S F COMMENTARY

the independent magazine about science fiction

No. 59 April 1980 16 pages Australia/World: $A1 each/Sub: $A10 for 10
Registered for posting as a publication—Category 'B' USA/Canada: $US1.50 each/Sub: $US12 for 10

Printed by Print Mint, Bank Place, Melbourne 3000
Editor and Publisher: Bruce Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. Phone (03) 419 4797. Editorial assistance beyond the call of duty: Elaine Cochrane. Agent for USA/Canada: Hank Luttrell, 2619 Monroe St, Madison, WI 53711, USA.

Chris Priest Leaves SFWA

OUTSIDE THE WHALE
by Christopher Priest

Seacon, the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton, was the first large convention to be held in Britain since the invention of something called a 'SFWA Suite'. This is an area of the con-hotel set aside for the exclusive use of writers, one to which they can retire and enjoy a quiet drink with their colleagues, one where they can be themselves, and one where they can find temporary sanctuary from the vexations of fame.

Also at Seacon there were a number of program items novel to British fans. There was a 'meet the authors' party, and there were autograph parties, and throughout the con there was a series of readings by authors from their works.

It will sound like British snobbism to say it, but much of this was greeted with resentment by many rank-and-file British fans, especially as certain authors carried their 'fame' with ill grace and bad manners. Such authors were in the minority, but their behaviour was so noticeably arrogant that many of their colleagues were embarrassed by the thought that they might be identified with them.

Although this obnoxiousness is still a minority phenomenon, anyone who follows trends in the sf world cannot help but have noticed that this kind of attitude is spreading. One hears of writers wanting to charge convention committees for their services (on the principle that fans only go to conventions to see them). Authors use their 'position' at conventions to publicise causes. Some authors start and administer fan clubs for their own books. One author even had the temerity to expect the Seacon committee to set aside a special room for her exclusive use, so that she could hold audiences with her fans.

This attitude sees fandom as existing only to feed the egos of authors, and is thus essentially contemptuous of it.

As I am a writer with fannish roots, and am still to a degree active in fandom, I cannot help but find this attitude repellent. Quite apart from a sense of being indirectly

slighted, it strikes me that it is inimical to the natural and beneficial harmony that has existed in the science fiction world for many years.

Having been a member of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America) for nearly ten years, I have come to the conclusion that the breeding ground for these attitudes lies there.

I originally joined SFWA for the same reasons as I write science fiction. I believe in sf as a valid and radical form of literature. I find the company of other sf writers stimulating and enjoyable. On the whole, sf writers are alert to the vicissitudes of the publishing industry and freely exchange helpful information about markets, contracts, and so on. I presumed, when I joined SFWA, that what I would find would be a concentration of such pleasures and interests, that there would be a certain purity of intent, a sense of radicalism and progressiveness, and above all a propagation of the general good mood and high principles that so many sf writers manifest in person.

However, I am British and I live in Britain, and so of necessity my role as an SFWA member is from a distance. Becoming perforce an observer, I have had for the last decade the opportunity to watch as an interested party while SFWA has expanded at more or less the same rate as sf itself has expanded.

The expansion of the sf genre has been an acquisition of fatty tissue rather than a hardening of muscular flesh. Sf is now over-produced, with writers and markets galore, series and sequels and film tie-ins and comic-book versions and illustrated novellas, and all the other decadent symbols of a declining literary form. In my role of SFWA-watcher, in but not really of, I observe that SFWA has encouraged this decadence by putting 'market' considerations before literature, by concentrating on, say, the sort of success attached to making a lot of money rather than the sort of success attached to writing well.

SFWA, like all writers' organisations, exists for three reasons. Firstly, we work for the common good by creating a lobby. Secondly, to provide a social context within which isolated writers can contact their peers. Thirdly, to promote an ambience, both commercial and artistic, within which creative freedom is encouraged.

It is in the last of these, for reasons both specific and general, that there has been the greatest dereliction of duty.

I have at last escaped from the floundering cetacean that is SFWA, by the simple expedient of failing to renew my membership this year. Now I am away and free, it seems to me that it concerns the sf community at large to know something of SFWA. I am a partisan, minority voice, admittedly, and I have not left SFWA without reason. (But a caveat: SFWA as a collective entity is greater or lesser than the sum of its parts. I have been in personal contact with many SFWA members over the years, and I almost invariably find that on this personal, individual level, few people are in agreement with the collective mind. Such is the momentum of the collective, though, that this seems to have absolutely no effect. It is a curious but real phenomenon. Therefore I must point out that my comments on SFWA are directed at the collective, not the individuals.)

Firstly, then, how does one join SFWA? Qualification for membership is obtained by publishing in the USA a piece of work that is recognisably science fiction. It does not have to be in an acknowledged sf outlet, such as one of the genre magazines, but in cases of doubt it does have to pass the subjective test of one or more officials of SFWA. In general, this is managed sensibly and well. The result is, in theory, that the membership is made up of active professional sf writers.

However, there's a thumping great presumption behind this philosophy. Briefly, it presumes that entry to the *American* market is the only test of professionalism. The sale of a 100,000-word novel to, say, Sanrio in Japan, or Calmann-Levy in France, or Victor Gollancz in Britain, does not count. The sale of a 600-word vignette to *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* does.

The argument in defence of this philosophy goes that the 'A' in SFWA stands for 'America', that it is principally an American organisation, and that if people elsewhere feel resentful of this they should start their own writers' organisations.

This is a sound defence so long as you believe that America is the only place in the world where science fiction is written. It is indeed the largest single market, and there are certainly more sf writers living there than anywhere else. The indications are, though, that this is merely a socio/geographical phenomenon, the product of a large, populous country enjoying a high standard of living. If you view the facts in a different light they take on different shapes.

For instance, if you express the number of writers actually working as a function of overall population, you discover that Britain has, *per capita,* more sf writers and more full-time sf writers than the States. In Australia, a nation with a population smaller than New York, there are proportionately more writers than in the States. In countries like France and Holland there are writers who enjoy the same sort of status and following as (just for example) Brian Aldiss or Chip Delany, yet whose names are all but unknown to the English-speaking sf world. The best-selling sf author in the world lives in Poland, the world's best-selling sf series came from Germany.

All these authors are permitted to join SFWA so long as their work makes it across to the States. But if it doesn't? If their work has the disadvantage of being written in a 'foreign' language, if it is 'too British', what then? I know of several instances where successful writers, many of whom lived by the pen, have been barred from entry to SFWA simply because American taste was not congruent with their work. Is a successful French author any less of an author because *Analog* or Ace Books don't like his stuff? Apparently so.

The first reason for clubbing together to form an authors' society is to gain some kind of collective muscle. Because there is a multitude of writers in the States, their numbers and influence should provide the cornerstone of a collective presence. Fifty British writers make a weak lobby of their own, as do thirty in Australia or fifteen in France. But those writers joining with the Americans would make a powerful wordwide lobby. American authors enjoy considerable success in the booming translation markets of Europe, yet these major markets are countries where SFWA is barely represented.

SFWA is at present a chauvinistic collective that accepts some and rejects others, and consequently it enfeebles itself.

Moreover, there is a persistent feeling within SFWA that what they call 'overseas' members are more trouble than they're worth. Last year, an author (who is extremely famous, and who writes long boring books about old men) circulated a memo to a number of people in SFWA saying, in effect, that 'overseas' members were an expensive nuisance, and should be charged a levy for the privilege of joining. In this particular author's worldview, 'overseas' is a place for tax exiles and loonies . . . and thus he ignored the fact that the majority of the world's population was born 'overseas'.

In its attitude to membership, SFWA is inward-looking,

isolationist, and self-serving.

This inherent conservatism extends also to political bias. **To its eternal dishonour, SFWA has acted in the recent past to suppress freedom of speech and to silence those whose opinions did not conform to what was presumed to be the consensus of the collective mind.**

SFWA publishes a fanzine called *Forum.* This is distributed to all writer-members (there are other kinds of member, incidentally, mostly publishers and agents), and contains the gossip of the society. The contributions to *Forum* are supposed to be confidential, and each issue prints a statement prohibiting any quotation from the text. Before you die of excitement at the thought of what this must contain, you can take it that most of *Forum* is intensely boring and trivial, and the prohibition serves not to protect confidence but embarrassment. The dialogues in *Forum* are at approximately the intellectual level of arguments in the public bar, and reveal the same order of prejudices.

In the early 1970s, the work of the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem began to appear in the West. It attracted a lot of attention. The United States was one of the last places in the world where his work was published, which was ironical because by then he was already selling more books than most American writers (and today is the top seller of all). Realising that Lem was in a country lacking hard currency, the incumbent SFWA committee invited Lem to become an honorary member. Lem accepted. In due course he started receiving SFWA mailings.

One can only presume he read *Forum* with a surprised expression. Certainly he did read it, because after two or three years he wrote an article for a German newspaper, scathingly describing the attitudes of the collective SFWA consciousness. He made free and easy with many of the contributions to *Forum,* notably one in which Poul Anderson quoted Robert Heinlein's perceptive literary *pensee*: that writers are in competition for the readers' beer money. For all the sarcasm of Lem's article, he wrote it from an impassioned point of view, and his own expressed attitude to writing was written in a civilised manner and was modest, moderate, and balanced.

SFWA's reaction to this was one of revenge. It was felt: (1) Lem should not be quoting from *Forum*; (2) Lem was being discourteous to the society that had honoured him; (3) Lem was preaching dangerous heresy. (1) is arguable, (2) is agreed, and (3) has never been admitted by the SFWA mind. With the hearty approval of the mob, by now howling for vengeance, the SFWA committee (composed by then of different people from the relatively liberal committee that had made the initial invitation) slung him out on his ear.

When the cries of protest were heard, and SFWA realised it had embarrassed itself, a searching of the bye-laws went on and a face-saving rule was found. The official Newspeak version of Lem's banishment is, these days, that his honorary membership was revoked on a technicality.

It is not admitted that Lem was kicked out for political reasons: that he questioned and derided the complacent assumptions on which SFWA is based. Nor will SFWA accept that in acting in the way it did it was lowering itself to the level of the State-controlled writers' unions that precensor and control writers in communist countries.

