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Aldiss's puzzles • Herbert's God • Australia's best
Disch's Daniel • Stellar gadflies • Damien's dragons
Everybody's letters • Susan Wood: a tribute

REGISTERED FOR POSTING AS A PUBLICATION - CATEGORY 'B'

ARTWORK: Mostly pen-and-ink renderings by Elaine Cochrane, with apologies to various originals, such as William Blake (p 7), Jack Gaughan (p 11—from *Golem*^{100}), and Escher (p 27).
PP 18, 20: Stephen Campbell. PHOTO P 39: Dick Eney; from cover of Eli Cohen's *Kratophany 7*.

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HOME, SAPIENS!

THE DREAMING DRAGONS: TWO VIEWS

Reviewed:

The Dreaming Dragons
by Damien Broderick
(Norstrilia Press; 1980;
245 pp; $12.95;
Pocket Books 83150.X; 1980;
224 pp; $US 2.25;
Penguin 14 005823; 1981;
245 pp; $A 4.50)

Damien Broderick had a short story collection, *A Man Returned*, published when he was extraordinarily young. A novel, *Sorcerer's World*, appeared in USA when he wasn't much older. In *The Zeitgeist Machine*, he gathered the third collection of Australian sf stories to be published by Angus and Robertson. **The Dreaming Dragons** is Damien's first novel to reach a wide public, with a simultaneous release in Australian hardback and US paperback. It is the second novel that Norstrilia Press has published.

Anne Brewster is a tutor in the English Department at Adelaide University.

Rowena Cory is a member of that vast multi-activity conglomerate, Cory and Collins.

THE AWAKENING OF MYTH

by Anne Brewster

Damien Broderick's novel, **The Dreaming Dragons**, is subtitled 'A Time Opera', yet the central metaphor of time is somewhat obscure. The first three of the five sections are set in contemporary Australia. Beneath Ayers Rock a vault which is, in fact, 'a dull white sphere on a flat surface' is discovered. It possesses strange qualities and interferes with the neurophysiological functions of the brain, plunging the unfortunate who approaches too closely into the psychic chaos of the id. To what else would a competent Australian writer, telling his tale of the Great Outback, take recourse? Patrick White has set the pattern for the second half of the twentieth century, it seems.

Yet Broderick's story is not introspective. It takes the Aboriginal creation myth of the rainbow serpent as its focal motif, translating this myth into the post-Darwinian vocabulary of a technological super-culture. Man is no longer determined by blind environmental forces; he is responsible for his own development. The potency at the source of the rainbow serpent myth comes not from the natural elements, the spirits of animals, or even uranium oxide. The vault beneath Ayers Rock is a complex machine, the artifact of a past Terran civilisation whose remaining members are suspended on their crippled space craft in 'deep time'. The vault is, in fact, the 'Soul Core' of that race and embodies its collective unconscious. The race has evolved from a dinosaur contemporary to that ape from which we claim descent. *Saurus erectus* evolves into *Saurus sapiens*, a plumed reptile that towers above man.

This race cultivates 'pongid' slaves, strange, fur-covered animals with straight, square teeth, and five digits on each hand. . . . The Saurians' space ship's controls are disabled by the explosion of a supernova and their civilisation stands on the brink of collapse. In the meantime, the pongid slaves, who have developed intelligence unobserved by their masters, revolt.

Parallel (one assumes) to the malfunctioning of the Ancillary Core of the space craft, the Vault becomes defective and erases the Saurians' past history from the face of the earth. Without competition, the early apes are now able to evolve unhindered, into *Homo sapiens*. This explanation summarises the last chapter of *The Dreaming Dragons*.

The first three chapters describe the adventures of an Aboriginal anthropologist and his autistic nephew, aided by Bill delFord, a Californian psychoscientist researching OOBE (out-of-body experience), who speaks like Timothy Leary, Arthur Janov, and Philip K Dick rolled into one, in investigating the various psychic properties of the Vault and cracking the metaphoric code of the unconscious. They work among top American and Russian scientists and military officials in a bid to simulate the various properties of the Vault and tension runs high in this atmosphere of co-operative yet not wholly stable suspension of hostilities. In his search to plumb the meaning behind mythic symbols, Bill delFord falls even deeper than a yogi's trance. . . .

The Dreaming Dragons is textually uneven and frequently repetitive and, despite consistent references to technological, sociological, and historical data to substantiate the plot, the ambiguity of place and time (the reader has the impression, for example, that the Saurians live on another planet rather than in a past/parallel world) is unsettling. It remains, however, an ambitious and inspired foray by Australian sf. The use of the Aboriginal legend, while studied, is never self-conscious. Here in Cairo, surrounded by ancient Egyptian Thoth symbols which are continually being recreated in commercial products, popular art, and tourist artifacts, I am struck by both their overt and covert cultural immediacy. It is this balance that Broderick achieves in his treatment of the Wanambi myth.

Anne Brewster,
Cairo, December 1980

MYSTERY WITHIN MYSTERY

by Rowena Cory

An alien artifact, Aboriginal legends, foreign intervention: do these sound familiar?

The Dreaming Dragons begins with the Aboriginal anthropologist, Alf Dean, and his autistic nephew, Mouse, searching for the Rainbow Serpent, which Alf believes is the skeleton of some ancient dinosaur. But deep within the cave system they find a portal. A faint breeze reaches Alf as he stands before it and, unable to restrain his curiosity, he steps through. Mouse watches his uncle collapse and, unaware of the danger, runs to his aid.

They have been transported to the underground chamber which houses the Sphere. Mouse drags his unconscious uncle through the Sphere's cavern to where the American and Russian personnel watch, unable to aid them. Alf the anthropologist is near death, but the Sphere's shield has no effect on Mouse. They are the first to survive the field: all others have died or returned insane.

On Alf's advice, an out-of-body experience (OOBE) expert is flown in from USA. While it appears that Mouse is somehow in tune with the Sphere, he begins to communicate in many languages. His cryptic messages, transcribed verbatim, astound listeners.

So we are presented with the first level of the mystery in these three chapters. The narrative shifts to the viewpoint of Bill delFord, the OOBE expert, and we find out more about the total situation.

Upon discovering a ruined base on the far side of the moon, the Russians and the Americans form an uneasy alliance. Some of the machines still operate after twenty million years. These pinpoint a large natural feature in the centre of the Australian continent. As the men work to discover what lies beneath Ayers Rock, the Sphere makes its presence felt. From what remains of the alien moon base, the scientists can duplicate the shield which partially protected it from nuclear attack. Under this gluon shield, their people react in a way similar to the actions of those who step within the Sphere's influence. It is left to Bill delFord to discover a way to approach the Sphere.

This isn't a formal novel: the construction is unusual, because of the problems of presenting a mystery of this kind. At times the grammar changes from past to present tense to make a section more immediate. Characters are introduced, allowed to play their roles in the story's development, then fall into the background. At one point after Bill delFord joins the team at Ayers Rock, the storyline is interrupted, and we are treated to a chilling first-person account of a brilliant Russian who finds he has been infected by a strange virus. He is told it was an accident, but he suspects that *They* are experimenting on him. Soon he forgets these nagging doubts as the endorphin peptide, which is being produced at a phenomenal rate in his brain, interferes with the cortical neuron receptors, causing mental retardation. Finally the process is halted and he returns to normal, still able to recall in humiliating detail his helpless infantile behaviour.

When the sequence ends, we learn that this is the Sphere's attempt, through Mouse, to precipitate a nuclear war. Some argue that it is an instruction to use this process on volunteers for the Sphere's field.

A new break in the narrative introduces a ship (which, as we learn later, travels through time), manned by relatively stupid pongids, which is faced by a crisis. The damaged master computer raises a generation of *Saurus erectus*, the ship's builders, to deal with the situation. It seems that ten thousand years before, a nearby nova occurred and somehow the ship's shield was pierced. Those pongids performing their simple tasks at the time were treated to a massive dose of radiation. The faulty computer raised a fresh generation of pongids, and those who were cancerous and crippled retreated to the Ancillary Core to fend for themselves. Left alone, the radiated survivors evolved in a short ten thousand years to something which might be *Homo sapiens*. Now the computer has decided that they threaten the ship's ability to achieve its programmed task, and the reptilian officers must solve this dilemma. The saurians are reluctant to believe that the feral pongids are intelligent, despite the fact that they still speak an accented version of the ship's language (an event almost as unlikely as the forced genetic evolution precipitated by radiation poisoning).

Gradually the reader begins to grasp the aliens' reasoning. To accept that the feral pongids are intelligent would elevate killing them to a crime, since all intelligent beings are linked. The

source of the link is the ancillary core, the same place which houses these threatening beings. The officers decide to seal off this section of the ship and open it to space, even though it will mean their own 'death'.

But we later learn that these same evolved pongids built the moon base. Apparently they survived their eviction since the ship was travelling in time and not space. An sf reader must be willing to accept certain concepts—faster-than-light drive, etc—but when reading this novel I felt my credulity suffering under the impact of these plot devices.

Now all the facts are there, yet the mystery still remains beyond the understanding of the reader, not to mention the main characters, who do not know the events of chapters 11, 12, and 13. The narrative returns to the original story as Bill delFord and Hugh Lapp, the ex-astronaut, enter the Sphere's field. How does an author write objectively about events which occur in the minds of his characters when they are hallucinating? And will the reader glean enough knowledge of these characters to understand the reality which is distorted through the prisms of their minds?

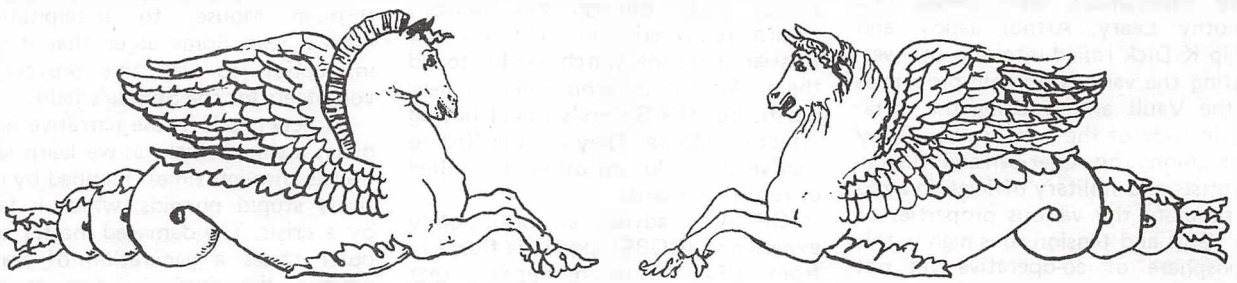
DelFord and Lapp do not survive their confrontation with the Sphere, though we are led to understand that this alien artifact is not inimical to man. Before they die a little more of the mystery is revealed, but not to the other characters.

They are back where they started, except for Mouse. The autistic boy takes his uncle and General Sawyer, a minor character suddenly elevated to greatness, into the Sphere's cavern. Here, through Mouse, all is explained. Instead of discovering that the advanced aliens will 'show us the way', it seems that our race's maturity will come from within, forced upon us by the Sphere, which houses the collective consciousness of all who have lived, both *Saurus erectus* and ourselves.

I have not given away the whole plot, but I could not discuss the novel without revealing so much background. From the first page I was wrestling with the mystery, trying to anticipate the answer. Having it all explained so neatly by Mouse made me feel cheated, though the clues were there.

The Dreaming Dragons is a difficult novel, with its narrative leaps and tense changes. The chapters dealing with the Saurian officers in the ship are particularly enjoyable, for the action is fast and the characters alien enough to intrigue. While I might quibble about the mixture of mysticism and science, others could think otherwise. It is an ambitious novel and I can only gasp at the breadth that Broderick covers.

Rowena Cory, November 1980



Australian SF: 2

THREE NOVELS FROM CORY & COLLINS

Bruce Gillespie
Wynne N Whiteford

AUSTRALIAN SF LURCHES FORWARD

by Bruce Gillespie

Bruce Gillespie discusses:

Breathing Space Only
by Wynne N Whiteford
(Void 3; 1980; 150 pp;
$12.95 hb, $2.95 pb.)

Looking for Blucher
by Jack Wodhams
(Void 1; 1980; 207 pp;
$12.95 hb, $3.95 pb.)

The Fourth Hemisphere
by David Lake
(Void 2; 1980; 208 pp;
$12.95 hb, $3.95 pb.)

I continue to admire the publishing work achieved by Paul Collins and Rowena Cory, without always agreeing with their judgment. They continue to

publish, despite extraordinary setbacks, including the refusal of major distributors to handle these books because they were Australian paperbacks. 'Void Publications' has become 'Cory and Collins' within recent months, and I presume we can expect a new set of books from them during 1981.

But for now, I have to make something of their offerings during 1980: three novels, which vary so widely in levels of ambition and achievement as to make it dismaying to review them under the one heading. (Fortunately, Wynne Whiteford relieved me of some of the burden by sending me the accompanying review of *The Fourth Hemisphere*.) One novel I liked a lot; one I liked in bits; and one I detested. So, in order:

I can still remember seeing Wynne Whiteford's distinguished face peering at me from the cover of one of Ted Carnell's *New Worlds* when I first began buying the science fiction magazines in the early 1960s. I was interested to note that there were people in Australia writing science fiction, and I enjoyed the Whiteford story in that issue. (That must have been his last fictional publication for nearly twenty years.) When I joined fandom, I began to meet Wynne regularly at conventions. The face was a lot older, though. And there were no more stories. This hiatus continued until Paul Collins and Rowena Cory began publishing *Void* magazine a few years ago. The Wynne Whiteford byline began appearing again, and eventually Void Publications achieved an unprecedented feat: a novel from Wynne N Whiteford.

The years between stories for Wynne have not been wasted. **Breathing Space Only** is a fine novel—in some ways, the best Australian sf novel to appear so far. It's an achievement of clarity, modesty, and authenticity—qualities which I admire in anyone's work, and find so rarely in science fiction. I suspect that it is not a book which could be written by a young person.

Not that some readers will believe me if they have read only the first chapter. Slam-bang action is the style set by the first few pages, and it's a pity that this section misrepresents the rest of the novel. Roy with his laser rifle disposes of three would-be invaders of the last bastion of technological civilisation in Australia: the mountain plateau around Adaminaby in the Snowy Mountains. After reading the first section I was prepared for a fairly tedious book, full of clenched-jawed heroes and tempestuous action. The action is here, all right, but it does not fit any of the cliches of overseas science fiction.

Breathing Space Only could well have begun with the second chapter, where we find Roy taking the captured ancient motor-bikes to Jindabyne. Whiteford disposes of explanations as quickly as possible: extraordinary pollution levels throughout Australia have been raised by the need of an oil-poor country to turn entirely back to coal, and then the burning of the coal-fields by 'Perms' during a general social breakdown. The Snowy Mountains plateau's settlements are still powered by the ancient hydro-electric scheme. Their inhabitants fear everybody from the permanently smog-ridden plains below, and guard all entrances to the plateau. Hence Roy's tour of guard duty, and his abrupt conversion into a killer of three.

Not much of this is intrinsically original. What is original is Wynne Whiteford's way of looking at the world, and his pleasant way of making his ideas come to life. His characters are alive, and his landscape is vivid.

Roy is no great brain, but he is an authentic enough down-to-earth decent Australian. He is not paranoid, for a start. He cannot really see why the settlements' elders, especially Max Lang, need be so distrustful of the outside world that they will kill all intruders. Worse, when terrestrial descendants, arrived back at Earth from a distant planet, try to make contact, the influential councillors forbid any signals to the visitors. Roy discovers information which shows that interstellar visitors must be immortal, and probably have much else to offer.

Roy's attempts to make contact with the visitors takes up much of the rest of the book. It could have been boring, but isn't. For instance, Whiteford could have made the book tedious by making Roy into a superhuman goody-goody. He isn't. He refuses to consider that Max Lang and the others might have a good point when they say about the visitors: 'If they *are* human, they've been living in some alien environment for generations. They'll be further apart from us than the Perms of the Outlands.' Which gives away the end of the book, but not really. *We* know all along that Roy will get a rude shock when he achieves his aims. If Roy had had time to sit down and think, he might have worked this out as well.

But the settlements' noble citizens are soon onto Roy's plans, and pursue him all over the countryside. Here is where Wynne Whiteford's talent for authenticity shows itself splendidly. Not that he indulges in elaborate scene-setting, but he does give us a remarkable picture of the Snowy Mountains in summer, and the rest of the Australian countryside covered in a permanent smog. *Breathing Space Only* is filled with memorable scenes: Roy flying a plane for the first time when the pilot is killed unexpectedly, then crash-landing when fuel runs out; Roy 'breaking out' of a HEP service tunnel when pursued by righteous citizenry; Roy hiding out in a deserted farmhouse as the settlement's only working helicopter hovers overhead. All basic stuff, yes, but imagined carefully and seen clearly. Whiteford's prose is full of authentic-sounding dialogue (not merely realistic), technical details, and an appreciation of the gritty surfaces of a real world that happens to be in the future.

It would be no insult to either writer to say that Wynne Whiteford could well be the Wilson Tucker of Australia. Both writers give the impression of having experienced much, and being able to convey the texture of that experience. Yet, with both writers, behind the surface detail is a commitment to idealism. *Breathing Space Only* gains force from the fact that both sides of the conflict are idealistic. Most of the citizens of the settlements want to sit tight on their mountains and re-occupy the plains 'for civilisation' when the smog has gone away and the Perms have all died of unchecked diseases. Roy hates the constriction of such a conventional social atmosphere. Certainly the star-travellers offer immortality, but they also offer a way to escape from the past. But Roy refuses to see that he might have caused a lot of trouble for nothing, and that the visitors from the overhead satellite might have nothing for him.

We know that Roy will be disappointed, and so will his girl friend Jill, who accompanies him onto the alien lander just as it is leaving for home. But nothing quite prepares us for the real poignancy of the last few pages, when Roy and Jill realise just how alien humans might become after many generations away from the original environment. The end of the book, in particular, makes *Breathing Space Only* a satisfying novel.

I can't say that I found any satisfaction in **Looking for Blucher**, by Jack Wodhams. It only confirms my impression

Breathing Space Only . . . in some ways, the best Australian sf novel so far. _Looking for Blucher_: . . . astonishingly bad. _The Fourth Hemisphere_ . . . latest example of Dull Australian SF.

of Wodhams as the most infuriating sf writer we have, somebody who is so often astonishingly bad, sometimes equally astonishingly good, and never seems to know the difference in his own work. Some people have described *Looking for Blucher* as brilliant. One such is Larry Buttrose, whose review appears in *Australian Book Review* for November 1980. Unfortunately, Buttrose's review describes the plot with sufficient clarity to make any reader instantly aware of the idiocy of the whole book.

Perhaps 'plot' is too strong a word. *Looking for Blucher* consists of a series of strange incidents which are gradually perceived to have some loose pattern. This pattern is completed by an incident at the end of the book which is slightly more memorable than the other incidents. Why any of these incidents should have been considered interesting enough to be written down in the first place remains a puzzle which this reviewer cannot solve.

Eventually a story does appear, a story which need not have existed. The strange protagonist with the ever-changing names occupies a kind of dream environment over which he has some, but not total, control. I still don't know why he is granted such a privilege. A bureaucrat named Baldcock (subtle Wodhamism) wants to gain some control over the dream environment and its occupant. He must persuade the occupant to let him in. Dream environments being what they are, why couldn't he have let himself in? If he had done so, there would have been no story. I wish there had been no story.

Enough. I suspect that Jack Wodhams hates writing novels, and expressed his hatred in the form of a manuscript delivered to Void Publications. It's not that *Looking for Blucher* is confusing in a New-Wave-eloquent sense; it's confusing in a getting-lost-in-the-middle-of-a-badly-told-joke sense. The dreary, sexist, music-hall-gag quality of the sexual innuendo is depressing, and shows the kind of humour which Wodhams might have been attempting. Stop it, Jack, stop it. Keep writing novella-length pieces, like 'One Clay Foot', and we'll stay with you. But we are not looking for *Looking for Blucher*.

The Fourth Hemisphere is a book which not even the author likes very much, so I suspect that Wynne Whiteford is being over-polite about it in his accompanying review. Perhaps not. *The Fourth Hemisphere* does have the qualities which Whiteford ascribes to it. But it also has its hero a most objectionably pompous twit, who is *always right*. Even when his guesses and conjectures are incorrect, there is always somebody standing by conveniently to give him the right information. Because Andrew Adams has a charmed life, there is very little drama in *The Fourth Hemisphere*. Lots of incidents, and most of them well told. But nothing is really at issue, except when Adams will get the goodies and the girl. With Wynne Whiteford's Roy as the main character, *The Fourth Hemisphere* might have been rollicking good fun. As it stands, it is David Lake's most recent contribution to Dull Australian SF. He does so much better in his short stories.

Bruce Gillespie, February 1981

A SUCCESSION OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

by Wynne N Whiteford

Wynne Whiteford reviews:

The Fourth Hemisphere
by David Lake
(Void; 1980; 208 pp; $3.95 pb, $12.95 hb)

The vital thing about **The Fourth Hemisphere** is that it creates for the reader an alien yet thoroughly believable world, a world which David Lake appears to have thought through in considerable detail.

As in some of the environments created by Jack Vance and Ursula Le Guin, there is a complex basis of geography and history underlying the stage on which the drama of the novel is acted out. As a result, there are no jarring inconsistencies of scene or character.

The central character, Andrew Adams, is sent on a one-man mission to the planet of another star, 54 Piscium, thirty-four light years from our solar system. The author always stays within the range of what is theoretically possible. His space ships never exceed the velocity of light, and Adams knows that his journey will be one-way, the distance making it necessary for him to be frozen into controlled hibernation for the duration of the voyage.

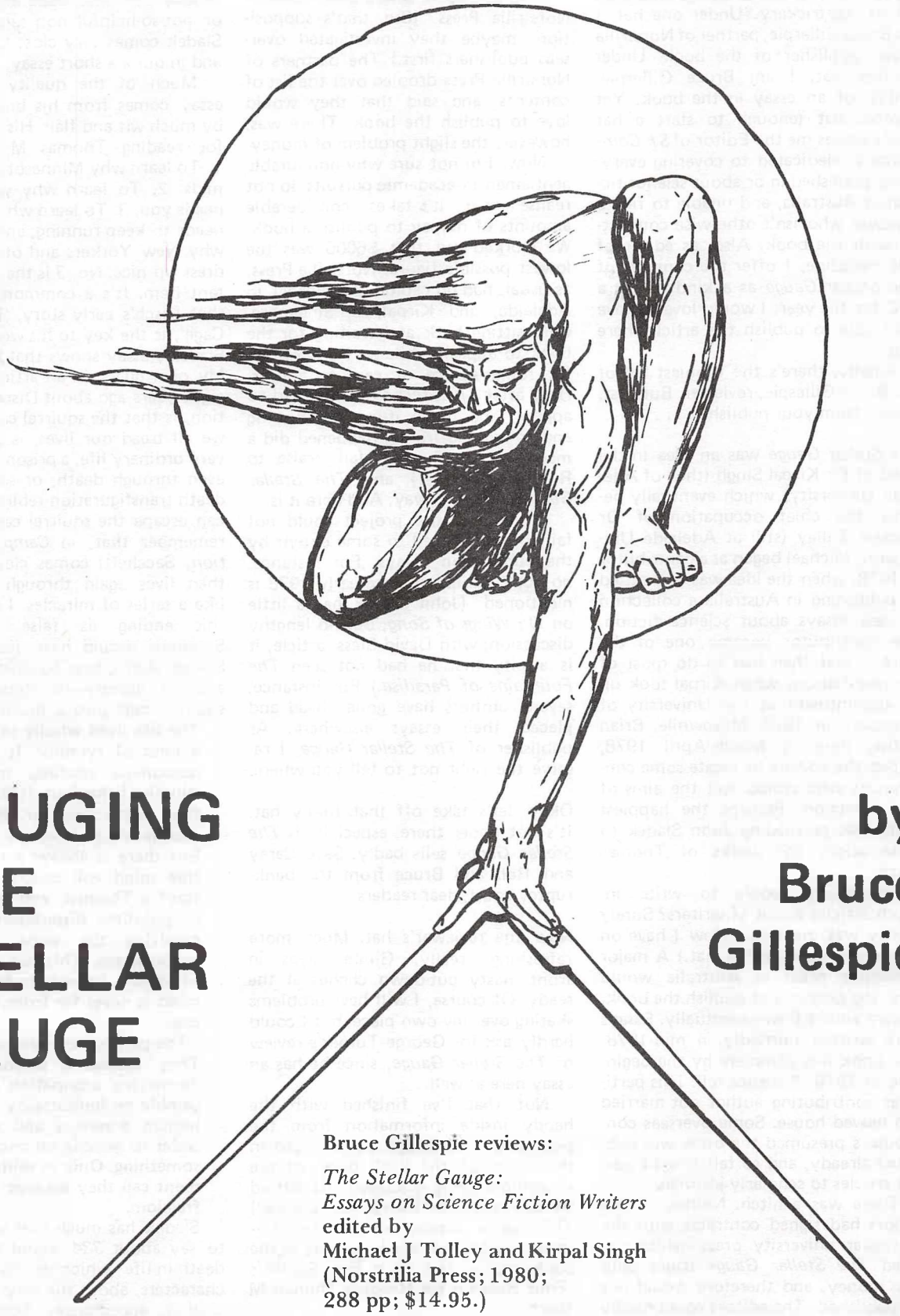
We are supplied with a double-page map of the planet Eran in the front of the book. For the first few chapters, we can keep checking back quickly to see where the hero's travels have brought him. After that, it isn't necessary—the alien continents and seas have been imprinted on the memory.

Compared with some sf, *The Fourth Hemisphere* may seem slow-moving, but this tempo gives the story its strength. When Adams parachutes on to the planet from the disintegrating landing craft, he is left with no means of defence other than a sheath-knife. He does *not* immediately contact humanoid aliens who speak perfectly understandable English, like the characters in *Doctor Who*. In fact, he has to learn their languages—and their customs—by slow degrees, something we accept because we have been told in the first page that he has specialised as a linguist.

A word of warning: don't make a snap judgment of *The Fourth Hemisphere* by reading the first few pages and looking at the end. A browser in a book store might easily skim the opening scene where Adams is selected for the voyage, read the President's view on 'Russkies' and 'Commies', look at the Chinese symbol for peace on the last page, and toss the book aside as just another propaganda vehicle. A pity, because he'd be missing a subtle, complex, carefully wrought story of the hero's gradual mental growth as he adjusts to a succession of different cultures.

Perhaps David Lake's own background has been of help here—his life in India, and as a teacher of English in Vietnam and Thailand (and Queensland!).

Wynne N Whiteford, July 1980



GAUGING THE STELLAR GAUGE

by Bruce Gillespie

Bruce Gillespie reviews:

The Stellar Gauge:
Essays on Science Fiction Writers
edited by
Michael J Tolley and Kirpal Singh
(Norstrilia Press; 1980;
288 pp; $14.95.)

To review **The Stellar Gauge** involves a bit of hat-trickery. Under one hat, I am Bruce Gillespie, partner of Norstrilia Press, publisher of the book. Under another hat, I am Bruce Gillespie, author of an essay in the book. Yet another hat (enough to start a hat shop) makes me the Editor of *SF Commentary*, dedicated to covering everything published in or about science fiction in Australia, and unable to find a reviewer who isn't otherwise connected with the book. Also, as editor of this magazine, I offer the contents of *The Stellar Gauge* as a kind of extra *SFC* for the year: I would love to have been able to publish the articles here first.

Finally, there's the funniest hat of all: Bruce Gillespie, reviewer. But first, a word from your publisher. . . .

The Stellar Gauge was an idea in the mind of Dr Kirpal Singh (then of Adelaide University) which eventually became the chief occupation of Dr Michael Tolley (still at Adelaide University). Michael began as a contributor in 1978, when the idea was first raised of publishing in Australia a collection of new essays about science fiction. The contributor became one of the editors, and then had to do most of the negotiations when Kirpal took up an appointment at the University of Singapore in 1979. Meanwhile, Brian Aldiss, here in March/April 1978, helped the editors to locate some contributors who would suit the aims of the collection. Perhaps the happiest result was persuading John Sladek to write about the works of Thomas Disch.

Persuading people to write in-depth articles about sf writers? Surely money was involved. (Now I have on my contributing-author hat.) A major university press in Australia would fund the project and publish the book. Money would flow—eventually. Essays were written hurriedly in mid-1978. The book was complete by the beginning of 1979. A silence fell. This particular contributing author got married and moved house. Some overseas contributors presumed the book was published already, and so felt free to submit articles to scholarly journals.

There was a hitch. Neither of the editors had signed contracts with the particular university press—which decided *The Stellar Gauge* could only lose money, and therefore would not be published. The editors could hardly sue for breach of contract, but they were left with an entire book waiting for a publisher.

You can guess where they turned—Norstrilia Press. (But that's supposition; maybe they investigated overseas publishers first.) The partners of Norstrilia Press drooled over the list of contents, and said that they would love to publish the book. There was, however, the slight problem of money.

Now, I'm not sure why honourable gentlemen in academic pursuits do not realise that it takes considerable amounts of money to publish a book. We worked out that $6000 was the lowest possible figure. Norstrilia Press, as usual, had no capital. So Michael, in Adelaide, and Kirpal, in Singapore, were sitting back and waiting for the book to appear, while we were waiting for some source of cash to appear. Only after *The Stellar Gauge* failed to appear, and much if-ing and but-ing and to-ing and fro-ing happened did a major miracle happen (all praise to Rosemary White!) and *The Stellar Gauge* was on its way. And here it is.

Of course, the project could not fail to be damaged to some extent by the publication delays. For instance, no book published since early 1978 is mentioned. (John Sladek has a little on *On Wings of Song*, but no lengthy discussion; with David Sless' article, it is a pity that he had not seen *The Fountains of Paradise*.) For instance, several authors have gone ahead and placed their essays elsewhere. As publisher of *The Stellar Gauge*, I reserve the right not to tell you where.

Okay, let's take off that funny hat. It's hot under there, especially if *The Stellar Gauge* sells badly. Save Carey and Rob and Bruce from the bankruptcy court, dear readers.

Now the reviewer's hat. Much more refreshing, really. Gimlet eyes in front, nasty put-down cliches at the ready. Of course, I will have problems skating over my own piece, but I could hardly ask for George Turner's review of *The Stellar Gauge*, since he has an essay here as well.

Not that I've finished with the handy inside information from the publisher. The essays are arranged in the order of the birth dates of the sf authors being discussed. (Is Alfred Bester really older than Arthur Clarke?) This has a number of odd results—in particular, that the best essay in the book appears last. It is John Sladek's **'Four Reasons for Reading Thomas M Disch'.**

I don't think anyone can do complete justice to the works of Tom Disch. I've tried several times, and usually sink into babbling admiration or not-so-helpful non sequiturs. John Sladek comes very close to perfection, and in quite a short essay.

Much of the quality of Sladek's essay comes from his brevity, helped by much wit and flair. His 'four reasons for reading Thomas M Disch' are: 1. To learn why Minnesota needs pyramids; 2. To learn why your country needs you; 3. To learn why the squirrel needs to keep running; and 4. To learn why New Yorkers and others need to dress up nice. No. 3 is the most important item. It's a common observation that Disch's early story, 'The Squirrel Cage', is the key to his work, but only Sladek's essay shows that key turning. My own guess, in an article published eight years ago about Disch's short fiction, is that the squirrel cage, in which we all tread our lives, is a symbol of very ordinary life, a prison. Escape this, even through death, or some kind of death-transfiguration-rebirth, and one can escape the squirrel cage. You will remember that, in *Camp Concentration*, Sacchetti comes close to dying, then lives again through what seem like a series of miracles. I always took this ending as false reassurance; Sacchetti should have died, damn it! Sladek shows that Sacchetti's deliverance is illusory—he steps from one squirrel cage into a much larger one.

> **The life lived wholly in the body is a kind of tyranny. It is a life of numbness, routine, mindless instinctive behaviour. It leaves neither time nor scope for thought. The alternative is freedom of thought. But there is always a risk that the free mind will choose to become (say) a Thomist, endlessly engaged in pointless disputation, endlessly revolving the same meaningless propositions. This too is a tyranny of routine. Indeed, the free-wheeling mind is never far from the squirrel-cage.**
>
> **The paradox is apparent in writers. They pursue a sedentary, body-destroying occupation in order to gamble on immortality. They avoid human company and sit alone in order to gamble on communicating something. Only in solitary confinement can they manage to dream of freedom.**

Sladek has much that is interesting to say about *334*, about the kind of death-in-life which is 'lived' by the characters, about the way they change clothes, appearances, bodies to hide evidences of the whirling squirrel cages beneath the skin. Sladek shows why style is all-important to Disch. To a

romantic, such as me, who believes that one might, somehow, some day, escape the squirrel cage or glimpse the possible path of such an escape, words can be used as instruments to jemmy your way out of jail. Disch does not believe in escape, but he knows that his characters do. They are alive and kicking, and their belief in something-other - than - the - squirrel - cage gives pathos to *334* and *On Wings of Song* in particular.

My major criticism of most of the contributions to *The Stellar Gauge* is that most commentators are too nice to their subjects. This is understandable—given carte blanche to write about your favourite writer, you tend to show why he or she is so good. (Sladek makes some differentiation between Disch's works, pointing out the real problems in *Echo Round His Bones*. But Sladek was on safe ground writing about Disch, who wrote second-rate work only during his early years as an author.)

George Turner, in **'Frederik Pohl as a Creator of Future Societies'**, is not nice about his subject. This fact alone makes the essay refreshing. A second fact, that George Turner hits the mark every time, makes his piece my second favourite in *The Stellar Gauge*.

'Frederik Pohl as a Creator of Future Societies' is so full of provocative and delightful goodies that I cannot hope to share them all with you. You'll remember, for instance, that George has spent years challenging luckless attendees at sf conventions and Nova Mob meetings to *define science fiction*. After all this time, George has at last provided his own definition! It's there on page 112.

George provides a pocket history of future societies in science fiction—an interesting essay in itself without any need to refer Frederik Pohl. When George challenges Pohl, he attacks him at his weakest point—*Gateway*. This is the review, more than any other, I wish I could have stolen from Tolley and Singh and run in *SFC*. It's a ripper—so much so that almost no flesh is left on the book.

