation of a secondary world, does not hold to its own logic. Too many symbolic hares are let loose and not followed up. I'll return to that later.

The book is told in a stream-of-consciousness manner from the viewpoint of a schizophrenic who alternates between a 27-year-old self, Block, and an older self, Papa Joe. This is the first hare, because not much is made of this second self, other than to raise the tenuous suggestion that Papa Joe could be Jonah (see particularly page 104) or even Kafka's Joseph K. We are told only that he represents an attempt at ironic and objective distancing.

The world posited by Malzberg is characterised by a prevailing sense of existential futility which is relieved by two mechanistic devices: one, the Transmitter which replaces thought with movement, transporting people effortlessly and frenziedly from one point of the globe to the other (progression rather than progress); and two, the Game:

Two hundred years ago Games began to dominate the lives of the people whose energies were being diffused into a hundred preoccupations. It became foreseeable that it would soon be entirely a Games Culture where people perceived their lives not as lived internally but only as they related to the Games; the energies of the populace more and more were being drained into the Games format. It therefore became inevitable that if the culture were to survive at all, if it were to lurch forward into the twenty-first and then the twenty-second century, it would be

Malzberg—"meaningful" allusions which are not consistently pursued.

necessary to either abolish the Games or to do something to integrate them into the main web and because abolition was impossible — people could not confront their lives and that is why they needed the idea of the Games in the first place — the second and better choice was the make the Games themselves more operative.

(page 69)

The fundamental principles affirmed by all the Games' contestants deal not with the nature of the Game so much as being largely an expression of conformity to the idea of the Game and to its omnipotence in their lives.

What the narrator discovers is that his challenger is ultimately himself, so that his losses and failures become failures in living up to his self-image, particularly humiliating in that the subject he has chosen is that of sexual competence. In that area, technique is emphasised in the face of an endless array of randomly chosen, anonymous, and silent sexual partners. What he also learns (and in this way Malzberg creates the illusion of character development) is that to pierce through that anonymity, be it of his partner or of his questioner the Gamesman, paradoxically renders him more vulnerable. When the mask of the automation or mechanistic anonymity is lifted from his antagonist, the narrator finds himself even more conscious of his own inadequacies because the burden is now upon him to establish the meaningful contact he has convinced himself he desired. He can no longer rely on rules or ritual, on technique, but only on his own resources as a human being. This is the ultimate test. A Dostoevskian interview between the narrator and the embittered ancient Games Master (Grand Inquisitor?) prepares us for this realisation that true freedom of choice is so mind-shattering that people generally relinquish it gladly for mere time-killing occupations, which is, of course, just what the Games are. This discovery is acted out by the narrator when he finds himself rejecting a plea for help by the one woman with whom he has succeeded sexually because he had previously established an emotional link with her.

Once he has rejected her cry, has has unconsciously asserted his existential isolation and must re-enter the toils of the Game because that is all he can manage and all he really wants — a sterile and endlessly repeated time-killing challenge of himself within safe boundaries. He has no resources to offer another human being. But, of course, the Game successfully prevents him from having to face up to this truth.

What I suppose I object to is that Malzberg, instead of developing a world which reflects these choices in an organic and related pattern, feels the need to introduce a host of "meaningful" allusions which are not consistently pursued. There is a sense that they have been imposed from the outside. For example, why is not more made of the fact that people are given the free choice to suicide up till the age of 25? What does the Pit signify? If there is an

actual game, an underlying sustained metaphor, and the numerous references to numbers appear to indicate this, then why is this not followed through? Quibbles, but when you realise that the central idea is not, after all, new, then the treatment becomes the prime factor in evaluating the book and the treatment is lacking in consistency.

SURREALIST TANTALUS

by John DiPrete

John DiPrete reviews

Irrational Numbers

by George Alec Effinger

(Doubleday; 1976; \$US5.95)

Irrational Numbers is a story collection having almost nothing to do with numbers. The tales collected here do not concern calculus, space theorems, or alien square roots — not even simple arithmetic. Instead, they concern good, unconventional stuff — the kind that a voracious reader like myself can sink his teeth into. Why then, the perceptive reader may ask, is Effinger's book entitled *Irrational Numbers*? The answer: beats me.