From the time of the Lem Affair the writing has been on the wall. There is an influential political faction within SFWA, conservative and regressive, one that feels threatened by ideas and minority opinions, one that sees the present boom in the sf market-place as vindication of their attitude.

It was with something approaching surprise that I discovered, at this time, that I had 'radical' ideas. Until then, I had assumed I was moderate in my views. Yet I aligned with Lem (a writer of whom I know nothing). It came as a personal shock to realise that I was at odds with the collective mind, and from that time it was inevitable that I should leave SFWA. I stayed on as long as I did on the principle that it might be better to work for improvement from within than from without. I no longer think this.

If this realisation came late, another did not. Almost from the time I joined SFWA I have been an opponent of the Nebula Award. It is a fraud, and the more people who know this the better.

Working within SFWA to abolish the Nebula is a waste of time and breath, although it has taken me ten years to realise this. The machinery of the Nebula wallows on and on, like a mindless, mechanical whale.

While in SFWA I did my bit to try to turn off this juggernaut. I have published two articles in criticism of it; I have consistently voted 'No Award' in every category, I have in recent years followed a policy of withdrawing any work of mine that has looked as if it might come within a mile of competing for the prize. (I have found the last an unpleasant thing to do, because it runs the risk of seeming an inverse way of drawing attention to yourself. However, if the award exists, and you oppose it, your opposition must be comprehensive.)

Yet the Nebula is criticised at personal peril. Honourable men like Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison—whose integrity is beyond question—have put plausible, impassioned cases for its abolition, using words like 'crooked' to describe it, and have either been ignored or their motives have been impugned. Because the collective assumption is that the Nebula is *per se* a good thing, it is further assumed that anyone who speaks out against it has some kind of underhand motive. To take two relatively recent examples:

In 1978, a well-known sf writer and former SFWA official said this: '[I suggest we] stop wasting time, energy, and trees on debating changes in the Nebula rules. We have 500 members and 4 annual winners, therefore 496 people will be dissatisfied with the results of *any* Nebula procedure.'

In the last SFWA publication I received before leaving, someone with rather less clout, but again a former SFWA official, said this: 'I find it most interesting that the most vocal opponents of the Nebula award are either people who have already won one or maybe even a handful, or others who have so far demonstrated a distinct lack of ability to ever produce something good enough to win one.'

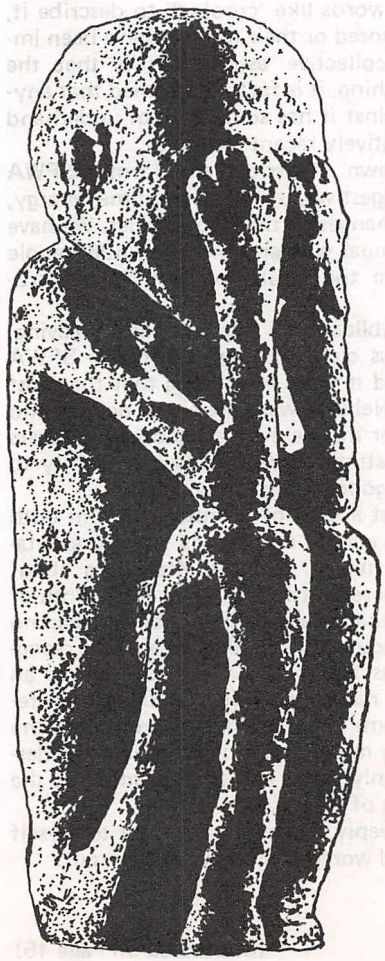
It is possible to detect a kind of primitive logic in both these remarks (and they are not exceptions, but representative of many others similar). What is interesting about them, though, is the inherent attitudes they reveal. Both of these writers are assuming that any Nebula is better than no Nebula, and that it is unquestionable that all authors recognise their value, both as tributes to their skill and as an important step towards reaching a wider audience. Therefore, the assumption seems to go, anyone who criticises the system must have a base motive. And if there is no underhand motive, then the only other explanation must be the tasting of the sour grapes of failure.

I find this attitude deeply offensive, not only to myself but to the other men and women who have spoken out.

(Continued on Page 15)

David Grigg:
TRUTH DEEPER THAN LOGIC

David Grigg
discusses
The Language of the Night:
Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction
by Ursula K Le Guin
edited by Susan Wood
(G P Putnam's Sons; 1979;
270 pages; $9.95)



In August 1975, I spent a week with a remarkable lady. The occasion was the first Australian SF Writers' Workshop, and the lady was the resident professional author. It was a hard-working, intensive, and exciting week, but the best part about it was getting to know, just a little, something of that wise, humane, and intelligent woman. Like everyone else at the Workshop, I fell a little bit in love with Ursula K Le Guin.

When it comes, therefore, to discussing a recent book, *The Language of the Night,* a collection of essays and critical pieces by Ursula Le Guin, I am hopelessly biased. I have already read through it twice; I expect that I will often re-read parts of it in the years to come.

I would, however, like to be able to explain to you why Ursula's teaching means so much to me, as someone who is trying to become a professional writer, and why this book is so valuable a collection to me.

More than anything, I think it is because, though writing in a genre such as science fiction, reknowned for its superficiality and its absorption with gadgets, or such as fantasy, tarnished by sword and sorcery, thud and blunder; Le Guin emphasises above all the human values. She passionately believes that it is possible to write 'science fiction with a human face', to write science fiction and fantasy which can be respected and seriously discussed. The fact that she has achieved this ideal in her own published works lends weight to the authority of her arguments.

And above all, she is a delight to read. Le Guin is a master of lucid, entertaining, and convincing prose. So much so that, sad to say, the reader is all too tempted to skip past the introductions of Susan Wood, who takes the credit for bringing together and editing this collection, and instead leap straight into Ursula's words.

Some of the essays reprinted here were already familiar to me. One or two were printed as small-circulation chapbooks; another was a speech I had heard. Collected together here, however, they gain force from each other. The pieces are varied: ranging from semi-autobiographical pieces which reveal that Le Guin

did not spring, as we might have imagined, fully armed with literary genius from the brow of Tolstoy, through carefully considered and persuasive literary discussions and passionate pleas for freedom of thought; to incisive and self-critical introductions to her own novels.

Unlike all too many authors in the science fiction and fantasy fields today, Le Guin was *not* raised from infancy on a steady diet of these genres alone. She is literate and well-read, as familiar with Dickens as with Dick. Her essays here show the value of this broader literary base, and should encourage any young writer to follow her example and seek out the classics. Le Guin has no patience with hollow, superficial, and characterless fiction. In one of the best essays in the book, 'Science Fiction and Mrs Brown', she follows Virginia Woolf in arguing that character is the essential purpose of the novel, but points out that fully rounded characters are as rare as hen's teeth in modern science fiction and fantasy.

The effect of all this on the aspiring writer, on me at least, is to make one ashamed to do anything but aim for excellence, to aim to create real characters, and to refuse to be content to turn out the merely ordinary, to write a science fiction novel of only the same quality as thousands of others. All this of course is as it should be. Art is nothing if it has no integrity. But it's dangerous stuff if you only ever wanted to write 'Barf the Barbarian Versus the Venusian Fire-Monsters'.

On the other hand, in a number of delightful passages, particularly in the essays entitled 'A Citizen of Mondath', 'The Child and the Shadow', and 'The Staring Eye', Le Guin recalls the wonder and pleasure of a young person discovering fantasy for the first time. But what she has to say about fantasy in general is profound, and in the last analysis, very disturbing.

Fantasy and myth, she says, are not merely superficial frostings, one kind of description rather than another, but spring from the deepest recesses of our minds. And it is because we share the same kind of mind that true myth acts so powerfully upon us. Given this Jungian standpoint, it becomes futile to try to write fantasy which merely adopts the trappings of myth and legend: that's the way we end up with Barf the Barbarian, or with stories that could as well take place on Poughskeepsie as in Elfland. To write true fantasy, you have to retreat within yourself.

This is all powerful stuff, as you can imagine. And despite her difficult, subtle, and often near-mystical message, the force of Le Guin's quiet prose carries great persuasion. 'Near-mystical' is a phrase that Ursula will not thank me for, and I admit it misses the mark, for she is nothing if not supremely rational. But she is wise enough to know what the majority of scientists do not: that truth is much deeper than logic, that art describes existence better than science, and that poetry is far more valuable than mathematics.

But the budding writer who seeks out this book should be warned: there are no formulae for success here, no guarantees. You may follow the hard road of art, renounce the world and live in a garrett, dive deep within your soul in search of pearls, and come up holding nothing but mud. Yet the effort must be made, or all the world becomes mud.

In the concluding essay in the book, the Guest of Honour Speech at the World SF Convention held in Melbourne in 1975, just a week after the workshop I first mentioned, Le Guin sobers us up:

> . . . From the writer's point of view, while writing, there are just two ways to go: to push towards the limit of your capacity, or to sit back and emit garbage. And the really unfair thing is that the intent, however good, guarantees nothing. You can try your heart out, work like a slave, and emit drivel. But the opposite intent does carry its own guarantee. No artist ever set out to do less than his best and did something good by accident.

I don't expect that this book of essays will have a revolutionary impact on the writing of science fiction. Not while audiences still lap up Barf the Barbarian. But it certainly deserves to do so. No other writer, unless it is Stanislaw Lem, whom the Science Fiction Writers of America rewarded by throwing out of their association, has done so much to expose lovingly the faults of science fiction and modern fantasy while unceasingly pointing the way to the right road.

The least we can do is to try to follow.

David R Grigg
January 1980

PROMISING YOUNG AUTHOR?