> **Any attempt to rationalise the workings of the Gateway Authority reveals the Corporation as an organisation of monsters, the products of a seriously deteriorated but unexplainedly psychotic culture, unable to practise simple business efficiency. It is a misfortune inseparable from such loaded writing that many a reader, bludgeoned by the emotional violence of the presentation, will too easily accept it as 'social realism'. . . . Suspension of disbelief is not achieved and no intellectual reward is offered, no view of a probable or even reasonably possible future, no statement about man now or then. *Gateway*, for all its panorama of savagery and far stars, comes close to being meaningless.**

George Turner shows that *The Age of the Pussyfoot* is remarkably awful, and so are most of Pohl's most famous short stories, especially 'The Midas Plague'.

Not that George's attack is aimed primarily at Frederik Pohl's person. One takes it for granted that he is a working writer who does the best he can when he can. George is mainly sniping at the readers—those who gave *Gateway* a Hugo, a Nebula, and one or two other awards in the same year; those who have listed 'The Midas Plague' (for instance) as an all-time great sf story on many a poll.

I suspect that George is the only contributor to write an essay for the book that *The Stellar Gauge* could have been—the next stage beyond the level of development represented here. Tolley and Singh wanted to present a book which showed both the academic reader and the intelligent public the real achievements of some of the best science fiction writers. Such an aim fails to recognise that most of these achievements are illusory. The next stage of book about science fiction would be something like *Anatomy of Horror* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue), in which the author debunks all his 'masters', but with wit and grace, and at the same time showing just why readers like these awful writers.

My point is made best for me by Jane Hipolito and Willis E McNelly, in their essay, **'The Statement is the Self: Alfred Bester's Science Fiction'**. This is quite a detailed survey of Bester's two science fiction novels, *Tiger! Tiger! (The Stars My Destination)* and *The Demolished Man*. As a map of the sources and strategies of the novels, the essay works fine—as long as you don't question for a moment the authors' assumption that Bester is a great author, at the top of his form when writing these books. So the essay rings false to me. Bester had some great moments—but only in the best of his short stories. Both *Tiger! Tiger!* and *The Demolished Man* read like hysterical diatribes to me: almost comic-strippy in their approach, without the self-mockery of the best comic strips. Hipolito and McNelly don't see things this way: in *The Demolished Man*, its 'psychological penetration makes the novel particularly amenable to psychological analysis, especially Jungian and Freudian interpretation'. So the authors go off psychologically analysing for page after page, and do not even ask whether the books are any good or not. I'm told that, if you do admire *The Demolished Man* and *Tiger! Tiger!* already, you will find much of value in the essay. But the important questions have been left out.

Much the same could be said about **'Beyond the Enigma: Dick's Questors'**, by Michael J Tolley—but in this case I am already a fan of the work of Philip K Dick, and so I found much of value in the essay. If I were not a Dick admirer, I would have to make much the same points as I made about the Bester essay: what about the two thirds or more of Dick's novels which are forgettable?; how do you account for the memorable stuff which is very badly written? (I asked these questions in *Philip K Dick: Electric Shepherd*, and only Stanislaw Lem has as yet offered any answer to them.)

So Tolley does not tackle what I consider are the really intriguing questions about Philip Dick's work. But given space limitations and the implied aims of *The Stellar Gauge*, could Tolley have varied much from the approach he uses, ie, to base an exploration of Dick's art and thought on a few of his best novels?

Indeed, the range of exploration and accumulation of detail in this essay are quite breath-taking. Surely there is no better account of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*? Surely nobody could have more to say about 'Faith of Our Fathers', *Deus Irae*, or *A Scanner Darkly*? The essay almost becomes drowned under the detail, so much so that I have difficulty in summarising Tolley's argument. Instead, some of his most interesting observations:

> **One of the characteristics of Dick's people, one which perhaps also marks them out as denizens of sf, not mainstream fiction, is that they are often not surprised by surprises. They make a quick readjustment and carry on, rationally or obsessively as the case may be. . . . Partly this is because so many of them inhabit a paranoid society that they almost expect their worst suspicions of life to be confirmed at every turn. . . . Some of Dick's characters rush eagerly to meet their surprises, . . . they are compulsive trap-**

The Stellar Gauge: new essays about sf; first of its kind. John Sladek comes close to perfection in writing about Disch . . . Turner nasty about Pohl . . . Tolley's detailed study of Dick.

springers; greedily they engorge without restraint, even though they know they are eating their own death.

Like Tolley, I am not sure whether this lets them be tragic characters or not. Tolley points to an aspect of Dick's characters which has also interested Ursula Le Guin: their frailty and humility. Could really frail characters survive in Dick's worlds? I suspect not. There is always the touch of the magic wand in Dick's books to save the characters upon whom the perceptions fall. For this reason, I suspect that Tolley is making too much of Dick when he says that:

> **It is not unusual for us to find in Dick's novels that the struggle against evil is being conducted by means of elaborate deceits; indeed, it is not an uncommon narrative pattern in his work to have a relatively good hero find that the 'evil' deceit he has unmasked is itself being perpetrated by another relatively good hero against a common enemy.**

Tolley's exposure of multiple levels of deceit and approaches to reality is so thorough-going that I'm not sure how he can argue at the end of the essay that 'Dick has a fair claim in some works to be regarded as a tragic artist'. Tragic? Ironic? Somehow Dick goes beyond such labels. Or is that such labels hardly apply to the intricate magic shows which are Dick's works?

See what I get into when I become really intrigued by some part or another of *The Stellar Gauge*? Perhaps it really is a giant *SFC*, to be dipped into and tasted in the way in which (I presume) most people read a magazine like this. So, a few remarks about the other offerings:

David Sless' **'Arthur C Clarke'** is a very good essay, one of the two or three to exhibit some scepticism about its subject matter. Sless sees Clarke as 'repeatedly indifferent to man and morality': downright inhuman, in fact. Readers respond to the Clarke hero: 'always male, adventurous, daring, and intelligent, the schoolboy image of the explorer-hero . . . thoughtful, kind to animals, in control of his destiny, and yet overcome with awe and a sense of insignificance in the face of nature's wonders'. This humility in the face of the wondrous saves many of Clarke's heroes, especially as Clarke's admiration is saved for exotic landscapes, 'objects of solitary contemplation'. Clarke 'makes the incredible credible', and Sless writes some brilliant pages of analysis showing just how Clarke grabs us with that Sense of Wonder every time. It's the kind of conjuring trick you can't see through until Sless explains it to you. (And it still works: I was enthralled by much in *The Fountains of Paradise*, even after reading Sless' essay.) Sless shows that Clarke's ideas about the possible future of humanity are actually implausible, even monstrous.

By contrast, Frederick Yuan's **'Immortality and Robert Silverberg'** is the most conspicuous example of the kind of essay I have already complained about: that in which the author presumes his subject is a Great Artist, without taking the trouble to prove it. Most of the Silverberg books discussed by Yuan are awful.

David Ketterer's **'Fathoming *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*'**, David J Lake's **'White Sphinx and Albino Griffin: Images of Death in the Scientific Romances of H G Wells'**, Kirpal Singh's **'Technology in George Owell's *1984*'**, Brian W Aldiss' **'Blish and the Mathematics of Knowledge'**, and **'Landscape Artist: The Fiction of J G Ballard'**, by Christopher Priest are impressive enough pieces about Verne, Wells, Orwell, Blish, and Ballard, but my lack of specialist interest leaves me with little to say about them.

Aldiss and Priest, as professional writers rather than academics, certainly write much better than the others. (And they don't use footnotes!: how I hated footnotes by the time I finished setting *The Stellar Gauge*.)

But Aldiss does rather lump all of Blish's stuff together as One Great Achievement, whereas much of it was second-rate or downright unreadable.

But Chris Priest's article began as a short fanzine article, and it could well have been much longer. Ballard deserves more detail than Bester.

But I cannot see the point of spending much space on very limited aspects of the work of either Wells or Verne, although I'm pleased to see that David Lake shares my high opinion of *The Invisible Man*.

But Kirpal Singh could have said so much more about *1984*, although his is an admirably thorough piece.

Who's left? There's Bruce Gillespie writing about **'Literature Which Awakens Us: The Science Fiction Novels of Brian W Aldiss'**, but I won't go into that here. More problems with moving hats. One source of smugness can be allowed me: that Aldiss, in an interview with Charles Platt in *Dream Makers*, shares my dissatisfaction with the current state of the English novel, and tells some nice yarns to prove his point.

So here it is: a long journey through an epic book. (I've put on my publisher's hat again.) *The Stellar Gauge* is an epic because it took most of the efforts of Elaine Cochrane, Carey Handfield, Michael Tolley, Rosemary White, and me for five months in 1980, and is the first of its kind. It faced extraordinary production difficulties, some of which were never solved. It is too expensive, but we cannot afford to charge less than the cover price. The cover is awful. (I was outvoted by the other two-thirds of Norstrilia Press.) The book includes no woman contributor, and has no essay about a woman sf writer. This is the main inadequacy of *The Stellar Gauge*. (In the Introduction, the editors say they could find no available contributor! This is incredible.) By the time we finished producing *The Stellar Gauge*, we were sick of it. Reviewing it has given me a chance to read large chunks of the essays again, and—you know what?—they don't seem too bad. I leave a final verdict to you.

Bruce Gillespie, February 1981

Past Masters 1:

THE LATELY GREAT ALFRED BESTER

by Damien Broderick

Damien Broderick discusses:

Golem100
by Alfred Bester
(illustrated by Jack Gaughan;
Simon and Schuster; 1980;
384 pp; $US 11.95.
Pocket Books/Timescape 82047.8;
March 1981; 392 pp; $US 2.95)

Warning: The following remarks do not necessarily presume that you have read *Golem100*, but I do mean to discuss plot and character: in short, to give the game away. To be fair to Bester, you should read the book first.

What's the bugger up to? Alfred Bester's strategy has always been to lead the reader a merry dance, not to say a *danse macabre*, to leap from concealment with shouts and firecrackers, to lure and entice and disguise and . . . Unmask! Explosion! Concussion! When he's in form, his pace, attack, payoff are exemplary. Dazzling. Out of form, he is . . . not flabby, which you might expect, but strained, herniated, desperate, clattering maniacally with his wooden leg and his goddamned varicose veins on a stage stuffed with burst toys, while the last of the audience grit their teeth in humiliation and pity.

When I was fourteen, fifteen, I loved Bester like a father. I loved Arthur C Clarke like a father, too, I suppose, the sort with a white reversed collar and a vision of the City of God. Strange chariots, sir. But Bester! Yes, imagine how it would be if your old man had a brain like that, sizzling with lunacy, knowing, cynical but flushed with a kind of baroque unashamed romanticism that wasn't all that common under the grey banner of Menzies. So now I have the guilt of conspiring with the other sibs, spiteful and oedipal, in kicking the old man off to Sunshine Acres; indeed, making it plain that he should have taken himself there while he still possessed some decent control over his sphincter.

Do you remember anything at all from *The Computer Connection*, aka *Extro*, aka *The Indian Giver*? Ah, a clue, wasn't there a wild-man Indian in it? And . . . and . . , that's right, a bunch of immortals who'd judoed Death by yielding at the nastiest possible moment. And . . . some superintelligent slugs, the first of a new breed of Man. And . . . a global computer? And . . . a narrator whose name was either Daniel Curzon or Edward Curzon

(and here I'm cheating, relying on the provocative Hipolito/McNelly paper in *The Stellar Gauge*), which perhaps indicates exactly how riveted Bester himself was by the whole exercise.

Some twenty years earlier, in 1956, Bester's masterwork left you in no doubt of the protagonist's name. The Penguin blurb caught it nicely: 'What is Gully Foyle? . . . saviour, liar, lecher, ghoul, walking cancer . . . a man possessed . . . a blazing hero of a science fiction novel that transcends its category.'

Indeed. Samuel Delany: '*The Stars My Destination* (or *Tiger! Tiger!*, its original title) is considered by many readers and writers, both in and outside the field, to be the greatest single sf novel. . . . It chronicles a social education, but within a society which, from our point of view, has gone mad.'

More than that. It is the peak of Bester's consistent struggles with a single theme: the heightened image of a compulsively driven individual bursting through the prison bars of nature and nurture both, marked by stigmata, a Bergsonian emergent evolutionary salient embodied in one passionate, driving creature, hurtling through a world stripped to hard, brilliant, teleological metaphors. This is his central notion, long abandoned by practising biologists: that Nature is in some sense a Designer with a Plan and Purpose, shaking the bottle of *elan vital* until it seethes and spurts. Bester's books are rank with grotesque coincidences, which have the obvious merit of advancing the story with maximum attack, but convey as well, through their failure to offend us, a subterranean awareness that in *these* universes Nature is a participant, a partisan, rooting for the seed-bearers.

In a half-arsed way, *The Computer Connection* persists with this theme, but blurs its expression hopelessly by skeining the dialectic, by shortsheeting the narrative, by splitting the typical Besterian dyad into a multitude of funny hats doing comic capers, some of them not so comic. **Golem^{100}** revives the dyad (male/female, though this is not self-evident: the male component is further bifurcated, without thereby generating a triad) which *The Demolished Man* evoked so stunningly in Ben Reich/Lincoln Powell, Ben Reich/Craye D'Courtney, Ben Reich/The Man With No Face. All of these subsume, quite consciously on Bester's part, into an archetypal conflict-mandala which can be represented at some cost as Eros/Thanatos, Life/Death.

In *Tiger! Tiger!*, the dyad is principally Gully Foyle/Olivia Presteign, at least in terms of narrative impulse, but the dialectic in reality is something grandiose and almost unspecifiable: the emergent salient of Life, versus the uncaring frigid vacuum of spacetime. On the social level, so to speak 'halfway' between the psychological rampaging of individual compulsion and the magisterial epiphany of Foyle-the-god, the dyad is manifest as common humanity versus power elite. Foyle effects a one-man revolution in human consciousness by dispersing PyrE to the brutalised masses of the world. PyrE is the primal stuff of the universe, latent force in its purest form, responsive only to Will and Idea. (It is puzzling that no critic, to my knowledge, has yet explored this crucial reference to Schopenhauer's philosophy.) On the one hand, Foyle's act seems precisely an unwitting metaphor for small-l liberal aspirations. On the other, it is an intriguing figure (no doubt overweighted) for the devastating potential of both art and science in the conduct and context of human affairs.

A quarter of a century later, writing *Golem^{100}*, Bester has recused from the social dimension. His imagined society in both *The Computer Connection* and *Golem^{100}* is a pot-pourri of gaudy images with no underlying texture, no embeddedness in gritty reality. Neither, in any literal sense, has the social order of *Tiger! Tiger!*, but there the apparent cartoons are emblematic, at once shimmering with wit and satirical laughter and darkening into depths of authentic pain, cruelty, and aspiration. The Guff, loathliest sector of the Northeast Corridor, is 'a lunacy of violence inhabited by a swarming population with no visible means of support and no fixed residence'. Portions of Third World cities today no doubt resemble this description, which is why Bester calls it 'a monstrous raree show', but below the surface it possesses no rationale except Bester's patent desire to strut his exhausted obsessives one more time on the peep-show stage.

The story line is pitifully frail. Eight bourgeois 'bee' ladies with twee 'secret names' while away their bored lives in the protected redoubts of the brutal Guff by playing at raising the devil. Their rituals bear fruit only when the husband of one of them, Droney Lafferty, 'the celebrated necrophiliac' and piebald haploid, introduces a radioactive catalyst into their incense. Awakened and given focus, 'the brutal cruelty that lies buried deep within us all'—as Bester simple-mindedly characterises Freud's *id* (having evidently learned nothing from his critics after the same silliness in *The Demolished Man*)—emerges and merges and purges its urges in hideous splurges. These atrocities defy normal explanation, to the chagrin of Police subadar Adida Alkhand-Sarangdhar-ind'dni. Meanwhile, the events from Bester's 1974 story, 'The Four-Hour Fugue', are modified and incorporated as an alternate narrative strand. Scent chemist Dr Blaise Shima (nee Skiaki) is slacking at work. Warlock Salem Burne (*sic!*) and psychodynamician Gretchen Nunn determine that Shima's supernal olfactory sense, coupled with his neurotic self-pity, make him obsessively vulnerable to pheromone trails emitted by humans: specifically, the trail of would-be suicides. In the mask-persona of 'Mr Wish', Shima pursues those unfortunates and becomes the occasion though not agent of their demise. For no clear reason, the Golem monster makes its presence known in such a way as to implicate Nunn and Shima in its list of crimes. To clear themselves, they must find the monster and defuse it. Their attempts to do so merely destroy its original embodiment, the eightfold 'hive', and provoke Gretchen Nunn (meanwhile revealed as 'the new Primal Man') into re-establishing the hive with herself as Queen. As part of the murderous nuptial flight preceding this consummation, Nunn couples with numerous 'drones', including a dog, and climaxes by tearing Shima's penis from his body with the muscles of her clenched vulva. Coming to herself, she learns with horror (?) that honest cop Ind'dni has been replaced by his negative self, a perverted being from the same Collective Underrealm which gave birth to the Golem. Fortunately, he is now a truly extraordinary lover, and a Primal Man fit for a Queen. He is, in fact, Golem^{101}.

Bolstering this attenuated 'plot' are (1) the usual Bester helter-skelter pyrotechnics, inventive setpieces, and concrete poetry format variations, segueing to and from (2) about 100 pages of rather fine integrated graphics by Jack Gaughan, by and large doing what could not be done by word alone. But alas, the fireworks are by now merely ever-more bizarre variants of Bester's original brilliant games from the '50s. Instead, say, of Lady Olivia Presteign, albino heiress blind to all but the infrared range, we have Gretchen Nunn, Watusi genius who sees (a) through the eyes of others, a

singularly unworkable notion, and (b) through the 'cloud chamber' of her own flesh, in the cosmic ray spectrum, a singularly useless ability. (Visual disabilities crop up again and again in Bester. Shima himself is colour blind. Salem Burne 'sees' the meaning of gesture. No doubt there is some link to Bester's own eye troubles' 'my eyes failed, like poor Congreve's', he said in 'My Affair With Science Fiction', and by God there's a clue we'll return to.) For the second great theme in Bester is perception: sight and insight, sleight of sight (The Man With No Face) and sight enhanced (telepathy, the obsessional rhythms of the Pi Man, the replacement of vision by motion, by *presence*, in teleportation, the Promethium-induced visions of *Golem100*). Yet, to stress the point, the variations dragged out like stones from the urethra in this book are agonisingly *constructs*: you can hear him groaning, sweating, as he forces another one out.

And above all, on this go-round Bester's own artistic perception and tact are crusted with cataracts. If he has always erred toward the sentimental, he has never before lost his grip on the bannister of taste. All right: here's the Congreve comparison. My *Encyclopedia Brittanica* mentions Congreve's 'delicacy of feeling and the perfection of his phrasing', and finds that his *The Old Bachelour* 'no doubt appealed to the audiences because it handled with a new brilliance themes they were familiar with'. Quite. 'If some of the repartee seems cheap and schoolboyish, that was the manner of the time.' Hmmm.

As an example of the schoolboyish note, not to say behind-the-dunny-door puerility, consider the Pukebox number uttered by Phlegmy:

Vomitation. Vomitation.
Retchitation. Retchitation.
Spew. Spew.
Upchuck, daddy,
With a solid pour.

I can only assume that this is meant as a scathing if-this-goes-on satire on, let's say, Alice Cooper (which is of course a great deal less alarming than the robot fascists which were jerking around *Countdown* until very recently). But what then should be our reading of the play-format scene on the subsequent page?

(A Hang-Glider sails low overhead, slowly descending. A man hangs by the neck from the glider, the strangling noose knotted into the traditional 13 turns of the rope.)

PI

Ooo look, Miz Gretch person. I seen a lot of suicides but never like this one before.

(A gaggle of crones follows the falling glider avidly absorbing the emissions from the spasming penis of the suicide.)

Now on one level this is familiar territory to readers of William Burroughs. On another, it is an extreme extension of the Extrapolation Theory of SF which Bester proclaimed in his collection, *Starlight*.

Here's my definition:

Extrapolation. The continuation of a trend, either increasing, decreasing or steady-state, to its culmination in the future. The only constraint is the limit set by the logic of the universe.

'And good luck,' he adds, 'to the late, great Alfred Bester, American author.'

He needs more than good luck if he's to persuade us that the Hang-Glider scene (a pun with all the spritzig of the riotous Salem Burne jest) falls within the constraints of the social universe inhabited by human beings.

A more niggling question concerns tone. In the same book just cited, circa 1975, Bester declares against pornography: 'A Puritan streak in my nature has always stifled the slightest temptation to do that sort of work. I'm strongly opposed to censorship in any form, and yet I confess to being disgusted by the passages that diagram it for you.' Disgusted. By golly.

So what's the silly thing about?

Right from the outset, Bester builds clues to his sociobiology blowoff. The eight middle-class nitwits are referred to as 'charming bee-ladies' who meet in 'the hive'. Still, he doesn't push it immediately: 'They were not all cut from the identical pattern like insect-type bees. They were intensely individual, human-type ladies.' Nevertheless, their leader is Regina (Re-JYN-a), 'the Queen Bee'. They 'buzzed with gossip . . . did bee-dances . . . gorged on sweets . . . butted heads to establish an informal dominance-order'.

From the outset, also, we learn that one of the husbands (*not* Regina's; she is a virgin) is nicknamed Droney. The moment Gretchen Nunn inveigles her way into the hive, she is dubbed 'Black Beauty' (for her Negro good looks), or BB, or, to spell it out, Bee-Bee. After a time the reader gets dazed, over-eager to seize this motif. The Glacial Army sing a revival-hymn titled 'Where You Beez Come God's Big Freeze', and your attention is stung, perhaps in error.

On a different point entirely, the eruption of the inverse Ind'dni from the contra-universe is specified like an Attic fate in the shape of his palindromic name: not merely Ind'dni, the short form of his patronymic, but in his first name, mentioned once and neglected thereafter: Adida.

Midway between these manifestations of The World as Word and Idea are the characters' names: Blaise Shima, the Japanese raised as a French Catholic (Shima is Japanese for 'island', not to say the opportunity for the horrendous pun 'Hero Shima'). Gretchen Nunn reeks of metonymy and metaphor. Other names are purely for fun, if that's your idea of fun: the thespian Sarah Heartburn, the lesbian Yenta

'When I was fourteen, fifteen, I loved Bester like a father. Imagine how it would be if your old man had a brain like that: sizzling with lunacy, knowing, cynical. . . .'

'So now I have the guilt of conspiring in kicking the old man off to Sunshine Acres. . . . The more I scour these pages, the more miserable I get.'

Calienta (you need Yiddish for that one), the twins Oodgedye and Udgedye, which Bester tells us is Chekhovian Russian for 'Guess who' and 'Guess which'.

The driving conceit, of the bee-ladies and their hive, seems to be a consequence of the primary story, 'The Four-Hour Fugue', and its earlier use of the pheromone-compulsion motive. Bester has, I think, taken very much the lazy way out in developing this concept. Yes, pheromones are typical of insects and not humans, yes. Yes, this is a good reason for supposing that humans do not use pheromones, rather than for supposing that *if* humans *did* use pheromones they would become like insects. Or whatever his dumb implied premise is.

The more I scour these pages the more miserable I get. As Bester's body juices dry up, I speculate nastily, he turns to an always-present but previously-contained taste for Grand Guignol (the nickname, after all, of the narrator of *The Computer Connection*), and the more schoolboy nasty the pustules become. Poor Shima's deracinated dong is unobjectionable, true; it's the stuff of myth, harvest festivals, P J Farmer, you know. But the ripping-wings-off-flies grottiness of the Golem atrocities is simply and unrewardingly unpleasant:

> **The man was circling a pillar stub of the decayed opera-house portico; crawling, falling, rising, stumbling, crying piteously, shrieking, calling on Christ and cursing his gods. There was a gash in his belly that oozed blood and extruded intestine. One end of his gut had been fastened to the pillar, and as he circled and circled it was torn out of him, inch by inch, to garland the column with a bloody, grey hawser.**

The discussions of masks and persona theory in Jung and how Bester gets Freud ludicrously wrong in his gutter psycho-analysis and how the theme of transcendence finally gets its come-uppance in the Epilogue (set 105 years later, but, on internal evidence, originally meant to stand at the beginning) and how the book was due to wonder-editors Dave Hartwell and John Douglas and how even so they cannot spell 'architectonic' correctly or decide on a consistent abbreviation for Promethium (Pm, or P-M, although on page 88 it is explicitly spelled out) or chide Bester with the intelligence that Golem to the hundredth power is a rather larger quantity than 100 times Golem, which he had in mind, or how impoverished the Apollinaire *calligrammes* have become when they take the form of Sarah Heartburn's tawdry expostulations and so on, all, as I look despairingly on the botched torso of *Golem100*, dim to irrelevancy before the heartbreaking need to cry out: Give the game away, the late, great Alfred Bester, American author. Break your staff and bury it.

Quit shitting in your own nest.

Damien Broderick, January 1981

Past Masters 2:

BISHOP CAN'T TRANSFIGURE IT OUT

by Henry Gasko

Henry Gasko discusses:

Transfigurations
by Michael Bishop
(Gollancz; 1979;
362 pp; 6 pounds 95.
Berkley/G P Putnam's Sons;
1979; 362 pp; $US 10.95.
Berkley 425.04696; 1980;
311 pp; $US 2.25.)

Michael Bishop continues to be the most frustrating writer in sf today. If we had only the evidence of his novels, it would be easy to dismiss him as just plain bad. But then, every few years Bishop writes a superb short story, such as 'Collaborating', in *The Rooms of Paradise*, and again I look forward to reading his next novel. Maybe this time that miraculous combination of 'alienness' and clarity in his short stories will be sustained, and the result will be the best science fiction novel in years. But instead, the result is **Transfigurations**, and my despair is even deeper.

'Death and Designation Among the Asadi', which forms the first part of *Transfigurations*, is the sort of Bishop story that I am referring to: a completely alien culture (a surprisingly rare achievement in sf). In appearance, the Asadi are apes with manes, with eyes like multi-coloured pinwheels. While the rest of the expedition gets on with the serious business of colonising the planet, anthropologist Egan Chaney watches the Asadi for months but comes no closer to understanding them. There is only the one small tribe of Asadi on the entire planet. Every day they enter a clearing in the jungle at sunrise, shuffle about aimlessly all day, and run off in all directions at dusk. Except for multi-coloured staring matches, there seems to be no communication between them.

The mystery deepens when an old 'chieftain', with grey, lifeless eyes, and with a bat-like familiar on his shoulder, enters the camp one afternoon carrying

three sides of meat. He watches as the tribe eat the first two sides. Then he devours the third and later throws it up. The tribe eat the regurgitated hunks with delight. That night the tribe carries the old chieftain through the jungle to the steps of a pagoda-like temple, where Chaney witnesses the ritual of death and designation. The old man is burned on a funeral pyre, and the familiar claims the only other dull-eyed member of the tribe as the new and unwilling chief.

As the tribe marches off, Chaney follows the new chief and his familiar (dubbed the 'Bachelor' and the 'huri') into the temple. Here, obsessed, exhausted, and babbling a stream-of-consciousness monologue into his tape recorder, Chaney sees the huri and his mates wrap the Bachelor in a cocoon, and later rip away and eat the strands. Outside again, the Bachelor disembowels another Asadi, and Chaney kills the huri in order to free the Bachelor from its domination. Chaney is finally rescued, still raving. He recovers and denies everything on the tapes. The other members of the expedition are inclined to believe him. His notes are assembled by his trusty side-kick, Thomas Benedict, who has been dropping him food supplies over the months. All attempts to find the temple fail. In the last scene, Chaney returns to the jungle to join the Asadi 'as one of the milling throng. I belong there even though that throng is stupid, even though it persists in its self-developed immunity to destruction. I'm one of them.' (p 108, Gollancz and Putnam editions)

And that's where 'Death and Designation' ended—a little heavy on the allegory perhaps, but exceedingly well written. The pacing was excellent, and the descriptions so precise that you were there in the jungle beside Chaney, witnessing a truly alien way of life. The promise of an explanation to come in the rest of the novel made the story even more enjoyable this time around.

The remainder of the novel concerns Chaney's daughter, Elegy, who arrives on the planet six years later determined to find her father. With her is an orang utan named Kretzoi, who has been biologically engineered to look like an Asadi. Together with Benedict, they set off to infiltrate the tribe, who are still milling about, throng-like, by day, and dashing off in all directions each night. The plot crawls along for 150 pages as the science, the characterisations, and the writing style all disintegrate before your very eyes.

To show that she's a strong-willed lady, and because there's little else happening, Bishop has Elegy sleep first with Benedict and later with the helicopter pilot (Kretzoi misses out). Then mild-mannered Benedict kidnaps one of the Asadi, but the native is soon shot by a xenophobic trooper. The autopsy reveals that the Asadi's eyes can photosynthesise enough energy to mill about all day with no other food supply! However, before his death apparently the Asadi had been able to communicate to Kretzoi which of the millions of trees in the jungle contained his 'nest'. They find the nest, and in it an Asadi 'reduced to little more than a head and a truncated torso' (p 257). The Asadi, it seems, are always born twins. The mother mutilates the *stronger* twin, which then remains in the nest for the rest of its life, photosynthesising from the sunshine and rainwater in order to stay alive. The weaker twin uses it as an auxiliary food supply, nibbling on it like a dog biscuit. All this is related in several pages of fairly wild speculation by Elegy about the Asadi's evolution: that their ancestors bio-engineered them to their current condition, that it's a good method of population control and a form of sibling love-bond, and that the ancestors once visited Earth for an abortive attempt at the same thing. The obvious answer, that such an asinine arrangement could only develop in some sf author's undisciplined imagination, does not occur to her.

Finally things begin to happen. Kretzoi impersonates a chieftain, complete with rubber huri, and is soon being carried off to the temple. Just as the Asadi are about to light the ritual funeral pyre, Benedict rushes in swinging the mock huri. The Asadi are stunned, of course, and literally begin to fade away. 'They're radiating a spectral pattern that polarizes or off-centers our ability to perceive them,' Benedict explains calmly, still swinging the huri (p 308). The temple has apparently been doing the same thing all along to avoid detection from the air. Benedict finally throws the fake huri at them and they conveniently run off into the jungle.

And so it's into the temple itself. The real huri attack. Suddenly a cavern opens up below them and down they go, to find dozens of huri who fashion a statue of Benedict from their own bioluminescent excrement. 'I know that it was meant to be me, and I felt that the huri had stolen some of my private essence in erecting it' (p 326).

They press on and finally find a guano statue of Chaney, and then Chaney himself hanging in a silken chrysalis. The revive him and even carry on a long conversation. But alas, Chaney is no longer human, having been changed by the huri for their own evil purposes. He lapses again.

This gives Benedict a chance to explain it all to the reader in a five-page section that is both an expository lump from the author and a completely unjustified exercise in conclusion-jumping by Benedict. But unfortunately it's the only way Bishop has of informing the reader of further pieces in the puzzle: how the huri ultrasonically control the Asadi, their attempts to escape through genetic engineering, and the building of the temple.

Then it's back to the story, as Chaney revives again and explains the present vampiric relationship between the huri and the Asadi. The conversation turns to Elegy and her father. For no reason, except that all novels should end on a suitably dramatic note, Chaney says, 'I want you to kill me, Elegy.'

'We'll get you out of here,' Elegy said.

'No use. You can see I'm unredeemable. Unless.'

'Unless I redeem you?'

'By redeeming yourself.' Deep breath. 'With your love.' (p 346)

And so, with not a lot more coaxing, Elegy kills him. The Climax.

The helicopter arrives conveniently, and it's back to base camp for the denouement chapter (titled 'Transfigured Lives'). Elegy and Benedict both return to Earth to pick up the pieces of their lives, older but wiser. Benedict even finds himself a good woman. The novel ends with one of those awful summing-it-all-up cliches that we all know and dread: 'And, in the strange, doubtful hour before dawn, she and I will lie together anticipating sunrise. It's not as spectacular an event as sunset, perhaps, but it's just as dependable, and I've come to appreciate that in nature as well as in my fellows' (p 362). The End.

Henry Gasko, December 1980

GOD, FRANK HERBERT, AND THE CONCEPT OF DEITY IN SCIENCE FICTION

George Turner discusses:

The Jesus Incident

by Frank Herbert and Bill Ransom
(Gollancz; 1979; 405 pages;
5 pounds 95/$16.95)

The 'incident' is the Crucifixion of 29 AD (allowing that Jesus was born about 4 BC, which seems to be the modern consensus) although the action takes place in a future so distant that the authors don't put a date on it. So God will be prominent in this essay, whether we like it or not.

Now, I don't know any more about God than you do—or than the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury do, for that matter—but this not-very-good novel has forced me to do some thinking about deity in order to make sense of what I was reading.

Atheists and agnostics may pooh-pooh my use of the capital letter, but *they* spell their names with capitals, don't they? And *if* God exists he must, by definition, be more worthy of such respect than they. There are, of course, people like andrew j offutt and e e cummings, but that isn't a comparison I care to pursue.

Bibles, Concordances, and *Asimov's Guide* to the ready? Let's go.

II

Before attacking the monster head on, I must note Herbert's habit of decorating his stories with epigraphs representing the widom of lost races, unwritten books, the characters in his novel, philosophies (mostly bogus), and Herbert himself. I couldn't be bothered counting the chapters, which are short and unnumbered, so God help you if ever you want to check a specific reference. I estimate that there are about sixty, each with its epigraph which is rarely pithy and sometimes several hundred words long; there is even one five-hundred-worder which has no chapter with it. Some are of doubtful relationship to the text following, some are merely impenetrable, most are trite. There is no end to the irritating artiness of this man.

Mystification begins, before the story proper, with a dedication to Jack Vance 'who . . . taught us the difference between fantasy and science fiction'. It would be difficult to think of a less likely mentor (much as I enjoy Vance) and the reader isn't told the difference anyway.

Then there is co-author Bill Ransom. The blurb features Herbert but tells nothing of Ransom, which is a pretty poor discourtesy; a man of Herbert's stature should at least have seen to the inclusion of a note detailing his collaborator's contribution. Since the style throughout is Herbert at his Duniest, one may guess that Ransom was an ideas man. The publisher prints his name in smaller type than Herbert's and otherwise acknowledges him not at all So much for swinging on the coattails of the great.

The novel also has its problems. With those dreary epics, *Children of Dune* and *The Dosadi Experiment,* I have fallen into the evil habit of skipping through Herbert's books in a hurry, hoping to be hooked by some sign of his occasional brilliance. However, since Bruce Gillespie passed me this one for purpose of review, I have conscientiously read every word of it. And made notes. And even struggled to make sense of the oblique, supersubtle, pretentious epigraphs.