"At the Bran Foundry" is allegorical fantasy; a metaphor. Touring a large raisin bran factory, a group of high school students confront a strange, surrealistic world. A crushing world of "surging machines . . . in a restless steel forest", of grim-faced guards, of unexpected death.

Less chilling, but nevertheless dark and foreboding in atmosphere, is "How It Felt" — the next-to-last story in this book. "How It Felt" gives a stark portrayal of a race of beings stripped of every emotion, all except for one girl, Vivi. Vivi, suppressing her rainbow array of feelings, accompanies Moa to a "new place" outside the Village. Here, Moa's hurricane of unleashed power rains across the Continent — destroying for the sake of destruction — before Vivi's sleeping eyes.

"Lydectes: On the Nature of Sport" composes the first, and best story, in this collection. In it, an altered version of Plato's manuscript turns up on the world Wolf 359. Computer-dissected, it reveals a strange, symbiotic relationship — a recurring pattern of death and rebirth occurring between two distant future worlds. Implicated in this mystery are the nature of sport, of God, of perennial "self-creation" — and Something More. "Lydectes" probes the dark depths of coincidence and sheds new insight into the nature of existence. Tantalising.

Sounds irrational?

Maybe.

But, taken together, these stories (eight in all) add up to enlightening reading. Robert Silverberg (in his introduction)

The Nightland—Volume Two is... Volume One repeated backwards, with every rock, cliff, cave, volcano, and slope renegotiated on their return.

writes: "George Alec Effinger is a science fiction writer, a surrealist... who uses the material of science fiction, the thematic accretion inherited from Verne and Wells and Asimov... and everybody else along the way, and uses all those robots and spaceships and time machines for his own playful purposes."

In addition, Effinger's technique pulls and stretches at the reader's nerves. As our New England winter approaches, his work adds fuel to the imagination. Read him.

NIGHT WITHOUT END

by Francis Payne

Francis Payne reviews

The Nightland

by William Hope Hodgson

(Hyperion; 1976; 583 pp; \$US6.95

original publication 1912)

is not everyone who can make a sow's ear out of a silk purse.

The central idea of *The Nightland* is nothing short of brilliant. Even mediocre handling would have left us with a memorable novel.

But to utterly destroy that idea, to subvert an inspiration with some of the most atrocious verbiage that I have ever seen in print, to so raise the reader's hopes and then dash them down so utterly; this is genius of a sort.

The Nightland is set on this Earth uncounted millions of years hence. This would make it science fiction by most definitions, but the structure and treatment is that of fantasy.

The Sun has died, and the world is in perpetual darkness. Hence the title of the book. Man has retreated to a vast pyramidal building, The Last Redoubt, and only rarely do any persons emerge into the darkness outside, peoples as it is by strange and monstrous creatures whose main aim in life is to attack and destroy the last remnants of humanity.

So simple an idea, and yet so effective! A night that knows no dawn, a night without stars. Almost every fantasy writer of the twentieth century has read this work and praised this sombre imagery.

Into the Last Redoubt is born a telepath, who receives impressions from an unknown second human colony, whose power supplies are gradually failing, thus threatening it with extinction.

At this point the story breaks down. Technical errors, of course, abound from beginning to end. A planet whose sun was extinct would be rather colder than Hodgson postulates, though he makes the point that the night land is "chilly". And

unless some totally new means of autotrophism were found, the food chain would break down and the monsters outside would die.

And the Pyramid is some eight miles high; on a world where the effective sea level is some two hundred miles further down, in basins to which most of the planet's atmosphere has sunk. Yet the doors of the Pyramid can be opened at will if there is any desire to emerge, and it is possible to breathe outside. I find this less than convincing.

The Nightland is written throughout in an archaic and affected style, which fits no particular era or dialect but is full of "doths" and "wilts" and past tenses along the lines of "I did go", "he did say", etc. It irritates. But it is irrelevant to the plot, which postulates that a person from our past has a dream in which he is transported to this far future.