The following appeared as a short article in David Grigg's own magazine for ANZAPA, *Logodoedoly 2.*

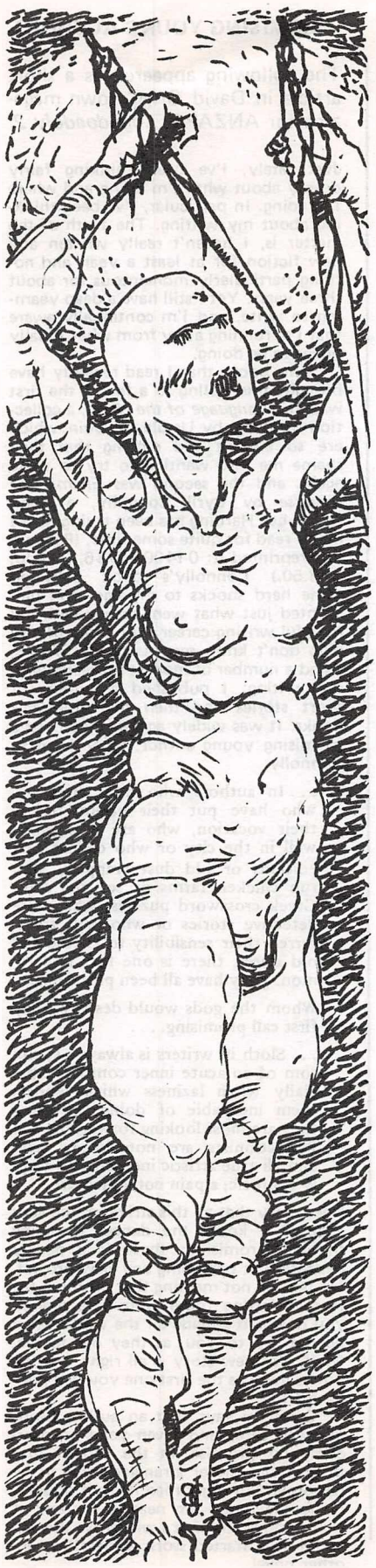
Just lately, I've been thinking fairly deeply about what I'm doing and where I'm going. In particular, I've been thinking about my writing. The truth of the matter is, I haven't really written any new fiction for at least a year, and nothing particularly momentous for about three years. Yet I still have a deep yearning to write, and I'm continually aware that I'm running away from what I really ought to be doing.

Two books that I read recently have brought this feeling to a focus: the first was *The Language of the Night,* a collection of essays by Ursula Le Guin, which are so elegant and moving that they shame me into wanting to try to write again; and the second was *Enemies of Promise* by Cyril Connolly, a book which Lee Harding has been trying to get me to read for quite some time. (Penguin just reprinted it: 0 14 00.1573 6, 283 pp; $A3.50.) Connolly's book delivered some hard shocks to my ego, and pinpointed just what went wrong with my hopeful writing career. For those of you who don't know me, in about 1975-76, I had a number of modest successes with my writing: I published a number of short stories and then two children's books. It was widely agreed that I was a promising young author. Now listen to Connolly:

> . . . In authors who have dried up, who have put their hobby before their vocation, who are now doing well in the city or who collect first editions or old dust-wrappers, who run chicken farms or set and solve Greek crossword puzzles, who write detective stories or who have transferred their sensibility to cheese and old claret, there is one fact in common. They have all been promising.
>
> Whom the gods would destroy, they first call promising. . . .
>
> . . . Sloth in writers is always a symptom of an acute inner conflict, especially when laziness which renders them incapable of doing the thing they are most looking forward to. . . . Perfectionists are notoriously lazy, and all true artistic indolence is deeply neurotic; a pain not a pleasure.

Need I say that all this strikes at me very deeply? I know the danger of being thought promising: there is a deadly hesitation at beginning any new project, for fear of not meeting that promise, for fear of letting those who have praised you down. It's made all the worse when people say to you, as they did to me, 'Well, this new story is all right, but it's not as good as the first one you had published. . . .'

Connolly says that an author needs between three and seven years to overcome his promise; at the end of that time it has either strangled him, or he has proved stronger than it. I am presently hoping that I am nearing the end of that period, and that I will prove the victor: I have started work (at last!) on another novel.



Writers learn only one way- the hard way

George Turner reviews

Transmutations
edited by Rob Gerrand
(Outback Press
in association with
Norstrilia Press;
1979; 216 pages; $11.95)

Rob Gerrand began his search for stories for *Transmutations* with the idea of mixing overseas and local writers, but found he had sufficient local material to bounce back at least one prestigious English submission and make the book all-Australian. That the bouncee was Brian Aldiss (who comments cheerfully on it in his 'Foreword') allows me to wonder if Rob's enthusiasm for the local quality wasn't more patriotic than justified. Either way, it was commendable; he has provided a local market and an incentive.

If there is not a clangingly *bad* story in the collection, neither is there one outstandingly good. The level of competence is high enough for one to agree that all of these young and youngish writers have earned a stall in the market place, but not quite high enough to decorate a national showcase.

Of the eleven stories, six were written by ex-attendees of sf workshops (with the editor as a seventh) and this alone gives the book a special interest for me. With this preponderance of ex-workshoppers and the fact that each of our four major workshops has been funded, in part, by the Literature Board of the Australia Council, I feel that Rob might well have struck a blow for the value of this interaction in his 'Introduction'. *Transmutations* represents no peak of Australian short story writing, but it shows that the Board's money was not ill-spent and that practical encouragement has brought practical improvement.

Rob's 'Introduction' is a conventional blurb-type note in which every writer gets a mention, with an editor's-eye-view of the stories. That I find the editor's-eye-view at variance with my reader's-eye-view is the almost inevitable result of such special pleading. I feel it is time that this type of reader-stroking (carried sometimes by American editors to grotesque lengths) be

---

Artwork by
STEPHEN CAMPBELL

dropped; there are so many interesting and relevant things that can be said. Thank heaven that Rob has not followed the pernicious practice of prefacing each story with one of those personalised pre-digestions whose angles of literary vision can leave the reader wondering if he and the editor are observing the same product.

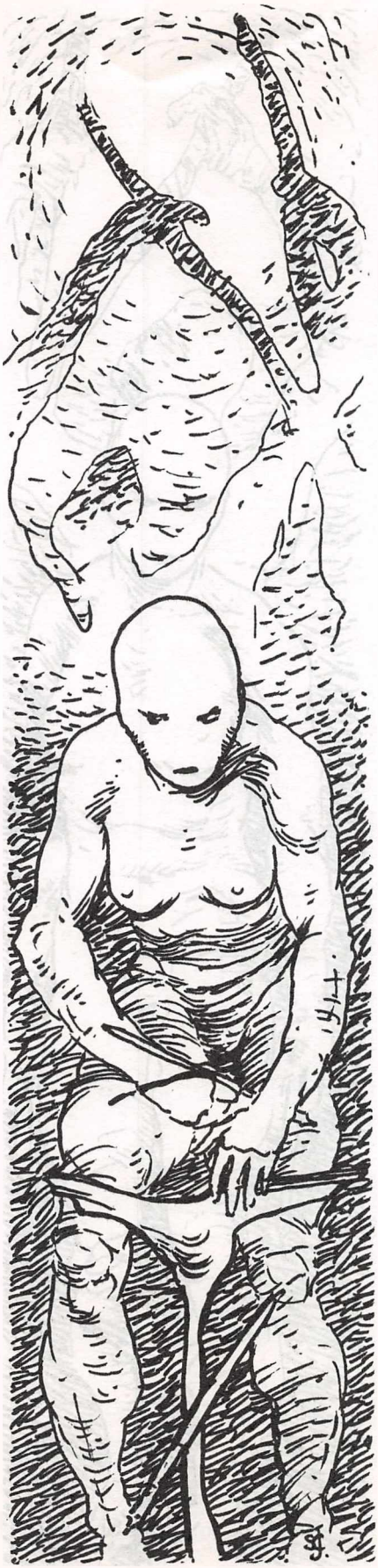
The 'Introduction' is followed by Brian Aldiss's 'Foreword'. I know that Brian had not read the stories and was constrained to produce a good-humoured piece out of moonshine and sea-glint, but the rather heavy-handed (though perfectly friendly) joking about Australia reminded me that the patronising 'really, these colonials are coming on, aren't they?' attitude is by no means dead in the British establishment writers in their ambience of proven tradition and dreaming spires.

Here I have to pull myself up short and admit a progressive alienation from the Aldiss output ever since the beautiful *Frankenstein Unbound.* It may be that our individual conceptions of sf and literature generally have moved so far apart that I no longer empathise with what seems to him obvious and natural. It is one of the unavoidable consequences of divergent evolution. So perhaps the 'Foreword' is gentle and amusing and right. Let me leave it at that.

Bruce Gillespie's 'The Wide Water Waiting' opens the main course. It is a story I met with in an earlier version and returned to Bruce with considerable annotation and comment, most of which I can't remember. How much notice he took I don't know, but he tells me he didn't do a great deal of rewriting, and I find myself balking at things which surely must have bothered me the first time around. There are, for instance, the two minor characters who are plainly unnecessary and get in the way of the action; part way through the story Bruce eliminates them in an offhand fashion which spells out only too clearly his reluctance to do the right thing, which was to return to square one and rewrite the story without them. Aside from this blemish, the tale reads interestingly until the very end. And here I plead some confusion. I can see what I am intended to understand but the visual presentation seems inconsistent with the time-lapse it illustrates, as though Bruce had tossed in an attractive set of visual metaphors without considering the physical realities too closely. It seems to me that a *frozen* tidal wave is exactly wrong for what is supposed to have taken place. However, one can't argue with another man's visions. This, together with his story in Paul Collins's *Alien Worlds,* shows that Bruce will write good fiction if he wishes to. A first requirement, though, is a willingness to rework—if necessary, half a dozen times—until a story is *right.*

Kevin McKay's 'Paddy Four-Finger' is a disappointment after his original and stylish 'Pie Row Joe'. He has everything he needs in the stylistic box of tricks, but here he deploys too many of the tools of trade in a story which could succeed (I think) only in terms of deadly simplicity. It is an anthropological tale sooner or later told, in one version or another, by all writers with an interest in 'ancient sorceries'. McKay delivers his punch-line scene effectively but loads the story with too many side issues which leave the reader in some doubt as to which is the real story-line. In these little horror anecdotes the reader's eye should never be allowed to stray from the ball; the attention which should have been on Paddy Four-Finger and the foolish woman geologist is dissipated in the talk of the American narrator being all new-chummy in outback Australia. One of my more unpopular exercises with workshoppers is to get them to relate their stories verbally in not more than two hundred words and many simply can't do it because they have not actually thought out what *matters* in their story and what is decoration, background, etc. Carried out properly, it is a procedure which shows exactly where the emphasis should lie and how much of the already-written version is camouflage. This is the basis of that much misunderstood word, 'structure', which means that all the elements, however divergent in nature, converge on a single statement.