III

For a story resume we must reach back to *Destination Void,* to which *The Jesus Incident* is a sequel. In the earlier book an interstellar vessel was built, housing a super-computer. The task of the human complement was to endow the computer with true consciousness, which they succeeded in doing. The computer, which developed a stupendous mentality, took control, found the humans a planet to colonise and, when the unfortunates asked their computer master what they should do next, told them: 'Find a way to worship Me.' It had become, at least in its own mind, God.

And a pretty ramshackle God, too, was the thought in *my* mind at the time, if that was the best it could manage for starters.

On that unintentional giggle the first book ended, but it must be admitted that in this one Herbert has gone to some trouble to explain away that piece of nonsense.

In the centuries which elapse between the two novels several attempts are made to colonise the planet, Pandora, which is indeed a savage box of evils. They all fail. The planet seems to be mainly ocean, with a land surface devoid of vegetation—at any rate none is mentioned—but inhabited by predators of extraordinary ferocity. The sea is mostly covered by a kelp which is also highly dangerous as well as intelligent. A hydrogen-balloon-type species controls the air and feeds on the predators. One is left to assume that the predators feed on each other. This, combined with the lack of land vegetation, raises problems of viability, ecology, and climate which are discreetly ignored. This, in view of Herbert's reputation as an ecologist, is a pretty glaring oversight.

However: The space ship, which is now recognised as the supreme entity, Ship, is in orbit above Pandora. Of those aboard, some are clones, some are naturally born, and a very few are original Earth-crew who have been kept in suspended animation. Some—the working classes, for want of a better phrase—have devised ways of worshipping Ship, who takes little notice of them. A special chosen few are in constant mental communication with Ship.

On Pandora's surface is the final colonisation group. Their leaders do not believe that Ship is God, a matter which does not appear to upset Ship overmuch. They have decided to finally conquer Pandora by wiping out *all* indigenous life—predators, kelp, and floaters. For workers they produce engineered clones, producing monstrous forms supposedly tailored to colonial requirements; in fact the authors' descriptions show them as merely monstrous without any logical application. They are regarded as expendable and are exposed for slaughter by the predators whenever expediency suggests, which is fairly often because of a food shortage caused by Ship. (Ship follows the old J W Campbell dictum: squeeze 'em hard enough and they'll produce. An intellectually primitive God?) Only the colonists' fear of Ship's material power prevents their attempting to destroy it.

In general the lines are drawn with Ship-worshippers as the decent people and non-believers as the villains.

Detailing of the plot's snarled intricacies would be pointless; it is of the same general type as Herbert's other stories wherein warring groups get nowhere against each other because both are being manipulated from behind the scenes.

The essential story goes something like this: Ship has given its people a difficult world to colonise; they can learn to live on it only by learning how to worship their God, Ship. It turns out that what Ship means by 'worshipping Him' (but doesn't bother to tell his frustrated humans) is really respect for and realisation of their own capacities. After all, He is their creation, not they His. He won't give direct help, but offers opportunities for them to perceive and act on.

Is Ship, then, less than God? Now read on.

Ship sends a couple of emissaries to Pandora, a doubting Thomas and a poet who fills something like the role of John the Baptist crossed on the Angel of the Annunciation, while a Colony girl, Waela, is destined to be a new Virgin Mary. None of these parallels are exact but they help keep the involved action passably clear.

These discover that the kelp, which calls itself Avata (ref. Hindu mythology) is the ruling intelligence of the planet. It seems to represent morally correct thinking, and sees to it that Waela's forthcoming girl-child will be a new messiah.

Good Ship-worshippers triumph over the evil Colony biologists, the messiah is born, Ship withdraws two evil biologists (representing Satan and, possibly, Judas or Mammon) back into itself and takes off into the void—where it will no doubt spend a few more centuries creating trouble for prospective worshippers, because it retains the two evil types with the statement that it will need them again later.

IV

And where does Jesus come into it?

He is, quite literally, an 'incident' about a third of the way through the book, wherein Ship sends a ship-girl, Hali, thousands of years back in time to view the Crucifixion in order to learn a sharp, important lesson—that interference doesn't pay. God sent his only begotten Son into the world to save it—and just you look what the world did about him, young Hali!

This is the reason why Ship will not help his worshippers. He simply makes things hard for them and leaves them to fend for themselves. Which seems to me a pretty two-faced form of non-interference. And why put Hali through this unpleasant event when the matter could have been rationalised in three or four simple sentences which she would automatically have accepted as truthful and right?

The reason was probably—and I admit to fumbling among possibilities here—to allow the authors to display a few subtle paradoxes. Their choices were unfortunate. It appears that Jesus was a projection originated by Ship (but quite real in historical terms), so that it was Ship who caused the Crucifixion and then realised it to be an error. (Does God make errors?)

But—Ship was not constructed until some 2000 years or more after that event. Are we to understand that man created God in his own intellectual image and that God, once created, embraced all past and present within Himself and so created man before man created him?

As soon as you begin to probe the intricate text of this novel the chicken-and-egg questions begin to pile up, obscuring the reader's real question: is he or is he not meant to accept that Ship is God?

Ship claims to be God. So what is Ship's definition of God?

We are not told, but we do get a clue in the last line of the book, when Ship breaks orbit and heads out into deep space and His worshippers hear his cry to the universe: 'Surprise me, Holy Void!'

It is not quite as silly a line as the finale of *Destination Void* but it has unfortunate overtones of some interstellar heavyweight announcing, 'I fixed dat lot; whaddya got lined up?'

It has the more unfortunate effect of raising further questions about Ship's theological status. If Ship recognises a greater entity which to him is holy and capable of surprising him, how can he claim to be God?

So what is he?

He is a paranoic, interfering liar and the whole novel is just another space opera with nothing to say about matters which pretend to be its central preoccupation. The Herbert-Ransom team is just another pair in the lengthening line of science fiction writers who have trivialised the conception of God because their own conception of deity is initially trivial.

In this case their non-interfering God interferes by indirection, and sometimes directly, throughout the story; he forces events by threatening to expunge the humans if they don't solve their problems; he even plants a Satan among them—and removes him for further trouble-making at the finish.

What are the authors trying to say? That only by allowing his better instincts full rein can man learn to conquer himself? That would be acceptable, but in this story all results are stage-managed from behind the scenes.

Bluntly, *The Jesus Incident* is just another intolerably long and unnecessarily complex piece of Herbert snow-blinding, pretending to profundity and philosophic questioning and tripping over its ankles at every turn of a phrase.

V

It has for some time been my view that Frank Herbert is one of the great, spectacular empty vessels of science fiction; his constant fiddling with the concept of God reveals only an inability to think beyond the most narrow of logics.

In *Children of Dune* he displays this limitation where Paul Atreidas' male child becomes—by way of a peculiarly contrived symbiosis—not God but 'the kind of God men need'. Now, there's some contempt for mankind! An imitation will do, says Herbert, if it gets results; the mugs won't know the difference.

This is no better than Lester del Rey's silly story of a fugitive God hiding from the Men who seek to capture and punish Him, and far worse than Arthur Clarke's naive anti-religious arguments in *The Fountains of Paradise.*

I suppose so much snorting and heavy breathing demands that I declare my own stance. Fair enough, but let me first spare a few paragraphs for pointing out what belief in God can demand of you.

Any religious belief demands an act of faith—an acceptance of the logically unprovable. The act of faith is demanded because of the existence of unanswerable questions, such as, 'What was there before the Big Bang?'

Why, nothing, of course.

You mean, just space?

No, I mean Nothing. Not even space.

But how—?

Quite so. How?

We tend to think of the primal event in visual terms: all the matter in the universe concentrated in an infintely tiny, blackholish sort of point which explodes to expand through all space and time.

This is not the vision of the astrophysicist or the cosmologist. There is, for them, no such concept as 'before the Big Bang'. Time itself did not exist until the Big Bang created it.

Matter did not expand to fill all space because space did not exist either, until the presence of matter made space necessary. And, until some unimaginable circumstance made it necessary, neither did matter.

The impossible thing to understand is that, as far as our physics can postulate, there was *nothing* before the Big Bang, not even a space or time for it to happen in.

So the scientist has reached the same point as the theologist, asking, 'How did it begin?'

The theologist says, 'God did it,' and rests his case.

The scientist says, 'We've shown you what happened,' but can't explain what he has shown you.

Each of them demands an act of faith for acceptance of the fact of Creation.

The atheist points out, rightly, that this doesn't prove that God is responsible. The philosopher snorts contempt and defies the atheist to prove that in fact *he* exists. *Cogito ergo sum* is all right, up to a point; then perceptions of paradox and uncertainty creep in (for a fuller account, see the novels of Philip K Dick) and the possibility arises that the universe itself is an illusion. (Ian Watson fumbled that idea badly in *The Jonah Kit* and finished in more intellectual trouble than enough, because his God also seemed smaller than His creation.)

So it may require an act of faith to believe you exist. (Hell!)

What it all adds up to is that where beginnings and endings and a few spots in between are concerned, we have no means of

knowing.

If you like to call the unknown 'God', that's your affair. If you like to feel that He has a personal interest in you, shiver in fear of hellfire if you wish—that's also your affair, but postulates a petty small-minded god, one like Herbert's version, one who would deserve the contempt a narrow anger like del Rey's pours upon him. (No capitals for that tiny god.)

I refuse to waste my time on a conception so vast that I cannot imagine it; the effort would have to take precedence over every other activity and would get me nowhere. The universe is young yet, and if the knowledge is available it will be dusted off before the *waermertod.* For now, I have no data on God or the Big Bang and no predilection for acts of faith (ie, making decisions in the dark), but will be interested in reliable information on all three.

(But—have you ever noticed how many top-class astronomers and physicists are stout believers in a Creating God? You can't class them among the stupid and easily imposed upon, can you?)

So I am a fence-sitter, having an open mind but no data to fill it. As for the moral aspects of religious commandment, all the major religions are pretty much in agreement about the basics (save in their attitudes to women, which are poor), which only seems to indicate that you can live by a good morality in any religious framework—and just as well in none.

Where does that leave me *vis-a-vis* Frank Herbert? It leaves me fed to the teeth with works displaying a conception of deity which is only that one Oscar Wilde derided long ago: 'an Englishman twelve feet tall'.

Science fiction would do well to leave God alone. The conception is not amenable to logic and can only be trivialised by forcing it into logical frames. That is not to say that science fiction should ignore *religion,* because that is very much amenable to logical examination, as Blish proved in *A Case of Conscience* and Miller in *A Canticle for Leibowitz,* two of the best novels yet produced in the genre. Both these writers, however, were men of too much intelligence to introduce God as a character, so their novels say something useful about religious values while Frank Herbert, Lester del Rey, Damon Knight, Ian Watson, Arthur Clarke, and others have merely revealed the limitations of their understanding.

VI

I have spent so much wordage on this because the questions of belief and non-belief are central to the theme of *The Jesus Incident.* How it turns out, in terms of plot, is that the 'good' who believe that a human-built, conscious computer is God are rewarded by being led into Eden while the 'bad', who have more sense than to believe any such thing, are defeated. Worse, their unfortunate clones, who have little reason or opportunity to make up their minds on points of belief, are slaughtered like cattle throughout the action while 'God' fiddles with his two-faced policy of non-interference.

The morality of this blood-coloured parable is beyond me.

So is much of the prose. Here is an extract from the epigraph on pp 202-203. Since this epigraph stands alone, with no accompanying chapter, one must imagine that it has thematic importance of its own.

AVATA: If you understand, then you cannot learn. By saying you understand, you create barriers.

HUMANKERRO: But I can remember understanding things.

AVATA: Memory only *understands* the presence or absence of electrical signals.

HUMANKERRO: Then what's the combination, the program for learning?

AVATA: Now you open the path. It is the program which counts in the most literal sense.

HUMANKERRO: But what are the rules?

AVATA: Are there rules underlying every aspect of human life? Is that your question?

HUMANKERRO: That appears to be the question.

AVATA: Then answer it. What are the rules for being human?

I submit that this super-subtle fencing is nearly meaningless. The entire passage, of forty lines 'quoted' from a 'reference' called '*The Avata*: "The Q & A Game"', can be boiled down to 'Nothing can be understood solely in terms of language, because language is only a system of references'. This linguistic truism is decorated with snide intellectual thrust and parry to waste two pages of text—and persuade a gullible reader that he is gorging at the feast of reason. And it explains nothing that is not clear at almost any point in the story.

Here is the epigraph on page 12:

St Augustine asked the right question: 'Does freedom come from chance or choice?' And you must remember that quantum mechanics guarantees chance.

This contains an untruth. Quantum mechanics does *not* guarantee chance; it *reveals* chance as a factor in the description of micro-systems but says nothing of it as a factor in the macro-universe. It has no application to St Augustine's question. But at least you know that Herbert is on name-dropping terms with classical literature.

It would be only too easy to pin down the book's pretensions by painstakingly unearthing one such snow job after another. The clear-eyed reader can perhaps have some amusement doing it for himself.

Perhaps these pseudo-mystic and pseudo-philosophic passages give the book a rarefied version of the old 'sense of wonder' by keeping the unthinking reader forever on the verge of some exotic revelation which never materialises. For the rest, the movement is slow, and when most of the characters speak, and usually think, in the same tone of allusive obliqueness, it becomes hard to regard any of them as being of particular significance. As usual with Herbert, only the villains have any life in them; they, poor dimwits, say exactly what they mean without raising clouds of veiled implication over every exchange.

For such an experienced novelist, Herbert makes hard work of his plotting. The short chapters, averaging about 2500 words, hop from group to group of characters in a fashion which, because there are too many groups, reduces the plot to a haze of general directions. This method, which can be very effective when used with a proper sense of dovetailing, results here in the Crucifixion being split into three chapters separated by sections so trivial by comparison of content as to be irritations. So one of the most emotive scenes in human history falls flat for simple lack of concentrated treatment and is then explained away in reasons of breath-taking inconsequence.

This book fails on every level of technique and content, except ingenuity. That is not enough.

PHILIP K DICK FORUM

part one

THE REALLY REAL

by Lesleigh Luttrell

Lesleigh Luttrell, long-time contributor to these pages, and fandom in general, began to gafiate around the time she wrote this article. At present she is alive and well and combining the occupations of radio announcer and laboratory researcher in Madison, Wisconsin.

What I'm proposing is a radically new theory as to what is "real" and what is not.

-Dick, in *Electric Shepherd,* page 33

The basic test that distinguishes reality from hallucination is...that one or several others see it too.

- *Rolling Stone,* page 93

Phil Dick has described his novels as books that "try to pierce the veil of what is only apparently real to find out what is *really* real."

- *Rolling Stone,* page 45

"What is reality?" This is a sophomoric sort of question that few, with the exception of idiots and geniuses, give much consideration to once they have reached the age of 20 or so. (Perhaps this is why Philip K Dick's books seem to hit those of us who come to them young with particular force.) The question that Dick asks in his books is not simply, "What is reality?", for he realises that there is no single reality, but "How can we interpret, how far can we trust our perceptions of reality?"

Dick's "radically new theory" of reality is not entirely his own invention, but is derived from the theories of European existential psychologists. They suggest that each person has two separate world views; one is their own unique, private view, termed *idios kosmos,* and the other is the shared world-view, the *koinos kosmos* (roughly equivalent to the *weltanschauung* of earlier linguistic-anthropological theory). It is only in achieving a rapport with other people that we are able to distinguish our personal view of reality from the shared view.

Dick has said that in his novels it is not the shared reality, "the *really* real", which is breaking down, but the personal worldview. As it breaks down, Dick claims, the shared universe (the world that his characters share with Palmer Eldritch and Glen Runciter) emerges more strongly. This is a frightening experience, for we each need our own personal *idios kosmos* to maintain our sanity.

Sanity, and various forms of insanity, are an important part of Dick's novels. However Dick, like most of us, is not sure how to define insanity. Is schizophrenia a complete retreat into one's own personal world, or is it the result of losing that protective individual shield and being subjected to the "absolute" reality? Manfred, the autistic child in *Martian Time-Slip*, seems to be afflicted with the latter type of insanity, since he can see into the future. However, his view of "reality" is so horrible that the reader would like to believe it is only a private universe.

However one defines it, insanity is, in Dick's novels, a way of breaking through, of "piercing the veil": "In my novels the protagonist's comfortable, private world is disintegrating and an awful, mystical, puzzling enormous world is expanding - from elements already there - to fill the void" *(Electric Shepherd,* page 32). This is an uncomfortable state of affairs for Dick's characters, who often go through hell in order to get to the other side of this veil, as has apparently happened to Dick himself at several times in his life.

Despite the pain and horror, it is important to Dick, and to his readers, that this veil be lifted, that we get through to the other side and achieve a new view of reality, or at least see the weak spots in our old view. Why is this important? Why shouldn't we, characters and readers alike, stay safely in our private little worlds?

An obvious reason is that science fiction writers like to play around with reality, and their readers enjoy these games, the stories of alternate worlds and time-travel paradoxes. Certainly Dick uses some of these tricks and cliches which are so familiar to stf readers in his books. However, there is one important difference between Philip K Dick and most other science fiction writers - he is not just "playing around" with reality, but is genuinely searching for a new reality.

Dick believes that there is evil in our world. Perhaps the most basic form is entropy. Entropy, the decay of the meaningful into the meaningless, is the real evil in this world: "Much of what in my books are regarded as hallucinations are actually aspects of the entropy-laden *koinos* world breaking through" (*Electric Shepherd,* page 33). If what is out there in the "real" world is this evil, entropy, why do we want to break through? Perhaps because it is a human characteristic to do so. Only humans can break through, can perceive that there is more than one reality.

Simulacra cannot achieve this. These quasi-human machines are another of the threads which unite Dick's books. They range from simple, one-track-mind mechanisms, like the coin-operated front door of Joe Chip's apartment in *Ubik,* to more complex teaching machines of *Martian Time-Slip,* to the not-quite-human Abraham Lincoln, simulacra in *We Can Build You.* However, these are still machines and, to Dick, one of the great potential evils in the world is the danger that humans will become less human, more inanimate, more machine-like.

The most frightening example of a mindless, machine-like "human", to the modern world, is the Nazi. Dick uses this figure in his most widely read book, *The Man in the High Castle.* Like true simulacra, the Nazis cannot deal with the idea of alternate worlds, with the revelation that there may be more than a single reality. Most human beings do have a great deal of trouble dealing with different realities, but it is a basic expression of our humanness that we at least make the effort.

Dick throws his characters into situations in which their perceptions of reality change, and even break down. If we, the readers, wish to emulate Dick's characters, wish to break down the barriers of our own limited view of reality, how can we go about it? We may try some of the methods which Dick's characters use.

The most readily accessible method, for most of us, is drugs. Taking drugs for Dick's characters (and his readers?) is a deliberate attempt to alter their perceptions of reality. For example, in *Now Wait For Last Year,* JJ-180 removes from the characters' minds and bodies "their private misconceptions about cause and effect". Can-D and Chew-Z plunge their users into the equally frightening shared realities of Perky Pat and Palmer Eldritch. Dick states the usefulness of drugs most clearly in *Deus Irae*, in the thoughts of Peter Sands: "He believed that the so-called hallucinations caused by some of these drugs (with emphasis, he continually reminded himself, on the word 'some') were not hallucinations at all, but perceptions of other zones of reality" (page 22). Drugs allow us to perceive other realities, providing a way of piercing the veil, but that thought also contains a warning - not all drugs give true perceptions. Jason Taverner is plunged into a frightening state of non-existence in *Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said,* because someone else has taken a time-binding drug, KR-3. "Anyone affected by it is forced to perceive unreal universes, whether they want to or not" (page 208). It is this possibility, that drugs can cause the perception of "unreal realities", that makes them dangerous. In *Martian Time-Slip,* Arnie Kott dies, not realising that he has been shot in the real world. This danger is presented most starkly in *A Scanner Darkly,* as Substance D shatters both the personal and shared realities of Bob Arctor, first splitting him in two and then reducing him to a barely functioning hulk.

A Scanner Darkly is Dick's most depressing book to date, because the characters in it seem to derive no new insights into reality from their experiences with drugs. Instead, drugs lead to insanity and death for most of them. In earlier novels, insanity was a creative force. Many of Dick's characters experience episodes of insanity (most often schizophrenia). They are frightening episodes, to be sure, but they seem to help in the struggle to find the really real. Joe Bohlen of *Martian Time-Slip* apparently sees into the future in his period of insanity Other characters have similar experiences. Perhaps the true importance of insanity is that it is an ultimately human experience. Although machines may go "insane", only humans can learn from the experience of insanity. However, it is not something we can control (as we imagine we control our drug experiences) and thus is not likely to be a method of altering perceptions of reality which Dick readers can use easily.

Another method to which most of us have little access (although, as with insanity, the possibility is always there, lurking at the edge of our consciousness) is telepathy. In many of Dick's worlds (most notably those of *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* and *Ubik*), telepathy and other psionic powers, such as precognition, are taken for granted. Yet telepathy is the ability to intrude into someone else's reality, precognition to view the shared realities of the future. In *The Game-Players of Titan*, drug-induced extra-sensory powers allow Pete Garden to see "things as they really are", to see the Vugs masquerading as humans. However, there is danger in these powers as well. Pre-cogs can see only into possible futures, not into *the* future (there is no single reality). Characters such as Palmer Eldritch, and Ella Runciter in *Ubik*, who come to believe that their powers allow them to manipulate reality, are in grave danger of disintegrating,

of losing their own *idios kosmos*.

Knowledge from the outside, knowledge which intrudes into the personal worlds of Dick's characters, is another aid in their search for what is really real. Strong personalities, such as Joe and Glen Runciter in *Ubik*, can impose their version of reality on others, at least for a while. Scanners may offer a way of seeing reality more clearly (but Dick is not sure that these spying devices do offer any real knowledge about reality): "If the scanner sees only darkly, the way I myself do, then we are cursed again, cursed again and like we have been continually, and we'll wind up dead this way, knowing very little and getting that little fragment wrong too" (page 146).

Religion may shake up a private worldview - religious beliefs are the ultimate form of shared reality - or serve to reinforce our personal realities. The users of Can-D in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* develop a religion which "explains" their altered perceptions of reality. The religion of the men in *Martian Time-Slip* allows several characters to transcend their private realities. In *A Maze of Death*, God turns out to be a real entity, rather than merely a part of our shared reality, and is able to inflict horrifying changes of reality on the humans who are unfortunate enough to come under its powers.

Again, these means which Dick uses to alter his characters' perceptions of reality are not readily available to the readers. However, there is one other source of knowledge about what's on the other side of the veil. In *Ubik*, Joe Chip finds messages from Runciter in match folders and bathroom mirrors, words from the other side. Dick's characters may find such messages in more ordinary places, particularly in books such as the *I Ching*. The word helps Dick's characters to break through while we, the readers, find new ways of looking at reality, and learn something about our own limited perceptions of reality in the writings of Philip K Dick.

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PHILIP K DICK FORUM
part two

STAYING ALIVE IN A FIFTEEN-CENT UNIVERSE

by Claudia Krenz

The following is a very much shortened version of Claudia Krenz's PhD thesis on the works of Philip K Dick. Claudia wrote her thesis in the mid-1970s, sent me this article (and a much longer version, which I have on file), moved from Idaho to Colorado, and disappeared from all fannish knowledge. A pity--I enjoyed corresponding with her very much.

Whatever it is that happens in a Philip K Dick novel frequently takes place against a backdrop of mouldy Martian Grubworm tv dinners, self-aware doorknobs (with built-in greed cycles) and carpets depicting Richard Milhous Nixon's final ascent into heaven. Joe Chip's 1992 world - where chromium has been replaced by ersatz-chromium, wool by synthetic wool, and mahogany by imitation mahogany - is a world of cheap limitations, the epitome of the plastic and the unnatural. Von Vogelsang's appearing in "tweed toga, loafers, crimson sash and purple propeller beanie" (*Ubik*, page 81) alludes to the disjointed times portrayed in *Ubik*, as well as to the tawdriness of Dick's future world.

The shabbiness of this future world, is, however, a reflection of our own. Trees, mountains, grass, meadows, and streams

have been replaced by fire hydrants, billboards, astroturf, junk yards, and Tang. Bacchus makes soda-pop wine and ambrosia is artificially flavoured and steri-sealed in plastic. What hasn't become plasticised, an inferior copy of itself? Yet people form their mythologies out of the elements surrounding them. For the Greeks, trees could be more than trees; the tree could metamorphose itself into a tree sprite. Now, as in Kafka's story, people turn into cockroaches - or, stranger still (in Philip Roth's *The Breast*) into 150-pound breasts. The spirit is latent within the body, but the body, the natural elements, have changed.

It is then in a sense more natural for the Absolute to be latent within the aerosol than within the mountain. A bent twig signalled to the older hunter, but stale cigarettes signal to us. These trash phenomena symbolise our age and its obsession with the external. For the Dick character, refrigerators are refrigerators as long as they continue to look like refrigerators; classifications are based on mere appearances. But this insistence on superficialities also lends an ironic sanity to *Ubik* - it is a daylight world, where spectres attack passersby at high noon. The trash also symbolises spiritual aridity, indicating that life has no real meaning or transendent value.

The contemporary milieu, our plastic eco-system, corrupts what occurs in it. A statement of Dick's philosophy appears as an interoffice memo (in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*), and a major theological statement as a book perversely entitled *How I Rose From the Dead in My Spare Time and So Can You* (in *A Maze of Death*); the Paraclete (in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*) is embodied as a Ganymedean businessthing, a slime mould, and Ubik, the mysterious absolute, appears as an aerosol can; Runciter's messages appear on matchbook folders, urinal walls, in randomly selected cigarette cartons in a randomly selected supermarket in the randomly selected city of Baltimore, and in other, similarly shoddy and improbable places.

Equally improbable are some of Dick's thematic statements. "'Quantus tremor est futurus,' the voices ((on piped-in music at the Beloved Brethren Moratorium)) sang. 'Quando judex est venturus, cuncta stricta discussurus'" (*Ubik,* page 91). Roughly translated as "How great a trembling there shall be, as soon as the judge shall have come and striked asunder those who are collectively bound together," this Latin passage implies that the collectively bound-together half-lifers are being tested, that half life is a purgatorial world. Who, besides Philip Dick, would disguise the impending Day of Judgment in Latin and then announce it on piped-in background music?

In Dick's worlds the visions of the past are corrupted by their contemporary form - as is seen easily in Matt/Bill (Jory's buck-toothed alter ego)'s rather undramatic reading of Richard's opening soliloquy from Shakespeare's *Richard III:*

> **Bill...shuffled his feet and grinned, revealing great pale teeth, as blunt as shovels. "'I, that am curtailed of this fair proportion, cheated of feature by dissembling nature - '... How does it go, Matt?"**
>
> **"'- deformed, unfinished, sent before time into this breathing world, scarce half made up,'" Matt the squirrel-like telepath said, scratching meditatively at his pelt.**
>
> **"Oh yeah," Bill the precog nodded... 'And that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them.' From *Richard the Third*."**
>
> (*Ubik,* page 50)

Matt/Bill have "selected" an ironically appropriate quotation. An able and ambitious actor, Shakespeare's Richard intends to control others through artifice and illusion. This opening soliloquy - where, traditionally, the truth is spoken - alludes to the disjointed times as well as to the Elizabethan notion that the soul governs the body: just as the body's physical characteristics are manifestations of the soul, so Jory's no-two-features-match appearance embodies the disjointed times in *Ubik*. The impact of this quotation lies in its meaning and relevance to *Ubik* as well as in its presentation. Even Shakespeare is corrupted by his surroundings. In being filtered through the present, the expressions of the past are distorted.

Corresponding to the trashy environment are Dick's highly fallible characters, amongst the most ordinary ever encountered in literature. Similar to contemporary anti-heroes, the Dick character is muffled in an aura of seeming ineffecutality: "Still in gay pinstripe clown-style pajamas, Joe Chip lazily...twiddled the dial of his recently rented 'pape machine...and then selected gossip" (*Ubik,* page 23). These characters - whether Chuck Rittersdorf in *Clans of the Alphane Moon* trying to run away from his wife or Joe Chip in *Ubik* trying to placate his door - seem generally unable to cope. Incapable of even getting drunk, they can only get "fnarfed" and "pizzled". Like Leo Bulero, some have extraordinary powers, but it never does any good. Unlike the tragic hero of the past, the Dick character lacks direction and purpose and self knowledge. Unlike the existential hero, he cannot come to terms with his existence.

Frequently depicted as being out of touch with their own human reality, the characters not only do not know who they are, but frequently they don't even know that they don't know. An example is Mary Rittersdorf in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*. Smug in her role as a sane marriage counsellor, she does not acknowledge, until forced, her own insanity. Dick, however, is concerned with more than individual identity; he is also concerned with species identity, with what it means to be human. An epic, not a slice-of-life writer, Dick melds man and machine in a fusion which ranges from Joe Chip's comparing himself to a low-class windup toy, to the wise and kindly Lincoln simulacrum (in *We Can Build You*), to the android (in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), whose human engramming is so complete that he no longer knows he's an android, to the Daniel Mageboom simulacrum in *Clans of the Alphane Moon* who smugly congratulates himself on his ability to hold his liquor. The android, the result of the man-machine fusion, is a vehicle wherein Dick explores what it means to be human. The reality of who-I-am is contrasted with the illusion of who-I-think-I-am and who-they-think-I-am, with who-I-think-they-think-I-am and who-they-think-I-think-they-think-I-am.

Caught in a hall of mirrors, each reflecting his gaze, the Dick character is no stranger to identity crises. Not too surprisingly, the characters are frequently unable to separate the reality of their essence from the fictions of beliefs about that essence. Their problems, however, are epistemological rather than psychological, as the seeming aura of incompetence surrounding them relates to an innately human inability to comprehend the world - a problem not individual and avoidable but collective and *a priori*. What is seen is not an accurate reflection of what is. Too removed from the characters, reality becomes a Rorscharch blot, all projection and no content. Since Dick views the senses more as blunt instruments than as precision tools, his characters are capable of discerning reality only if it hits them over the head long enough and hard enough.

The malady is universal, and there is no one to judge other than similarly blind mice. Since psychology's cure is to hook the characters back into the illusion that they're in touch with reality, psychologists receive less than complimentary attention in Dick's fiction. They are a motley lot - ranging from protable, mechanical Dr Smile (in *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*), to psychotic Wade Frazier (in *A Maze of Death*), to the self-ignorant Mary Rittersdorf (in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*). Not only are individual attributes - good/bad, happy/sad, cheap/extravagant - questioned but, more importantly, the foundations of existence itself are shaken. The identity question alludes to the larger question of how we can know anything, let alone who we are.

That we live in a world we don't understand is a cornerstone of Dick's writing. Doubt assails his characters on all sides. In *Ubik* the collectively bound-together half-lifers stand alone, capable only of vaguely delineating certain characteristics of the forces that beset them. That the "contemporary" pay tv becomes the Philco radio (and the Philco radio is, hence, the foetal tv) indicates that things, objects, tend to devolve along conceptual lines. Human kind, however, does not suddenly convulse and look out of once-more Neanderthal eyes. Instead, humans undergo an accelerated ageing process, culminating in death. But such delineations don't help, for the forces still remain inexplicable. Jory causes the hideous entropic process, yet he is inadequate when compared with the process itself. He appears to lack the motivation, the intellect, and the power necessary for the controller of such a force. Pat, on the other hand, seems more than equal to the task, yet she is unmasked as a victim of the process she was thought to control. Despite the fact that her sadistic temperament adds up to a picture of a malignant power, Pat is a mere paper or straw villainess, manufactured by hasty generalisations, delusions, and probability. Hers is guilt by association. In *Ubik*, then, one bizarre event follows another, with nothing ever adequately accounted for.

Dick also exposes what passes for reality as illusion. Joe Chip's continual battle to keep coins makes money appear important but, in the end, the money is revealed as trivial: the change changes and the coin-operated machines revert. As finding Walt Disney's head on a coin indicates, money buys superficials: "'Don't take any wooden nickels'" (*Ubik*, page 173), Pat tells Joe; don't take something which appears to be something it's not. To compensate for Jory's dimming Ella, von Vogelsang offers to give Runciter his money back. Obviously, this neither affects the reality of the situation nor offers any real compensation. Clearly, in *Ubik* the money is hopelessly superficial, trite, and inadequate when compared to the dissolutionary and devolutionary forces which sweep across the ice-bound plane of Joe Chip's half-life world.

Dick shows us half-blind characters who are incapable of comprehending even the superficial aspects of their reality. Disdaining escapes into illusion, Dick does not substitute a more likable, a more believable

(and hence false) world for the contemporary one. Although he does not ignore this world, he denies it because it is, in a larger sense, not real. Dick hints that existing beyond temporal reality is a "real" world - camouflaged though it is behind the Grubworm tv dinners - and that underlying the cheap exterior of the 15-cent universe is what could be called metaphysical reality. Dick's worlds are also characterised by the existence of purposeful cosmic forces which do battle for good as well as evil. Lord Running Clam, the embodiment of the Paraclete, and Ubik, the mysterious aerosol Absolute, are both forces for the good. Yet, while beneficial, their efficacy is limited, and they are frequently questioned. Joe Chip's only hope is Ubik, something which is everywhere but which can't be found, something which is safe only when used as directed but for which no directions can be found, something which brings reality into focus but which regresses along with other objects.

What is Ubik? At one point we are told that it is a "portable negative ionizer", at other points that it is a "reality support" and that it "perks up pouting household surfaces", "makes coffee better", "cures upset stomachs", and "provides uninterrupted sleep". But Ubik is also a theological statement:

> **I am Ubik. Before the universe, I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik, but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be.**
> (*Ubik,* page 207)

I am Ubik, but who am I? Change "Ubik" to "God" and Ubik becomes the basic belief underlying Christianity; change it to "Brahman" and it becomes Hinduism; "Allah", Islam. This statement, theological both in content and in form, contradicts our other definitions of Ubik. A power so described cannot be limited by being invented, nor can it be defined as a "portable negative ionizer", This epigraph, moreover, signals the collapse of Runciter's world. Runciter finds Joe Chip money in his pocket, and in two short pages, all of the characters' and the readers' hypotheses are shattered. As Ubik itself changes from a commercial to a theological statement, concrete turns into quicksand, transforming the absolute Ubik into something sinister. Ubik is Abraxis, and in it what we experience as both good and evil are fused. Indeed, we sometimes find in Dick's gods the selfsame image of the force they oppose, that of evil. While Ubik seems to work for the good, its essence, as the last chapter implies, is unfathomable. Undercut by ambiguity, Dick's gods are of limited efficacy.