In or around the seventeenth century this fellow had a wife, whom he loved dearly, and who died (all this in the first twenty pages). In the era of the nightland he is reincarnated as the telepath who discovers the second colony; and his loved one reappears as the corresponding telepath of that colony, who tells of her people's danger. Convenient?

The power supply of the second colony is failing so rapidly that something must be done before they all die. So our hero sets off by himself to rescue his Loved One, facing hideous monsters and Evil Forces and, of course, getting to the second colony just in time. It has failed and been overrun by monstrosities.

And who should he discover outside, "a little figure that did kneel, sobbing, upon the earth", but his Loved One, alive out of all the millions that died in the all of the Second Pyramid. (There are actually a few other survivors wandering around, but the hero ignores them, as is only proper; they are, after all, bit parts only. All he came for was his Loved One and he's found her.)

Thus ends Volume One. Volume Two is, by and large, Volume One repeated backwards, as every rock, cliff, cave, volcano, and slope is renegotiated on their return. Most of the monsters are faced for a second time, and the whole this is only rescued from utter boredom by the silly sentimental slosh that goes on between the two lovers, which alleviates ennui at the cost of inducing nausea.

And the ending. My God, the ending! It is the worst bit of a bad book. As the pair pass the "House of Silence" - a haunt of Evil Forces just outside the Last Redoubt - an influence shoots out that almost kills the Loved One. She becomes insensible and will die very soon. So he picks her up and runs for about three days flat (so says the story), chopping up monsters right, left, and centre without so much as pausing in his stride, like a cross between John Wayne and a surf lifesaver.

But he's too slow. When he arrives at the Redoubt, the doctors pronounce her dead. His reaction is to fall into a three-day swoon. On awakening, he realises that he will die of sorrow.

At last! thought I. It's elevating itself to tragedy. She died in their first encounter and she'll die in this one. The stark and grim tone that marked Book One is re-appearing. What an improvement.

A vast State funeral is prepared, and the millions of the Last Redoubt throng round to see it. Her body is on display; for their technique of burial is to throw the corpse into the "Earth Current" that powers the whole building. The Earth Current is a sort of hot glowing force field, and the body goes up to it on a vast conveyor belt, which sounds like the things that they tie maidens to before power saws appeared in third-rate movies.

And so, at the head of that vast throng, knowing that his Loved One's funeral will soon be followed by his own, he watches in silence as her body inches its way to cremation.

You've guessed it. She wakes up. No, she wasn't really dead, just stunned. Never mind that the medical science of a billion years hence had pronounced her dead; never mind that the undertakers had been working on the body for three days and that it had been lying in state for some time: that didn't worry her. She woke up, and they all lived happily ever after.

'Nuff said?

TALK TALK TALK

by Van Ikin

Van Ikin reviews

Buy Jupiter and Other Stories

by Isaac Asimov

(Gollancz; 1975; 206 pp; \$A8.70)

This collection of stories has a history behind it. In March '74 Asimov was Guest of Honour at Boskone XI (held in Boston) and, upon accepting the invitation, he learned that it had become traditional for the convention committee to publish a small collection of the works of the GoH. After consultation with Doubleday, Asimov agreed, and a little book of eight stories appeared. It was published late, and sold poorly.

Then Doubleday stepped in, offering to publish the book themselves if more stories were added. And so we get the twenty-four short-stories in this collection (most of them no more than 2,500 words long, and some considerably shorter).

To flesh out the still-slim volume, and to give it its only real sources of interest or importance, Asimov keeps up a running biographical commentary between the stories. This was his practice in *Before the Golden Age* and *The Early Asimov*, and most Asimov readers will know that these two books, together, form a sort of literary

Asimov frankly admits he doesn't drink, has "hardly ever sat in a bar", and has probably got the barroom details "all wrong".

biography up to 1949.

Buy Jupiter opens in 1950, closes with stories published in 1973, and so brings the enthusiast "up to date".

The two dozen stories are not just "slight", they're trivial. The only high points are a few brief moments of humour (I did like the story about the craze for "Dinachicken" — roast dinosaur) and on the whole there is not a single story that I would care for or find worth reading.