Philippa C Maddern (known to us as 'Pip') is one who knows all about this, instinctively. She is the best stylist in the book and the most competent at structuring her fiction; she knows exactly what she is after and the quickest, smoothest, plainest way to get to it. Yet 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' disappoints—not much, but a little. The metaphor of alienation from a hidebound, mechanistic culture is brilliantly original and is followed through with a masterly piling of detailed observation; yet the denouement, when the girl who has hidden herself in the unnoticed interstices of civilisation is discovered, is unsatisfying. The final picture of agoraphobic



horror confirms the offered vision but seems also to imply no alternative to despair. It seemed to me that a powerful statement needed a more powerful resolution than simple surrender. But then, I refuse to believe that the future is an unrelieved disaster. Then, too, nothing that I believe or refuse to believe will prevent Pip Maddern from becoming a successful writer.

Francis Payne is one of that Melbourne University stable who have been sharpening their fictional teeth in *Yggdrasil* for some years past, and 'Albert's Bellyful' shows that perserverance is a rewardable virtue. It is one of those jet-black comedies of tomorrow—in this case, among the post-holocaust mutants—which leave one with the uncomfortable feeling that one really shouldn't laugh at such things, but still laughing. It is the tale of the boy who exacts his inheritance from Great-Grandpa in order to marry his beautiful two-headed girlfriend, and it romps along in a welter of light-hearted bloodshed and brutal viewpoints on basic necessities. Its one failing, for me, is the curious one that this first-person narrative about Australians in an Australian locale has a peculiarly 'hillbilly' flavour in its prose. Through the deliberate Australianism protrudes a distinct American accent; perhaps Francis needs to listen more closely to his own people.

Petrina Smith's 'The Reclaimers' is a story I met at a workshop a couple of years ago. I think it has been reworked to some degree, but memory of the original is fading, and what strikes me now is what struck me then —that Petrina is the one workshopper who has displayed a natural gift for displaying character in dialogue. The story itself is an amusing trifle whose interest lies in the clash of personalities rather than in its sf content; on its own terms, it succeeds.

With David Lake's 'What Is She?', we move into fully professional regions, and this is the most satisfying story in the book, as well as the longest. If it has nothing fresh to say about parallel-worlds romance (and it's many a long year since any did), it says the old things with some charm and from a number of original angles. I was particularly taken with the strong visual qualities of the prose, with the conception of space infinite-but-bounded beautifully exemplified in the transition scene. Also, it manages to be thoroughly Australian in atmosphere and approach without using any obvious 'local content' tricks. (My statement has always been that if you feel like an Australian, you will write like one; have overseas models by all means, if you need models, but don't *imitate* them.)

Edward Mundie, another ex-workshopper and one who has since published professionally with Hyland House, takes on an awkward proposition in 'The Man Who Moved Trees' and brings it off by *not* using technical tricks of trade. He settles for a plain statement of what happened, with the result that the story, though minor, is exactly right for its intention. And Ted, I am happy to say, couldn't write a non-Australian style if he wanted t—and I hope he doesn't want to.

I know nothing of David King, but his 'Third Person Infinite' leaves me speculating on his literary models. I suspect a strong dose of Jorge Luis Borges in his reading. Here is a typically Borgesian visual conception—an enormous library existing for no obvious reason in an unlikely place, with one lone visitor exploring it. To tell more would be to destroy the story, but the central idea is neat and fresh, although the climax does some violence to logical structure. The style is a little intense and imitative, but there is a voice there; one would like to see David King attempt something more demanding.

David Grigg needs no introduction to local fans, but 'The Ancient Seed' is less than he is capable of. It is solidly enough based and holds the interest, but leaves me with a feeling, which I might find hard to justify in practical terms, that David is not a natural short story writer, that his proper venue is the novella or even the novel. His ideas are often too spreading for short-story plotting, and one feels a need to know more about the details.

Margaret Pearce is a stranger to me. Her story, 'Head for the Year', is a horrific metaphor for some of the sillier trends in permissive education. It is too horrific for its own good, over-shooting its mark by sheer excess of energy. Good satire requires that one should find it, at bottom, believable. 'Head for the Year' shows a sportive and prickly imagination at work but not a genuine indignation expressing itself in satire.

What to say of Randal Flynn and 'The Paradigm'? Randal was one workshopper who seemed to me to have that deep interest in *people* which is so lacking in sf. He still has it, but it isn't enough. He has written a tale about oppressive bureaucracy and the creative instinct. It has been written a thousand times by young writers feel-

ing within themselves that dissatisfaction which seems to be preventing the full expression of the creative urge. They all write the same tale about the need for intellectual freedom, usually in the form of *ideological* freedom (thus transferring the problem to an outside audience where it can be resolved in terms of action), and inevitably fail to resolve the problem. Randal's hero comes to the usual crisis where only escape will serve, but I can't see that anything will improve for him at the end of the escape; there will be only further restriction and discontent. In real life, a day comes when these young writers realise that the battle *is* the freedom. In perfect freedom, which is only licence, nothing is created; the need to create is itself created by restriction; freedom reduces it to redundancy. 'The Paradigm' is a fair enough example of its kind, but over-wordy. There are several passages which editor Rob should have sheared right to the bone, for example the first two paragraphs on page 210, which pass the time but tell nothing; the temptation to fake 'atmosphere' by insistent talk must always be resisted. Atmosphere rises from dialogue and incident, rarely from a character's inner writhings. There can be no doubt of Randal's talent for fiction, but I feel he needs to think his themes through to a logical conclusion. It is not necessary to tie a plot together and stick it with cellotape, but there is little reader satisfaction in a question left hanging with no suggestion of where an answer might be.

Rob Gerrand's work as editor is less easy to discuss. Choice of stories is influenced by considerations other than simple merit, and in this case one can only applaud the decision to focus on local work rather than admit some overseas contributions which might have been of higher professional quality. I stress *professional* because the differences between the work of the *Transmutations* authors and all but the very best of the global field are mainly of craftsmanship and practical experience. Most of my objections to these stories could be levelled at items in almost any random collection, but here the deficiencies are cruder in their impact because we are dealng with writers who are still learning their trade. While there are editors willing to give them public exposure, where they are faced with comparison and criticism, they have the chance to learn that trade in the only way that shapes and solidifies—the hard way.

What many of our young writers lack is the experience of being quite literally 'stood over' by an editor until they face up to their blunders and rehandle them effectively. (A good editor knows the *technical* failures of a story and can point them out; he tells the writer what is wrong, *not* how to put it right. An artistic failure he cannot interfere with under normal circumstances; he can only regretfully decline to accept it. Artistry is an argument between the writer and his material.)

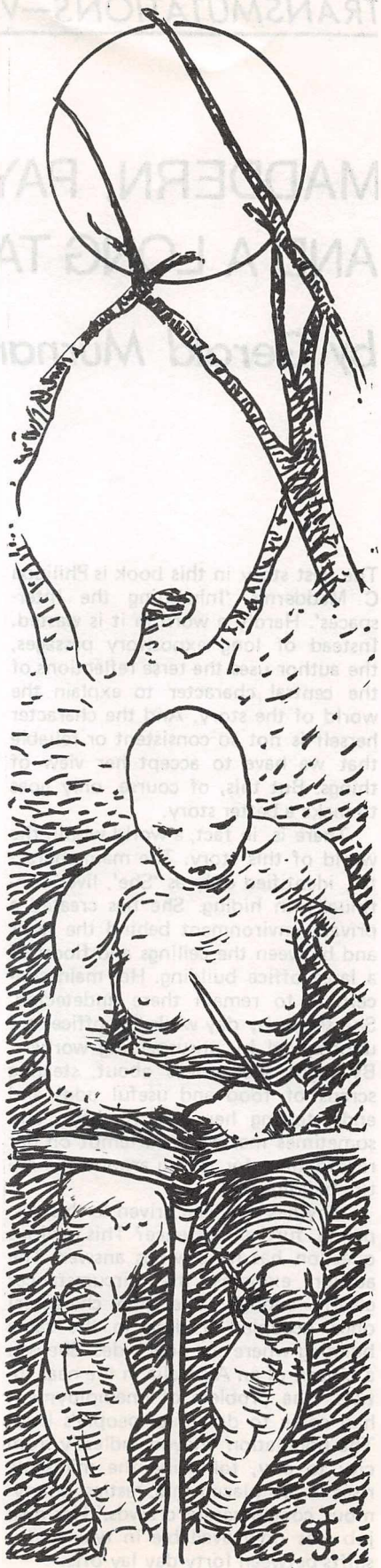
I think Rob has too often been too kind. I cannot imagine Terry Carr or Lee Harding letting Kevin McKay and Randal Flynn get away with their stories in their present form; an effective rehandling of either would not have been difficult. Bruce Gillespie's story presents problems other than the purely technical but it could (I think—and, as always, may think wrongly) have benefited from a more explicit handling of the water-crossing scene at its climax and a much more powerful emotional forcefulness. The water-crossing, in particular, seems to contain actions and visions so arbitrary that meaning and intention become doubtful.

Editorial suggestion has been the making of many an otherwise borderline tale. Editors have to be insistent. Every editor is a presumptuous and ignorant bastard in the mind of his suffering writer until a measure of success awakens the author to a simple truth—that he has been goaded to a concert pitch he might never have achieved on his own.

Editors, like writers, have to learn by experience because there are no schools for the application of appreciation and discipline to matters of personal preference. Rob has come through his solo baptism well enough, producing a book which will not make sf history but will give encouragement to our growing brood of young writers.

All our aspiring writers could do worse than get themselves a copy of *Transmutations* and study it in relation to their own work. Its defects and virtues are clear, but the attitude should not be a gleeful spotting of weaknesses so much as a consideration of how they could have been avoided or overcome. Workshoppers should by now know how to learn from each other.

George Turner
December 1979



MADDERN, PAYNE— AND A LONG TAIL

by Gerald Murnane

The best story in this book is Philippa C Maddern's 'Inhabiting the Interspaces'. Hardly a word in it is wasted. Instead of long expository passages, the author uses the terse reflections of the central character to explain the world of the story. And the character herself is not so consistent or reliable that we have to accept her view of things. But this, of course, only goes to make a better story.