They are further undermined by the forces of evil, a current running through much of Dick's fiction. In some novels we only glimpse it, as in Ignatz Ledebur's dream of a "shiny jello of rot" (*Clans of the Alphane Moon,* page 59)[1], but in others it is more fully realised, as in *Ubik*'s Jory and *Martian Time-Slip*'s Gubbler. All are manifestations - Jory a devolved one - of what Dick has called the Form Destroyer. (In an interview with Philip Purser - "Even Sheep Can Upset Scientific Detachment", *The Daily Telegraph Magazine*, 19 July 1974, page 30 - Dick said, "I really do believe there is an evil form destroyer - *eidos* destroyer - normally kept at a distance from us by society, friendship...but which can strike at us when alone.") While it is impossible to know reality, value is nevertheless attached to it - or to the idea of stability and form. While the essence of the Form Destroyer is beyond comprehension, its manifestations evoke horror. Manfred Steiner's vision is beyond doubt one of the darkest of contemporary fiction:

> **Inside Mr Kott's skin were dead bones, shiny and wet. Mr Kott was a sack of bones, dirty and yet shiny wet. His head was a skull that took in greens and bit them; inside him the greens became rotten things as something ate them to make them dead.**
>
> **He could see everything that went on inside Mr Kott, the teeming gubbish life. Meanwhile, the outside said, "I love Mozart. I'll put this tape on..."**
>
> **A hideous racket of screeches and shrieks issued from the speakers, like the convulsions of corpses.**
> (*Martian Time-Slip,* page 126)[1]

Not only is the perceiver too inadequate and the world too complex, there is also a force decimating whatever form and meaning there is. In the juxtaposition of the Form Destroyer and the Absolute, Dick resurrects the ancient battle between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between order and chaos.

The gods - our traditional source of salvation - provide no help. Like the surface of the 1992 world, Dick's gods seem trite and superficial, cheap and shoddy. They are undercut by ambiguity and opposed by forces which at least seem far more potent than they. Is there then nothing to provide surcease from the absurd? In observing his reality crumble, Joe realises:

> **But this old theory** ((Plato's idea i objects)) **- didn't Plato think something survived the decline, something inner not able to decay?...the soul - out of its nest the bird, flown elsewhere...in that case, we can meet again. In, as in *Winnie-the-Pooh,* another part of the forest...a category he thought, imperishable... We will all wind up with Pooh, in a clear, more durable new place.**
> (*Ubik,* pages 129-130)

Dick sees "something inner" as being impervious to the Form Destroyer. This something can be objectified as the Forest which, in turn, alludes to *Ubik*'s introductory epigraph. This "song" - low German in form, language, and subject matter - suggests the folk and a closeness to nature unspoiled by *civilisation. Yet a return to the tempo*ral past does no good; culture may be spoiled by civilisation but to escape into the illusion of the past accomplishes nothing. Joe Chip had "'never heard the term "n-----" used'... and found himself appraising this era ((1939)) a little differently, all at once" *(Ubik,* page 146). While obscured by the Grubworm tv dinners and mysterious absolutes, the Forest is nevertheless important. Certainly, the Forest is more real, more durable than the 15-cent temporal world, where *les fleurs du mal* have devolved into black, plastic dimestore flowers. Unlike the absurdists, Dick goes beyond disintegration. What was assumed to be reality - the absurd universe - is split to reveal the seed of, the potential for a new, more real life.

Dick tells the eternal tale of a humanity cut off from its edens, left half blind to stumble home while the old landmarks disintegrate. But midnight is the first minute of the new day. The first step is to acknowledge the shattered images, to see that in seeing only superficial existence, we live, in essence, only half lives. "Relentlessly, Leo went on, 'When I was a boy there was no mental illness like there is now. It's a sign of the times'" (*Martian Time-Slip,* page 106). The schizophrenia that Dick portrays so frequently depicts a humanity cut off from meaning and value. It is a sign of the times.

Our view of the world is a fragmented one, implying that we have lost some ordering principle. Yet to perceive accurately the surface of our world is to perceive fragments and disharmony. But to see, as Dick implies, only the surface world is to have a one-sided vision:

> **Below lay the tomb world, the immutable cause-and-effect world of the demonic. At median extended the layer of the human, but at any instant a man could plunge - descend as if sinking - into the hell-world beneath. Or: he could ascend to the ethereal world above... Always, in his middle level of the human, a man risked the sinking. And yet the possibility of ascent lay before him; any aspect or sequence of reality could become either, at any instant. Hell and heaven, not after death but now! Depression, all mental illness, was the sinking. And the other...how was it achieved?**
>
> **Through empathy.**
> (*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch,* page 83)[1]

In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* characters proved their humanness by "passing" the "empathy test", In *Clans of the Alphane Moon,* Lord Running Clam has empathy - as Paul said, a very important virtue - which enables him to grasp the essence rather than the shell; similarly, Gabriel Barnes' gradual transcendence of his illness parallelled by a rise in empathetic understanding. Empathy is *caritas*. In *Ubik*'s darker world, Joe Chip is able to procure Ubik by actualising the aerosol behind the surface of the Kidney Balm, by grasping it not from its outside surface but from its inner essence. Dick suggests that, like Baines, we must remove ourselves from our prisons, that we must transcend them. Intuitive understanding, what Kierkegaard called the leap, is the key which unlocks the prison.

While the Forest may not be just around the bend, nevertheless it lies in this direction. All other forms of knowledge give us only descriptions of surface, superficial qualities. Dick's characters, practitioners of Jnana Yoga, the metaphysical discrimination between the Real and the apparent, are precluded by their phenomenal existences from a direct understanding of the Real, but *Caritas* at least enables them to discriminate between reality and illusion. Through their ability to make such discriminations, they find, if not satori, enlightenment, then at least a momentary glimpse of a peace that passes all understanding.

** ** ** **

In contrast to the "normal" method of observing and measuring outside, superficial characteristics, Dick would have things grasped from their inner essence. But although this brings a temporary surcease from the absurd, it does not bring salvation. Central in Dick's fiction is the idea that the world has already dimmed, that it has already reverted, "sort of like Humpty Dumpty; the original state had been one of perfection, and...had fallen...into rusty bits and useless debris" (*Martian Time-Slip,* pp 76-77). The world is less than it should be;

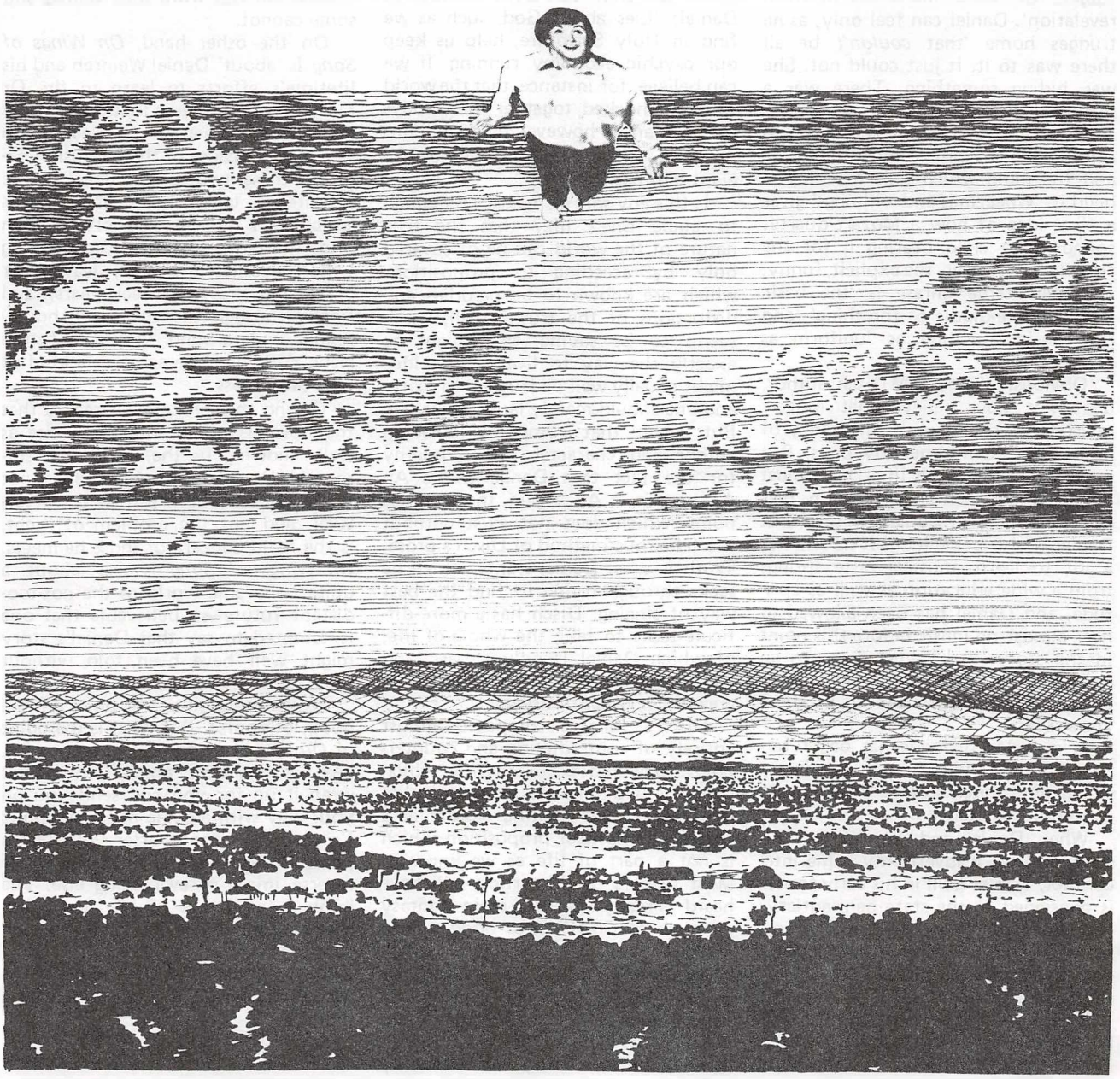
Concluded on Page 69

SING A SONG OF DANIEL

by Bruce Gillespie

Bruce Gillespie discusses:

On Wings of Song
by Thomas M Disch
(St Martin's Press; 1979;
359 pp; $US 12.95.
Gollancz; 1979;
315 pp; 5 pounds 95/$15.95.
Bantam 13667.4; 1980;
359 pp; $US 2.25)



When Daniel Weinreb is a child, in Amesville, Iowa, sometime in the near future, his friend Mrs Boismortier puts a Mozart string quartet on the phonograph for him to hear for the first time. Daniel expects some extraordinary revelation. Instead he hears only 'wheezings and whinings, groanings and grindings that continued interminably without getting anywhere. Once or twice out of the murk he could hear melodies begin to get started but then they'd sink back into the basic diddle-diddle-diddle of the thing before you could enjoy them. On and on and on, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, but all of a dullness and drabness uniform as housepaint.' Meanwhile, Mrs Boismortier listens enraptured, as if subject to 'some incredible mystical revelation'. Daniel can feel only, as he trudges home 'that *couldn't* be all there was to it. It just could not. She was hiding something. There was a secret.'

In only two paragraphs, Disch can capture the rhythm of both the music and the mind which fails to comprehend it. 'Wheezings and whinings' gives a clear idea of how a Mozart quartet sounds to a child hearing it for the first time; however, the explicit, funny, and memorable phrase is 'the basic diddle-diddle-diddle of the thing'—and the music sounding as 'uniform as housepaint'.

Obviously, Thomas M Disch, author, does not now believe that Mozart quartets have the aural consistency of housepaint. Only the boy does. But once sometime in his life, Disch must have had just such an impression: he's in sympathy with Daniel's misery. But Daniel is also being judged: he still has a lot to learn: musical taste springs from a wide education as well as aptitude, and Daniel has been allowed to hear almost no music before this point in the story: and Daniel develops an early habit of looking for revelations, and something will need to be done about *that*.

A complex dialogue has begun between author and character, a dialogue which does much to give the book its contrapuntal vitality.

When Daniel and the law of the state of Iowa inadvertently come into conflict, Daniel (still in his early teens) is consigned to the state penitentiary. It has few guards and no fences; if any prisoner tries to escape, the capsule embedded in the lining of his or her stomach will explode. The internal 'democracy' of the prisoners' society hides endless injustice, and the young Daniel finds it difficult to keep hope alive. Mrs Boismortier sends him a copy of a book called *The Product is God*, by Jack Van Dyke. 'Daniel was enthralled by the book. After a long dusty day of detasselling corn he would return to its paradoxes and mental loop-the-loops with a feeling of immersing himself in seltzer water'. We notice an effect which becomes familiar throughout the rest of the book—that when Daniel has some revelation about hope and faith and the whole damned thing, the author withdraws into solitude and refuses to make a judgment about such naivety. The prose creates the sense of fizziness in Daniel's mind, yet devalues it with just those images of 'selzer water' and 'loop-the-loops'. Disch satirises the 'message' which the Rev. Van Dyke conveys to Daniel: 'Lies about God, such as we find in Holy Scripture, help us keep our psychic economy running. If we can believe, for instance, that the world was all knocked together in six days rather than in however many billions of years, we've come a long way toward self-mastery.'

Is this any sort of message by which to guide one's life?—that the true nature of the world can be discovered only by acceding to propositions which are known to be parodies and distortions of the truth? Well, Disch seems to be saying, that might be exactly the way to live—or the idea might equally well be laughed to scorn, and one should merely laugh at Daniel. But again that sympathy between author and character: the sympathy for the fact that Daniel wants An Answer To It All. Again, the counterpoint, which does not exist without the felicitous method of Disch's prose. Truth is what Daniel wants, which he seeks through trying to find the best way of singing. Disch has a more difficult task: to take the whole of life, of which Daniel is only a part, and make everything sing. And the struggle creates *On Wings of Song*.

Disch's song is composed almost entirely of contradiction and counterpoint, powered by a rhythm which connects two opposites: looking at life in the eye, and looking closely at a wholely fantastical proposition which is not a part of life as we know it. Most readers of this article will have heard already of the main fantasy gimmick of *On Wings of Song*—that a machine has been invented which enables people to 'fly', to escape their bodies and engage in out-of-body experiences. National Flightpaths supplies the machinery; the body remains behind, barely living, intravenously fed. Services to the dormant body must be paid for, or else life support systems are turned off and the body dies, and presumably the person remains in flight. This step forward in the national entertainment industry has been developed in a world where the comfort systems available to people of the Western nations are gradually breaking down.

On the one hand, *On Wings of Song* is 'about' flight and the effect it has on the people of America, especially those people who cannot achieve flight. Many cannot, including Daniel Weinreb. To fly, you need to connect yourself to the machine, then sing, as musically or as passionately as you can. Nobody quite knows why some people can rise from their bodies and some cannot.

On the other hand, *On Wings of Song* is 'about' Daniel Weinreb and his lifetime's efforts to learn to fly. Or rather, Daniel believes that he can only learn to fly when he has learned to sing well. Because of the confusion between these two ideas, Daniel allows his life to take a number of turns which lead him first to prison, then into the arms of Boadicea Whiting (who becomes his wife, leaves her body, and flies for fifteen years), and finally through the theatrical, homosexual underground life of a future New York until he achieves a kind of musical success.

During this process we realise that the novel is doing something else as well: showing us the world that surrounds Daniel but which does not really concern him, just as mere survival, and not the problem of flight, is the main concern of those he meets. *On Wings of Song* is also 'about' a quite believable world of the not-too-distant future—so believable that one is tempted to say that Daniel's story might well have been told without referring to flying at all.

Which is to miss the point of the book, of course. But what is the point of *On Wings of Song*? What is the nice, neat, cutesy-clear phrase which will wrap it up for you and send you on your way with a smile of satisfaction? I'm sorry; I cannot offer you such a phrase. Everything in this book is the reverse image of everything else. The book is an image of life itself, and there are no convenient phrases which sum up life itself. As I've said, 'flying' is Disch's most effective image for the life of the novel, yet it is a fantastic premise. . . .

II

Daniel is attracted to flying for the first time when he realises that it is forbidden in Iowa, the Farm Belt state in which he lives. He realises that he will need to learn to sing; indeed, learn something about the rudiments of music, since most forms of music are still suppressed in Iowa. Hence Daniel's first encounter with the 'diddle-diddle-diddle' of Mozart. More importantly, his reach outwards towards flying is part of his first adolescent outreach towards all that part of life which Iowans want to exterminate. He has a vision that 'someday the whole world would know who he was and honour him. How and why remained a mystery.'

Daniel takes the first of his abrupt slides into obscurity when his run-in with the repressive laws of Iowa leads to his prison sentence. Life in prison is mainly miserable, but Daniel meets two people who have actually flown. One is Barbara Steiner, a maverick, who has those kinds of hard-boiled gimcrack beliefs ('that everyone always got exactly what he or she deserved') which echo around much right-wing science fiction. She first flew at the age of seventeen: 'The song is always going on somewhere.... It's like finding out you shook hands with God.' She is the first of many people in Daniel's life to offer prescriptions for achieving flight (and hence, by implication, success in life): 'But what counts is not the song. It's the way you sing it. The commitment you can give.'

The shadow of Barbara Steiner stretches long over the book. She is only 'on stage' for a few pages, yet her vibrant courage and her contradictory suicide (by walking out of the prison) remain memorable. *Does* Daniel get what he deserves? I don't know. No honest reader of the book can give an unequivocal answer. In the end, the life of the novel, life itself, cannot be summed up in such a way. Perhaps Barbara Steiner is the only example which proves her own belief.

Equivocation also surrounds her prescription for flying. Daniel takes her to mean that he must develop his technical ability to sing: he devotes his life to this skill. But he meets Gus, the prisoner who can sing magically: 'The single voice rose from the assembled silence like a moon rising over endless fields of snow.' The precision of Disch's image makes this one of the most vivid moments in the novel. It also defines the transcendental experience—a moon rising above ordinary life—endless fields of snow. Gus himself is not too interested in transcendence. He has flown in the past, and it doesn't mean much to him. Daniel wants to be taught singing, but baulks at paying Gus's price, sexual favours. Gus offers only one last piece of advice on how to sing: 'Make a mess of your life. The best singers always do.'

Again here is one of those boisterous memorable statements which gives shape to the novel, and which might be endorsed by the author and might not. It is simply not true that Boadicea Whiting, the daughter of the local farmland baron, Grandison Whiting, has made a mess of her life—apart from marrying Daniel, of course. Yet when she and Daniel stop over in New York on their way to Europe for their honeymoon, she is the one who can fly straight away. In fact, she does not return to her body for fifteen years. Daniel keeps trying; he still cannot fly. The plane on which he and Boa were due to leave for Europe is blown up in mid-air and everybody believes them dead. Daniel decides to stay anonymous, changes his name to Ben Bosala, and takes it upon himself to raise the money, year after year, to keep Boa's body supplied with nutrients. Daniel's life has become a real mess—but he still cannot fly, and his only comfort in life might be some realisation of how heroic is his struggle to keep Boa 'alive'.

Daniel's descent into the low life of New York is a section of the novel which rivals the quality and range of the best American writing in the richness and complexity of its detail. Yet, just when we think that the book has become documentary, not fictional, Daniel begins to edge his way back to his real ambition. For flying to him is singing, and he re-enters the ambit of music only indirectly. The most popular music in New York has become bel canto opera, starring not Joan Sutherland but the same type of castrati who dominated bel canto during its original heyday. Daniel begins to work as an usher at the Metastasio, the leading bel canto theatre. In New York, a reverse image of Iowan society, a eunuch-homosexual society guides life and fashion. It has become, for instance, quite the thing to become a 'phoney' (black face, from *faux noir*). One thing leads to another: Miss Marspan, Boa's aunt, offers to pay for the upkeep of Boa's body; Mrs Schiff, a friend of Miss Marspan, gives Daniel and Boa's body a home when the money is about to give out. Mrs Schiff writes and updates operas for the Metastasio; she loves Ernesto Rey, one of the leading castrato singers at the theatre; in turn, Rey falls in love with Daniel. Daniel's life sinks to its ultimate messiness when he is forced to don constant phoney costume and an 'insanity belt' (chastity belt) as Rey's whore—just in order to earn enough money to keep Boa alive. Triumph is just around the corner, of course, but the phoenix that arises from the ashes of Daniel's life is still sooty from the ashes of New York's disintegrative fires.

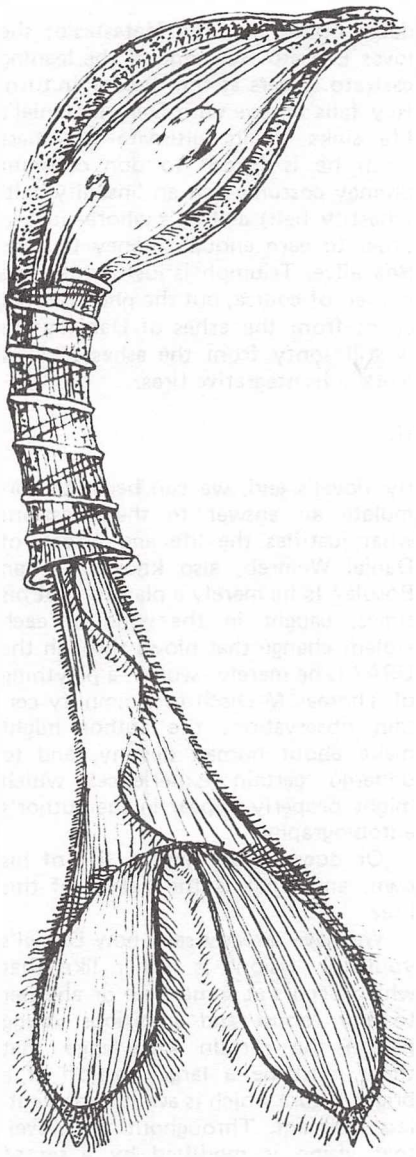
III

By novel's end, we can begin to formulate an answer to the question: what justifies the life and efforts of Daniel Weinreb, also known as Ben Bosola? Is he merely a plaything of his times, caught in the wind of each violent change that blows through the USA? Is he merely—worse—a plaything of Thomas M Disch to exemplify certain observations the author might make about human destiny, and to undergo certain experiences which might properly appear in the author's autobiography?

Or does Daniel have a life of his own, and what is the nature of this life?

We have already seen how Daniel's youthful 'vision' is rather like that which occurs at some time or another to any robust and ambitious young person—the certain knowledge that there must be a large portion of a bright future which is awaiting a relentless claimant. Throughout the novel, that vision is modified by a set of experiences which make Daniel more 'cynical', at least in his own eyes. (However, he is still susceptible to 'self-improvement' books and other assurances that one day he might guide the direction of his own life.) Grandison Whiting's cynicism, however, takes his breath away, and even ten years later in New York Daniel is still a fairly complacent man who has switched off the critical section of his mind ('He believed, even now, that the world was his shepherd, with a natural instinct for providing green pastures and attending to his wants.'). In fact, he has discovered a new idealism: 'Other men have families. Daniel had his wife's corpse (for such she was now legally) to sustain him. But it served the same purpose: it kept him from believing, despite every other evidence, that his defeat was final, whole, and entire.'

Daniel's sacrifice teaches him more



about life than he would have learned in any more comfortable situation. Because of the sacrifice, the need to earn money, becoming Rey's whore, being taught to sing by Rey, he achieves his one worldly success—he becomes the inventor and main performer of a new type of bel canto pop, writes his own fabulously successful musical, *Honeybunny Time*, and has his face on the cover of *Time* magazine. Yet at the end of the novel he has little sense of having achieved anything —returning to Amesville, Iowa, for the last time, he looks out over his brother-in-law's backyard with envy: 'The pull-toy on the sidewalk, the idle water-sprinkler, the modest flower-beds and their parallelograms of pansies, marigolds, petunias, and bachelor buttons.'

Events, it seems, have swept him away from all this, but they have not yet delivered flight to him. In New York he dreams that he is flying. He keeps trying to define flight, find its true meaning. He has a moment of insight when he sees:

> **the fountain of art; of song; of singing; of a process that renews itself moment by moment; that is timeless and yet inhabits the rush and tumble of time, just as the fountain's trumpeting waters are endlessly conquering the same slim splendid space. It was what Mrs Schiff had said about music, that it must be a warbling and willing to inhabit *this* instant, and then *this* instant, and always *this* instant, and not just willing, and not even desirous, but delighted: an endless, seamless inebriation of song. *That* was what bel canto was all about, and that was the way to fly.**

So what is flight, then? It is, after all, music itself, its performance beyond the touch of those who cannot enter fully into it and surrender to it. Here we see the evidence of Disch's own struggle towards art over many years; Daniel has the insight as well, but both sees it and misses it. His personal obsession is pushing him away from life and art, even as he rushes towards his life's success. And all the while prose reveals something far beyond flying or singing: perhaps even an image for the novel itself, which continues to recreate the effernescent, indefinable excitement of a life of the mind which occupies *'this* instant' while we are reading the book, and evades petrifaction into formula.

But Daniel's ambitions hurl him onwards. During the debut of *Honeybunny Time*: 'Suddenly a switch slipped inside him and a light came on, one bright flash of everlasting glory, and there was no way to explain it but he knew that if he'd been wired into a flight apparatus at just that moment (and the moment was gone already) he would have taken off.' The pathos of that parenthesis! Does that moment ever return? Daniel seems to approach ever closer to his goal, particularly when Boa returns to her body and tells him of the wonders of flying ('Here one finds, at most, only a little pleasure; there, there is only pleasure'). He seems poised for flight—but does he ever achieve it? My own reading of the final two pages does not settle the matter either way: each reader is left to adjudicate Disch's meaning, or decide if Disch turns his head away from meaning.

IV

But even if Daniel never flew, did he achieve transcendence? This seems the real question of the novel. *On Wings of Song* is a religious novel, just as *Camp Concentration* and *334* are religious novels. What is to live, and be human? Can one ever be human without seeking to be more than human, without seeking to eat a portion of the moon of heaven, of frail achievement, which can be glimpsed above the frozen plains of 'ordinary existence'?

By the end of *On Wings of Song*, Daniel has achieved many moments of transcendence. They gleam less brightly for him because he seeks something more. But it is that seeking which leads him along his necessary, tortuous path. Indeed, Daniel's salvation might have been a tiny event, of which he knows nothing, during his last night alive in Amesville, Iowa:

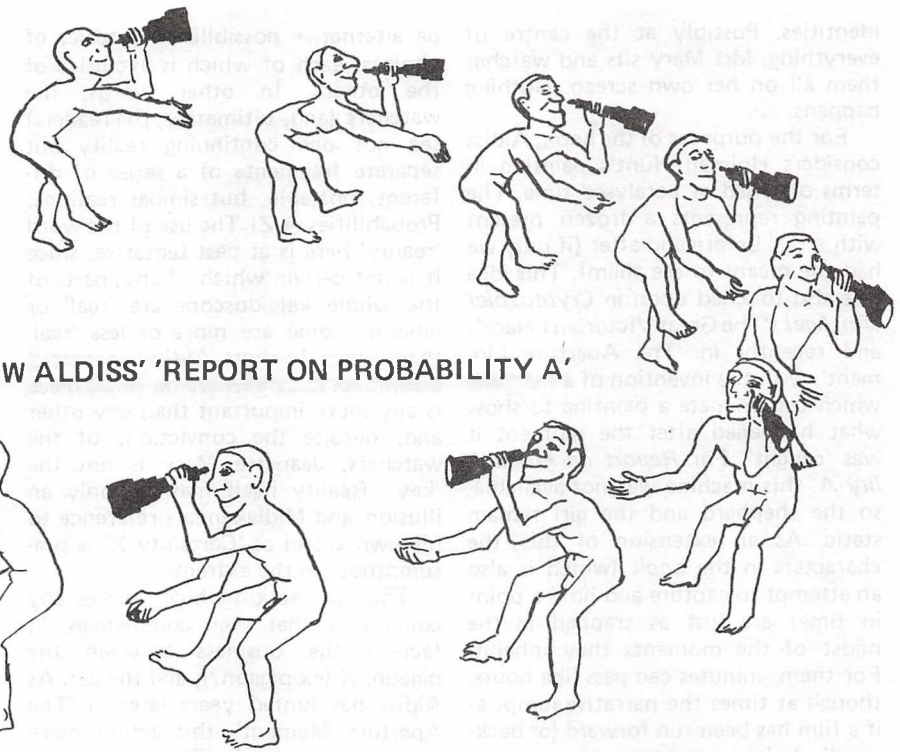
> **So he sang his old favourites, and they looked at him, and listened, and understood. . . . Far at the back of the auditorium Eugene Mueller's twelve-year-old son, who had come here in defiance of his father's strict orders, understood with a rapture of understanding, not in gleams and flashes, but as an architect might understand, in a vision of great arching spaces carved by the music from the raw black night; of stately, stated, mathematic intervals; of commodious firm delight.**

Here, I think, is the 'point' of Disch's novel, if we happen not to have understood it so far: not some neat little statement which imprisons the variety of life, but a focal point around which the rest of the book can revolve. To see the 'arches carved by the music', to know the 'commodious firm delight' of art, which takes us beyond ourselves, to hear the 'diddle-diddle-diddle' resolved into moments of music, is perhaps the best that life can offer. Yet (and here we can go forever circling through the loops of Disch's meaning, as in Grandison Whiting's fairy trap) this understanding has nothing self-evident in it. It might come easily to some people, as flying does to Boa and Gus. If it does, it exacts its own revenge. It might involve the payment of all one's love and energy—the sacrifice which Daniel makes, the energy which Disch invests in the novel. It is no proof against anti-art, 'the forces of Caesar', as Daniel calls them. These forces fell Daniel eventually. The search is everything, is never over, and always ends in death. But somebody might be out there listening, watching.

Bruce Gillespie, September 1980

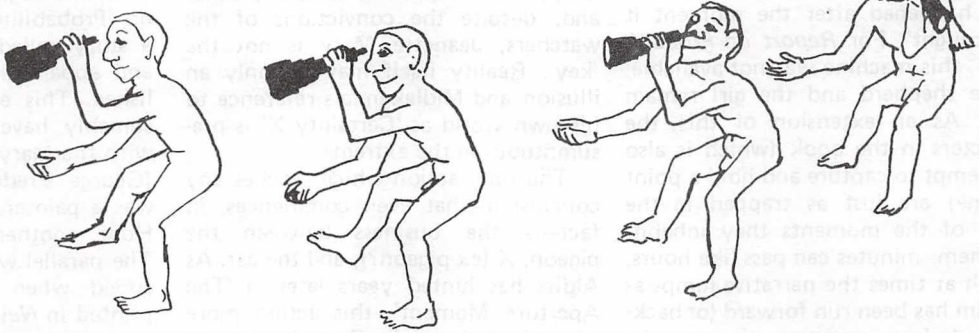
Uncommon Writers: 2

A WINDOW ON CREATION



SOME THOUGHTS ON BRIAN W ALDISS' 'REPORT ON PROBABILITY A'

by John McPharlin



John McPharlin discusses:

Report on Probability A
by Brian W Aldiss
(This novel has stayed in print during most of the years since it appeared first in 1968; most recent edition to hand is: Avon 52498; 1980; 144 pp; $US 1.95.)

In the house are Mr and Mrs Mary. Outside are G, S, and C. G, the ex-gardener, lives in a wooden one-room summerhouse in the Marys' garden. S, the ex-secretary, lives in the old stable at the bottom of the garden. C, the ex-chauffeur, lives in a cramped loft above the garage. Each of these three is aware of the presence of the other two. All three were once, but not apparently at the same time, employed in their various capacities by Mr Mary. Although each in turn has been sacked, they have not left the property. Mr Mary seems to be aware of their continued presence but does, or can do, nothing to end it. The three share a common obsession, namely Mrs Mary. G keeps watch on the house in his piece of mirror, S through his telescope, and C with his home-made periscope.

Across the road is a shop run by G F Watt, stationer, grocer, draper, cafe and snack-bar proprietor. Although he is involved only peripherally, through his affair with the Marys' maid, he also watches Mrs Mary and provides current reports on her movements to each of the three, who frequent his establishment (at different times of the day) without paying for what they receive. Along the street and on the pavement, people drift by bearing the wounded parts of injured bicycles.

These four watchers are the subject of a report being read in another time/space continuum by Domoladoss and Midlakemla. These two are in turn watched and studied, through a rift in their own reality, by four Distinguishers. In New York, but not the New York of our world, technicians have breached the continuum of the Distinguishers and study them by means of an electronic surveillance device housed in a robot fly. At a seance, the Wandering Virgin reports to ten jurymen on the data being received by the technicians. A manifestation of the technicians also appears, in a warehouse, to two young men and a boy. Holman Hunt's painting of 'The Hireling Shepherd' appears to be common to all universes, while the artist himself has a variety of parallel

identities. Possibly at the centre of everything, Mrs Mary sits and watches them all on her own screen. Nothing happens. . . .

For the purposes of the book, Aldiss considers Holman Hunt's painting in terms of failed or paralysed time. The painting represents a frozen present with a real before and after (if only we had the means to see them). This idea was also touched upon in *Cryptozoic! (An Age)* ('The Great Victorian Palace') and recently in 'The Aperture Moment', with the invention of a machine which can animate a painting to show what happened after the moment it was 'caught'. For *Report on Probability A*, this machine was not available, so the shepherd and the girl remain static. As an extension of this, the characters in the book (which is also an attempt to capture and hold a point in time) are just as trapped in the midst of the moments they inhabit. For them, minutes can pass like hours, though at times the narrative jumps as if a film has been run forward (or backward) before stopping to examine another frame elsewhere.

In spite of the merciless observation, we learn very little about any of the characters in the book and nothing is studied at first hand since even G, S, and C, right on the Marys' own property, resort to mirrors and lenses in preference to simply walking up to the house and viewing it directly. How these three watchers came to be where they are, why Mr Mary allows them to stay, what their arrangement with G F Watt is, what Mrs Mary's place in all this is, and how all of the other realities came to be in contact with one another are just a few of the more major questions to which the report does not address itself. The whole thing is quite oblique and it is not even clear who wrote the report, although Mr Mary—who spends much of his time writing—appears to be the most likely candidate.