Like the stories in Clarke's *Tales from the White Hart* (or, for that matter, like Frank Hardy's "Billy Borker" stories — *The Yarns of Billy Borker* and *The Great Australian Lover and Other Stories*) many of these pieces are set in a bar and develop through bar-room chat. But Asimov uses this device mechanically and bluntly, without finesse or feeling. Frank Hardy captures the rhythms and atmosphere of Australian pub life; Clarke conveys the spirit of an era by conveying the hopes and dreams of a generation of s f fans (and after all, those fans were historically important for they were right; they were heralds of an era of "popular science"). Each of these writers knows, loves, and appreciates the social significance of the milieu he's writing about. But Asimov frankly admits he doesn't drink, has "hardly ever sat in a bar", and so has probably got the barroom details "all wrong".

As a matter of fact, he has — though not in the way he means. There are no errors of detail or of fact, for there is no real attempt to describe the barroom situation in the first place. For Asimov, the bar is just an excuse to sit two or three mouths on stools and set them yapping. It enables him to write stories the easy way:

You see, Joe Bloch, Ray Manning, and I were squatting around our favourite table in the corner bar with an evening on our hands and a mess of chatter to throw it away with. That's the beginning.

Joe Bloch started it by talking about the atomic bomb. . .

This is the kind of thing that would fascinate a sociologist. The American male, confronted by boredom, indulging in "scientific talk". Does it reflect the American belief that every man can be President and every man can assess the problems of atomic power? Does it reflect some form of popular American belief that "science" is their own province, the American's gift to the world? Asimov does not answer such intriguing questions (probably he's not even aware that his stories raise them); he simply ploughs ahead, doggedly, and churns out his story. The stories evolve through talk, talk, talk, often using the prop of some weirdo mad-scientist type who ambles into the middle of a conversation and intrudes his own eccentric views (which usually turns out to be based on his actual experiences in a time machine, etc).

Stated simply, these stories are hollow. They are worked up out of nothing; they're

crumbs of ideas left over from Asimov's more substantial writings. Often they're just structures erected to prop up a punch-line (or even an Asimovian sick pun: one shaggy dog story is entitled "Shad Guido G" (think about it; the title itself is a pun). Like many of Clarke's weaker stories, they're little more than doodles — simple ideas teased into shape just for the hell of it. They don't merit the time and energy required to work them into a proper story, with dramatic action and a sense of real-life situations; yet Asimov won't let them stay decently buried. Most of the ideas are fairly corny: Martians colonising the rarefied slopes of Everest; A-bomb-wary aliens blanketing the Earth with a "cure" for radioactivity.

Above all, the stories don't mesh with the barroom framework, for Asimov is forced constantly to play down the heavy science in the stories:

I didn't always catch the big words, so later on I'll just stick in what I can remember. I checked all the spellings, and I must say that for all the liquor he put away, he pronounced them without stutters.

Personally, I can't take this at all. It's as artificial as Santa-snow. It's not just coy, it's a bit bloody ridiculous, because the "science" and "big words" are the guts of the story. Play down the science and there's nothing left.

Ploughing through the stories, I began to form the theory that the book could be salvaged partially by taking the stories out of the barroom and putting them into a scientific context — where they belong. It all seemed so logical and promising; Asimov could have *scientists* taking (during tea-break, maybe, or as they clean the test-tubes) and he could recreate the atmosphere of the scientific world in the way that Clarke recreates the White Hart.

Then I re-read portions of the book (and was that good reviewing practice or masochism, I wonder?) and saw my theory collapse. For some of the stories were set amongst the scientists, but they were the same as the others. Which proves that the heart of the problem is not the stories but the writer. Asimov can't get himself *inside* his material, can't develop a "feel" for it or see its potentialities. His writing is sterile. Barren. Never — not even by accident, not even in passing — does he capture any sense of what life, living, or being human is all about.

And, significantly, his personal notes on the stories always reflect a stiff, non-organic view of the creative process. He talks of "getting ideas" — "accepting assignments", trying to write a particular kind of fiction — but never of expressing himself, never of seeking to recreate a personal emotion or experience. (And we're talking about Asimov, so you can't say he's just shy and retiring!)

One and all, these stories are hollow constructs, never vital organic flowerings from the soil of the writer's experience.