There is, in fact, a world within the world of this story. The main character, identified only as 'She', lives continually in hiding. She has created a private environment behind the walls and between the ceilings and floors of a large office building. Her main concern is to remain there undetected. She sleeps by day while the offices are unoccupied by unsuspecting workers. By night she prowls about, stealing scraps of food and useful odds and ends, testing her skeleton keys, and sometimes making an attempt on her record time for racing around the entire building.

Why has she been driven to this desperate, furtive existence? This obvious question has no obvious answer. The author explains the circumstances clearly enough. She (the character) once occupied a desk in the same building where she now hides. She was a citizen of an Australia in the near future. The problem of unemployment had come to dominate people's lives. The population 'moved endlessly from city to city, following the miniscule rises in job placements, restless anonymous conglomerate crowds.' Her own job was only available in twenty-day shifts between forty-day lay-offs.

Her duties at her desk seem not to have been too exacting. Life in the office was strictly regulated but this was almost a comfort to her. For what she craved was, in her own words, stability and a sense of continuity. Soon after hearing of the drug-induced death of a friend ('his body lay suspended in a great stillness'), she makes her plans.

> At the end of her shift, she bought an expensive new lumitorch, told all her acquaintances that she was going to spend her forty days bush-walking around Hattah Lakes, and hinted that she was thinking of taking off for Central Australia. On the last day, she walked into the building carrying a limited-life plastic bag with a supply of food, the torch, a screw driver, and other odds and ends which she thought would be useful . . . she disappeared from the unstable glare of her daytime life.

After this fairly casual departure from the world, she begins her life in hiding, which has been going on for an unstated time when the story begins. But if she walked out of the daylight world a rather dispirited young woman, she has become, in her own dark territory, fierce and resolute. Most of her energy is directed towards staying out of sight and scrutinising her surroundings. 'The important thing was to take notice when things changed, because changes meant danger of discovery.'

We are told as much as we need to know about the limited, private world that she has created in the 'interspaces'. But we learn little of what goes on beyond it. She herself makes little sense of the scraps of information that she picks up on her rounds of the building. She sometimes sits in an office chair and reads letters, diaries, and the papers from in-trays. What does she make of these? We are not told. Either the world no longer makes sense to her or she regards it as beneath her contempt.

And yet she is ideally placed to observe the world if she wished. Her usual resting-place in the daytime is behind the wall of a conference room. But if anything of importance is discussed in the room she cares nothing for it. She goes every morning to her cubby-hole 'to lie on its furry floor; watching the blade of light on its straight wall strengthen and broaden as the day grew; to drowse through the hours, waking sometimes to the tramp-shuffle of feet, the drawing back of chairs, the slap of papers on the table, and the argument of the day-people's voices. . . .'

I'm sure I'm not the only office worker to have dreamed of donning a cloak of invisibility and eavesdropping on the conversations in a hundred rooms. And of course I wasn't interested merely in the more sober business of the building: what my superiors thought of me; the agenda of conferences behind closed doors: who was next in line for promotion—or an official reprimand. I have at least the average human hunger for meaty gossip. I wanted to know just what a certain man murmured to a certain young woman while he leaned over her desk, and what tales of people's private lives were told in quiet corners in the cafetaria.

Most of us would like to see what the butler saw or hear what reaches the ears of the conjectural fly on the wall. Why then does Philippa Maddern's protagonist take so little interest in the world whose interspaces she inhabits? She observes only what bears on her physical safety. She scrutinises the arrangement of furniture and the contents of cupboards and corners—but only as a fox or a mouse might sniff around for anything unfamiliar or threatening. She considers the people of the building as nothing less than enemies, although they were once her colleagues. Why?

I could not arrive at a simple answer to this. She is described as craving a stability that the outside world could not provide. Perhaps, since she lives in a society where the fear of unemployment motivates millions, she wanted

Gerald Murnane has had two novels published—*Tamarisk Row* and *A Lifetime on Clouds*—and various articles and short stories. He is at present Writer in Residence at Prahran Institute of Advanced Education.

no more than a steady job. Then again, if she wanted to simply drop out, why did she have to choose such a bizarre method? Are there so few outlets left for people of imagination that she could only express herself by turning into a malevolent recluse and keeping the whole of society at bay? But she hardly appears as someone whose creative energies have been thwarted by society. It seems more likely that her decision to hide was the result of mental imbalance. But the fact that we have to speculate like this hardly detracts from the merit of the story. If she perceives the world unclearly she is all the more interesting for doing so.

In the story itself the inevitable happens. The human mouse becomes aware that someone in the building knows of her existence. From this point on, the author is at her best. The events that follow are neither neatly predictable nor wildly improbable. They happen in a way that disconcerts —that makes the reader want to intervene and explain to the characters how misguided their actions are.

The ending, as I read it, no more than hints at the future. Is the world outside the building as dreary as she supposes? And even if it is, must she rebuff someone who may be on her side against it? It says a lot for the story that I wondered for some time after reading it what might have happened to the two who were left at the end in a situation that many writers would have mishandled. Philippa Maddern obviously knows that any future will be called, by those who live through it, the present, and will be subject to as many misinterpretations as the time that we call by that name.

Francis Payne's contribution, 'Albert's Bellyful', falls far short of 'Inhabiting the Interspaces', but it has some recommendations of its own. It's a satisfying story in the old-fashioned sense of having a beginning, a middle, and an end. And it's rather funny. Francis Payne realises that no matter what catastrophes afflict the world, the survivors (assuming there are some) will try to make light of their troubles.

The narrator of 'Albert's Bellyful' is a sort of nuclear-age hillbilly. He may not seem such an original character to regular readers of sf, but I found him a refreshing change from the many solemn, cerebral heroes that have crossed my fictional paths. This amiable moron, Jon, lives in the Mallee district of Victoria in the century following a nuclear disaster that has, as he puts it, screwed everyone's genes and made all the kids come out wrong.

Jon himself is fortunate. His parents were able to afford something called the Rijansky treatment which undid most of the damage from those screwed-up genes. But his brother Albert, is a mess. Jon, however, has learned to get along with Albert and his failings.

> He's pretty bright for a Defect, Albert, and can talk a fair bit. . . . But he has a messy and nasty way of skinning rabbits and knows that he shouldn't do it on the verandah. . . .
>
> 'Albert, can't you kill them first?'
>
> 'Nah. More fun alive.'
>
> There were times when I'd belt Albert if he really knew what he was doing. But, like most Defects, he doesn't, so it's no good complaining.

This hardly qualifies as brilliant humour, but it stands out among the generally ponderous stuff that makes up *Transmutations.*

Here is Jon's mother talking about Great-Grandad, the eccentric member of the family.

> 'He was always a bit. . . .' She tapped her head meaningfully. 'He used to collect them funny paper things.'
>
> 'Books,' I suggested.
>
> 'Yeh, books. Dunno what good they did him, but he claimed he had a use for them . . . he used to spend hours and hours just looking at the paper bits. Bloody queerest thing I ever saw.'

After 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' and 'Albert's Bellyful' the standard falls away rather steeply. *Transmutations* has what cricket commentators would call a long tail. I read the book at one sitting some weeks before I began this review. Of the stories I haven't mentioned, I remember three others as at least promising. Randal Flynn, Bruce Gillespie, and David Lake, to name them in alphabetical order, should keep at it.

Gerald Murnane
February 1980

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Response to recent issues of *SFC* has been gratifying. Thank you to the many recent correspondents, including people long absent from these pages. Too bad that I have to hold over the entire IMBTTMF column until next issue—I've run out of room for either letter-writers or my ramblings.

However, I have noticed a peculiar trend in recent letters. It can be summarised in a headline such as:

GILLESPIE NOT MISERABLE: SFC READERS PROTEST!

Not that life has been entirely free from Crushing Blows: just the other day our favourite silly black cat, Julius, went missing, and the back yard seems a lot emptier, not to mention quieter, during recent days. Elaine has tramped Collingwood's streets looking for him, but we fear the worst. If he were alive anywhere, we would hear his yowling; and if he's not alive, where can he be?

But on the whole, recent issues have reaped such response as this from:

Philip Stephenson-Payne
c/o Systime SA (Pty) Ltd
PO Box 3238, Johannesburg 2000
South Africa

I must confess that I have been finding *SFC* less and less interesting over the last few issues. The reason I used to like *SFC* so much was because of the very noticeable presence of Bruce Gillespie. I felt you were talking to your friends in those days, and it was interesting and thought-provoking.

But then you cheered up. I am very pleased for you (and Elaine) that you enjoy life with each other so much, but I think it's had a deadly effect on *SFC*. It's nobody's fault—certainly not Elaine's—but it just seems that people are most interesting and thought-provoking when they're miserable (or just fed up) than when they're happy. Maybe it's because in the first case they have nothing to lose. Also I think that to some degree *SFC* used to be your 'whole life' (just about) which certainly isn't (and shouldn't be) true any more. (As you say in *SFC 54*, 'A basically content Gillespie finds less to write about than any other sort of Gillespie.') (9 March 1980)

The rest of Phil's letter is thought-provoking, mainly because he raises the other doubt which has appeared in recent letters, ie, if *SFC* is no longer so much a personalzine, and discussing mainly sf, why do I go on with it, since sf is so incredibly dull and awful these days? I don't have much space left in this column to discuss this question, so I'll skip it for the time being. My general comments are:

* Many correspondents complained like mad when elements of melancholy crept into earlier *SFC*s.
* The magazine's coverage of the sf field would be more exciting (and up-to-date) if I had the time/money to get into print the marvellous stuff I have on file. Money, not 'married contentment', is what decides the future quality of *SFC*. All contributions accepted.

Meanwhile, I enjoy publishing *SFC,* and I hope you'll stay for the ride. A proper IMBTTMF next time—I promise.