Nor is it clear whether the book is bound to any form of conventional 'sequence'. At times, each watcher seems to repeat himself almost, but not quite, exactly. If the chain of watchers is cyclic, as is suggested by the fact that Mrs Mary 'sat at her own screen and regarded the cycle of universes as night closed in', and also by the references to the painting of the two snakes swallowing each other's tail, then it should not surprise that time is cyclic for each of the watchers. However, the underlying nature of the book is static rather than cyclic, and these apparent repetitions could easily be alternative possibilities—a series of choices, each of which is exclusive of the others. In other words, the watchers (and, ultimately, the readers) see not one continuing reality but separate fragments of a series of different, unstable, but similar realities: Probabilities A-Z! The use of the word 'reality' here is at best tentative, since it is not certain which, if any, parts of the whole kaleidoscope are 'real' or whether some are more or less 'real' than others. In short, Aldiss has created a complex puzzle where no single piece is any more important than any other and, despite the convictions of the watchers, Jeanette Mary is not the 'key'. Reality itself may be only an illusion and Midlakemla's reference to his own world as 'Certainty X' is presumptuous in the extreme.

The only action which reaches any conclusion—that even commences, in fact—is the business between the pigeon, X (ex-pigeon?), and the cat. As Aldiss has hinted years later in 'The Aperture Moment', this action more properly belongs in 'The Awakening Conscience' rather than 'The Hireling Shepherd' and may explain why it is not subject to the same general paralysis here. (The only copies of this painting that I have seen were very poorly reproduced and the area surrounding the cat is unclear, so I am taking his word on this point.) One could also postulate that the destruction of the pigeon by the cat is symbolic of the effect of the report on life in 'Certainty X', that it will break down under the realisation that reality is an illusion in the eye of the beholder and that there is no universal certainty. There again, this could be reading too much into it.

Readers familiar with *Barefoot in the Head*, which was also being prepared for publication (having appeared in *New Worlds* and *Impulse* as a series of short stories) at the same time as *Report on Probability A* was being revised for publication by Faber, will be instantly struck by the references to the book *Low Point X* in *Report on Probability A*. *Low Point X*, of which S has a paperback copy, is referred to in several of the descriptions of the Holman Hunt painting and a portion of 'The Hireling Shepherd' itself has been reproduced on the covers of all of the Sphere paperback editions of *Report on Probability A*. In those cover reproductions, the book *Low Point X* is clearly visible in the painting, just as the descriptions in the narrative would lead one to expect, but in no other reproduction of that painting that I have ever seen does the book appear! It is only a minor point, however; *Low Point X* is more of a dry literary joke here, rather than the symbol of psychic/emotional depression that it became in *Barefoot in the Head*.

Aldiss' interest in Holman Hunt did not end with the publication of this book, and the painter and his works reappear from time to time in Aldiss' own work, most noticeably in the incredibly tongue-in-cheek 'The Secret of Holman Hunt and the Crude Death Rate' (*New Worlds* quarterly, No. 7).

In the beginning, though, there was no 'Probability A'. Brian Aldiss wrote a story called 'Garden With Figures' and apparently could not get it published. This early version would presumably have been concerned solely with the Marys, G, S, C, and G F Watt (George Frederic Watts, with an 's', was a painter and a contemporary of Hunt; another Aldiss jest, I suspect). The parallel worlds were subsequently added when the story was finally printed in *New Worlds 171*, and there is no knowing what, if anything, may have been excised from the narrative at the same time to keep it down to the right length for its appearance there. The added segments, aside from their infinite regression, provide a few brief interpretations to the basic narrative. They also interfere with what was an almost perfect disappearing act by the author.

From at least the mid-sixties onward, Aldiss has not been content to sit back and simply produce stories. Each book has been an experiment and a challenge. *Report on Probability A* seems to have been his experiment in absence. If the overall concept of the book is one which can be easily associated with the main body of Aldiss' work, the execution of it is almost totally devoid of his usual style and presence. Except for one or two familiar touches, it is an absolutely impersonal book. He gives more detail on some pages than many authors give in a whole book, yet this welter of detail also serves to cover up the fact that he is really telling us very few of the things we normally expect to be told in a novel. We do not even learn the names of the three main watchers, let alone their reasons for their actions or the outcome of those actions. The novel is sparsely seeded with a few insubstantial clues which are left for the reader to find and make use of as best he can.

Based on the form of the French 'anti-novel', and, in particular, the work of Michel Butor (*Passing Time*) and Alain Robbe-Grillet (who, at least

in his published film scripts, always refers to his characters by a single letter: A, M, X in *Last Year at Marienbad*; L, M, N in *The Immortal One*), the book emotionlessly catalogues events in the same way that it catalogues objects. In the unstable 'Probability A', everything is redescribed and redefined each time it comes into view as if it is something new being seen for the first time (which, of course, could be true). For all we know, the underlying physical properties of the various universes might not be identical, either to our own or to each other. A milk bottle is seen to be empty and is later seen to be full. It is not reported that anyone saw it being refilled or replaced with a full one, therefore there is not even a hint in the report that that is what might have happened. Throughout, the onus is on the readers, as the author steadfastly refuses to make any assumptions on our behalf. Perhaps even something as commonplace as a milkman is unknown in this closely observed world and, if so, where does that leave us all except out in the garden, watching and waiting with the other voyeurs? Like S, reading through episode three of *The Secret of the Grey Mill*, we will never be told explicitly what happens in the next gripping episode, though we are freer to make our own assumptions and so reach our own conclusions.

In *Report on Probability A*, Aldiss has succeeded in pulling the carpet out from under his readers and has forced them to fall back on their own imagination and sense of wonder. It is not an easy novel to come to grips with, especially for those who prefer to have their fiction spoon-fed to them. The author's absence means that the reader must make an extra effort if he is going to gain anything from his reading. As with J G Ballard's 'condensed novels' and, more recently, Aldiss' own 'enigmas', it is an attempt to communicate more fully by going around the narrative rather than straight through it and it can achieve results which are both more personal and more satisfying for the reader, if he or she is prepared to meet the author on his own ground. All you have to do is try.

John McPharlin, 1978

UP FROM HIS MIDNIGHT BED

by Damien Broderick

Damien Broderick discusses:

Anatomy of Horror: The Masters of Occult Fiction
by Glen St John Barclay
(Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 1978; 144 pp; 5 pounds 50/$16.95.)

Literary intellectuals, with the exception of the most refined Leavisites, nourish a secret, guilty, solitary vice. Somewhere in childhood or adolescence they've contracted an infatuation for cowboy stories, or wise-cracking thrillers, or space opera, or folk songs of the most pitiful banality. Sooner or later they break under the strain and come out of the closet. They celebrate their affliction in print—Portnoys of low-life culture.

But they feel rotten about it. You can tell. Even as they flail about justifying vampires in terms of the oral tradition, a peevish note of censorious reproof drones in the background. Kingsley Amis, hardly a literary bootlicker, defended science fiction as a sociological sideshow. Fans of the action novel tend to do the same.

This is not a matter of bad faith. Taste matures, and even the most faithful cultural pluralist, doling out measures of positive unconditional regard, has to admit the frailty of genre writing. To save his self-respect, the fan of genre writing is prodded into contortions of indictment and justification. When these calisthenics are conducted at book-length, you're sometimes left wondering if the author rushed straight from penning the final page to incinerate his entire genre library, overcome by disgust and remorse.

Dr Barclay is Reader in History at Queensland University, a droll writer who clearly has a fondness for occult stories. This slim volume hurtles across the modest peaks of English-language horror fiction, from Sheridan Le Fanu's crypto-lesbian vampires to William P Blatty's *The Exorcist*, with brief synopses, biographical snippets, and bits of Freud, Plato, and Manicheism.

His intention is set out at the end of the first chapter, 'The Lure of the Occult', following a string of surprising citations from the Great Works of Western Lit.

> **The fact is that many and perhaps most of the major novelists concerned with presenting authentic visions of the human experience have felt required to include occult intrusions as elements of that experience.**

So occult fiction enthusiasts aren't necessarily dills. Yet the argument is rather thin. So we come to the genre proper:

> **On the other hand, there have been writers who have devoted most or even all of their literary output exclusively to the occult. Most of them have been very bad and very unimportant, and it is reasonable to assume that their chief motivations have been lack of ability to work in any other area of fiction, or the simple desire to make money in the easiest possible way, by cultivating their readers' fears or prurience.**

I told you he felt rotten about it. Not only are these mainstays of horror very bad writers, often incapable of penning a fresh or even lucid sentence, but their efforts are pitched at the beast in us. How, then, can a fan dare show his face in civilised company, after confessing to a taste for this prurient tat? But wait—

There are still others who by their

treatment of occult themes have somehow managed to create or revivify legends, or have themselves become legends in their own lifetimes. They include some of the most popular and certainly most assiduously emulated and plagiarized authors of the past hundred years. They are remarkable phenomena in their own right, and as such they are certainly worth close investigation. They might even have a message for us.

The fan, shivering with wicked pleasure in his midnight bed, has become a biographical sociologist, an explorer of the psychology of mass desire, tinged with a strange hope of illumination from unlikely sources. Of course every critic shifts into abstraction by virtue of his critical decision, his detached angle of appraisal rather than involvement. But this is usually done to get a better grasp on the *text*, not on the 'remarkable phenomena' of the authors and their readers. Admittedly, Dr Barclay's subtitle is 'The Masters of Occult Fiction', but his main title promises to anatomise the writing.

When he does, his book is sparkling, particularly on the plentiful occasions for flaying bad writing and quirky tricks of the horror trade. Of the noxious Dennis Wheatley, he states:

> **Wheatley can seriously claim to be the greatest living master of the cliche. One can find on almost every page whole passages that might have been assembled by a computer, programmed to regurgitate nothing but certified banalities**

and he quotes one to make your sinuses ring.

> **[Wheatley] is also unexcelled as an observer of stocking tops. . . . The curious reader is referred in particular to *Come Into My Parlour* (stocking tops, murder, Nazis and sadism); *Star of Ill-Omen* (stocking tops, adultery, Communists and flying saucers); *Curtain of Fear* (stocking tops, Communists and flagellation); and especially *To the Devil—A Daughter* (stocking tops, Communists and the production of homunculi).**

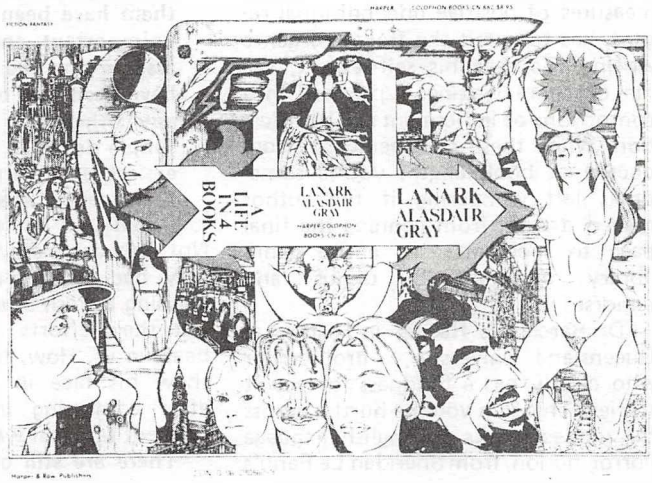
But what Barclay finds most notable about Wheatley is his espousal of Manicheism, the theological view that the world is the Devil's creation, or at least his demesne; that the Devil is as powerful as God. Certainly there is tension here with Wheatley's other conservative values, and the popularity of his books might just therefore 'have a message for us'. It is not the Joy of Sex which is doing the permissive society in, but its non-permissive residue, the Joy of Cruelty.

I'm no expert on occult fiction, but I was startled by some omissions. Barclay says of *The Exorcist* that it 'would have to be the most obscene and revolting book ever written'. (He states this with some relish.) Presumably he hasn't read Philip Jose Farmer's trilogy, *An Exorcism*, published before Blatty's, which includes castration by steel dentures, a phallic symbiont bearing the shrunken, hungry head of Gilles de Rais which eats the entrails of hapless fornicators of its hostess, and a psychiatric checklist of other repulsive inventions. Barclay might have difficulty finding redemptive values there.

Damien Broderick, 1978

8 point Universe

This column works much the same as in the last issue: the books I like best are at the top, and the books I like least are at the bottom. You will have to work out for yourself which ones you want to read. (Some readers will start their buying at the bottom of my list.) Review in this column does not, as they say, preclude later, lengthier discussion. Indeed, contrary opinions are welcome. This list does *not* include reviews of original fiction anthologies; reviews of such anthologies will appear later in a separate column.



LANARK

by Alisdair Gray (Harper Colophon CN 862; 1981; 561 pp; $US8.95)

Lanark is the best science fiction of 1981, or almost any year. (But is it science fiction?—let others decide that.) Not that you would gain much idea of its originality from a summary of its plot—traveller arrives in mysterious city; battles the Powers That Be, traverses long distances and amazing rituals for the sake of True Love to reach a kind of salvation in death; meanwhile we discover his true origins. So much of what I would call the diagrammatic content of the book sounds familiar that the reader is hardly surprised to find, towards the end of the book, a detailed list of all the elements which the author stole from other authors. (But none of them was stolen from science fiction authors.)

No, *Lanark*'s originality has little to do with content, but everything to do with attitude and style. As I romped through this book, tasting every delectable page, I kept thinking: 'Why can't sf authors write this well? Why are nearly all of them so much worse than this?' For a start, sf writers are usually trying to *prove* something. Gray isn't. The whole of life—even if it is the life of a puzzling and unmanageable world—interests Gray. The reader seems to live through the events of the book with the book's main character, Lanark, blow by blow, surprise by surprise. Gray is not trying to remake the world into something 'better', which often seems the aim of modern fantasy writers. Instead, he holds up a distortion mirror to life, and shows that the only distorting factors in the world, even this weird world, are people themselves. Plots and counterplots and endless cruelties and attempted reconciliations guide the eruptions in the city of Unthank.

Most similar epics in science fiction place their imaginary worlds into a sort of rose-coloured jelly wherein bright little figures

swim and perform peculiarly placid facsimiles of life. *Lanark* and its world has the opposite effect. About a half the novel tells the story of 'Lanark' before he died in our world—a racy and wonderful account of growing up close to the ground in Glasgow. The main character tended to dip out of life, finally committing suicide and finding himself on the train arriving in Unthank. The new life has strange horrors which make Lanark respond with ferociousness and an energetic attempt to roll back the disasters faced by all this world's inhabitants. The magic world grinds away at him and kills him, remarkably quickly, from old age. But that is only at the end of the book, when a whole lifetime's events have cascaded around Lanark and the reader.

Gray's style is marvellous—clear, vivid, energetic, funny, angry. The author is not out to prove anything, or even 'make a world', but simply to strip off all the layers of illusion and comfort which allow us to 'enjoy' life in our own world. Inventions pour out from every page, so that the reader tumbles along in a current of surprises and enlightenments.

Read this book, even if you have given up reading all other science fiction books.

BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD

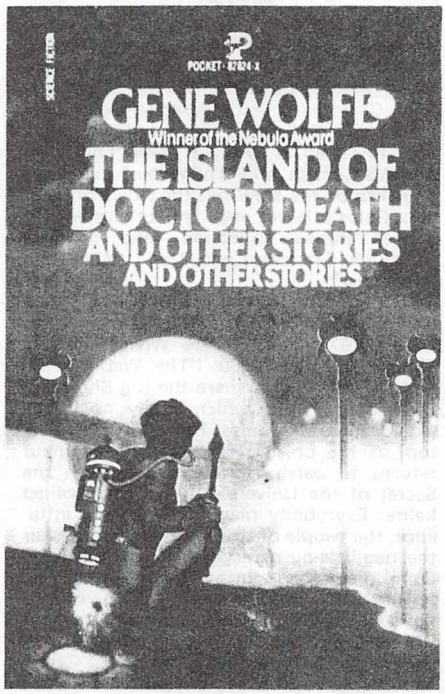
by Brian W Aldiss (Avon 53561; January 1981—original publication 1969; 222 pp; $US2.25)

Well, yes, I think *Lanark* is a better book than *Barefoot in the Head*, because Gray achieves a more complex effect with clear, down-to-earth language than Aldiss does with clotted, pun-filled, wilfully 'difficult' language.

But, having said that, I would have to say that *Barefoot in the Head* remains astonishingly good, and we can only be grateful to Avon for bringing it back into print. Its ambition and sense of joy lift if far above the massed ranks of the science fiction hordes. Indeed, when I read it again a couple of years ago, I found that it had acquired resonances which it did not have in 1969 (or 1967/68, when I read it first as novellas in *New Worlds*). Simon Charteris, seen at first as a psychedelic messiah roaming through a Europe wondrously disintegrated under the influence of LSD bombs, turns out to have been a thorough little git all along. He kills at least four people without much of a thought for the morality or consequences of his actions; sleeps with one girl, Marta, while his girlfriend, Angeline, the real hero of the book, keeps him alive and on the road; and generally learns little from his adventures. *Barefoot in the Head* turns out to have been a strong condemnation of the psychedelic movement, although I don't think I have seen this fact mentioned anywhere.

When *Barefoot in the Head* appeared first, the usual reviews gave the impression that Aldiss was trying to create in words a world where everyone was high. I've always had my suspicions about this theory, especially as people I've known who were quite often high in 1969 hated the book when it first came out. The attraction of getting high seemed to be that it simplified the world; *Barefoot in the Head* complicates the world (as any good book should) and that provided too much hard work for many readers. Reading the book now, I find that *Barefoot in the Head* really is not too much hard work to read, provided one is forgiving of puns or can catch them all. What stands out, indeed, is the joy of Aldiss' commitment to the possibilities of language, and the success with which he realised that commitment. *Barefoot in the Head* is precisely the kind of book that could never be written in an LSD-bombed world; it is a book seemingly dedicated to the civilised, witty, literate reader. I hope there are enough of them around to keep this book in print for many more years.

(The great discussion of *Barefoot in the Head* remains John McPharlin's in the Twelfth Anniversary Edition of John Bangsund's *Australian Science Fiction Review* [1978].)



THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES

by Gene Wolfe (Pocket 82824.X; June 1980; 410 pp; $US2.95)

While I was reading this collection, I kept saying to myself: 'So that was what that story was *really* all about.' No wonder I have been a halfhearted fan of Gene Wolfe's short fiction through all the years: I had completely missed the point of most of these stories the first time I had read them. These stories *must* be read a second time to squeeze any juice out of them at all. 'Tracking Song' seems an aimless survival-in-primitive-environment story unless one takes account of the Great Sleigh travelling in its path around the world. For some reason, I missed any significance in the image during first reading. 'The Toy Theatre' is another story whose ending is clear now, but just made me scratch my head when I first read it.

Even so, only a liar or a fool (or a genius or Gene Wolfe) would say that she or he knew what these stories were *all* about. 'Alien Stones' made some sort of pattern in my mind this time around, but even subsequent readings have failed to make a pattern which fits in all the clues that are there. The captain of the spaceship is called Daw, and he has a sidekick named Wad, who turns out not to exist anyway; the alien spaceship found turns out to be inhabited, although

A Moveable Feast:

Recommendations List 1979-1981 (so far)

Same setup as last issue, except that on this list I have dropped any books published for the first time in 1978. I have added an item only if it was published for the first time during 1979, 1980, or 1981 (so far).

1 LANARK
Alisdair Gray (Harper Colophon CN 862; 1981; 561 pp; $US8.95)
2 A WOMAN OF THE FUTURE
David Ireland (Allen Lane; 1979; 351 pp; $A9.95)
3 ON WINGS OF SONG
Thomas M Disch (Gollancz; 1979; 315 pp, $A15.95)
4 BIRTHSTONE
D M Thomas (Gollancz; 1980; 160 pp; 6 pounds 50)
5 THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR DEATH AND OTHER STORIES AND OTHER STORIES
Gene Wolfe (Pocket 82824.X; 1980; 410 pp; $US2.95)
6 OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO
Richard Cowper (Pocket 83501.7; 1980; 191 pp; $US2.50)
7 FUNDAMENTAL DISCH
Thomas M Disch (Gollancz; 1980; 373 pp; 7 pounds 95)
8 RETURN FROM THE STARS
Stanislaw Lem (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1980; 247 pp; $US8.95)
9 THE FLUTE-PLAYER
D M Thomas (Gollancz; 1979; 192 pp; 4 pounds 95)
10 JUNIPER TIME
Kate Wilhelm (Harper & Row; 1979; 280 pp; $US9.95)
11 LADIES FROM HELL
Keith Roberts (Gollancz; 1979; 198 pp, $A14.90)
12 THE YEAR'S FINEST FANTASY, Vol. 2
ed. Terry Carr (Berkley; 1979; 311 pp, $US1.95)
13 NEBULA WINNERS 13
ed. Samuel R Delany (Harper & Row; 1980; 239 pp; $US10.95)
14 EDGES
ed. Ursula K Le Guin and Virginia Kidd (Pocket 83532.7; 1980; 239 pp; $US2.50)
15 THE LIVING END
Stanley Elkin (Dutton; 1979; 148 pp; $A9.55)
16 TIMESCAPE
Gregory Benford (Gollancz; 1980; 412 pp; 7 pounds 95)
17 THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE
Arthur C Clarke (Gollancz; 1979; 255 pp; 4 pounds 95)
18 INTERFACES
ed. Ursula K Le Guin and Virginia Kidd (Ace 37092.6; 1980; 310 pp; $US5.95)

no alien inhabitants are seen; is it possible that the earth ship works much the same way, and nobody on it really exists, including the captain from whose viewpoint the story is told? I don't know. The story is told in a series of ever more puzzling 'clues', each of which adds up to an ending which solves nothing. I can understand any reader who feels annoyed by this process; I find such a story interesting and worth rereading because of the clarity and quiet panache of Gene Wolfe's style. He has one of those fine-drawn styles which does not call attention to itself unless he makes a slip. This happens seldom.

Read *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories* (which could have been called *The Very Best of Gene Wolfe*) to re-read such fine pieces as 'The Doctor of Death Island', 'Seven American Nights', 'The Eyeflash Miracles', and 'Hour of Trust' (although I am not sure where that one was published originally). These are stories where the patterns fall satisfyingly into some sort of shape, and can then be re-read often.

STARSHIP

by Brian Aldiss (Avon 55152; Seventh printing of the 1969 edition; 224 pp; $US2.25)

Aldiss' first novel (under its real name, *Non-Stop*) still reads very well today. If you want to know what I think about it, read my piece on Aldiss in *The Stellar Gauge*. It's enough to say that the real uncertainties of style and tone in this book matter little when compared with the grandeur of the literary construction of the starship and the impelling quality of the adventures of Complain and his companions. *Starship* has perhaps the most vivid final image in science fiction.

THE LATHE OF HEAVEN

by Ursula K Le Guin (Avon 43547; 1971—eighth printing; 175 pp; $US1.95)

I re-read *The Lathe of Heaven* recently because I was able to see The Television Laboratory's film production. I won't discuss that film here, except to say that I enjoyed it very much. However, some aspects of the story were left unclear in the film, and I wanted to see if Ursula Le Guin had got them wrong in the first place. She hadn't. I think she runs a bit close to the wind in having not only Orr, but also Haber and Lelache, realising that Orr's dreams are effective. I know it's essential to the story that Haber realises what is happening, but the explanation (that these people are closest to the centre of the worldchange, and therefore perceive the change) is shaky.

Well, okay, you notice things like that the second time through. Much more importantly, you realise just how complex and wonderful is the whole conception of *The Lathe of Heaven*. In some of the world changes, great reality leaps take place. These were rendered particularly well in the film. But towards the end of the story—where the film gives up following the twists of Le Guin's thought—subtle and delightful changes are shown indirectly. Le Guin really does unravel reality, at least according to her Taoist conception of it. The film messes up the ending of the book—all Orr had to do was press that little button, instead of dance around in a lightshow.

OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO

by Richard Cowper (Pocket 83501.7; October 1980; 191 pp; $US2.50)

THE WEB OF THE MAGI AND OTHER STORIES

by Richard Cowper (Gollancz; 1980; 160 pp; 5 pounds 50)

I had paid little attention to the work of Richard Cowper before reading the stories in these volumes. If I didn't know how second rate he can be in some of his novels (especially *The Road to Corlay*), I would now list him as one of my favourite writers.

The two collections do not contain quite the same stories, but there is enough overlap for me to list them together. *Out There Where the Big Ships Go* has the title story, 'The Custodians' and 'Paradise Beach' (in the English Gollancz *The Custodians* collection, reviewed in *SFC 52*), and 'The Hertford Manuscript' and 'The Web of the Magi'. *The Web of the Magi* has the title story and 'Big Ships', leaves out the others in the Pocket Books collection, and includes 'Drink Me, Francesca' and 'The Attleborough Poltergeist'.

So both collections contain what must be among the very best stories of, respectively, 1979 ('Out There Where the Big Ships Go') and 1980 ('The Web of the Magi'). 'Out There Where the Big Ships Go' is the sort of story which, surely, no author would undertake unless he or she felt at the top of his or her powers. An astronaut returns to earth from the stars with the Secret of the Universe. It is a game called kalire. Everybody plays it. Under its influence, the people of the world begin to repair the debilitating damage they have inflicted upon themselves during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A twelve-year-old boy, Roger Herzheim, meets the astronaut who brought back the game, Peter Henderson. He has become the Master of the Game, and has never been beaten. Henderson conveys a few cryptic words to Roger, his young fan, including a description of what it was like to meet the alien race which gave Earth the game of kalire. Roger ponders the Master's notions of reality, and. . . . Well, I won't tell you the delicious ending. It is only after finishing the story that you realise just how many elements have been juggled in it, and brought back to a satisfying finale.

Not that Cowper's main concern is with a bunch of tricks. He is concerned with the question: how best can humanity live? how could we be persuaded out of the current push towards mass suicide? One doesn't really believe the 'solutions' in 'Out There Where the Big Ships Go', if only because it looks as if no astronaut ever will reach the alien stars. What are we left with? The conclusion of 'The Custodians', I'm afraid. That's a bleak story, but very well done, and worth reading again.

There's quite an element of mysticism in 'Out There Where the Big Ships Go'. This mysticism is extended into a satisfyingly full-blooded adventure in 'The Web of the Magi'. A traveller in *Lost Horizon* country in the nineteenth century meets his own destiny in the form of the pattern in the loom. Lots of exciting and mysterious mind-boggling here, and I can't think of anything from the past couple of years that doesn't seem anaemic compared with it.

Most of the other stories in these collections let Cowper have fun with his yen for the English antiquarian. There's a haunted house ('The Attleborough Poltergeist') and, more convincingly, a haunted person ('The Hertford Manuscript'). 'Drink Me, Francesca' is very enjoyable, and plays with some of the notions of 'Big Ships'. 'Paradise Beach' is the only real clinker in the bunch.

FUNDAMENTAL DISCH

by Thomas M Disch (Gollancz; 1980; 373 pp; 7 pounds 95)

Although I will congratulate Gollancz on issuing this major collection from the best current sf writer, I can't help warning readers to seek out the much cheaper American paperback version. (This Gollancz hardcover will be about $24 in Australian currency!) I read somewhere that Samuel Delany had actually made this selection; there's no hint of this in the Gollancz edition. If it is true, then I would disagree with Delany that some of these stories form part of the 'fundamental' Disch. Too many of them are from his early period, which ran the gamut from sick-joke to slick-horror.

A much better collection than this is *Getting into Death*, now eight years old, and probably unobtainable. If Gollancz had merely reprinted that volume, it would have presented a much better idea of true Disch. A few of the later stories are here in *Fundamental Disch*, though—enough to make this an unmissable collection if you cannot find the stories elsewhere. I will say nothing about the great pieces here—'Casablanca', 'Angouleme', 'Bodies', 'The Squirrel Cage', 'The Asian Shore', and 'Getting into Death'—since I have said such things much better elsewhere (either in the *Magill Survey of Science Fiction*, volume 5, or in *SFC 41/42*). Disch is a great American writer who happens to write bits which we call science fiction; it is a pity that this book is only a representative cross-section of his work, instead of a Best of the Best.

RETURN FROM THE STARS

by Stanislaw Lem (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 1980; original publication 1961 as *Powrot z gwiazd* in Polish; translation by Barbara Marszal and Frank Simpson; 247 pp; $US8.95)

It is very hard to gain much idea of the development of Stanislaw Lem's work, since his books have appeared in English very much out of order. *Return from the Stars*, for instance, comes from the period of *Solaris*, which is a much more interesting book. But if you forget about the hovering shadow of *Solaris*, *Return from the Stars* is a very fine book. Its underlying story begins much like that of George Turner's *Beloved Son*. The traveller from the stars finds a world changed almost unrecognisably since his departure. Nobody welcomes him home or is much interested in his existence when he arrives back on Earth. To give a sense of disorientation, Lem depends very much on a skilful description of the strange architecture of the city in which the astronaut finds himself. Only gradually does Hal Bregg realise how different are the social assumptions of this world from the one he left. Thus the tone of Lem's book is rather different from that in Turner's. The returned astronauts in *Beloved Son* are outraged by the political setup on the world they return to; Lem's astronaut realises that he can never understand the setup at all. These people seem completely complacent—inhabitants of a utopia and knowing it. Bregg finds in this eerie, impersonal world merely a reflection of the emptiness he knew among the uninhabited stars he visited.

Return from the Stars is a sombre book, lacking the *brio* which, say, a Thomas Disch might have brought to the same subject matter. But it's worth a ponder, and a second perusal.

LADIES FROM HELL

by Keith Roberts (Gollancz; 1979; 198 pp; 5 pounds 95; $A14.90)

I suspect that I keep insulting Keith Roberts by forgetting about him altogether when I make mental lists of my favourite sf writers and stories. Roberts' stories during the 1970s have been almost uniformly interesting, and five of his best recent pieces appear in this collection. My favourite story here is 'The Shack at Great Cross Halt' (from *New Writings 30*), which gives a marvellously claustrophobic impression of what it could be like when things really do fall apart in Britain. The story tells of people living in complete poverty and social isolation, hoping that occasional goodies drop from the sides of vast, never-stopping trucks. This is partly an adventure story, and partly the tale of a single attempt to form some human communication in circumstances which make such an attempt seem foolhardy.

'The Ministry of Children' is a gritty account of bullying and violence in Keith Roberts' version of The Terrible Things That Are Happening In Our Schools. The story is mainly memorable for its hero.

'The Big Fans' is a nice blend of the English pastoral story (as permanently shaped by the late John Wyndham), Alan Garnerish earth magic, and possibilities for alternate technology. Roberts' prose is fine, clear, and robust, and so he writes this kind of adventure story much better than most of American writers. Roberts does not, for instance, load the story with piles of ponderous explanatory bullshit—weird things just *happen*, and that's the way I like it.

Come to think of it, Roberts is probably a better writer than, say, Richard Cowper. It's just that I happen to like Cowper's most recent short fiction very much indeed. Roberts is a guaranteed Good Read. (The other two stories are 'Our Lady of Desperation' and 'Missa Privata'.)

SOMERSET DREAMS AND OTHER FICTIONS

by Kate Wilhelm (Harper & Row; 1978; 174 pp; $US8.95)

I've been meaning to give this a full-length review for some years now. I've never found the time to do the work that such a review would involve. (I *have* done most of the work for a full-length review of Wilhelm's novel, *Juniper Time*, but I've never quite had the time to finish that, either.)

So: a short review.

There are two Kate Wilhelms. One is the writer of dreary domestic-spats-with-science-fiction-added-extras. Dialogue from these stories usually sounds like that in television situation comedies. These do not form the major part of Wilhelm's work, but they are pretty ghastly when they turn up.

The other Kate Wilhelm is the creator of stories which can most crudely be described as domestic ghost stories or, perhaps, domestic horror stories. I call them 'domestic' not because they remind one of the kitchen sink, but because the unsettling circumstances in them are always so uncomfortably those of the 'ordinary' American. Often these tales involve the occupation of the protagonist, usually a rather prosaic job in the sciences. Scientific research turns out to be funded by the military and to have sinister purposes. Situation turns nightmarish, and the protagonist is faced with terrifying facts about a social setup which seems charmingly civilised on the surface.

In 'Somerset Dreams', Kate Wilhelm's best piece of short fiction, the main character becomes, without quite realising it, part of some dangerous dream research. The trouble is that she is visiting her old home town during this time, and the unsettling effects of the research become mixed up with bizarre discomfort she feels at revisiting the small town she should have stayed away from. The ingredients combine into a marvellous recipe of ghostly horror which creeps up on the reader. (My long review of this story was in *SF Commentary 21* in 1971. It's interesting that in a vast general anthology of some years ago, *Science Fiction Argosy*, edited by Damon Knight, 'Somerset Dreams' was the best story among a group which included many pieces of short fiction and two famous sf novels.)

'The Encounter' is another story which I remember with some pleasure from its original appearance in *Orbit*. On one level it is a psychological horror story; on a more immediate level it is a standard horror story of being trapped, in the middle of a fierce snowstorm, in a bus station office where the thermostat is not working properly. Wilhelm does this sort of thing much better than the writers who usually contribute to *Whispers* and *Shadows*.

'Mrs Bagley Goes to Mars' is a wonderful fantasy about Mrs Bagley, who escapes from this world by going off to Mars every now and again. Truly.

Other stories are 'Planet Story', 'Symbiosis', 'Ladies and Gentlemen, This Is Your Crisis' (not recommended—Wilhelm is not good on overt Message Stories), 'The Hounds', and 'State of Grace'. *Somerset Dreams and Other Fictions* is not quite a 'best of' collection, but comes close.

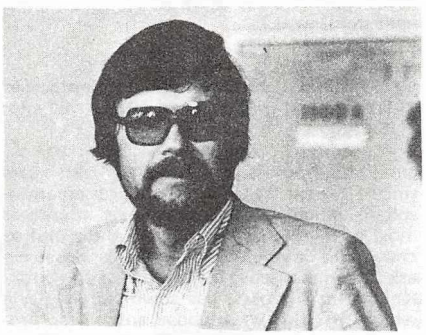


Photo: Robert Pedersen

GREGORY BENFORD

TIMESCAPE

by Gregory Benford (Gollancz; 1980; 412 pp; 7 pounds 95)

Timescape seems to be held in awe by many members of the sf community, and even Tom Disch is quite struck by it (see elsewhere in this issue). Well, I was caught up in it as well, but I couldn't help feeling that it was a little . . . dare I say it? . . . dull. It was about 150 pages too long, I suspect. Benford's story is basically taut and terrific, but the author takes much too long to tell it.

You probably know the thrust of the story already. Basing your research on current ideas about time and energy, how would you send a message from the future to the past, in the hope that the poor deluded fools in the past would stave off world disaster? How would you *really* do it? Benford has obviously thought out the whole problem for some years, and then constructed a way to tell the story of this experiment. He succeeds, but I think the book could have been still better. Benford tells two stories. In 1962 we meet Gordon Bernstein, whose experiments are blitzed by unaccountable interference patterns. For reasons which Benford makes plausible, Bernstein works out that these patterns are messages from the future of earth, sent by tachyons across time-space. In 1998, beleaguered scientists are trying to send the messages, realising that they will never know if they succeeded. If they succeed, the world will be different from theirs, and with any luck it will be less disaster-ridden. Benford tries to put a lot of effort into Characterisation, but Science wins every time. The only character who interested me much was the unscrupulous yet amiable rake, Ian Peterson. All the other characters are ultra-nice, and are given soggy dialogue by Benford. Probably the most authentic sections are, as other reviewers have noted, those which show scientists in action. This is Benford's world, and he gives us a fascinating tour of it.