CURDLING CONCOCTIONS AND A GEM

by Van Ikin

Van Ikin reviews

Cosmic Kaleidoscope

by Bob Shaw

(Gollancz; 1976; 188 pp; \$A10.10)

This is embarrassing. I am about to do a brief demolition job on the style and character of Bob Shaw's stories, but in doing so I am conscious that less than a year ago I won a short story competition with a piece that perfectly exemplified most of the flaws I'm about to roast. Perhaps the pill can be sweetened by saying that Bob Shaw's talent lies in the novel, not the short story (I believe it does). But the sad fact remains that it is easier to criticise than to create — though not as *much* easier as some people think — and Bob Shaw is about to fall victim to that age-old truth.

You open at the first of these nine stories, "Dkirmish on a Summer Morning", and you read:

A flash of silver on the trail about a mile ahead of him brought Gregg out of his reverie.

No sense of tone or mood, just a journalistic assemblage of necessary bare facts: a character, Gregg; a trail; something silver, but far enough away to be intriguing but not threatening. You keep on reading, and the story proves interesting; it seems to be a kind of s f western.

Gregg encounters a young woman in "an unusual silver garment". She is pregnant, her garment is seamless, and she appears ill-at-ease with the local lingo. Events proceed apace, and Gregg injures Wolf Caley in a shoot-out (Wolf being a bad boy, can't you guess). Gregg learns that "Josh Portfield and his mob" are seeking him out for revenge. Suspense! suspense! Meanwhile, the silver-suited sheila gives birth to her baby.

As you can guess, said silver sheila is not what she seems, and the revelation of her identity coincides with a pyrotechnical climax as the Portfield mob shows up for Gregg and a far more formidable foe turns up for the sheila. And, to do Shaw justice, his "set-piece" scenarios are brilliant. They crackle with an old-style zest for the weird and wonderful, drawing their effects from elements of horror stories, comics, and the pulps. Shaw's sheila stands in strange transfiguration over her new-born child, her golden hair stirring "as though it was complex living creature in its own right". The hair fans out, each strand becoming straight and seemingly rigid, forming a bright, fearsome halo. . . And later Shaw sets his villain on stage — a curdling concoction of pul-comics melodrama. . .

A tall, narrow-shouldered, black-cloaked figure, its face concealed by a black hood, was striding up the hill towards the house. It was surrounded by a strange aura of darkness, as though it had the ability to repel light itself. . .

The only effect of their shots was to produce small purple flashes at the outer surface of (the figure's) surround-

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ing umbra. After perhaps a dozen shots had been absorbed harmlessly, the spectre made a sweeping gesture with its left arm, and Portfield and his companion collapsed like puppets.

Given the right mood, most s f readers can lap up purple flashes and light-repelling auras of darkness. It's rollicking, romping good escapist entertainment, and good luck to Shaw for giving us that.

But — the style! Knowing his story's appeal and success rests on plotting alone, Shaw has to make damn sure no one misses a clue, or fails to tremble at a hint of foreboding. Consequently his characters spend so much time scratching heads or mulling over the woman's "strangeness" that they don't have time to be themselves. So Shaw is forced to Give Explanations — to Spell Things Out in clumping expository prose:

"There's no need to keep thanking me." Gregg spoke gruffly to disguise the fact that, in an obscure way, he was pleased that a yong and beautiful woman was prepared to entrust herself to his care after such a brief acquaintanceship.

If the reader cannot discern Gregg's motivation from the dramatised action of the story, it's not much of a remedy to spoon-feed the information. And if the pace of the story is such that there is no time or space for the action to spell out such questions of motivation, then either the story is paced incorrectly or the matter of motivation is irrelevant anyway. Another thing: "in an obscure way". That's verbal sludge. The kind of thing we all write, but the kind of thing that should cop a red line in revision. It's not at all "obscure" about why he's pleased (any bird or bee could give you the answer), so there's no need for the phrase to develop the meaning of the sentence. Look closer and you'll see why it is there: it separates an otherwise over-close repetition of the word "that". (Without the offending phrase, the sentence would read, in part, "the fact that he was pleased that".) Rather than re-draft the sentence, you leave the sludge in place.