19 March 1980

STONES CAST AT CLONES

in which
Mark Mumper
considers his verdict on

Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang
by Kate Wilhelm
(Harper & Row; 1976; 251 pages; $7.95;
Pocket Books 80912; 207 pages; 1977; $1.75)

Mark Mumper sent me this article before *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* won the Hugo Award, Best Novel, and the John W Campbell Award, for 1977—decisions which I disagree with. Also, I don't think the book is worth 5000 words, because, as Mark writes: 'The questions raised . . . are given no fair hearing, but immediately answered in favour of things as they are (or were): the clones are increasingly portrayed as provinical, conformist, unexciting, dead-ended—not through any necessity . . .' Whereas I dislike the book, Mark has sought for a fair verdict, and that search is the main interest of this article.

I

I offered Bruce a praising review of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* in the spring of 1976, just a few months after the book had come out in USA. He said he'd like to see it, especially since his own opinion did not agree with mine. I said I'd have it for him soon, wanted to do some touching-up and possibly a rereading—and then it sat for months untouched. Bruce's vague comment re his dislike for the book and the passage of time both, finally, commanded a close re-reading, a full year after my initial one. This brought some changes.

I had thought when I first read *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* that it was an important literary advancement for science fiction, that it enlarged the characteristic genre limits or even transcended them. Maybe I just hadn't read any decent sf for a while. I've come away now with less easy praise and some important objections to the book. (And I feel only a *bit* sheepish about following Bruce's lead and reversing my strong early opinion, since it's been worth it.)

Wilhelm has constructed this story in three novellas—a familiar form for some familiar classic sf 'novels'. This determines several elements that might otherwise have been different: plot, character, unity (lack of), among others. I think that whatever strengths come out of this scheme fail to replace the need for a true unified novel to explore and express her material fully.

The book's first section, also called 'Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang', starts the plot with a series of global ecological catastrophes that destroy human culture and the higher animals—all except the requisite main characters, the Sumner family, who have built a biological refuge in their Virginia farm valley. To fight increasing infertility, they grow clones. These clones eventually succeed their 'elders' and, regarding themselves as a new and better 'species', they opt for continued cloning rather than sexual reproduction. The conflict between them and the pre-catastrophe elders is seen here from the viewpoint of David Sumner, a sympathetic character who, ultimately, is banished after trying to subvert the alien new order.

The second novella, 'Shenandoah', begins a few generations later when the clones are status quo and the sociology is different. The characters Molly and Ben further the motive announced with David, of creative resistance to a repressive group-state.

Their son carries this to finality in 'At the Still Point', when he leaves the stagnated clones and builds a new society along the conventional reproductive and moral line of his forgotten elders.

II

It's easy to remember why I thought so much of *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* at first. Kate Wilhelm's talents are apparent to anyone who knows her work: she's particularly impressive compared with most other sf writers for her intelligence and sure craft, and these traits dominate the early part of the book. Three qualities in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* fixed it immediately in my admiration: Wilhelm's plain ability to *write*, her restraint, and the rich interplay of her themes.

Her writing displays a conscious but subdued choice of symbols and imagery; moments of excellence put it frequently beyond the normal mediocre sf performance. A few instances: The familial resemblance among three women in Part 1 prefigures the clones' corporeal identity with their elders. Several mystical references to an antique, primeval forest near the Sumner farm invoke the book's central concepts of evolution and renewal. And—the best of the prose generates a striking immediacy of scene and situation:

> David would imagine himself invisible, floating unseen over their heads as they discussed him. Someone would ask if he had a girl friend yet, and they would *tsk-tsk* whether the answer was yes or no. From his vantage point he would aim a ray gun at Uncle Clarence, whom he especially disliked, because he was fat, bald, and very rich. Uncle Clarence dipped his biscuits in his gravy, or in syrup, or more often in a mixture of sorghum and butter that he stirred together on his plate until it looked like baby shit.
>
> . . . He would point his ray gun at Uncle Clarence and cut a neat plug out of his stomach and carefully ease it out, and Uncle Clarence would ooze from the opening and flow all over them.
>
> 'David.' He started with alarm, then relaxed again . . . His father's quiet voice, saying actually, That's enough of that.
>
> (pages 3-4, Harper edition)

This is especially effective for using science fiction cliche in an entirely naturalistic setting.

All passages where Wilhelm is at her best show a restraint uncommon among sf writers: the play of her language accomplishes what is usually achieved through action or blatant emotionalising. This extends to larger schematic considerations: the multifarious catastrophes of Part 1 occur out of sight, but lose none of their impact for this. As the Sumners fall back on their farmland, David's cousin and lover, Celia, joins a Brazilian agricultural relief project. Rather than witness the world's disasters through her eyes, we feel her lengthening absence from the valley in the wake of communications breakdowns and growing isolation. Rather than watch urbanised technological culture's destruction and collapse in the thudding chaos typical of sf, we see its results: the Sumners flooding a valley where urban refugees have grouped to attack the farm, and the inevitable radioactive rains and the unseen disappearances of birds and beasts. This effective indirectness has been used before in end-of-the-world stories, but not often, and even less frequently within the genre itself. It is unexpected just to have someone construct an apocalypse *without* the familiar easy sensationalism.

Also uncommon is Wilhelm's abundance of complementary thematic material. All of it, if one cares to notice, plays more or less off the imagery and metaphor of Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 73', which includes the line which is the book's title. Now many sf writers do incorporate more than one or two levels of awareness in a work, but the mix isn't always congenial, much less poetically evocative. Wilhelm works in a number of sub-themes that reflect her main theme, which explores the human qualities necessary for suvival and evolution. Natural imagery and attentiveness to the large world underscore a concern with environment that brings recognition of self to each of the major characters.

The need for art and individual freedom to produce it is a main concern of 'Shenandoah'. The artist, Molly, on an exploratory expedition to ruined Washington, DC, discovers her own individual psyche when separated from her intimate clone sisters. This new identity, an aloneness strengthened by affinity for the wilderness outside her society's confines, transforms her photographically 'realistic' art into a richer impression, truly revealing her environment and companions.

In the final story, Mark furthers this identity by breaking entirely from the clones and establishing the new community.

All these threads explore the quiddities of being human. Their interweavings made me easily favour the book—and I still feel this has its own merit. The allusion to Shakespeare isn't just window-dressing.

III

But excellent prose, subtlety, and convolution of expression cannot carry a book if they appear only sporadically and, after the first chapters, this is what happens in *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang.* My re-reading saw these qualities diminish in the second and third parts, although they never disappear entirely. The first novella can stand (and has—in *Orbit 15,* 1974) on its own as a complete, unified expression of some of the things Wilhelm has attempted in the larger book. Its artistry is fairly uncompromised.

Eventually discrimination of character and incident break down, and Kate Wilhelm's writing becomes considerably poorer in places. Its restraint fades before a lacing of melodrama and cheap character manipulation. The lively human qualities that her characters feel remain vaguely expressed, despite their conceptual interplay. In the end, they are subordinate to the plot.

And this is where the book is most disappointing. *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* fails, in the way of most commercial sf, to transcend a mere story outline, and articulate the substance from which the story arises. Wilhelm, though she tries, finally delivers no more than a sketch of the profundities in her characters. The result is another competent, mainly unexceptional science fiction 'novel'.

These failings are the first I noticed in re-reading, and are perhaps most important. But there are other problems, too—weaknesses in structure and logic—that undermine Wilhelm's intent from the start.

The book isn't a true novel, yet the story demands a novel's breadth and unity to accommodate and develop its broad theme. As it is, each novella's protagonist carries the theme only so far before the plot must be resolved with some clean finality. This leads to shallow character realisation—an emphasis on action rather than development.

The story does open well: the clones' increasing alienness and opposition to David and the family, their final ruthless inheritance of power, and David's banishment set the theme of what makes a human—as *we* know humanness.

But the clones' frightening bland homogeneity only accepts the 'worthiness' of their unique, individuated elders, and ultimately they are no more than superficially conceived foils for the book's 'heroes'. Wilhelm does not develop their psychology beyond this role. Several passages characterise the clones as people with 'something missing, a dead area' void of human idiosyncrasy. The basis for this characterisation is unrevealed.

The argument against cloning as the sole means of reproduction is an argument against the clones' closed society, for the open variety and serendipity of the sexually reproducing society. But these opposed belief systems increasingly act only as elements of flat conflict in the plot. They fail to justify themselves, to strengthen or illuminate thematic matters. The questions raised—just what *is* human?; how can we tell when science wrongly alters the 'natural' course of evolution?—are given no fair hearing, but answered immediately in favour of things as they are (or were). The clones are increasingly portrayed as provincial, conformist, unexciting, dead-ended—not through any necessity (although we're made to feel they must, somehow, be this way) but to make them antagonistic to the three main characters, who are either pre-clone (David), 'ex-clone' (Molly, whose separation from her sisters has made her 'different'), or non-clone (Mark), and who are all adventuresome, iconoclastic, creative, dynamic.

Molly sees the unseen world outside the farm valley and, given the luck to be away from the clones' repression, finds her 'real' self, free and creative and now at odds with their staid community. In 'Shenandoah', these clones are shown as mainly silly, conservative, and embarrassingly ritualistic. The feast given to launch Molly's expedition is as choreographed and pure as a Virginia reel and reeking of schmaltz:

> Other small groups were starting to converge on the auditorium. The Louisa sisters waved and smiled; a group of Ralph brothers swept past in a run, their long hair held back by braided bands, Indian fashion; the Nora sisters stepped aside and let Miriam's group pass. They looked awed and very respectful. Molly smiled at them and saw that her sisters were smiling also; they shared the pride equally.
>
> . . . music filled the auditorium . . .
>
> The Jeremy brothers had worked out an intricate dance, more subdued than the flower dance, but requiring concentration and endurance. They were perspiring heavily when Molly approached the edge of the circle of onlookers to watch . . .
>
> The music changed, and Molly and her sisters swept out to the floor . . .
>
> (pages 72-74)

After the smiling and dancing, the schmaltz:

> Roger, the eldest of them all, was the master of ceremonies. He said, 'A toast to our brothers and our sister who will venture forth at dawn to find—not new lands to conquer, nor adventures to prove their courage, nor riches of gold or silver, but rather that most priceless discovery of all—information. Information we all need, information that will make it possible for us to erupt into a thousand blooms, a million! Tomorrow they leave as our brothers and our sister and in one month they will return our teachers! Jed! Ben! Harvey! Thomas! Lewis! Molly! Come forward and let us toast you and the most priceless gift you will bring to us, your family!'
>
> (pages 74-75)

Et cetera. This all adds a bizarre colour, perhaps, but strikes me as lazy filler material that could better accommodate more pertinent story development.