THE FOUNTAINS OF PARADISE

by Arthur C Clarke (Gollancz; 1979; 255 pp; 4 pounds 95)

This is a book which I enjoyed thoroughly, although I thought I would hate it. I disliked *Imperial Earth* intensely, and thought Clarke must have lost his grip altogether when he wrote that. Well, Clarke has not lost his grip. If Clarke really intends to end his writing career with this book, it's a fine finale. (And it won him a Hugo.)

Not that there isn't a lot in any Clarke novel to make one choke with disbelief. It's not so much his optimism about the future of the world that is ridiculous, but the fairy-tale scenario by which he justifies this optimism. Oh well, I kept telling myself, it's Clarke's prerogative to wave a magic wand—now let him produce the real magic tricks.

And he does, of course, without really disguising the fact that he is dealing with magic. I don't really believe in the 'Space Elevator' stretching from the surface of the earth to freefall space. Even after Clarke describes its construction, I cannot believe in it—but I can see it being built. *The Fountains of Paradise* takes over the reader and takes him through the struggles of the mastermind of the project, Vannevar Morgan, as slow successes raise the tower. The fact that Morgan is willing to sacrifice himself for his project gives a strength to the ending of the book which it might not have had.

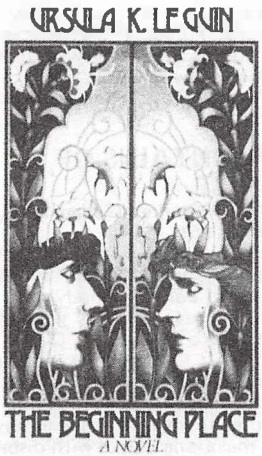
But in Clarke's world people and their problems do not really matter, as many commentators have shown. What matters is the image: firstly of Taprobane (a slightly fictionalised Sri Lanka) and its mountainous 'fountains of paradise', and then of the space elevator itself. (Barry Bayley has an excellent review of *The Fountains of Paradise* in *Arena 11*, November 1980.)

AN INFINITE SUMMER

by Christopher Priest (Faber & Faber; 1979; 208 pp; 5 pounds 25/$A17.95)

This is not a review of *An Infinite Summer*, a collection of novellas by Christopher Priest. If I were to *review* this book, I would take a week or two to read the stories again

thoroughly, take notes, and write an essay of not less than 2000 words. I don't have time to do what I should do, so I will do the next best thing, and recommend this book. I'm not sure whether I recommend this book *completely*, since I'm not sure that Chris Priest hasn't become too hooked on puzzlement and ambiguity even for my taste. But his images are memorable (ie, I remember them, even though it is some years since I have read most of these stories). And Chris's prose is a great pleasure to read: no raising of the voice, no tedious explanations; and a refreshing confidence in the reader's ability to take rigorous mental journeys. The ghostly London of 'An Infinite Summer' is still vivid to me, as is the quiet terror of 'Whores', the doomed near meetings of 'Palely Loitering', the fierce frontier of 'The Negation', and the suffocating obsessions of the main character of 'The Watched'. *One* day I'll review these properly, for my own enjoyment at least.



THE BEGINNING PLACE

by Ursula K Le Guin (Harper & Row; 1980; 183 pp; $US8.95)

THRESHOLD

by Ursula K Le Guin (Gollancz; 1980; 183 pp; 5 pounds 50)

I've put off reviewing this book, I must confess. When I read it, I thought it was a 'return to form' for an author who seemed to me to have lost her way after the great success of *The Dispossessed*. (Not quite; I thought *Very Far Away From Anywhere Else* was very enjoyable, but it seems to have faded from sight.)

But a bewildering number of other readers—those I get to speak to—disagree with my opinion and vigorously dislike *The Beginning Place* (*Threshold* in England). I think I can see why. There is an uneasy shift between the realistic first section, when we meet both the main characters, and the fantasy world of the main part of the book. This seemed intentional to me. Le Guin makes herself fairly clear in the essays of *The Language of the Night*: we need some way to grasp at our fantasy life. These two characters search for the key to their own lives until they pass out of our 'realistic' world into one which has more meaning to them. Le Guin's assertion, both in essays through the years, and metaphorically in this novel, is that our fantasy lives are not *easier* places to inhabit than so-called realistic worlds. The two main characters of *The Beginning Place* are faced with a task which seems impossible because of the magic forces which are crushing the fantasy world. Their victory is ambiguous—or is it too hopeful and neat for some readers? Maybe. I finished the book feeling that I had undergone an ordeal with the characters, an ordeal whose effect was not easily assimilated or classified.

I doubt whether Ursula Le Guin has made any great stride forward in *The Beginning Place*, but its publication certainly announces that she has resumed her literary Long March.

VALIS

by Philip K Dick (Bantam 14156.2; February 1981; 227 pp; $US2.25)

What *can* I say about *Valis*? That poor ole Phil Dick has finally gone loony altogether? That Phil Dick has finally produced a piece of the autobiography begun in the pages of this and other fanzines nearly a decade ago? That Philip K Dick has produced a synthesis of mystical literature that everybody of a mystical bent should read? That Phil Dick has written a spotty novel, seemingly autobiographical for half its length, wildly fictional for the other half of its length, and just a bit tedious all the way through (except when it is funny)?

All these things could be said, and probably have been. I'm not sure, since nobody seems to be doing interesting book reviews for the fanzines anymore. These are some of the shades of opinion I've picked up from talking to Phil Dick fans (and detractors) around Melbourne.

My own guess is that Dick set out to write a wholly autobiographical novel, which includes extracts from the many ancient writers he was studying during the early 1970s. Halfway through, his more reliable instincts took over, and *Valis* takes on some of the pain and zaniness of Dick's best fiction. *Valis* does not work wholly as a novel, or as autobiography, but it's very funny in places, and tells you more about life in California than you would really want to know. (I just hope Phil Dick's friends don't start a party trick of shining a pink light in his eyes.)

HELL'S PAVEMENT

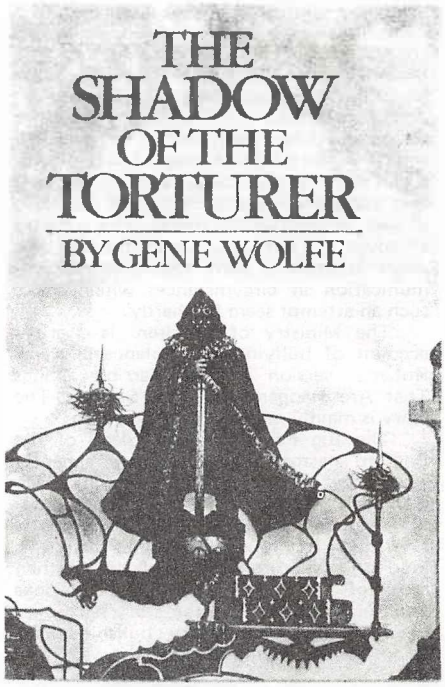
by Damon Knight (Avon 52381; September 1980—original publication 1955; 191 pp; $US1.95)

To be honest, I cannot remember quite how good this book is. It's at least fifteen years since I read it. What I remember is an atmosphere which is as paranoid and intense as most of middle-rank Phil Dick, and a plot so crazy and involuted that you cannot even ask if it makes sense by the end of the book. Knight, at his best, has a whip-crack style which lifts this book above any of the productions of Van Vogt (with whom comparisons might be made). I know I should have read it again, but I didn't have time; but *Hell's Pavement* does stay in the memory as having been a satisfying book to read. Not many others do.

SHIP OF SHADOWS

by Fritz Leiber (Gollancz; 1979; 253 pp; 6 pounds 95)

This collection is less interesting than it might have been. From the blurb: 'This special new collection brings together all [Fritz Leiber's] award-winning stories, with the exception of the long novel *The Wanderer*—three stories, two novellas and one complete novel (*The Big Time*).' It's a good marketing idea, but hardly presents the best of Leiber's work. In fact, of the pieces in here, *The Big Time* is the only one I really like. Most of the others are more sentimental or awkward than one expects from Leiber; maybe that's why the voters liked them better than his really great pieces. Apart from *The Big Time*, take your choice from among 'Ship of Shadows', 'Catch That Zeppelin!', 'Gonna Roll the Bones', 'Ill Met in Lankhmar', and 'Belsen Express'. ('Ill Met in Lankhmar' is by far the least interesting of the Fafhrd and Gray Mouser stories; why it won a Hugo I can never guess.)



THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER

(Subtitle: *Volume One of The Book of the New Sun*)

by Gene Wolfe (Simon and Schuster, 1980; 303 pp; $US11.95)

If you've read my note on *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*, you will realise that I've become very wary of making any judgments about the work of Gene Wolfe, especially after reading a story or novel only once. I've read *The Shadow of the Torturer* only once. Good sense tells me to wait until the four books of the series, *The Book of the New Sun*, are released before reading it again. Even better sense tells me not to say a word about the first volume until I've read it a second time.

Be blowed to good sense. I have to report that, so far at least, I'm pretty disappointed with *The Book of the New Sun*, if *The Shadow of the Torturer* is any guide to the whole. Acquaintances of mine who were looking forward eagerly to this book were also feeling let down. So far, I can see why no reason for thinking that Gene Wolfe has anything to add to the rather gimcrack genre of heroic fantasy. I just cannot see why he wrote the book. Admittedly, this is more difficult to read than most books in the genre, but a high level of difficulty does not guarantee equal quality. But the basis of the plot is just another heroic quest across dangerous territory. *The Shadow of*

the Torturer is a bit hard to take, because the main character has only just left the city of his origin when the first book ends! Slow stuff, and I could not get really interested in all the bits and pieces which slow down the book.

But I'm willing to admit I'm wrong if, after the fourth book in the series appears, some vast, intricate, and wonderful plan is revealed. Gene Wolfe has done this sort of thing before. Maybe he'll do it again. I will just have to wait and see.

LIFE IN THE WEST

by Brian W Aldiss (Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 1980; 310 pp; $A19.95)

Reviewing this book poses great difficulties for me. What happens when one has retained links of friendship with an author, and by and large one has liked his writing—and along comes a book with which the author is very pleased, and about which the reviewer has nothing but doubts? Sometimes the reviewer chickens out altogether, and never discusses the book. (That is what I was going to do.)

But, damn it, I do have reasonable doubts about *Life in the West*, and I suspect that, in writing the following sentences, I will be expressing doubts held by other admirers of Aldiss' earlier work.

Life in the West is not precisely a science fiction novel. I suppose you could call it a speculative fiction novel which happens to be set during the late 1970s. Its main character is Thomas C Squire, whose financial circumstances are comfortable, and whose penchant is for globe-trotting. The book tells us much of the thoughts of Thomas C Squire, who proves to be an intellectual lightweight (creator of the TV documentary series, *Frankenstein Among the Arts*), snob, boring upper-middle-class right-winger, and blamer of everybody but himself for his marital difficulties. In short, he is as unpleasant a character as you will find in any English novel of the last forty or fifty years. The trouble with *Life in the West* is that it is not clear whether or not Aldiss is satirising Squire or not. Satire, even downright contempt, seems the only proper response. But Aldiss reports Squire's rantings and opinions fairly straight. Sometimes Squire gets over-excited about something or other, and causes no end of trouble. In these passages it is clear that Aldiss is distancing himself from Squire. In other chapters, we see Squire undergoing a genuine dilemma—whether to take a former companion from World War II days at face value or face the possibility that his Yugoslavian warrior friend is planning his 'accidental' murder during an inernational conference. Because of his deftness in understanding the situation, Squire comes out of it well. He does not come out of his marriage (or unmarriaging) situation at all well. Here in particular the reader feels uncomfortable with this smooth man-monster. A similar character, Bodenland in *Frankenstein Unbound*, was shown as a monster; in *Life in the West*, Aldiss seems to endorse Squire's most objectionable attitudes and characteristics.

As George Turner has pointed out, the style and the architecture of the novel show many aspects of the Aldiss the novelist at his best. But doubts about the main character, about everything that is central to the novel, make me wonder whether or not Aldiss has fallen into the trap (*a la* Amis or Burgess) of delivering the Big Performance, and not a really interesting novel. A Big Performance, of course, has a target audience. If my suspicions are correct (and Aldiss has proved them wrong often enough), I may no longer be in Aldiss' audience.

THE DREAMING DRAGONS

by Damien Broderick
(Pocket 83150.X; November 1980; 224 pp; $US2.25)
(Penguin Australia 14 005823; July 1981; 245 pp, $A4.50)

A short note just to mention that the two paperback editions of *The Dreaming Dragons*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue, have appeared.

The Pocket Books edition, because of negotiations too complex to describe, is actually the original edition, and Norstrilia's the British Commonwealth hardback reprint. In turn, the Penguin edition is the Australian paperback. The Pocket Books edition has an okay cover, and the Penguin edition has a dreadfully literal cover (ie, of a dragony creature) by the usually okay Marilyn Pride. I think Penguin should have used Grant Gittus' marvellous cover from the Norstrilia edition.

My doubts about the book would echo those of Rowena Cory in her review. For instance, I just did not understand the Big Explanation at the end of the book. I thought I would find out the secret from the author; this happened, but I maintained that the vital clues are not there in print. Still, as Eric Lindsay says in the latest issue of *Gegenschein*: 'I can picture Damien sitting plotting to write a superscience novel, in the grand tradition, no so much for the sake of the story, or even the sale . . ., but just to prove he could write it, as a fun thing, and get away with it being taken seriously.' Well, it is fun—a sizzling, spirited book, and nobody has shown much sign yet of taking it too seriously.

DISPLACED PERSON

by Lee Harding (Penguin 14 00.5822; 1981—original publication 1979; 138 pp;$A3.50)

Here is the Australian Penguin edition of *Displaced Person*, and it should do well for Lee, despite the cover. My own doubts about the book remain, mainly about the first section before the main character dips out of the 'real' world. The section set in a shadowy St Kilda is rather different, and is sufficiently spooky and imaginative for one to get a bit annoyed at the story-teller's continued insistence on the Horror Of It All. As I said in a recent *SFC*, the reader gets to know St Kilda quite well—but a St Kilda quite unlike that in any other book.

I suppose I should mention (again) that *Displaced Person* won the Australian Children's Book Award 1980. Penguin fails to mention this on the cover.

FIREFLOOD AND OTHER STORIES

by Vonda N McIntyre
(Gollancz; 1980; 281 pp; 5 pounds 95)
(Timescape 83631.5; March 1981—original Houghton Mifflin edition 1979; 237 pp; $US2.75)

I'm not reviewing this book in detail because there are still some stories I have not read, or some stories from near the beginning of Vonda McIntyre's career which I cannot remember too well. When she is good she is very very good. I cite 'Aztecs', which I have read several times. It works very much in the way I like stories to work: as a series of intense personal encounters. The lady who can go out into space, and her lover who forever cannot come alive very convincingly: the opportunistic sly optimism of the lover and the complex naivety of the space pilot. They become separated by inevitable fate; the scene in which this becomes apparent is one of the most memorable in science fiction (but did not cure me of bathing in swimming pools).

'Wings' and 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand' are the other stories which I like very much. I would have placed this volume higher on the list if only I did not have a strong memory that Vonda's early stories were very much beginner's pieces, and should have been left by the wayside. What the hell—the best three stories in the book justify buying it; read the rest of the stories to find out where Vonda McIntyre came from, not where she's going.

(A splendid review of this book appeared in *F&SF*, June 1980. The review was by Thomas M Disch. I suspect it would be worth a lifetime of devotion to writing science fiction if one thought that somewhere along the way there was a possibility of having one's work reviewed by Tom Disch.)

A ROBERT SILVERBERG OMNIBUS

(includes: *The Man in the Maze, Nightwings, Downward to the Earth*)
by Robert Silverberg (Harper & Row; March 1981, 544 pp; $US14.95)

I haven't read these books for a long time, but my recollection is that *The Man in the Maze* is the most easily enjoyed of all Silverberg's novels, and that *Downward to the Earth*, as both a tribute to *Heart of Darkness* and a piece of Silverbergian mysticism, works fairly well. Both books lack the hysterical over-writing which came to dominate all the books which Silverberg later regarded as his 'important works'.

Nightwings is ponderous and portentous, and completely lacks the humour and verbal dexterity of, say, Jack Vance (whose similar book, *The Last Castle*, was also very dull).

I find it hard to believe that you cannot find cheaper editions of these books somewhere, if only on a secondhand book bin. But if you cannot, this is pretty good value, at an average $5 per book. (Come to think of it, new *British* paperback editions of these books will probably cost more than $5 each.)

Perhaps I should mention the following sent to me as review copies recently:

THE MAN IN THE MAZE

(Avon 38539; February 1969—third printing; 192 pp; $US1.50)

DOWNWARD TO THE EARTH

(Gollancz; 1977; 190 pp; 3 pounds 95)
(Popular Library 425.03952; 1979; 181 pp; $US1.95)

THE GREAT SCIENCE FICTION SERIES

edited by Frederik Pohl, Martin Harry Greenberg, Joseph Olander (Harper & Row; December 1980; 419 pp; $US16.95)

Harper and Row seems to have gone for this sort of book quite a bit recently. *The Great Science Fiction Series* is not designed for sf readers at all. If you are any sort of an sf reader, you know all these series backwards anyway. It seems designed for one of the many science fiction courses which have grown up in USA and Canada. (Every now and again I hear rumours of such courses here as well.) In turn, it is hardly suitable for the kind of course where your teacher is an sf enthusiast from way back, and anyway, the kids have read more than the

teacher. No, it's a book for the kind of people, both teachers and students, who 'would rather like to try' science fiction, and don't yet have a map.

That all sounds carping, especially since this is a good map for the uninitiated, and has some nice new things for the sf reader. For instance, here is one of the stories that eventually became *Hothouse (The Long Afternoon of the Earth)*, as well as Brian Aldiss' account of how he came to write that best of all his works. (He did tell a much better version of the story at Unicon IV here in Melbourne, but probably that version was libellous.) Ballard on the Vermilion Sands series is worth having as well; as is Arthur Clarke on the White Hart series. All the great series are represented: that's the strength of the book. If it has a major weakness, it is that sometimes the story picked to represent a series is not the best available. If I had been Messrs Pohl, Greenberg, and Olander, I would have picked 'The Cage of Sand' instead of 'The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D' to give the best idea of the atmosphere of Vermilion Sands. I can think of better People stories than 'Ararat', better Berserker stories than 'Sign of the Wolf', and (perhaps) better Instrumentality stories than 'The Game of Rat and Dragon'.

But, to spoil my argument, here's 'No Great Magic', not only the best of the Change War stories, but one of my Top 10 SF Stories of All Time, and worth having the book for if you can't find the story anywhere else.

Still, the interest for the sf reader will not be stories, usually obtainable elsewhere, but the anecdotes which the authors tell to introduce their series.

THE GARDENS OF DELIGHT

by Ian Watson (Gollancz Fantasy;1980; 176 pp; 6 pounds 95)

Once I was an ardent fan of Ian Watson's writing. *The Embedding* inspired in me so many rapturous and fine thoughts that I put off reviewing the book for years because I thought I could never do justice to it. Who knows? Perhaps I couldn't have; I never quite got around to the review. My admiration held through Watson's next two books, with some qualifications. But I was really looking forward to his recent batch of books. After reading *The Gardens of Delight* and *Miracle Visitors* (see below), I'm not sure whether I want to read any more of his novels.

In *The Gardens of Delight*, Ian Watson has his astronauts land on a planet whose geography mirrors the images in Bosch's painting, 'The Garden of Heavenly Delights'. The astronauts travel around this world, which includes quite a few hellish delights as well. The novel is set out like a diagram . . . and that's all there is to it. Watson does not even leave you the fun of working out what all the pieces of this world represent. He tells you—in long and tedious detail. Apart from a few striking images, there is almost nothing which I would call novelistic at all. There are no real characters, and almost no surprises. Watson's explanations take up most of the space of the book. Not that the explanations have any originality; they all seem to be pop versions of anything from Freud to alchemy.

TALES OF PIRX THE PILOT

by Stanislaw Lem (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; 1979—original Polish publication, as *Opowiesci o pilocie Pirxie*, 1968; translated by Louis Iribarne; 206 pp; $US7.95)

Most of Lem's books have been translated now (although not the book reputed to be the best, *His Master's Voice*). Of all the works to appear during the last decade, *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* is the book least worth translating. In fact, the stories read so much like beginner's pieces that I'm wondering why Lem allowed them to be collected in the first place.

Not that the basic notion for the stories isn't a good one. Pirx is the ordinary guy who happens to be a space pilot. He muddles along, and somehow solves problems. He's no superhero, but he has none of the shine of divine madness of Trurl and Klapaucius (*The Cyberiad*). He is only as interesting as the stories he appears in, and most of them are dull, one-line jokes stretched out beyond the reader's interest. 'The Conditioned Reflex' is the best story. Pirx must find out why an accident happened in an observer station on the dark side of the Moon. When he arrives at the abandoned station, the same things start happening to him as (so the records say) finished off his predecessors. The answer to the puzzle is a nice gimmick—but Lem uses it again in 'On Patrol'! 'Terminus' has at least one haunting image (the doomed robot in the bowels of the elderly spaceship), but Lem's telling of the story has little of the assurance of such novels as *Solaris* and *Return from the Stars*.

Collect this book if you are, like me, a Lem completist. Because I am such a person, I am annoyed that I have never been able to obtain *Mortal Engines*, the last Lem book which Seabury published. No copy seems ever to have escaped the publisher's offices, let alone landed in Australia. (I'll even pay real money for a copy, if somebody wants to sell.)

NEANDERTHAL PLANET

by Brian Aldiss (Avon 54197; 1981—original edition 1969; 192 pp; $US2.25)

In 1969 I reviewed a collection of Brian Aldiss' short stories for *SFC*. The collection was called *Intangibles Inc*, and I gave a very favourable notice to some of those stories. When the collection appeared in USA, most of the good stories were left out, one dreary piece, 'Danger, Religion!' included, and the result was called *Neanderthal Planet*. All the stories here are primitive Aldiss, except for 'Since the Assassination' which, although it did not appear in Moorcock's *New Worlds*, was one of the best Aldiss stories from the New Wave period. Not that its style is particularly difficult, but it is filled with a gloomy Gothic air centred around people who have become out of time with the world around them. (It's much the same gimmick as in 'Man in His Time'; Aldiss simply shows you how to get a lot more out of almost any idea.) I cannot recommend *Neanderthal Planet* unless you cannot obtain 'Since the Assassination'. I suspect, however, that a recent re-release of *Intangibles Inc* is available in a British edition. That is worth buying.

MOREAU'S OTHER ISLAND

by Brian Aldiss (Jonathan Cape; 1980; 174 pp; 4 pounds 95/$A13.40)

Moreau's Other Island is not a disappointment like *Life in the West*—it is simply a bomb, such a total failure that some people who usually do not like Aldiss' books might get a charge out of it. I don't find it easy to say why it is a failure, though, since it seems to have been written at about the same time as *Frankenstein Unbound*, and then held over for some years. But the style which worked so well in *Frankenstein Unbound* fails entirely in *Moreau's Other Island*. Also, Aldiss stretched his scope beyond that of the model novel in *Frankenstein Unbound*. In *Moreau's Other Island*, he produces a narrative which is noticeably less subtle and complex than the original. Aldiss' tribute to Wells remains 'The Saliva Tree'; *Moreau's Other Island* would be an insult if I did not know that it was meant otherwise. One waits while reading the book for Aldiss to do something with the long-familiar island and its inhabitants—and he doesn't. He places the events in the near future, and has one nice twist on the whole plot. But nothing else. Um . . . I suppose even Aldiss must crash sometimes.

THE ROAD TO CORLAY

by Richard Cowper
(Gollancz; 1978; 158 pp; 3 pounds 95/$A10.70)
(Pocket 82917.3; September 1979; 239 pp; $US1.95)

As you might guess from the pagination, the Gollancz edition of this contains only the novel, *The Road to Corlay*. Instead of buying that, you would do better to search out the American Pocket Books edition (includes 'Piper at the Gates of Dawn'). This is a novella set in a future England which has retreated back to feudalism (ho hum). A child prophet arises, and of course he is doomed. As such, that story was pedestrian, but Cowper was able to bring alive the boy and his whole world, and make his situation real. This tale about miracles is itself something of a miracle, striking a light from soggy wood.

The Road to Corlay? I must admit I can remember almost nothing about it, and that first reading was only a few months ago. There was a lot of chasing around between islands, if I remember correctly, but not much else. Certainly nothing I would associate with the Richard Cowper who wrote 'Out There Where the Big Ships Go' and 'The Web of the Magi'.

The cover of the Pocket Books edition is very pleasant to look at.

MIRACLE VISITORS

by Ian Watson (Gollancz, 1978; 239 pp; 4 pounds 95)

Cy Chauvin has already done justice (execution as most fitting justice) to *Miracle Visitors* elsewhere in this issue of *SFC*. If anything he has been too kind to the book. *Miracle Visitors* makes it so clear that Ian Watson has come to mistake the form of the novel for the shape of a soapbox. People tell each other the most preposterous theories for page after page, without any sense that these theories mean anything to the people delivering the lectures or the people involved in the adventures. Only a few of the events have any striking images. The ride to the moon in a gravityless car has some amusing moments, but by the end of the book we are not even sure that *that* happened. Perhaps the real trouble is that nobody—not even Ian Watson or Steven Spielberg—will ever interest me in UFOs.

THE LUCK OF BRIN'S FIVE

by Cherry Wilder (Pocket 41637.5; 1981—originally published 1977; 219 pp, $US2.50)

No, I am not reviewing this book yet again. But I will mention that this is a new printing of the Pocket Books edition, that the pages missing from the earlier Pocket Books edition have been restored, and that the new printing has a marvellous (uncredited) cover. The sequel is supposed to have been published, but I have not seen a copy.

LORD VALENTINE'S CASTLE

by Robert Silverberg (Gollancz, 1980; 444 pp, 6 pounds 95)

Again, I'm mentioning this only to record a new edition. Also, I must record some astonishment at the sheer ghastliness of the cover of the Gollancz edition. Not even this book, dull as it is, deserves such treatment (particularly as Gollancz bought the book, I presume, in the hope of selling lots of copies of 'the new Silverberg'). It's interesting that the best cover I've seen for *Lord Valentine's Castle* was a fine design in turquoise and gold, just lettering and lines, which adorned the proof copy which Harper and Row sent me before the American hardback had appeared. The cover which Harper and Row used eventually for its edition was cutesy and tacky, but still a lot better than the Gollancz cover. What will the British *paperback* cover be like?

ENEMIES OF THE SYSTEM

(Subtitle: *A Tale of Homo Uniformis*)
by Brian Aldiss
(Harper and Row; 1978; 119 pp; $7.95)
(Avon 53793; February 1981; 110 pp, $US1.95)

When Brian Aldiss was in Melbourne in 1978, he sounded quite proud of having written *Enemies of the System*. I scratched my head when I read the book, and refrained from comment. I can't help thinking that *Enemies of the System* was a horrible blunder; perhaps Aldiss should read it again.

Enemies of the System suffers from so many conceptual errors that it's difficult to find room to list them all. It is supposed to be a satire of utopia, of a future homogenised Homo Uniformis. But the book actually reads like a fairly feeble satire of Eastern European Communism, which is surely not taken as utopia by anybody, least of all by its inhabitants. If the book is supposed to be about the far future, it is a failure: we get little feeling that these people are much different from us, except that they are very bland. Okay, that's part of Aldiss' point, that utopia is bland. But when the real gutsy humans on the alien planet make their appearance, the experience is still fairly bland. All that's happened is that Aldiss, on a soapbox, has made a real point. But the point is worthless, because what he's really preaching about is the Horror of Communism Triumphant. Now the idea of Communism triumphant throughout the galaxy is an *interesting* idea. A proper treatment of it would involve a complete analysis of the state of Communism now and where it is going. If any author did that, the result would be a book very different from *Enemies of the System*. It could be, on a dystopian level, very like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, or rather more like the satires of the Strugatsky Brothers. In fact, Aldiss conceives this story at such a superficial level that one can simply dismiss it by comparing it with the Strugatskys' swipes at their own society.

Why take so much space over *Enemies of the System*? Because Aldiss can do so much better, even with the wrongly conceived notions as they are here. But I would like to see somebody get the notions right.

EARTHWORKS

by Brian Aldiss (Avon 52159; October 1980 —first published 1963; 142 pp; $US1.95)

Earthworks is a reminder that Aldiss has had inexplicable lapses of quality throughout his career. It is not at all clear why some of the worst of these lapses have been used to launch Avon's reprinting of a uniform edition of Aldiss' works. *Earthworks* is a book better forgotten particularly because, like *Enemies of the System*, it is not really a novel, but has that strange long-novella shape which Aldiss does not really do very well. One of Aldiss' virtues as a short story writer is his compression of the complex into few words. In *Earthworks*, Aldiss gives the impression that he has tried to compress a large number of events into few words, but at the same time has stretched out the few ideas in the book. The result is very odd. The book is helter-skelter to read; come to the end, and it is plain that little has happened. Like *Enemies of the System*, *Earthworks* was an irritating misconception, and it should have been left quietly by the wayside.

MOCKINGBIRD

by Walter Tevis (Doubleday; 1980; $US10, 247 pp)

Lapses from Brian Aldiss, say, are usually excused, even forgotten about, when compared with the range and quality of his best books. But the remarkably bad *Mockingbird* is only Tevis' second science fiction novel. Give up the game now, Mr Tevis!

Not that I'm over-irritated by Walter Tevis, who probably thought he was doing his best. Instead, I'm horrified at the amount of praise received by *Mockingbird* among sf people during the last few months. What are we all coming to, that we take any notice of such a book at all?

I wish I had the polemic powers of a Franz Rottensteiner or a John Foyster to give the entire details of the badness of *Mockingbird*. Perhaps then I could convey what it is like to read a book about a future society where most people cannot read and only watch television, and to realise that the book itself seems designed for people who cannot read and only watch television. All the people in *Mockingbird*, except perhaps the robot, have simple brains, and simple thoughts. They do simple things, which sometimes turn out bad and sometimes out good. But they learn to Read—this is the big event of the book. But it has no effect on them—they still sound like characters in a particularly gormless TV situation comedy. You know—sanitised, deodorised, and frightfully good for you. *Mockingbird* wasn't good for me, though; it set me back $10 or so.

THE STARCHILD TRILOGY

(contains: *The Reefs of Space, Starchild, Rogue Star*)
by Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson; 1980—component books first published 1963, 1965, 1969; 508 pp; $A5.95)

When Penguin recently published a vast quantity of sf titles in one batch, I suppose I was expected to exclaim admiringly and congratulate the firm on its foresight and enterprise. This I could not do. Only one title, of those I had read, interested me. That was *Roadside Picnic*, which I reviewed in *SFC 60/61*. Most of the titles in the batch were old rubbish like *The Starchild Trilogy*. When I was fourteen or fifteen, I really enjoyed *The Reefs of Space*. Read it at that age, or even younger. I was a few years older when I tried *Starchild*, and found it unreadable. The age of willing suspension of disbelief had passed. These books, as I remember them, had a curiously rushed, peremptory quality to them. Later encounters with Jack Williamson's output have convinced me that Williamson actually wrote most of the words in these books. I can't guess what Frederik Pohl contributed, or why he consented to put his name to them. But if you are fourteen or fifteen or younger, you might really enjoy *The Starchild Trilogy*.

100 GREAT SCIENCE FICTION SHORT SHORT STORIES

edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin Greenberg, and Joseph D Olander
(Robson; 1978; 271 pp; 3 pounds 95/ $A10.70)
(Avon 50773; August 1980; 294 pp, $US2.50)

I'm not objecting to *100 Great Science Fiction Short Short Stories* because it is badly edited. It may well be superbly edited. I do object strongly, however, to 'short short' science fiction stories, also called vignettes. I can't say I've ever read one that worked as a story. A vignette doesn't even offer the same satisfaction as a good joke. Typically one of these stories wanders along for four pages, then finishes with one line which is expected to make you jump up and down with excitement. I would prefer stories, such as the great folk tales, where *every* line is interesting.

But if you like vignettes, buy this book. For copyright reasons, this does not contain the most famous pieces by Fredric Brown; that's a cavil mentioned by other reviewers.

Also noted:

PROFUNDIS

by Richard Cowper (Pocket 83502.5; February 1981—originally published 1979; 207 pp; $US2.25)

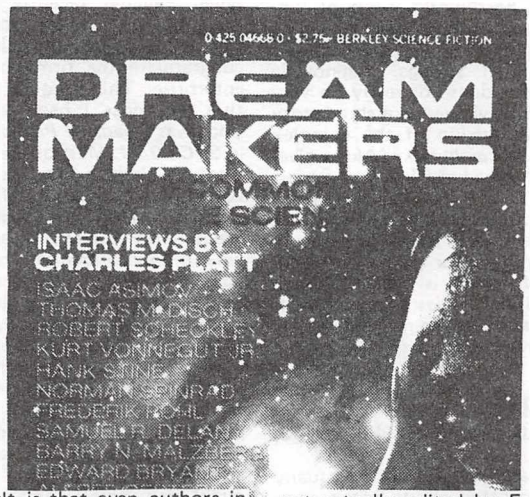
I haven't read this, but Elaine thought it was quite amusing when she reviewed it a few issues ago. I'm not sure whether or not there has been a British paperback as well.

BOOKS ABOUT SCIENCE FICTION

DREAM MAKERS

(Subtitled: *The Uncommon People Who Write Science Fiction*)
Interviews by Charles Platt (Berkley 425. 04668.0; November 1980; 284 pp, $US2.75)

Dream Makers is a book of innumerable delights—anecdotal and analytic, literary and cultural. On one level it seems merely a series of edited interviews with twenty-eight science fiction writers (including an interview with C M Kornbluth, thirty years after his death). There have been several such books in recent years: most of the others were convincing evidence that science fiction writers should be chained to their typewriters, and never allowed to speak near a tape recorder. Is Charles Platt wittier, wiser, a finer conversationalist than the other interviewers? Probably. But he also sees interviews as literate articles, and not mere transcriptions. Platt introduces each interview with a short essay which shows the circumstances of meeting, the general impression given by the author to the interviewer and, most importantly, the reasons why Platt was interested in conducting the interview. Platt gives no sense of the breathless acolyte, an impression which arises only too clearly from most of the other author-interviews I have seen in recent years.