The collection contains nine stories, one initially published in 1959, the rest published during the '70s (mainly 1975 and 1976). None of the stories seeks to provide anything more than colourful escapist entertainment, and most are as blunt in style as "skirmish". Some of the special effects and scenerios are memorable, but not the stories themselves.

— With one outstanding exception. "The Giaconda Caper" is a gem. Not "just another entertainment piece" (though it is only an entertainment), it is witty, sparkling cunningly — brilliantly — original.

"The Giaconda Caper" concerns the discovery of a second copy of the *Mona Lisa*, and it climaxes in the revelation of the true story behind the painting of Leonardo's most famous work. I can't reveal the punchline, of course, but it was undoubtedly born of the devil, probably conceived in an orgy of brilliantly creative drunkenness, and — if proved true — would most certainly cause the Vatican to burn the works of Leonardo and pull out the scuppers to make Italy sink beneath the waves. And the funny part is that it really is a plausible theory...

Life is short, reading time is limited. There are better books than this that deserve a reader's attention. But all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy — and "The Giaconda Caper" is just the thing to correct that imbalance.



FALLING BETWEEN TWO GOALS

by Paul Anderson

Paul Anderson reviews

The Lifeship

by Harry Harrison

and Gordon R Dickson

(Harper & Row; 1976; 181 pp;

\$US7.95;

Pocket Books; 1977; \$US1.25)

The Lifeship is a good example of a starship and of the results of the explosion for the human passengers and the survivors of the alien crew. The slow-moving first half tells of the predicament and the possibilities for survival in space. The interactions between the male leader of the humans and the female captain of the destroyed space ship are more interesting.

Problems arise, mostly, from the basic differences between the two cultures. The Terrans' will to survive clashes with the aliens' concept of death with honour being preferable to life without honour. The contrast between the two viewpoints is used well by the authors to point up some of the basic faults of the "western society" of contemporary Earth. Behind a seeming facade of unity in the future Earth society, there is fragmentation and dissension.

We are told of divisions between the ruling class and the rest; of a quest for power. One of the problems seems to have been engineered genetically by the scientists of the ruling elite. However, the description given of the victims of this interference and control would seem to fit many people today:

The heavy duty arbiters, those males specially bred to the few hard physical tasks that remained, were essentially a culture apart from the rest of the working class. To keep them from becoming discontented with the relatively simple, repetitive tasks they had to do, they were gene-controlled for a low intelligence level and for those factors that would encourage a feeling of docility and dependence on their superiors. Theoretically they were as free as the other arbiters.

Hem had been like the rest. To him, the barracks had been the whole world, and his beer mate, Jase, the closest thing to any kind of family he knew.

Everything that Hem knew had been taken from him. He would never again have a barracks full of old friends to return to. He would never again know the friendly drinking and the equally friendly brawls of the beer-busts, the jokes, the tricks, the pleasure of working in company with his mates. Above all, he would never see Jase again.

For twelve years of barracks life

they had been beer-mates, which in essence meant they did their after-hours drinking always in each other's company.

The glimpses of human existence in the "new" society are one of the best aspects of the book. The major plot line — the lone aristocrat pitted against the group of lesser people, or peasants — is not very interesting and is far too predictable. All too often, the action dictates that the characters be restricted to mere caricatures. This includes the hero. And one of the more interesting characters is offstage for most of the book, except when he is the centre of the subplot.

The Lifeship is a good example of a book that falls between two goals. The surface action gets in the way of the better written sections. Still, it is worthy of its selection by Harper and Row.

JAPAN SINKS — KARMA LIVES ON

by Paul Anderson

Paul Anderson reviews

Japan Sinks

by Sakyo Komatsu

translated by Michael Gallagher

(Harper & Row; 1976; 184 pp;

\$US7.95;

original Japanese publication 1973)

Japan Sinks belongs to what almost amounts to a whole "Submersion of Japan" genre, but it is still a worthwhile book. *Newsweek* (1 April 1974) reports that the book has sold "nearly 2 million copies in Japan and the movie version of it is currently one of the country's most popular films." A drastically cut version of the film has been released in USA.