The clones, very communal and sticky-togethery, are always seen fawning on each other, sleeping and loving together and generally being wonderfully close and understanding. This is reasonable, if a little distasteful, but when Molly returns, her sisters suddenly develop an inexplicable selfishness. Her insular devotion to her art, her failures to come back into the sisters' love-making, cause them to rise up in totally foreign hateful indignation (voiced here by the 'head sister'; the others are all robot characters):

> 'I don't think she wants to come back to us. She's resisting us. I wish she hadn't come back at all if this is how she's going to be from now on. It's too hard on the other sisters.'
>
> (page 104)

But this fails to manifest any tragedy, because it's simply a given, which furthers the plot—allowing Molly's eventually casting-out—but which works against all the earlier well-established clone empathy. There is no depth to this reaction.

Wilhelm has created a realistic, convincing dramatic world—but such a world demands realisation, as the whole story demands the unity and unwavering direction of a novel. David's story is one of ironic alienation, Molly's explores the alienation and freedom of the creative individual, and Mark's is juvenile adventure (sprinkled with juvenile alienation) transformed into pastoral utopia. Among all these divergent threads, the unity is lost.

In any event, the reader who is looking for more than familiar politics of action and dystopian conflict finds the book's questions of human psychology and morality implied, even tossed around a good deal, but no more. Character and situation are not conceived or resolved rigorously enough to support a more complete exploration.

This same looseness allows other unsupported characterisations and logical inconsistencies to weaken the book. The gap that must exist between the pre-catastrophe world and the clones' world isn't at all apparent (even allowing for the surface changes of sexual habits and community identity, which exist fairly similarly in parts of present society anyway). The clones are not as different in their consciousness of social structure from 'us' as they should be, having never lived in a mass-technologised urban society.

When the first expedition reaches Washington, its members have never seen a city before, and have never known firsthand the qualities of the cuture that could create it, yet they're hardly amazed or pensive.

In a later section, Molly remarks offhandedly to Ben that she'll read a book before sleeping, but nothing is made of her reading a pre-destruction book, or what she or any clone would think of it, yet the questions this raises are central, I feel, to the conception of the story. Perhaps this asks for more of a Tolstoyan vision than Wilhelm sees the need for, but I don't think so; a science fiction world, especially, should be consistent with its premises.

Molly and her scouting companions are treated as heroes when, as quoted earlier, they are sent off; but the notion of 'hero' implies a worship of personality foreign to the basic selflessness of the clones.

A related inconsistency is their treatment of the 'mentally ill'. Rather than enlist any of a multitude of humanistic psychologies, known to us now or not, to bring alienated members back to the group, they eschew psychology, and indeed any cure, entirely, since it 'revives the cult of the individual', and 'a functioning unit's members are self-curing'. This, too, contradicts the clones' earlier unqualified love and devotion for each other as they selfishly reject the sick members. The paradoxes here may be intentional, but the apparent change from previous behaviour again comes too suddenly, with no support from internal evidence. The clones have been drawn so vaguely that it *might* be a reasonable response, but I would prefer more well-thought-out justifications. It just seems too easy for Wilhelm's purposes (ie, allows Molly's exile, and Mark's secret birth, without which he might have been less hostile to the clones).

The baldest example of Wilhelm's manipulations is that clones past the fourth generation decline in viability, enforcing the

adoption of sexual breeding to provide fresh cell material. If a woman is discovered to be fertile, she is taken immediately from the community, given the 'Ceremony of the Lost' (more for her siblings' benefit), and placed in an outcast 'breeders' compound' to be inseminated and pump out babies until she is spent. (No stigma is attached to the men providing sperm.) When Mark is discovered at age five, Molly is made a breeder. An entire chapter tells of her life in the compound. While it has pathetic moments, its overall style borders on the mawkish. The compound is a scene of domestic drug-induced captivity (I cringed at the women moping about in their robes and fluffy slippers) intended to portray 'woman's lot' for emotional effect.

But none of this is necessary. The clones have the technology to gestate foetuses artificially. They do this as a matter of course in cloning. There is no reason why sexually conceived zygotes cannot be transferred to artificial wombs, or even conceived artificially! Thus the 'breeders'' pain of separation from the family, and their lonely suffering, are without justification. This chapter has an important role only in alienating the reader from the clones and making Molly into more of a hero.

I mentioned above that the quality of Wilhelm's prose declines in the book's later portions; this is certainly the least excusable fault for a writer who usually has such control of her writing. Most of the prose is either merely competent (still better than that of most sf writers), conventional, and unimaginative, or embarrassingly thick and awkward. Some examples:

> David was aware of her, as he always was . . . He was aware that she stood up, that she didn't move for a moment, and when she said, in a tremulous voice that betrayed disbelief, 'David . . . David . . .' he was already starting to his feet. He caught her as she crumpled.
>
> Her eyes were open, her look almost quizzical, asking what he could not answer, expecting no answer. A tremor passed through her and she closed her eyes, and although her lids fluttered, she did not open them again.
>
> (page 40)

> 'I should have stayed,' Mark whispered. He was staring at the sprawled bodies . . . 'I shouldn't have left. I should have kept after them, to make sure they didn't go on. I should have stayed.'
>
> Barry shook his arm, and Mark kept staring, repeating over and over, 'I should have stayed with them. I should . . .' Barry slapped him hard, then again, and Mark bowed his head and stumbled away, reeling into trees and bushes as he rushed away . . .
>
> (pages 213-214)

> . . .'Don't you even care?'
>
> 'Care?'
>
> Ben heard the pain there, sharp, undeniable. He closed his eyes hard.
>
> 'Should I weep and howl and tear my clothes, and bang my head on the wall? Should I beg you not to leave me, to stay with me always? Should I throw myself from the topmost window of this house? Should I grow thin and pale and wither away like a flower in the autumn, killed by the cold it never understands? How should I show I care, Ben? Tell me what I should do.'
>
> He felt her hand on his cheek and opened his eyes and found they were burning.
>
> 'Come with me, Ben,' she said gently. 'And afterwards perhaps we shall weep together when we say goodbye.'
>
> (page 128)

These are all the more melodramatic because they occur at the end of narrative sections.

IV

The failings I've noted here have made it more difficult to judge *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* than I expected initially. The book's lack of unity, its inconsistent conception, its often awkwardly manipulated tone, raise questions of the author's intent that cannot be satisfied by explaining them away as simple lapses in concentration.

We can guess why Wilhelm makes the clones so disagreeable: she uses them to declare the need for human individuality and freedom, the nonconformity and mutability essential for social and biological evolution. But is it necessary for them to be *so* unsympathetic, so obviously villainous (and for the main characters to be *so* noble), to make this point?

I don't think so. I believe that Wilhelm was too caught up in her characters to demarcate herself from them. It's always dangerous, if not wrong, to assume that an author has made the same judgments that her characters make, or that she carries unconscious values into the worlds she creates (there is an inherent patriarchal sexism to all three societies here—the pre-clone culture analogous to our own, the clones' culture, and Mark's incipient community—yet I suspect Wilhelm was not aware of it, except possibly in the highly manipulated 'Shenandoah'). The narrative tone she has chosen, almost entirely from an interior third-person protagonist point of view, is tied so closely to the other larger judgments the book makes (the inevitability of human sexual survival, the need for uniqueness, etc) that this assumption is warranted. The judging process extends to 'objective' story elements outside the influence of any main character. In the latter two novellas, for instance, the clones' speech becomes tiresomely stilted, contractionless, forced. This is such an awkward manipulation it's embarrassing. Wilhelm tries too hard, too obviously, to make them qualityless androids, and after enough of this maddening dialogue (see especially pages 153-154) I gave up interest in them and Mark's conflicts with them.

Wilhelm also seeks to express, in her distinct, allusive style, the intangible meanings of consciousness. And there are places in the book where my original impressions may be substantiated. The most luminous paragraphs enlarge the characters' awareness to the evolving momentum of life, putting them within its full vibrant scheme:

> And often . . . she felt a release. At those times strange visions came to her, strange thoughts that seemed untranslatable into words . . . only colour would do, colour and line and light . . . it was almost as if she were alone with the river that seemed to have a voice, and infinite wisdom. The voice murmured too softly to make out the words, but the rhythms were unmistakable: it was speech. One day she wept because she could not understand what it was saying to her . . .
>
> (pages 97-98)

But still, I feel these scenes, *representing* a character's learning awareness, themselves lack total clarity—or the cogency, for example, of Wilhelm's tight short stories. Molly's struggle to hear the river's words seem also to be Wilhelm's.

For me, the story's richest transformation takes place when Molly discovers the whole world, her self, her art after returning from the river, yet the consistent qualities of her change are not articulated so that I really *know* what they are:

> Her thoughts were chaotic; there was something that had come to live within her, something that was vaguely threatening, and yet could give her peace as nothing else could. The beginnings of insanity, she thought wildly. She would become incoherent, scream at nothing, try to do violence to others or to herself. Or maybe she was going to die. Eternal peace. But what she had felt was not simply the absence of pain and fear, but the peace that comes after a great accomplishment, a fulfilment.
>
> (page 102)

This is a description of art. Art is vital to Wilhelm's theme, and vital, clearly, to herself as a writer; so this closes the distance between Molly and her creator even more. Molly's shadowy, incorporeal feelings are given an equally indeterminate expression.

Nonetheless these *are* difficult phantoms to apprehend; I think what this indicates is the difference between a good writer and a great one. Kate Wilhelm is without doubt a good one.

V

This book, and this analysis of it, have put me through a number of changes. The book has changed, too, in my thoughts, from an exciting, even pioneering, well-integrated humane presentation of unexplored scientific concepts, to a well-intentioned but conventional, and conventionally faulty, addition to the parochial genre of commercial science fiction. My first impressions were sudden and naive; what first seemed an admirable handling of complex data now appears poorly executed. This is not, as I thought, a significant new work of art but, finally, another treatment of the great American catastrophic dystopia-turned-utopia that preserves and ratifies the patriarchal, double-edged Judeo-Christian tradition, in the name of free personal expression, growth, and evolution. Regardless of the story's inherent metaphorical richness, Wilhelm has made it much too simple to condemn the 'inhuman' clones and fall for the standard business-as-usual ending.