The total result is that even authors in *Dream Makers* who have been interviewed many times before deliver quite new sides of their characters to Platt and his readers. Aldiss is, of course, witty and wide-ranging (and, I'm pleased to see, echoing some comments of mine about The English Novel which I made, quite separately, in my *Stellar Gauge* essay). But less expected is the poignant interview with Ted Tubb, whose struggles to keep writing, according to his own understanding of his craft, make a funny, yet heroic story. To find Disch at home to Platt is so delightful, yet somehow what one would expect of Disch. But Platt also enters the home of Algis Budrys, whose thought processes seem so alien to those of anybody I know that I wonder we both live on the same planet and speak the same language. The interview with Phil Dick is a good introduction to the stranger aspects of *Valis*, but nothing in Van Vogt's novels can prepare us for the Real Truth about A E Van Vogt, as revealed by Platt.

Dream Makers is particularly valuable for the idea it gives of Platt's pilgrimage across America, then back home to England. Budrys and Farmer in the mid-West take on a life of their own which owes much to Platt's interest in exploring alien territory. Dick and Van Vogt are essentially Californian. Disch and Sheckley are so much of New York, while Moorcock laughs and grumbles away in London. *Dream Makers* is not just about a collection of science fiction writers, but comes closer than any other book to showing the world of science fiction.

(The book has two glaring omissions: Gene Wolfe, who might be in a second volume which Platt is preparing now, and women writers in general. Maybe the second *Dream Makers* will feature the many women writers who were left out of the first.)

SURVEY OF SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE

edited by Frank N Magill (Salem Press; 1979; 2542 pp; $US200)

I have a copy of this five-volume reference work only because I wrote seven of the essays in it. Not that I haven't found it very valuable since I have had it; it's just that I could never have raised the money to buy it without having contributor's discount. This set is for libraries and rich folks. If you fall into either of those categories, and like good meaty discussion about science fiction, you will not be wasting your money.

A few interesting facts: This survey was not actually edited by Frank N Magill. Its real editor was a helpful man named Keith Nielson. Under the guidance of Keith Neilson and an international committee, essays of 2000 words each were commissioned from sf critics all over the world. Each essay dealt with a separate book. (Evidently this fits in with the format of a continuing series of Magill Surveys of various forms of literature.) The great strength of this survey is that covers nearly everything—not just American or English books, but science fiction from all over the world, and just enough of the not-quite-science-fiction books, such as Durrell's *Tunc* and *Nunquam*. If there was any hint of providing a reference book of 'crib sheets', this has been dispelled by the seriousness with which sf critics take their task. The best of these essays are *the* best on their topics, standard discussions with which all later material will have to be compared. I cannot pretend to have read every essay, but I have enjoyed what I have read. For instance, Peter Nicholls' discussion of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* is the best essay on that book I have seen. Here is Franz Rottensteiner discussing Lem's *Glos pana*, the one major Lem book we have not had in English yet. On the other hand, Tom Shippey's discussion of Amis' *The Alteration* is a bit too convincing: read the essay and you think it must be a masterwork of English literature; read the book and you find it superficial and dull. But that hardly makes Shippey's essay any less interesting.

You can order the Magill *Survey of Science Fiction Literature* from Salem Press, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632, USA. The price you will be charged will have added about $20 for postage, packing, and insurance, so perhaps inquire first about the exact price.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF SCIENCE FICTION

edited by Peter Nicholls (Granada; 1979; 672 pp, $A44.80)

I will just mention this so that Peter Nicholls will realise I am not neglecting him. After all, there is no need to review *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. Everybody else has done so already, and no book in science fiction has received such universal praise. I don't really have a sufficiently encyclopedic memory to know how accurate the book is, those who know say it's fairly good. I particularly enjoy the English tone of the text: with Nicholls and Clute in charge, one is not likely to be expected to believe six impossible things before breakfast (or whenever you consult your sf reference books). *The Encyclopedia* is certainly hot on trivia as well as the all-important: both 'S F Commentary' and 'Bruce Gillespie' get mentions. However, I will write a letter to Peter Nicholls to reprimand him for leaving out somewhat more interesting items, such as 'Damien Broderick' and 'Robert Thurston'.

The price was horrific when the book appeared, but already standard hardback prices are surpassing it. A copy bought now will seem cheap within the next two years.

SINGAPORE SCIENCE FICTION

edited by R S Blathal, Dudley de Souza, and Kirpal Singh (Rotary Club of Jurong Town, Singapore; 116 pp)

WONDER AND AWE

by Kirpal Singh (Chopmen; 1980; 58 pp)

Both of these books were sent to me from Singapore by Kirpal Singh (yes, the *Stellar Gauge* Kirpal Singh). I was pleased to see them, but do not know what I can say in detail about them.

Singapore Science Fiction is really an original fiction anthology. However, the column I want to complete about recent original fiction anthologies seems as far in the future as ever, and I think this book deserves a mention. *Singapore Science Fiction* is a book whose intention is very much like that of *The Altered I*. A short story competition yielded these best entries; the aim is to show what could be developing in a whole new geographical area of sf writing. Therefore the main interest of the collection is not the quality of the writing. Most of the story are single-idea, single-punchline pieces, with fairly laboured explanations of things. Only a piece called 'The Incredible Shrinking-Gun', by Gertrude Thomson, stands by itself as something good.

No, the real interest of this book is the picture it gives of Singapore itself: teeming yet lonely, overruled yet open-ended, exciting yet stultifying. In a way, this aspect lifts *Singapore Science Fiction* above the level of *The Altered I* or any of the other Australian anthologies, our young writers are not, by and large, looking their own society in the eye and taking its measure. I hope something solidifies out of the atmosphere of excitement which surrounds the entries in this book.

Wonder and Awe is made up of some lectures Kirpal Singh gave to people who, I presume, knew nothing about science fiction. I didn't like the book much, mainly because its notions are too vague. Kirpal does not get down to details; surely those who have never before encountered science fiction become hooked by the ideas first? But there are only overwhelming claims for the literary quality of science fiction. Since I don't believe this quality exists, except in the writing of a few authors, I was not sympathetic to the arguments, and not swayed by Kirpal's method of argument. Still, maybe I am merely the wrong audience; I would have been far more interested to read an account of the question-and-answer period after each of these lectures was delivered.

No prices or addresses of publishers are given, I presume you could obtain these books from Dr Kirpal Singh, Department of English, University of Singapore, Bukit Timah Rd, Singapore.

Bruce Gillespie, May 1981

Susan never rusted

Susan Wood died in Vancouver, Canada, on 11 November 1980. She was 32 years old. The news is still unbelievable to me. How can the most alive person I have ever met disappear from view? How can one imagine life without her cheery letters and cards and fanzines and articles and books pouring through the mail? It's as if half the American continent slid abruptly into the sea. There was nobody else like Susan. I can't believe it.

Many articles have appeared about Susan during the last few months. Each article takes hundreds of words to list her achievements. Each article lists a different set of achievements. But Susan's single greatest talent was friendship. She offered total and unqualified support and understanding to each person she called friend, and she had hundreds of friends. She took an interest in each friend, often with a fervour which could never be adequately returned by the person befriended. I've seen this in my own life many times. When I was travelling in USA, she put vast amounts of effort into trying to find a way for me to stay on the American continent. During many of the scrapes of my later life, she has sent endless letters of support, encouragement, and exhortation. She was the last person left (apart from immediate

family and friends) who remembered my birthday every year, and every year she sent me some remarkable card. I never felt that any of this effort could be discounted as going through the motions of friendship. I knew that Susan meant all of it, and that she was doing the same for many other people she knew. That's awe-inspiring, and irreplaceable.

I tried to be a friend in my own way. Often I would write to Susan and say: 'Slow down, please! Slow down!' But she never did. Basically, Susan wore herself out. To read an account of her daily activities was to invite instant exhaustion. She did all those things, and she was exhausted for the last two or three years of her life, but she would not stop. She would teach at the University of British Columbia at Vancouver all the academic year, and write papers and fanzines, and edit books—and then traipse all over America (or all over the world) during the summer vacation. She had had some vile disease which she called 'strep throat' for more than two years. It was only when Carey reported back from America in September 1980 that I realised many more problems had been added to the considerable list. I don't know why she became so depressed, or used alcohol to get through her life during 1980. I don't suppose I will ever know. The strain was too much, and Susan's heart gave out. Susan never rusted; she burnt out.

That world-wide group of friends called 'fans' has been shocked beyond measure by the news of Susan's death. Tributes have appeared everywhere, but a few seem to have special poignancy:

Denny Lien (in *Murgatroyd 15*, ANZAPA December 1980): 'I first saw Susan at TorCon in 1973. [*brg* So did I.] My first worldcon; I knew almost nobody except the Minneapolis fans I'd come with. (I'd been in fandom for over a decade, but always as a hermit.) I didn't even know enough not to go to the programming, and so went to the Hugo Awards, and so saw Susan dash up shrieking to receive her shared Hugo for *Energumen*. . . . For a rather shy and rather overwhelmed semi-unknown fan, it was nice to see a Big Name Fan excited enough to behave like a kid at Christmas. I'd like to be able to react with child-like or adult-like responses as situations warrant, and try to do so. But Susan was always better at it. I was surprised, years later, to find she was a couple of years younger than me, but there was no reason to be surprised: she always seemed both older and younger than me or almost anyone else, at the same time. A chronochameleon. . . .

'After 1973, I next saw Susan at Aussiecon in 1975. In the intervening two years, my self-confidence in fannish crowds had edged up from "poor" to "below average". As there were only some sixty North American fans flying down together and travelling together, it might be thought that it would be difficult for the shyest of fen not to rapidly get to know them all. Nonetheless, I managed: Susan Wood was the co-Fan Guest of Honour; a Hugo winner, a genuine PhD in literature with a genuine university appointment who still managed to produce high-quality fannish prose for large circulation fanzines. I was a graduate school dropout with a civil service job who produced one apazine on ditto each month except the ones I didn't feel up to it. I tend to take myself too seriously, but retain some sense of propriety and one rule of fannish etiquette: don't bother the Important People. And I thought Susan was an Important Person. Well, she was and, dead or not, *is* to me and to others. But unlike me, she was never *self*-important, and when the con was almost over and I was adding depression to my other hang-ups, sought me out, talked to me, made me feel comfortable talking to her. . . .

'In 1976 I published my Aussiecon report in *Rune*. Susan wrote me about it, and sent me her fanzine, *Amor*; I added her to my minute non-apa mailing list for my zines. She said, among other things, 'You are a Funny Person.' It's nice to be something. Susan was also a Funny Person, and several other types of Person, as the need arose. Sometimes several types at once. Serious constructive frivolity: very nice. . . .

'Between 1976 and 1980 I saw her just six times: twice at worldcons (Kansas City and Phoenix), twice at Vancouver, twice in Madison-with-a-stop-in-Minneapolis. We exchanged fanzines and occasional letters, and spoke on the phone at rare occasions. In Vancouver I visited her house, petted her cat and her Hugo, lounged with other fen on her sinfully thick shag rug, drank wine, and talked. In Minneapolis I got to fix her a gigantic breakfast to combat her jet lag, and was told she had just had dental surgery done. At KC Con we started a Silly Tradition of seeing each other across a floor, jumping up and down a bit and running arms outstretched toward each other, only to swerve at the last moment and hug the people we were each with instead. As traditions go, it was even sillier than most.

'1980: Early Saturday afternoon I headed for the auditorium for another stint of guard duty, and was overtaken by Susan calling out to me and running toward me. She seemed tired and unhappy and hyper, and when I said that I was happy to see her responded that I was probably the only person

at the con who was. She wanted food and an ear to talk to but asked only for the former. I escorted her to a snack bar, told her I was late for the job I had promised to do, and would call her when I got off work three hours later. From anyone else, almost, I would have been concerned, but this was Susan, who was all things to all fans and who could take care of herself and thus could not possibly be asking for help. Only slightly concerned, I left to guard for three hours a door that one one tried to steal. I never saw her again.'

Joyce Scrivener (from *Cycles 2*, ANZAPA, December 1980): Susan 'was all the things I have wanted to be: lovely, productive, active, capable, a woman who got to the top in several fields without losing the sight of her femininity and sex, vocal, human, talented in writing. She was more, too. She was an ideal, someone who had overcome the things I see in myself and accomplished visible productions. She was my friend, she liked me and I loved her. She mattered. . . .

'I remember Susan as I first met her at Iggycon. She was so happy that Denny and I had gotten together and she told me so. I remember her jumping naked into the Adams' swimming pool to "liberate" it the last night of the convention. I remember picking her up at the Minneapolis airport at 6 am and taking her and David Emerson home to the immense breakfast that Denny fixed and she couldn't eat due to her teeth being infected. I remember her being among the group at Noreascon who wanted to go out to the Dinner Party, a large feminist art work. And I remember saying goodbye to her because she had to be back for dinner herself and I did not see her again, but I was expecting I would. . . .

'. . . fans are my family, they are closer than my relatives, in many ways they are, to me, better than other people and Susan was one of the best of people, one of the best of fans. If we cannot save our best, what can we save?'

Lastly, the complete text of a contribution from **Eli Cohen** to an American apa of which he is a member:

'Susan Joan Wood was pronounced dead of cardiac arrest at approximately 11.20 am, November 12, 1980, in Vancouver. She was 32 years old.

'(I can't believe she's really dead. I lived with her, off and on, from May 1974 until January 1980, she's been the most important person in my life for the last seven years.)

'She co-edited, with Mike Glicksohn, the Hugo-winning fanzine *Energumen*, she also published *Aspidistra* and the *Amor de Cosmos People's Memorial Quietrevolutionary Susanzine*. (I remember the kiss after each page of *Amor* we finished running off. . . . Fastest slipsheeter in the West, she was, and she could collate like the wind.)

'She won the Hugo for Best Fan Writer in 1974, and again in 1977. *The Language of the Night*, a collection of Ursula Le Guin essays which Susan edited, was a Hugo nominee for Best Non-Fiction Book of 1979. (In fact, she would have been nominated in *four* different Hugo categories, but we never got together enough votes to put her sf class on the ballot for 'Best Dramatic Presentation'.)

'In September 1973, she moved to Saskatchewan (and we started corresponding; on December 29, 1973, she came to New York for a visit and I fell in love with her); she spent two years teaching at the University of Regina. (I've still got the Chinese cookbook she gave me when I arrived, inscribed "To Eli—because you think Saskatchewan is a type of Chinese cooking".)

'She received her doctorate in Canadian Literature from the University of Toronto in 1975 (I remember the night she tried to throw her thesis off our third-floor balcony), the same year she moved to Vancouver to become an assistant professor of English at UBC. (She taped "Another Storm", by Humphrey and the Dumptrucks, before she left. In snowless Vancouver it was hard to remember the weekend it hit 50 below and we had an eight-inch icycle growing into our living room. But then there was the night we stood in the snow at the Millers' farm, watching the aurora. . . .)

'Her hobbies included rock and folk music (there were so many concerts we went to—Cris Williamson, Warren Zevon, the Dumptrucks, Yes . . .), gardening (she used to talk to her plants: "Grow, baby, *grow*" she'd tell them, and they would), and photography. She also carried on extensive correspondence with many people (not to mention putting up thousands of visiting fen at the Wood Hotel).

'Her academic interests included Canadian Literature, science fiction, and children's literature, in all of which she taught courses and published papers. UBC granted her tenure in the spring of 1980.

'Her next-door neighbour heard a thud and, finding her unconscious, called the police. She had apparently been on her way out of the house, pausing to write a note which she was in the middle of when she collapsed. She was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

'(There were a lot of bad times and a lot of good times. I won't ever see her again. I miss her.)'

—Eli Cohen, 2 December 1980

THIS ISSUE ISN'T REALLY LATE . . .

. . . it only seems that way. If you are Ted White or Mike Shoemaker, or one or two others, you might wonder what happened to your letter of comment. All in good time. Most of the issue was finished at the beginning of March. The '8 Point Universe' column was written in late May. Otherwise . . I've been busy, and broke. See page 62.

1980

was somewhat morbid overall. We lost our cat, Julius, and the injury to my wrist set us back a bit, but generally Elaine and I went unscathed. But for a while Leanne Frahm, one of our favourite people, was in some danger but now seems to be recovering well. Damien had something horrible happen to his eye, but that has healed. A virulent thief kept breaking into the house newly occupied by Jenny Bryce and John Foyster. Right at the end of the year, I heard from Dave Piper in England about the terrible events of the last part of 1980. It was That Sort of Year.

Nearer to home, Elaine's uncle died. He was a gruff sort of fellow, and I can't say I ever found it easy to hold a conversation with him. But he was an old-fashioned hobbyist, with wide interests, and he had always given great help to Elaine. He was one of those few people whose death leaves those around him in real difficulties. His final illness had lasted for seven years, during which time he had taken care of his mother (Elaine's grandmother). After all that time, his ending was sudden, and Elaine's family has faced real problems in maintaining two households. I wouldn't be saying anything about Elaine's Uncle Doug, if I didn't think that his life and death showed something I hadn't realised about the life and death of Susan Wood. Both were basically very modest people, I suspect, who valued themselves much less highly than others valued them. I keep wondering: of the people I know, whose lives are really important to themselves and to other people? Usually the most modest people I know are those who would be most missed. Did I tell Susan in her lifetime how valuable she was? I think so; I hope so. Did anyone tell Elaine's uncle in his lifetime how valuable he was? I'm not sure; quiet families rarely say these things among themselves.

Missing at the end of 1980 were Alfred Hitchcock and John Lennon, among others. I think I can take the news that there will be no more John Lennon records with some equanimity, but he deserved a quiet, contented middle age, if only for the fact that that's what he wanted. He was one of the few rock stars who survived the last twenty years without attempting some kind of suicide. Keith Moon, John Bonham . . . irreplaceable, but their deaths were not entirely surprises. Bon Scott? I don't know—these people live lifetimes in ten years. Maybe that's what Susan did too.

I'm sorry. I start writing about someone else altogether, and everything comes back to Susan, and what she meant. More than any rock star (eg, Lennon), Susan symbolised the sixties to me, even though all her career happened during the seventies. She once said that Joni Mitchell represented what she would like to be when she grew up. Like those of us who still have the stardust of the sixties in our eyes, Susan never saw herself as having 'grown up'. There was so much youthful excitement still to come, but the rest of the world was growing more determined to be unexciting. Hence the death of John Lennon symbolises the double death of the sixties, the destruction of everything humane and adventurous in life. Now USA (and the rest of the world) must put up with a President seemingly elected in order to pick a fight that will begin World War Three. Laying flat the whole world would really symbolise the end of the seventies.

As I've said, I've been seeing these things whirling around Elaine and me, rather than affecting us directly. Touch wood, but the firm of Cochrane and Gillespie had probably the best year we will ever have. We wined and dined and spent vast amounts of money on trivialities (and on books and records, which are necessities). At the end of the year, I discovered that our bathroom scales are remarkably inaccurate, and that I was actually more than 10 kg heavier than I suspected! A heavy diet for us has meant not going out to restaurants, which has saved us money, but sometimes tried our patience during this, the hottest summer for umpteen years. I made a resolution during January to write fiction for at least an hour a day. The resolution has not lasted long. It's hard work writing fiction! And the story is still stuck at 4000 words. What better reason for turning back to writing material for *SFC*?

The financial disaster area of this household is, as usual, *SFC*. One of the few highlights of 1980 was the removal of Damien Broderick and Diane Hawthorne from Sydney to Melbourne; Damien enjoys thinking up Great Ideas during his spare time; one of his Great Ideas is to find some way of financing *SFC*. So far, these ideas have come to nothing, since they involve gaining access to, for instance, academic money (of which there is little to spare). Anybody with further ideas, or with cash donations, or willing to advertise in *SFC*, should get in touch. I had hoped to finance regular editions of *SFC* with the 'profits' from the sale of *SFC Reprint Edition: First Year 1969*. It's still not out, though, although I have set about half the copy. I don't think there will be any profits, either: it will be larger (about 150 pp) and more expensive to produce than I had thought. Thanks very much to the people who have already sent $40 payment for the reprint: work is still proceeding.

I mentioned Norstrilia Press last issue, and it gets a guernsey in various pages of this issue. Even though I make no money from NP's sales (except as payment for type-setting, layout, etc), I can ask you to buy our estimable products, especially *Stellar Gauge*, which seems to be the only book produced in Australia during the last five years to receive no grants or other support.

As Eric Clapton would say, I've got ramblin' on my mind. I really should focus my mind on higher things, such as my:

Best of Everything 1980

Favourite Novels 1980

1 **The Debacle**
by Emile Zola (first published 1892; edition read: Penguin Classics L280; 509 pages)
2 **Let Us Now Praise Famous Men**
James Agee and Walker Evans; 1941; Ballantine 01512; 428 pp)
3 **Limbo**
Bernard Wolfe (1952; Random House; 438 pp)
4 **George**
Emlyn Williams (1961; Penguin 14 004079; 432 pp)
5 **The Franchiser**
Stanley Elkin (1976; Farrar Straus Giroux; 342 pp)
6 **A Young Man of Talent**
George Turner (1959; Condor 1181; 256 pp)

7 **Birthstone**
D M Thomas (1980; Gollancz; 160 pp)
8 **The Manticore**
Robertson Davies (1973; Macmillan; 310 pp)
9 **The Mutual Friend**
Frederick Busch (1978; Harvester Press; 222 pp)
10 **A Stranger and Afraid**
George Turner (1961; Cassell; 280 pp)
11 **The Flute-Player**
D M Thomas (1979; Gollancz; 192 pp)
12 **Jailbird**
Kurt Vonnegut Jr (1979; Delacorte; 241 pp)
13 **It**
William Mayne (1977; Hamish Hamilton; 189 pp)
14 **The Franchise Affair**
Josephine Tey (1948; Penguin 841; 255 pp)
15 **The Man in the Queue**
Josephine Tey (1927; Peter Davies; 247 pp)

A much better year than 1979. I think it's because I stopped reading the science fiction magazines, and so gained time for books I really enjoy. Also I started a plan to read the best of what we have already on the shelves, instead of reading merely what arrives in the house. Also, and most importantly, I spent most of the year type-setting seven days a week—there isn't much you can do after a day of setting except read at night or go out to dinner. Since sumptuous dinners have detrimental effects on the waistline, I suppose I'll be reading more than ever during 1981.

The Debacle is the best novel I've read for some years, and reminds me that I should stick more closely to the best of the nineteenth century. *The Debacle* is also the best war novel ever written, all the more so because it describes several events in that odd, in-between war, the Franco-Prussian of 1870. Most of the book follows the fortunes of a group of soldiers who are supposed to be defending France from the invasion of the Germans. However, the French can't find the Germans, who have been proceeding quickly by a different direction. The book is a chronicle of suffering, most of it caused by the inefficiency of the French army itself and its generals. Soldiers are reduced to starvation because the food wagons go up a quite different road; French towns, not German, are looted for their last available scraps. The soldiers are caught in the area of Sedan and beaten horribly only because of the accumulated mistakes of the French army bureaucracy. Zola is known as a 'naturalist' or a 'realist', but often this is used as a pejorative term; it ignores the pictorial, stage-set quality in his writing, and the poetic sensuousness of much of his description. Zola catches us up in the spectacle of the battle, but does this not with generalised thud-and-blunder, but with an emphasis on the tiny details of experience as they strike the participants. One remarkable example: as the forces gather, Zola points out several times a farmer on a hillside who continues to bring in the harvest, despite the bloodshed taking place all around him. For more than a hundred pages there is no mention of the tiny figure in the distance. Then casually Zola picks out a burning farmhouse some distance from the worst of the battle. It seems that the war has struck down the farmer after all. *The Debacle* is a book of total involvement of the reader, has much suffering and much humour, and has just been re-released by Penguin.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men has much the same quality, although it is not likely to carry the reader along with the force of its plot. In the early 1930s, James Agee, writer, and Walker Evans, photographer, were sent from New York to the Deep South to dig out a story about absolutely the poorest white farmers they could find. They did so, and lived with them for some weeks, but *Life* magazine would not run the story, and it was some years before it appeared in book form. My inclination is to ascribe the book entirely to Agee, but he insists that Evans' photographs are just as important as his text. The text is remarkable. Agee and Evans found that they could not approach the three share-cropper families with anything like traditional reporters' objectivity. They came to understand how the farmers managed to live, despite extreme poverty. The more they understood, the more they felt themselves intruders. Agee's gives a diary-like account of what it is like to be an intruder among people whom he came to find genuinely dignified, even beautiful. His meditations are interspersed with factual pieces on the way of life of the three families. Every page is written in sensuous, exciting prose, dripping insights, pathos, and even a sense of wonder (the kind that all those gosh-wow sf writers could never understand). I must thank Gerald Murnane for recommending this to me nearly ten years ago. Sometimes I just take too long to get around to reading good books.

I read in Charles Platt's *Dream Makers* that *Limbo* (in its English edition, *Limbo 90*) had an influence on the writing of J G Ballard. I suspect that it had a strong influence on the work of Brian Aldiss as well. If so, then Aldiss and Ballard would be the only worthy successors to Wolfe. This does seem to be the science fiction/prophecy book which many authors have tried to emulate for the past 30 years. Most of the others have failed because they have not seen what Wolfe is really doing, which is making a statement about *all* human activity and aspirations, not just that of the inhabitants of this unfortunate future civilisation. Wolfe's theme is the very strong force of masochism and attempted suicide in human activity, perhaps best expressed in the current systems of nuclear weapons facing each other across the world. Wolfe's marvellously funny, eloquent, energetic, yet quaintly sad main character is a refugee from an atomic war. From his South Pacific island hideout he returns to a warped civilisation, finding his own ideas on how to improve humanity worked out in dreadful, even ridiculous detail. Of course, this sounds like so many other novels—but most of them are by people who cannot *write*. Wolfe's prose flows on in great sweeps of theory, observation, action, grandeur, pathos, and always a lot of below-the-belt humour. I found a first edition of the American edition in a second-hand bookshop in Chicago in 1973, but others might not be so lucky. Reprint, Penguin, reprint!

George, by Emlyn Williams, poses a problem which strikes every so often when compiling these lists: 'Novel' or 'Non-fiction'. Of course, *George* is non-fiction, because it is the first part of Williams' autobiography. But it is also a work of literature, in a way that most autobiographies never are. It is more like a novel than anything else. It goes in *this* list. For instance, *George* is not just about Emlyn Williams; it tells more about his father and mother than anyone else. It tells more about life in Wales during this century than any other book I've read. It is a book full of the sights, sounds, and smells of that country, and also shows to what extent Wales is really a colonised country. Emlyn Williams' story is there, too, and he has a pleasant, indirect way of telling it. He gives a much better idea of the motives and actions of the people who impelled him forward from Welsh village life to Oxford than he does of his own

motives and feelings in the matter. Only at the end does he delve into himself, when he must show why he abandoned the Oxford career and took to the stage. This is the only book I've read which shows me what actors like about acting.

Year after year I list new books by Stanley Elkin as Best for the Year, but it is still almost impossible to buy his work in Australia. And if this is the best American novelist, and we can't buy his books here, then what else are we missing out on? It was only by accident that I discovered *The Franchiser* had been published. Thanks to Readings Books, Carlton, for finding a copy in America. Needless to say, *The Franchiser* is a great novel. All of Elkin's books are, because they all feature the same main character. He has a different name in each book—Dick Gibson, Boswell, and now, Ben Flesh—but he is the same mighty figure: egocentric, hungry for experience and insight, yet wonderfully paranoid, seeing dangerous patterns in the world where others have seen only whorls in the carpet. Elkin's characters convert their worlds in words, then eat them in great gulps. But the words change, if the character does not; Elkin sees his America as a gigantic Library of Babel, filled with an infinite number of concepts, values, colours, and constructions. It is there to be traversed forever. Yet the point of America is Americans, and the ridiculous, enormous burden they take on themselves by remaining Americans. Says Flesh: 'And a heart-attack victim, too, don't forget, when I was thirty-eight. But not a victim. I didn't die, didn't see *that* action either. Just let off the hook with what the doctor called a "warning". He meant I should change my life. But how can I change what I don't understand?' Elkin might have been speaking for himself. For some years, he has been a sufferer from multiple sclerosis. In *The Franchiser*, Ben Flesh also develops the disease. This gives the book a poignancy which none of the others had. God knows how you would find a copy of this book, but find it if you can.

George Turner keeps insisting that *A Young Man of Talent* is apprenticeship work, a first novel he would rather forget about. I keep telling him to read it again. I would be proud to have it as my only novel, let alone first novel. Not that I would ever have had a chance to read it if Damien Broderick hadn't found a beaten-up secondhand copy of the ancient English paperback.

GEORGE TURNER

I've borrowed that, but would be willing to buy a copy if anybody ever offers one for sale. The word I would offer to describe George's prose is 'muscular', since the characters in his novels are usually in violent conflict, and they are usually muscular characters, even when they are female. (This comment goes for *A Stranger and Afraid* as well.) The books would not work unless the conflicts were made real. George does this extremely well in *A Young Man of Talent*. In the New Guinea highlands during World War II, a dangerous, almost criminal soldier and a meticulous commanding officer arrive at the camp at the same time. The viewpoint character, who is used to easy-going ways, gets caught between the two. He thinks he can tame both of them, but instead becomes involved in progressively more dangerous situations. This is high-energy stuff, with more than a dash of melodrama, but it's drama as well, since every aspect of the novel arises from contradictions within and between the main characters. A word of warning: if you ever get to read *A Young Man of Talent*, you might feel, as I do, that George unpacks much of himself into each of the characters, and tells us too much altogether about the real George Turner.

I reviewed *Birthstone* and *The Flute-Player* in the 'Eight Point Universe' column, *SFC 60/61*. Just as well, since I'm running out of room in *62/63*.

Robertson Davies has become somewhat of an idolised writer among Melbourne fans, perhaps because his books are so hard to get in Australia. It was only by begging, borrowing, and not-quite-stealing (much help from Micheline Cyna-Tang) that I could put together the famous trilogy (*Fifth Business, The Manticore, World of Wonders*). I found them a shade disappointing; I couldn't quite see what the fuss was about. Davies has a plain style which slides off sometimes into complacency and pop-novel attitudes. Davies specialises in elaborate novel-length conjuring tricks, the kind which work much better in the cinema or on stage than in a novel. Davies knows much of human aspirations and possibilities, yet he tends to set up his novels as clever spectacles in which the people become lost. The spectacle which works best is that presented in *The Manticore*. The main character seeks to know the secrets of his past and his own soul. He finds help from a Jungian psychologist in Switzerland. Davies sets up the story as a combination of the confessional novel and the trial novel. The book is un-put-downable. I discovered much that was interesting about Jungian psychology, and was treated to some delectable entertainment. (But Davies certainly isn't Canada's answer to Patrick White.)

I have George Turner to thank for discovering *The Mutual Friend*. He reviewed it for *The Age*, and sent me on his copy. In turn, it set me off on a Dickens discovery tour which lasted some months. *The Mutual Friend* is the story of Charles Dickens' last year or so, as told from the viewpoint of a character who appears briefly in the Johnson biography (see below). The servant, Dolby, feels himself humiliated and badly used by Dickens, who set off on long reading tours of England and USA just as his health was giving out. Much is made of the contradictions in Dickens' character, many of which showed themselves clearly only during Dickens' last few years. Much of the novel seems merely like an uncomplimentary look at the Great Man; *The Mutual Friend* really comes to life after Dickens has died and Dolby is left to fend for himself in the most squalid circumstances of Victorian London. This is really fine writing. I've seen copies of this book recently in Melbourne book shops.

A Stranger and Afraid would get much the same kind of review as I gave *Young Man of Talent*. This is the first of the Treelake novels (based on George Turner's years in Wangaratta), but I hope none of the local dignitaries ever recognised themselves in George's books. Jimmy Carlyon takes up a position in the local employment office, and gradually we (and various townspeople) discover that Jimmy has arrived in town to find his mother, who is probably living under an unfamiliar

name. The search for a lost parent is a major theme for George Turner. I think it worked more successfully in *Transit of Cassidy*. Still, Jimmy's encounters and adventures on the way to his mother make gripping reading, and his mother, once discovered, is a memorable character. (A doubt always comes to me after reading one of George's novels: how do his characters stay alive when they live under such ferocious tension?) George gave me his own copy of *Stranger*: thanks.

Under normal circumstances, I do not stretch my list to a Top 15. In fact, this was the first year since 1973 when I could have gone to a Top 30. But I do not have enough room to talk about them all. Luckily, I have discussed *The Flute-Player* and *Jailbird* already (in 'Eight Point Universe', *SFC 60/61*). *It* is peculiar, but enchanting. (Begins as a horror story featuring a local English-village ghostie, and changes into a very funny romp; nobody else but William Mayne could get away with it.)

And Josephine Tey was my discovery for the year. Well, not quite. The ABC had a radio serial of *The Singing Sands* back in 1969 when I was eating my chops and veg in my lonely flat in Ararat. The modesty and quiet humour of the writing came through to me, but I never followed up Tey's writing. Reading her first mystery, *The Man in the Queue*, led me to buy some more of her books. Josephine Tey specialises in mysteries which obey none of the rules of the genre. There is, for instance, no way of guessing the murderer in *The Man in the Queue*. Only an accidental meeting leads to a solution. This sounds more convincing to me than Hercule Poirot's little grey cells, fan though I am of the best of Agatha Christie. Likewise *The Franchise Affair*: it has no neatness, as in an Agatha Christie book. The situation is genuinely difficult for the people involved, and the real theme of the book is the nastiness that lies below the surface of a nice English village. Quite the opposite of Christie, where the essential upper-middle-class niceness of everything is always affirmed by the end of her books.