We are accustomed to news disasters from overseas, and the casualty lists seem to have lost their power to make us feel anything. The major factor in the success of this book, then, is that the only real character is Japan itself:

The final drama was played out in the Central and Kanto regions of Honshu, with no witnesses. The slipping of the earth had generated so much heat that when the waters rolled in, there were explosions of such cataclysmic force that the mountains were blown apart and shattered to fragments. While the Pacific coast slid away into the deep, the Japan Sea coast rose up for a brief moment, like one side of a capsizing vessel. But then the same blind force took hold of it and plunged it, too, down into the sea.

The other characters serve to advance the story and highlight the magnitude of the catastrophe. Toshio Onodera is one of the characters who remain powerless to avert the sinking and his task is reduced to predicting the timing, so that millions of people may be evacuated.

Professor Tadokoro, "a man unhampered by scruples" is quickly pressed into research:

If he has research to do, then he'll snatch money from the hand of the devil

himself, confident that nothing will stop him from doing things his way...

Should the evidence, however, begin to point toward an actual occurrence and that, if not in two years, at least in the next few years, then the formulation of a government program to deal with it would have to be done in secret to avoid public turmoil.

Professor Tadokoro assists here, as he holds the view that intuition is "far and away the most precious gift he can possess... without it he'll never make a notable breakthrough."

The explanations for the disasters are perhaps less convincing:

"Why things could be moving so fast, I don't know. But, in any case, the mantle mass on the Pacific side of the Japan Archipelago is rapidly shrinking."

We meet two major characters, as well as others concerned with keeping ahead of the two-year time limit imposed on them. The evacuation problem is daunting:

As they grew wearier with each passing day, a growing despair took hold of them. How could they hope to win their battle against the violent, overwhelming force of nature? Their fate was sealed, and nothing they could do would alter it. Together with the scattered remains of their countrymen, they would perish beneath the smothering ashes or be swallowed up by the voracious, dark sea.

To me, the book is effective. Its cumulative effect can be summed up in these last few extracts:

Even if our race lives on, then, our descendants, it seems, will have bitter times ahead of them... From now on, whether it's a matter of going on being Japanese or ceasing to be Japanese, whatever the case — we have to leave Japan out of our consideration.

When this nation called Japan and its culture and its history — when all are swept away with the land itself. But the people of Japan will still be a young people, a people uniquely gifted. And this other karma, a living karma, is one that will go on.

ALL AT IDS AND EGOS

by Neville Angove

Neville Angove reviews

The Man With a Thousand Names

by A E Van Vogt

(Sidgwick & Jackson; 1975; 160 pp;

\$A8.75;

original US publication 1974)

I have always left an A.E. Van Vogt offering with a feeling of dissatisfaction. There is always a nagging doubt in my mind that I have missed something important, perhaps an implication generated by a peculiar twist of prose, which may have earth-shattering consequences. Van Vogt's latest novel, *The Man With a Thousand*

Van Vogt—"Mothers", "Fathers", "Gi-Ints", Ids, Egos, Superegos.

Names, leaves me with the same feeling.

Utilising his father's wealth, Steven Masters has obtained a berth on the first expedition to the newly discovered planet of "Mittend". After a run-in with the local humanoid aliens, Steven finds himself suddenly back on Earth, in the body of a former employee, Mark Broehm. The mind transference was apparently caused by the aliens via an entity called "Mother". Since no one will believe his story, Steven plays along with the situation, only to become the victim of two unsuccessful murder attempts by "Mother".

After the military lose contact with the expedition on Mittend, they are forced to accept Steven's story, and he is sent with a second, but larger, expedition to Mittend. At the abandoned campsite of the first expedition, a female alien is captured. While he is supposed to be guarding her one night, Steven rapes her, in the hope that physical submission might force her to cooperate in other areas. But "Mother" transfers his mind back to Earth, where Steven finds himself in the body of an old enemy, Daniel Utgers. The only consolation is that Utgers has an attractive wife.