I think science fiction, good sf concerned with exploring new possibilities (which is what it always *says* it does), should examine itself for these sanctions of the established order, *think* about them, and then, if it will go beyond lip service, turn to investigating the ramifications of true change.

For what it's worth, what I'd *like* to read is a novel about the viability, and moral and creative strength, of a cloned society that shows its members struggling with and perhaps altering human psychology, biology, and the 'natural order of things'. *That* would be pioneering (science) fiction!*

Mark Mumper
May 1977

* I hope Mark has read George Turner's *Beloved Son*, since it meets these criteria. (Editor)

OUTSIDE THE WHALE
(From Page 3)

So the very existence of the Nebula is divisive, engendering suspicion, cynicism, and hypocrisy. This could of course be argued about any important award, but the Nebula is one inflicted on writers by writers.

Moreover, it is a sham. It is wide open to corruption. Its manner of working is cumbersome and suspect. And although it was presumably conceived for idealistic motives, it represents an incontrovertible dishonesty about the nature of such awards.

That the Nebula has been corrupted is an 'open secret', one freely acknowledged in private by many people. Nothing can be proved, but there is hearsay and circumstantial evidence from the past, and in the present there is abundant direct evidence that vested interests seek to influence the way the Nebula is worked. Writers occasionally draw attention to their own work, offering to send Xerox copies to anyone who would 'like to make up their own minds'. Publishers circulate free copies of novels in which they have invested heavily, 'suggesting' that they be 'considered' for the prize. In the past, until it was stopped, editors of anthologies were known to nominate stories from their own books.

(This morning, while typing out this article, I received a package from a publisher who evidently has not heard yet of my defunct status. In the package was a xerox of a story, and the following Letter: 'Dear SFWA Member, The enclosed novelette, RAY-GUN RANCH by Ignatius Hackenbacker, will most probably be on the Nebula Award final ballot. We think it's a brilliant and important story and we would like you to have a chance to read it if you haven't already. RAY-GUN RANCH made its first appearance in *Boggling SF* in May 1979 and has just been reprinted in GRAB-BAG, Ignatius's new collection published by us.' Can anyone doubt that a Nebula for this story—actually written by a generally unassuming author, so presumably this was sent out without his connivance—will not help the publisher?)

Incidentally, the free books sent out to SFWA members are now institutionalised. At the end of 1979 a letter was sent to every SFWA member, prompting renewal of membership for 1980. It included the following insight into the universe: 'If you're like me, the free books alone mount up to much more than the dues (and if you're not getting many, try Nebula-nominating and see how popular you get) —and those lists, too, are taken from our membership files.'

All this is harmless enough on the face of it, but the other well-known fact about the Nebula is that only a relatively few SFWA members bother to participate in either the nominations or the voting. To ensure a prize for any particular title, all that is needed is a small swing in its favour. Authors who have the nerve to draw attention to one of their stories do often pick up the prize. Books heavily touted by publishers do indeed collect.

Any author wondering how to go about launching an effective campaign should consult *Locus 229.* This contains a detailed article by Norman Spinrad on this very subject. Award-grubbing has now become so commonplace that it is developing into a science.

The manner in which the Nebula is worked from day to day is also suspect, for different (but connected) reasons.

As the year proceeds, individual titles are 'recommended' by apparently disinterested ordinary members. A 'recommendation' is not intended to be a vote for the title, but is merely bringing it to the attention of other members, suggesting they read it for themselves. Those who 'recommend' have their names attached to the story . . . so it appears democratic, open, and above suspicion. However, as the months tick by it becomes obvious that some titles are more popular than others, as the 'recommending' names accumulate. This *de facto* counting thus turns the simple 'recommendations' into nominating votes, encouraging interested parties (as opposed to disinterested ones) to campaign.

(Mr Hackenbacker's publishers are doubtless acutely aware that at this very moment, 'Ray-Gun Ranch' is leading its category.)

Under old rules, this concealed nomination system was acknowledged by the fact that the works with the most 'recommendations' went on to the final ballot. Under newly introduced rules, the SFWA committee has bowed to pressure and changed this. Now all stories with more than one or two recommendations are listed as the basis for a preliminary vote to establish the composition of the final voting form.

Procedures can be changed, and in fact the Nebula rules change with the wind. They are irrelevant, though, because no matter how much the detailed rules are juggled, the central objection to the whole system cannot be denied.

That the Nebula was dreamed up from the highest motives is not questioned, but now that it exists we can see that it is *conceptually* impossible to work.

The idea is, of course, that the prize is awarded to a few writers by the majority verdict of their colleagues. It symbolises, in other words, the recognition of one's peers. If *other* science fiction writers, the reasoning goes, think such-and-such story is the best of the year, then surely it must be? After all, they should know, etc etc.

The besetting sin of genre science fiction is its inbred nature. Since the creation of the sf pulp magazines, the history of sf has been one of imitation piled on imitation, of accepted themes and idioms and tropes, of unwritten rules and shorthand and jargon.

The best science fiction is, and always has been, that which has broken with the idiom of the day, that which has taken a few chances, that which has stepped forward or outside, that which enlarges and advances. We admire and remember originality.

The worst science fiction is always that which is derivative or imaginatively borrowed. Bad sf is secondhand sf. In short, sf writers are at their least original when they have been reading too much sf.

Yet here is a prize, the Nebula, which by its lights demands that those sf writers who award it have read every science fiction novel in a year, every novella, every novelette, and every short story.

It is, or should be, self-evident that if anyone did read all that science fiction in a year, he or she would be incapable of telling day from night, let alone be retaining a sense of literary perspective.

And if an award made by writers is *not* based on literary principles, what other reason could there be?

Anyone who casts a vote for a 'best' work in a year is tacitly saying that everything has been read. Not just the titles listed on the voting form . . . *everything.*

To give some idea of the scale of reading necessary in any one year, consider this:

For the 1979 Nebula, the following numbers of titles have been recommended: NOVELS: 65. NOVELLAS: 12. NOVELETTES: 52. SHORT STORIES: 101. (NB: These are just the titles that have been singled out; it is not by any means a count of everything published in 1979.)

A novel is defined as a work of fiction in excess of 40,000 words; a novella is between that and 17,500 words; a novelette is between 17,500 and 7,500 words; a short story is anything below 7,500 words.

If we assume that all these recommended titles have a word length at the *minimum* of their categories (and the short stories are all, say, 5,000 words long) then we can work out just how many words a voting SFWA member will have to read.

In the Novel category: 2,600,000 words. Novella: 210,000 words. Novelette: 390,000 words. Short story: 505,000 words. A grand total, in fact, of 3,705,000 words.

This is roughly equivalent to about forty novels of the same length as Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness.*

Remember: These figures are the lowest possible estimates. They do not in any degree represent the total amount of fiction published.

Can anyone claim to be able to read even this small sample of the year's output?

Can anyone claim to have read everything? (Never mind whether they should.)

Can anyone who votes *without* reading everything not admit that they are deceiving themselves, deceiving the authors, deceiving the readers?

Most of what is in this article I have already said in SFWA circles, either in the form of letters or articles published in SFWA publications, or in direct correspondence with officials. So none of this should be new to SFWA ears, and consequently I feel free to bring it into public forum. I was tempted to resign quietly, just to let SFWA drift away from my professional life as once I had drifted into it, but I believe the collective SFWA mind is representative of an important body of thought in the sf world. **SFWA stands for the lazy consensus view, the received idea, the narrow mind. It is unadventurous, unquestioning, and distinctly anti-radical.**

Everything I have said here of course has opposing arguments, and in SFWA circles they are often voiced.

The defence of the membership requirement, for instance, is the insular one of the 'innate Americanness' of science fiction . . . an assumption that is wrong and dangerous, both in practice and as an idea. The Lem Affair is best left undiscussed and avoided . . . awkward and embarrassing business, that. The usual defence of the Nebula is that it makes a lot of money for those who win it.

So . . . does any of it matter? I believe it does, although by confining myself to three specific issues I have so far evaded what is for me the central failure of SFWA. This is the failure of the spirit, and because this is a nebulous concept, one for which neither arithmetic nor assertion will work, I have to approach it directly.

In spite of the conservative consensus, SFWA is not a monolithic entity, unchanging and unyielding. The committee changes personnel from year to year, and each new committee sets out with an earnest attempt to improve matters. The writers who become SFWA officers usually put in a year's hard service of thankless labour. They are rarely unresponsive to criticism, although the response too often is sympathy rather than action. Even the Nebula has often gone to deserving works, without coercion.

In recent years, SFWA has scored two major victories, neither of which can be gainsaid, but the nature of these victories should be clearly understood. In the first case, SFWA, alone of all writers' organisations, stood in the face of a pernicious new contract dreamed up by Pocket Books, one of the major American paperback publishers, and it won. It won too when it confronted Ace Books, whose former owners had been getting their royalty calculations wrong for a number of years.

These victories were tactical: the outcome of professional writers acting in concert for the common good. They required expertise and skill.

But in addition they required the nebulous sense of the spirit, of principle, and, to use an unfashionable word, of morality. At times like these, SFWA became a force for the good, extending an influence far beyond the matters I have been discussing here.

When SFWA fails in matters of the spirit, when it no longer keeps the faith, it becomes a lapse that is keenly felt. It betrays the very people it was set up to represent. By indecision and inaction, by obeisance to what it interprets as the safe consensus, by mistaking the short-term gain for the long-term strategy, it allows standards to slide and principles to become sullied. It condones the sham of the Nebula, it punishes the heretic, it applauds the quick buck.

In the moral climate it has by default helped create, the preening need for SFWA Suites becomes not only accepted but inevitable. This is the context in which authors squabble with convention committees over their presumed status, in which grown men sulk because they haven't been given a paper hat to wear, in which big-heads become spokesmen.

If SFWA has not directly contributed to this decay of the spirit, then certainly it has not been felt as a force that resists it. This is its principal failure, and one to which it has never addressed itself.

Christopher Priest
February 1980