Two more attempts are made on his life: one by "Mother", and one by Kroog, a "Gi-Int" (???), an alien race of extragalactic origin, opposed to "Mother". Steven goes looking for "Mother", who turns out to be a 886 young women, and the collective unconscious of all the life in the galaxy. Steven is slated to be "Father" to "Mother", provided he can defeat Kroog, the old "Father", and his children (16,000 of them). Before he can object to the idea of impregnating 886 women each year (to create the pool of women that the components of "Mother" are drawn from), Steven is back on Mittend in his own body. After defeating another attempt on his life by Kroog, he makes an agreement with the alien, by which he rejects "Mother's" offer. But Steven's experiences have changed him too much, and after further attempts on his life by Kroog, he rejoins the battle.

Then the story becomes complicated!

This book could easily be subtitled "The Raising of Cain" (excuse the pun), since the major concern is the forced maturation of Steven Masters. Van Vogt has taken the "put yourself in his shoes" notion almost to its extreme (Kelly's *Mindmix* and Sheckley's *Mindswap* are better in this regard). At the outset, the main character is a spoiled brat, the supreme egotist who feels that it is degrading to "ease himself out of the airlock just like an ordinary member of the crew". He is shocked to find that the world seems the same when viewed through the senses of Browhm and Utgers, or even of a woman. He is forced to realise that "other people desire also happiness, pleasure, joy and excitement". For the first time in his life he is deliberately kind to someone; for the first time he is forced to think before acting; it is only by thinking of his fellow man that he becomes really human and, by doing so, becomes something more.

The other characters are simple exemplars of various facets of human nature.

Broehm can only see things from the one, fixed point of view; and Utgers will not accept that which contradicts his own view of the universe, since contradictory thoughts are easier to ignore than assimilate.

A superficial plot of the story involves the integrative battle of the Id, Ego, and Superago. Steven is all ego, and is often described in such terms. He thinks that he is the centre of the universe, the only individual among the "stupes". He has no conscience; his actions are restricted only by his own immediate desires and the laws he cannot buy off. "Mother" is the superego: "she" is so pure that "she" cannot fight the threat of one alien directly, even at the expense of every life in the galaxy. Even "her" dress is the filmy white "phony angel getup". Kroog represents the id: the base desires of unchecked animalism, the "volatile ups and downs and total savagery of a carnivorous animal".

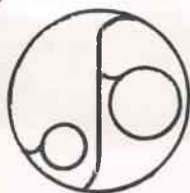
But this superficial plot is only a layman's mish-mash of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, allowing us to place "Mother" as "good" and Kroog as "evil", with Steven moving from the latter to the former as he develops.

Beneath this superficial resemblance, the roles are reversed, and the real plot is developed. "Mother" is the true Ego: "she" is the control and computational centre, the collective unconscious, for all life. "She" provides directions and answers for "her" people: neither good nor evil, only neutral. Steven is the real Id: he does the first thing that comes to mind, acting on impulse only, never thinking of the consequences, not having the ability of rational thought. He is only pleasure oriented. He does what we would all like to do. Kroog is the true Superego, the social conscience, acting within his own moral framework. Steven has none, and "Mother" has no choice. Kroog, is bothered by his lapses into animalism, but it is part of his nature. The reader identifies immediately with Steven, and against Kroog, but for the wrong reasons. Steven is a poor victim of an interstellar battle, but he is really what we are underneath. Kroog is the ruthless alien, but actually embodies much of what we admire. The switch between the two plots accentuates our misconceptions about our own values.

In order to stress the differences between the two plots, Van Vogt has been forced into several inconsistencies and contradictions. The "Gi-Ints" are not explained, and neither is the resemblance between Steven and "Mother's" many offspring (although the conclusion may hold the key; if it does, it is rather trite). The characters seem stereotypes — like clockwork figures which stop when they leave the immediate scene. Several ideas are left half-developed and hanging.

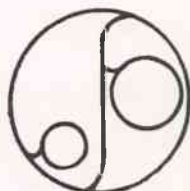
The Man With a Thousand Names is not one of Van Vogt's best efforts, although a distinct change from his usual, with its less turgid and narrative prose style. It is enjoyable, but seems incomplete. Or have I missed something?

Neville Angove
October 1975



S F COMMENTARY

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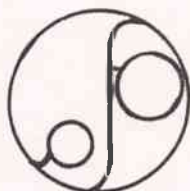
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