Runners-up:
Hard Times
Charles Dickens (1854; Signet Classics CQ514; 292 pp)
Timescape
Gregory Benford (1980; Gollancz; 412 pp)
The Fountains of Paradise
Arthur C Clarke (1979; Gollancz; 255 pp)
Dead as Doornails
James Cronin (1976; Dolmen Press/Calder and Boyers; 201 pp)
World of Wonders
Robertson Davies (1975; Viking; 358 pp)
Fifth Business
Robertson Davies (1970; Macmillan; 308 pp)
The Living End
Stanley Elkin (1979; Dutton; 148 pp)
Ascendancies
D G Compton (1980; Gollancz; 208 pp)
A Rude Awakening
Brian W Aldiss (1978; Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 205 pp)
Breathing Space Only
Wynne N Whiteford (1980; Void; 150 pp)

Favourite Non-Fiction 1980

(In order of reading):
Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television
Jerry Mander (1978; Morrow; 371 pp)
Enemies of Promise
Cyril Connolly (1938; Penguin Modern Classics 14001573; 279 pp)
The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays
W H Auden (1963; Faber; 527 pp)
The Pleasure Dome: Collected Film Criticism 1935-40
Graham Greene (1980; Oxford University Press 19281286; 277 pp)
In Joy Still Felt
Isaac Asimov (1980; Doubleday; 798 pp)
Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph
Edgar Johnson (1952, 1977; Penguin 14004895; 583 pp)
The Twenties
Edmund Wilson (1975; Macmillan; 359 pp)
The Wound and the Bow
Edmund Wilson (1941; Methuen University Paperbacks UP36; 264 pp)
William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary
E P Thompson (1955/77; Merlin Press; 816 pp)
The Black Death
Philip Ziegler (1969; Pelican 14021189 288 pp)
The Stellar Gauge
ed. Michael Tolley and Kirpal Singh (1980; Norstrilia Press; 280 pp)

If I start talking about all these, I will be here all year. *The Wound and the Bow* (which I had to borrow from John Foyster, since I cannot find a copy anywhere) and *The Pleasure Dome* are the two best books on the list. *The Dyer's Hand* has some magnificent stuff as well. Greene is even better talking about films than he is about books. All of his prose is impeccable, and some of his observations were thirty years ahead of their time (since he insisted on the importance of the art of the director, long before others had started to talk about the art of the cinema). *The Wound and the Bow* contains some of Wilson's best prose. The complexity and depth of his argument surpasses that in any of the other books of his I've read. Not-completely-worthy subject matter can bring out the best in the writer: the most interesting article in *The Wound and the Bow* is about Kipling, just as the two most interesting articles in Auden's essay collection are about Verne and the art of the detective story.

Reading *The Mutual Friend* (see above, Favourite Novels), thanks to George Turner, set me looking for other material about Dickens. Busch admits that his interpretation of Dickens is derived from Edgar Johnson's biography, which has just been re-released by Penguin. Johnson's approach is a bit dull, but very complete, and does not gloss over Dickens' many personal faults. Johnson is irritating only in the usual habit of Dickens scholars: praising the 'great art' of his more ponderous books, not even admitting that gigantic books like *Bleak House* are often creaky, sentimental, ill-constructed, and downright undramatic.

William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary is irritating in quite a different way: it has that unreadable completeness of a good PhD essay. I just did not want to know everything Morris wrote in his diaries and letters about every stage of his life. Also, much of the 'revolutionary' stage of Morris' life was concerned with groups which had fewer members and less influence than the tiny fan groups chronicled in, say, Harry Warner Jr's *All Our Yesterdays* (but Harry has style and wit; if he had them, good old E P Thompson left them behind when he wrote this book). But many are interested in Morris, and will like this book.

What else?: Well, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* has a lot of silly stuff in it, but it makes some nice points which tv addicts and national administrators could take to heart. All advertising is in bad taste, and especially tv advertising. That's one maxim from the book. There's no such thing as using network tv for 'good' or 'socially useful' purposes: the medium only makes, say, conservation ads, programs of classical music, and interviews with ordinary people look 'dull'. Mander's details are convincing. Even public television fits all of Mander's arguments against network television. :: *Enemies of Promise* has been discussed in recent issues of *SFC*. :: *In Joy Still Felt* is not as good as the first volume of Asimov's autobiography, mainly because he is so coy about details which usually are impor-

tant to people when writing about their lives, eg, it is almost impossible to work out just why, and by what stages, Asimov and Gertrude separated. :: *The Black Death* is history written the way history is written very rarely: a clear style, much personal anecdote, a sense of the patterned landscape of events as they must be told in an historical narrative. :: *The Stellar Gauge* is discussed elsewhere in this issue.

Favourite Short Stories Read During 1980

I've changed the heading for this section because somebody said to me about an item on the 1979 list: 'But that wasn't published in 1979 . . .' Um. Amazing what you must do to make yourself quite clear when writing this column. Perhaps there was confusion because of my 'Best SF of the Year' list which I kept up to date for a while. That list seems to have disappeared, because I cannot bring myself to finish the sf magazines for 1975. 'Best of the Anthologies' lists will appear when I get around to reviewing the original fiction anthologies. Meanwhile (and, incidentally, giving *some* idea of the best of recent sf):

1 **'Bliss'** (Katherine Mansfield) from *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
2 **'Separating'** (John Updike) *Problems and Other Stories*
3 **'The Stranger'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
4 **'The Daughters of the Late Colonel'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
5 **'Miss Brill'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
6 **'Pictures'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
7 **'The Little Governess'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
8 **'Something Childish But Very Natural'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
9 **'The Gun Shop'** (John Updike) *Problems and Other Stories*
10 **'The Garden-Party'** (Katherine Mansfield) *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*
11 **'Kingmakers'** (Robert Thurston) *New Voices 1*
12 **'Old Folks at Home'** (Michael Bishop) *Universe 8*
13 **'The Doctor of Death Island'** (Gene Wolfe) *Immortal*
14 **'Sleep Well of Nights'** (Avram Davidson) *Year's Finest Fantasy Vol. 2*
15 **'Children of the Kingdom'** (T E D Klein) *Dark Forces*

In any other year, John Updike's 'Separating' would have been by far the best story read for the year. Maybe I should have included it some years ago when I heard it read on the ABC's *Sunday Night Radio 2* during a John Updike special program. A pity that Mr Updike had to contest honours with Katherine Mansfield: that's too much competition altogether. As you might have worked out, *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield* is the best book of any sort I have read for some years. A recent re-reading was exciting as well. I'm not sure what Katherine Mansfield does that makes even John Updike look a bit dull, flat on the ground, not quite a literary flyer. Perhaps that's the right word for Mansfield's stories: they fly. In almost every story, there is a broth of conversation, some bright sentences of description, a feeling of being whisked up and away into Mansfield-land. In the middle of the story there is always a blank spot where you think she has done nothing but whirl around some impressions of her characters. Then, as you approach the end of the story, the wonderful (but more often tragic than comic) pattern of the impressions shows itself, and you realise that every sentence was in the right place all along. I've listed 'Bliss' as the supreme example of Mansfield's art, but the others on the list compete strongly for this honour. So could a dozen more from the same collection. I bought the 830-page *Complete Stories* in the early 1970s, but I've seen a re-issue recently in Melbourne bookshops. Worth buying—or else you should be able to find the two Penguin collections, *Bliss* and *The Garden-Party.*

As I've indicated, John Updike's art is more careful, more earthbound than Katherine Mansfield's, but still fine reading. 'Separating' gains a special power from its slow development, as a couple announce their separation, slowly, agonisingly, over a full day to their children. It turns out that the separation is the story-teller's idea, and even at the end of the day he's not sure why he's going through with it. (The whole thing is obviously autobiographical, but few writers manage to derive such concentrated art from the bits of their disintegrating lives.) 'Separating' has one of my favourite lines: 'How often divorce followed a dramatic home improvement'. (After hearing that on the radio in 1976, I've always remembered it as 'Divorce often follows dramatic home improvements'.)

'The Gun Shop' has the same quiet grace, where relationships between generations of men in one family are suggested by the details of visiting the basement of a friend, who makes and sells guns for his neighbours.

The sf stories on this list seem a bit clanking and obvious compared with Mansfield and Updike. Even the best sf stories seem top-heavy, with the apparatus visible near the surface of the story, instead of buried deeply. In Thurston's 'Kingmakers', the apparatus of time travel pretty much *is* the story, except that it finally ends up as a tale of character and destiny. Most sf writers seem to contrive their stories clumsily because they cannot do anything else; Thurston, on the other hand, chooses a tricky, difficult way of telling a story, knows the limitations of his ambition, and makes the contrivance work. Memorable story. :: So is 'Old Folks at Home', but for quite different reasons. Bishop builds a future world (that of *Catacomb Years* and *A Little Knowledge*) and sets real people in it. It's the real people who are interesting. In his novellas in particular, Bishop shows skills which are unique in science fiction; perhaps only Leiber at his best would write a story anything like this.

But I did not mean to talk about these stories here. I still promise to write 'The Original Fiction Anthologies 1976-79', and reviews of these stories will turn up eventually.

Favourite Films 1980

1 **The Line-Up**
directed by Don Siegel
2 **Keeper of the Flame**
George Cukor
3 **Five Fingers**
Joseph Mankiewitz
4 **The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds**
Paul Newman
5 **The Gunfighter**
Henry King
6 **Tunes of Glory**
Ronald Neame
7 **42nd Street**
Lloyd Bacon and Busby Berkeley
8 **Manhattan**
Woody Allen
9 **F for Fake**
Orson Welles
10 **Tree of Wooden Clogs**
Ermanno Olmi
11 **The Loved One**
Tony Richardson

12 **The Europeans**
James Ivory

Behold how television hath corrupted the ways of a true cinema fan! Out of the whole list, only three did I see at the cinema. In fact, if I had had to rely on films seen at the cinema, I don't think I would have bothered with a list for 1980.

The great advantage of watching films on television (apart from being able to get a cup of coffee every hour or so during a commercial break) is that most of the good ones are *old*. If you are really lucky, you will get 1930s and 1940s films shown in almost new prints, with their lustrous blacks, whites, and greys shining out at you. None of these horribly grainy, washed-out apologies for colour that you get in almost every newly released cinema film these days. B&W is beautiful. . . .

Where was I? To explain: late in 1979, Elaine's sister and brother-in-law gave us a television set. It was the first time I had ever lived in the same house as a tv set. For awhile I found almost nothing on the box. I still find almost nothing on the box—except for the old movies. Almost everything about good 1940s and early 1950s films is better than even the best of new films. The photography is much better than now; the acting is better; the scripts are better. That seems an odd thing to say, since most script-writers during the 1960s and early 1970s reacted against the limitations imposed on Hollywood scripts during the 1940s and 1950s. Quite so. But really great writers and directors work particularly well within very tight limitations. The result, in fact, has been a line of tight thrillers and westerns which don't turn up very often, even at the Valhalla, and which occasionally appear late at night on tv.

The Line-Up is a classic Don Siegel thriller. I don't need to say anything more about it. It's not quite as good as *Charley Varrick*, but it is in the same class.

I saw *Keeper of the Flame* when I was very young, and did not remember much of it. Full of great, classic, beautifully lit, beautifully staged set pieces starring Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy. The breathless suspense of the script and the glamour of the atmosphere only hide its strong anti-Nazi line (in a film made before USA entered World War 2). Like *The Line-Up*, this has a perfection of form and intensity of conviction which one cannot find at the cinema any more.

Ditto for *Five Fingers*, the story of a British spy (James Mason) in a British embassy in a neutral country during World War 2. The blend of comedy and suspense is particularly effective here, including the marvellous double-sting-in-the-tail ending.

Ditto for *The Gunfighter*, which takes the mickey out of some Western legends, but within the framework of a carefully wrought classic Western. Gregory Peck is particularly effective as the gunfighter who comes back to town for peaceful purposes of his own, but knows that somebody sometime will try to gun him down, no matter how he acts.

The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds does not really belong in this section of the list. It relies not on good direction (although Paul Newman's direction *is* good), amazing photography, or crisp scripting, but rolls along entirely on theatrical values. Paul Zindel's original play is magnificent, and the film is great because Joanne Woodward and everybody else in the cast are worthy of the play.

I suspect that *Tunes of Glory* also started out as a play. It would all be too longwinded to make good cinema —if it were not for the acting of John Mills and Alec Guinness. Guinness is so good that you can forget he is Guinness and concentrate on the intricacies of his role as the deposed regimental commander. *Tunes of Glory* has many points of similarity with another saga about the armed forces—George Turner's novel, *Young Man of Talent* (qv, as they say in the best magazines).

42nd Street. A film so famous that any comment of mine makes little difference. However, I think that somebody at the tv channel has snaffled some Busby Berkeley footage from the film. The final section seemed very short to me. The enjoyment of this film, however, does not spring essentially from the Berkeley stagings, but from the snappy dialogue. The Hays Code stopped that sort of thing shortly after the film was made; the return of cuss words in films has not returned comedy scripts to the standard set by *42nd Street*.

Manhattan is a film which proves what I have been saying about the old movies. *Manhattan* is beautiful: the black and white photography at the start of the film, in wide screen, is some of the best I have seen. *Manhattan* has pathos and affection: at any rate, the sight of Mariel Hemingway struck me with a whole range of emotions which certainly included affection. I don't care whether Mariel Hemingway was acting or not; just make sure that somebody keeps casting her in films! *Manhattan* is one of the best of the late 1970s movies—which means it only scores No 8 on this list. The trouble with *Manhattan* is that nothing in it is *necessary*. There's this big, cute, and cuddly intelligence called Woody Allen presiding over it. There is not a great and magical intelligence *directing* it. That's not a very precise way of putting it. I will try to think of something more exact to say for next issue.

I could say the same kinds of things about the rest of the films on the list. They are all marvellous in different ways, especially Olmi's affection for his people in *Tree of Wooden Clogs*. But each is somehow unfinished, untransformed. *F for Fake* has some of Orson Welles' best photography and direction, yet seems doomed by its semi-documentary flavour to be a second-rater among Welles films. *The Loved One* has much fine acting (although Robert Morse is quite wrong as the bemused Britisher in California). It has some fine photography, great effects, funny scenes. Yet it is also a bit of a mess. It has little of the crisp sharpness of Evelyn Waugh's original novel. And (huff, puff, as we get to end of the list) *The Europeans* has magnificent colour photography of New England in autumn, and some great acting, and a faithful rendition of Henry James' novella—yet the whole thing never quite comes to life for me. Maybe a second viewing would change my mind.

The best film I saw all year (on tv, of course—a midday movie during the fortnight when my hand was in plaster) was one I had seen three times before, **This Sporting Life**. Somehow it struck me as even more heart-wrenching than ever before. Richard Harris captures the ferocity and self-destructiveness of that footballer so well that it is impossible to believe that he wasn't acting out a part of his own life. And Rachel Roberts glimmers and glows on the screen so powerfully that it is impossible to look at anything else in the frame when she appears. If any film better portrays the power of human love, then I do not know of it. The photography is splendid; so is Lindsay Anderson's direction (of course). But more than any act of craftsmanship emerges Anderson's devotion to a vision which is given body by his actors. The visionary is still scarce in films, even though visions are supposed to be the cinema's business.

Favourite Music 1980

Not another list! you say. No, I don't keep lists of records heard or bought. I should. I buy far too many records, and far too many have been heard only once.

To start at the top: Only a few new lps of 'classical' music spring to mind. Verdi's **Requiem** is not a piece which I've usually liked (except for the Dies Irae, of course). I suppose it's because I don't like Verdi's operatic style very much. However, Riccardo Mutti's recent rendering (EMI SLS 5185) changed my mind. The soloists are much better than I've heard on any other version, and the clarity of the recording is probably the best on any record I have.

Music which I like much more is that of Berlioz. World Record Club recently re-issued the Colin Davis version of **L'Enfance du Christ**. Very pleasurable listening. On the other hand, WRC has *not* picked up from Philips the Colin Davis *Les Troyens*, and local Philips has let it go out of print. Anybody who could sell me an unspotted copy of *Les Troyens* would earn my sincere gratitude.

As everyone knows, the great days of rock music ended in 1968. Since then, my interest in the field has remained that of interested surveyor. But I still buy vast numbers of pop, rock, or rock and roll records! The addiction of it all. As I mentioned in *SFC 60/61*, the best record for 1980 was Emmylou Harris' **Roses in the Snow**. But Bruce Springsteen's **The River** is a mighty effort. When Dave Bromberg was out here, he mentioned that his type of music, which, to the untrained ear, includes everything, could be described as 'American folk music'. Springsteen's recent stuff is very good American folk music. Songs like 'The River', 'Drive All Night', and 'Hungry Heart' have great lyrics. Springsteen's carefully roughened rock and roll style is envigorating. By contrast, I would describe AC/DC's style as flattening, rather than envigorating. I can listen to one side of **Back in Black** at a time, before retiring from exhaustion. The new lead singer seems a lot better than Bon Scott, and production on *Back in Black* is perfect.

The record I played most during 1980 actually caught up with people only twelve months after its initial release in mid-1979. That was Pat Benatar's **In the Heat of the Night**. The record is never more than good pop, with some rock and roll thrown in, but every song has been carefully thought out, then performed with some passion.

Tell the truth, much of my listening and buying during 1980 was affected by two new influences: regular watching of *Countdown* on television, and listening to one of the two first commercial FM stations in Melbourne, 3EON. *Countdown* convinces me that most pop groups are worse than one could ever imagine, but that the English groups make superb film clips. Clip of the Year was the Vapors' 'Talking Japanese', with Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2' a close second. More recently, the clip for Ian Dury's 'I Wanna Be Straight' must be the funniest piece of film I've seen for years. I don't know who is the director who does all the British film clips—she, he, it, or them should receive Oscars regularly. :: 3EON must have a musicologist as its program director (by contrast with pop AM stations, which have robots as program directors). Every time I hear a particularly interesting album track, I go into my favourite record shop (Pop In in Flinders Street) to ask for it, only to find that it has been out of print for eight years. Even so, a lot of good old records are still around, and they have made up most of my purchases.

A new interest for me is buying the occasional jazz record. Again, I have new patterns of listening to thank for this: specifically, Jim Macleod's 'Jazztrack' on ABC-FM. Most of the music was indistinguishable when I began listening to the program. Gradually I found that certain artists were very much better than others. I've bought a few records by a few of the people I've picked out as very good. Best new discoveries are Pat Metheny, LA4, John McLaughlin, and a few oldies always known to jazz fans but not to me, like Oscar Peterson. I'll let you know how this interest in jazz develops.

'Have you finished now, Gillespie?' Yes. 'Good. Get on with the letters.' But some of the letter writers have listed their favourite things as well. 'Oh, no.' Oh yes. Here's

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I'm not into making lists, but there were two books that I read in 1979 that stand out and deserve comment. Neither is recent. Neither is quite a novel, although both resemble one.

The smaller of the two is *The Master of Go*, by Yasunari Kawabata. I've read two other novels by Kawabata, and I look forward to the rest at leisure, but this one is superb. It's a novel in the wider Japanese sense which, according to the introduction, can include autobiography and memoirs with fictional colouring; Kawabata called this 'a faithful chronicle-novel'. It chronicles a 1938 Go match in which the old master loses his final match, and in so doing it represents the passing old order (which in fact was gone when the book was written, in the post-war decade). It is a chronicle, but not chronologically written; you know the outline at the beginning, but the novel follows its own internal development through shifting scenes from different points in the months-long match. I do not play Go, but I understood well enough what was going on, between the explanations of the moves in the text (and meditation on their meaning) and the charts of the board at different stages of the game. The game of Go interacts with the characters in very complex ways. The writing is very lucid; Edward G Seidensticker is a magnificent translator, and I've become so addicted to his renderings that I've been reluctant to read the Kawabata novels translated by someone else.

The second book is over 1000 pages and makes no pretence of being a novel, although in its complexity and insight into character and meaning it rivals the really good novels. It's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, by Rebecca West. In the course of a book about her trip through Yugoslavia in 1937, West writes a magnum opus on the history of Europe, the clash between Turkish Islam and Eastern Christianity, the land and people of Yugoslavia and its component regions, the nature of human evil, and the causes and meaning of the doom approaching Europe at the time she wrote (it was completed in 1941). Although I don't share West's essential dualism in viewing human nature, I an enormously impressed by the achievement of this book. It gives me a sense of the strength of the European tradition at its best, not just at its most attenuated, as we usually see it in modern America. West has certainly shamed me into studying in depth the history of any country I plan to visit in the future, since, for all my powers of observation, my understanding of the countries I've travelled through is so shallow compared to the layers and layers of history, art, and meaning that she brings to her travels in Yugoslavia.

Just for the sake of listing, here are the other titles that stand out from my reading of the past year (not in order): *Through the Flower*, by Judy Chicago; *A Room of One's Own*, by Virginia Woolf; *Watchtower* and *The Dancers of Arun* by Elizabeth Lynn; *Latin for People/Latina pro Populo*, by Alexander Humez and Nicholas Humez; *Snow Country*, by Yasunari Kawabata; *The Language of the Night*, by Ursula Le Guin, edited by Susan Wood; *When the Tree Sings*, by Stratis Haviaras; *Fault Lines*, by Kate Wilhelm; *The Last Time I Saw Paris*, by Elliot Paul; *Blue Moose*, by Manus Pinkwater; *The Love Poems of Marichiko*, translated by Kenneth Rexroth; *A Sportsman's Notebook*, by Ivan Turgenev; and *Pieces of the Frame*, by John McPhee. Actually, that last is probably from this year. Lists can get out of hand too easily, but it's interesting to me just to see these titles all together like this.

I'm not much of a movie-goer, but two films also stand out from last year: *Outrageous!* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

(12 May 1980)

John also includes some personal details which, I suspect, are not for publication. My respect for the talents and personality of John D Berry is pretty high, but it rose even higher during 1980 after reading his splendid article about the original 'Skid Row', Seattle, which appeared in *Telos 1*. Great new fanzine; great article.

Kawabata's books are sitting on the shelf awaiting perusal. So are most of the other books on the shelf. I'm looking forward to them. I don't think I've ever seen a copy of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

THOMAS M DISCH
New York, USA

Herewith, in no particular order, my top ten for 1980. The first six came my way as a reviewer for *The Washington Post* or for *F&SF*, but I like them no less for having been paid to say so. Anyhow, not everyone gets the *Post* every Sunday. Only two, Benford's and Sladek's, are sf, but two others are by writers familiar in the field (Jennings and Jacobs):

1 *Aztec* by Gary Jennings (Atheneum, $15.95)
2 *Morgan's Passing*, by Anne Tyler (Knopf, $9.95)
3 *The Towers of Trebizond* by Rose Macaulay (first published 1956; 5th printing 1980; Farrar Straus Giroux, $5.95 paper)
4 *The Juror* by Harvey Jacobs (Franklin Watts, $8.95)
5 *The Specialty of the House* and other stories, by Stanley Ellin (The Mysterious Press, $15)
6 *Timescape*, by Gregory Benford (Simon and Schuster, $12.95)
7 *Roderick*, by John Sladek (Granada, 6 pounds 95)
8 *The Way We Live Now*, by Anthony Trollope (published in 1875)
9 *The Sailor's Return*, by David Garnett (published in 1925)
10 *Rembrandt*, by Gladys Schmidt (published in 1961 by Random House).

Aztec and *Rembrandt*, as their titles suggest, are historical novels, and very well-wrought in the straightforward middlebrow way of almost all historical novels. *SFC* readers won't need a mini-essay on the similar appeal of sf and historical novels. Let me add a retrospective endorsement for Wouk's two World War II novels, than which no account has ever made a neater geopolitical bundle of all those old movies knocking about in my memory.

Whenever I can get a good used copy of anything by either Rose Macaulay or David Garnett, I snap it up. *The Towers of Trebizond* is her last novel and generally accounted her best. As a novel I have a few misgivings (it rambles), but there hasn't been a better travel book for years. Garnett wrote a classic fantasy, *Lady into Fox*, which got me started reading him. *The Sailor's Return* is pure caviar, on a par with *A High Wind in Jamaica*, the one book on the list I can't imagine anyone not liking.

I'll quote my review for *Morgan's Passing*: 'Alternately lyrical and rambunctiously comic—as though Chekhov were to rewrite one of Kaufmann and Hart's comedies . . . as though Flannery O'Connor were to forget all about religion and write a whole novel as droll as her tales; as though Dickens were alive and well and living in Baltimore.'

. . . and for *The Juror*: 'Leon Drew's [the hero] ever-overactive imagination . . . leads him, on his downtown lunch hours during his week of jury duty, to commit a series of dumbfounding (and, I confess, delightful) gratuitous crimes. If Bob Newhart of sitcom fame were to start behaving like Raskalnikov, the effect could not be more disquieting, and when some pages go by and the author offers *no explanation* for Leon Drew's aberrant behaviour, disquiet deepens to uncanny—as though Bob Newhart had been metamorphosed into Kafka's beetle.'

Timescape? No need to say more. By now, surely, you've all voted for it.

Roderick is so far only available in England. A magic carpet of ballroom dimensions with a secret trapdoor under each new twist of plot. What's more, this is only the half of it.

The Way We Live Now lived up to its title. I've never cottoned to Trollope before, but no other Victorian novel has less bullshit. After living the previous four years in the nineteenth century, this was a splendid good-bye to all that.

The Specialty of the House. Ellin is my candidate for First Prize in the Traditional Craftsmanship category (Short Story division). It's always the mixture as before, and he almost never fails to bring it off. They're mysteries, for the most part, but there's a large fantasy component too. Popcorn never tasted so good.

All in all, a rather unambitious year intellectually. No highbrow hijinks, no emotional maelstroms, not a single labour of Hercules. But much pleasure and food for thought.

(30 December 1980)

Who could ask for anything more? (Well, I don't. Not often.) Thanks, Tom. Now all I have to do is find some way of obtaining these books. No Aus-

JOHN D BERRY on Kawabata and Rebecca West.

THOMAS DISCH's favourites for 1980: Jennings' *Aztecs* in first place . . . Tyler, Macauley, Jacobs . . . also Benford and Sladek.

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5 Jan 81.

Dear Mr Gillespie,

I know that my husband, the writer, would want me to write to you now that he has gone from us. He left on his desk both SF COMMENTARY 60/61 and THE STELLAR GAUGE, with your essay on him; both coincidentally arrived here on the same day, and I feel that he was planning some sort of a response to them.

Brian was a modest man, although the fools of this world often provoked from him outbursts some mistook for conceit. He accepted many of your criticisms of him and laughed at the praise, which he never could persuade himself he deserved. You may not realise that he greatly relished his place in the writing hierarchy, and enjoyed the particular skills you brought to SF COMMENTARY over the years: which is to say, that he liked your criticism of sf but enjoyed it all the more for the way in which you tempered it with your personal life; he had a similar quality of frankness, and was not afraid of making a fool of himself, knowing that only fools would mind. Perhaps in this context I should make mention of the remarks the eponymous Dr Rottensteiner commits to paper; but Brian understood that anyone who knew him would see how the remarks grew from a dark nature, and fell a bit wide of their target.

He had one particular enthusiastic comment on your essay on him, which he marked in the margins of his copy of THE STELLAR GAUGE. You speak of the Aldissian tone of voice, which you characterise as, "a mixture of vibrant ebullience, English jollity, pungent irony, and acute melancholia". He quoted this with glee. His sense of comedy tended to the macabre.

Although his thought was of a philosophical cast, he concealed this side of his nature through diffidence. I think myself that he agreed that his position within the sf field was uncomfortable. His vitality was not appreciated, nor his black humour understood, by many within the sf field which he so loved and hated. He would have fared better in the opinion of many of his English friends had he forsaken science fiction for the wider world in which he had also made a mark; but he maintained to the end that his temperament and imagination were fitted to the field of sf, and vice versa. He had just finished a long novel, HELLICONIA - designed as the first of three - which I hope you will find vindicates your good opinion of him.

May I conclude this brief note by saying how often Brian talked of his visit to Australia, and of the friends he met there, particularly Lee Harding, John Bangsund and Sally, George Turner, and many others. Now he has gone, and the house is strangely silent. You can imagine my thoughts when I regard his desk, littered with notes, drawings, rhymes, unfinished plans.

Fortunately, he will only be away for a week, deciding he needed a little sea air at Bournemouth, but I thought I would reply to you before he returned.

Yours sincerely,

Connie Aldiss

tralian bookshop has any of them.

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Perhaps you should change the title of your magazine to *The Journal of Disillusioned and Former SF Readers*. Tom Disch has a good description of our current crop of Leading S F Writers in the February *F&SF*: he calls them 'entertainment engineers'.

There's a great quote from Raymond Chandler: 'If you have enough talent, you can get by after a fashion without guts; and if you have enough guts, you can also get by, after a fashion again, without talent. But you certainly can't get by without either.' So much for S F 1980 (and 1979, and 1978 . . .). I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of sf pieces that impressed me last year, and even then I would be dragging in marginalia like Vonnegut's *Jailbird* (I agree with you, a real return to form, and I especially liked the 'Trout' story about Einstein and heaven), and Dick's *The Cosmic Puppets* from 1957, which I finally managed to locate (borrowed it from your trusty reviewer, Terry Green, who I finally met at a get-together organised by John Robert Columbo, doyen of Canadian sf, such as it is, in support of Judith Merril's Spaced Out Library) though Dick's short story, 'Frozen Years', in a recent *Playboy*, is nearly a return to form. Oh, and Tevis' *Mockingbird*, unless that was 1979.

I was gratified to hear that you've abandoned your S F Magazine Marathon, if also a little guilt-stricken if I was in any way responsible for it. My feeling about the magazines (apart from *F&SF*) is that, unless I'm going on a train or plane, or absolutely desperate for something to read, I can leave it to Terry Carr to pick out anything readable for his annual collection. I also think you should take a tip from your friend Rottensteiner's letter. You don't have to read beyond the first few pages. In fact, often you don't have to read beyond the first few *sentences* to know you're going to hate something. For example (and it may be unfair to take this example, but it's the first that comes to hand), the first sentences in the first story in *The Berkley Showcase, Vol. 2* (original anthology) read: 'His name was Tain, and he was a man to beware. The lacquered armor of the Dread Empire rode in the packs on his mule.' Amen and goodbye, Dread and Empire. (There is much better stuff elsewhere in that volume, incidentally. There is also an interview with Barry Longyear —perhaps the quintessential *Isaac Asimov's SF Mag* writer—about how he earned $50,000 in his first eighteen months of writing sf, before suffering a heart attack. Fascinating.)

I like Clark's *No Other*, too, but I find it perhaps a little too slick, and remain convinced that *Roadmaster* is superior. I picked up *City* on your recommendation and particularly enjoyed McGuinn's 'Skate Date'. The man is shameless. On the subject of rock, I'm not sure Malcolm Edwards is right in saying that 'things were better ten years ago'. Of course I feel the same thing, but I suspect that, as far as rock is concerned (and maybe a few other things, too) things were *always* better ten years ago. . . . I think we get imprinted, like Konrad Lorenz's ducks, at a certain point in adolescence and never really recover. This is one reason why I decided I had to stop being a rock critic six or seven years ago (another reason being that there was no money in it). I do appreciate Elvis Costello, though. I don't know how it went in Australia, but the commodification of John Lennon broke new ground in bad taste over here.

Interesting that Edwards is freelancing. Is he writing fiction? I always enjoyed his articles. For that matter, are you still freelancing? I've been doing general interest freelancing for the past three years (pop psych, business, science, management, etc, etc) and I'm entering the burn-out zone . . . churning out one article after another gets to be like long-distance running, and I'm finding it harder and harder to put one foot in front of the other. Also, I never have any time for fiction (although it may be that I deliberately structured things this way) and wrote precisely one new story last year. I'm thinking of becoming a stock market speculator—it seems like a more suitable occupation for these days of Late Capitalism—once I pay off last year's taxes, of course.

(2 January 1981)

The last I heard, Malcolm was trying to freelance for a rapidly collapsing British publishing industry. You'll have to ask him directly how he's surviving the first half of 1981. I'm freelancing, yes, but I've sold no writing for years. The thought of writing fact articles for a living does squishy things to the inside of my stomach. It's much of what I was doing when I was working for the Education Department's Publications Branch up til mid-1973, and I'm glad I escaped it. Most of the time I sit in front of Norstrilia Press's IBM composer (the same machine which brings you *SFC* these days) and typeset other people's material. We did well from last year's mini-sf boom in Australia. The boom has bumphed this year, so I'm relying for work on the Technical Teachers' Union of Victoria, whose office is next door. (That's the lead-in for a complicated story, which I won't tell.) Currently, that work is paying for hire of the machine, but not enough to keep Elaine and me prosperous or our cats fed. But tomorrow there could be a phone call, and I could spend the rest of the year cursing the lack of time I have to do *SFC*! That's what 1980 was like, and I did not enjoy it. We'll see what happens with *SFC Reprint: First Year 1969*. I hope you get back to fiction sometime, Andrew.

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I've almost given up reading science fiction: it's not in decline, but it seems to me to be static. Perhaps, like Le Guin, I OD'd on it too early. I'm in full retreat, to the children's shelves: to Alan Garner, Lloyd Alexander, Ursula Le Guin, Susan Cooper—escapism, perhaps, but escapism from what was an escapist genre itself.

There are practitioners who are constantly before me, like Aldiss, Disch, and Anthony (for various reasons, I'm still reading them). For that matter, I'm still reading Delany, although at present I wonder why. I enjoyed his early material, and grimfaced I have struggled through *Dhalgren* and *Triton* in much the same way I fought through the marshes of *The Silmarillion*.

My ten best for the year? There probably weren't that many. *Plain Tales from the Raj, Freedom at Midnight*, the Taran Wanderer series, *Gödel Escher Bach*. To go further, one has to go into professional reading, such as Highet's *Classical Tradition*, Westcott's commentary on Hebrews, Howard's *Introduction to A Grammar of New Testament Greek*.

(10 January 1981)

Another disillusioned former reader of sf! Who's still out there munching through it? Well, I am, since I seem to have a lot of books lined up for the 'Eight Point Universe' column. I discovered the better children's writers some years ago, and haven't followed up that interest as avidly as I meant to.

PETER COOMBER: 'Has sf fallen down a well? Will Literature bother to throw in a rope to aid? Does sf want to get out? (It's so popular down there!)'

I still try to read several William Mayne books a year.

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I think I'm bound to comment on *SFC 60/61*: I wasn't prepared for such a blast at sf. Since then I've been trying to salve hurt feelings by hopping into a few unread sf novels. I haven't enjoyed any of them really, and my stomach churns when I re-read some of the letters in *60/61*. The truth hurts, I suppose.

Glad I'm not the only one not bothering with sf magazines anymore. It's been a combination of not being able to afford/not wanting to buy for fear of getting the same-old-shit (which it inevitably is). I think all this was precipitated for me by the demise of Ted White's *Amazing* and *Fantastic*, and the onslaught of Asimov's nightmarish rag. I was getting sick of *Analog*'s mediocre stories being presented and illustrated so badly (in most cases) as to make them impossible to read. *F&SF* still publishes good stuff. Occasionally. Sf is standing still. Has sf fallen down a well? Will Literature bother to throw in a rope to aid? Does sf want to get out? (It's so popular down there!)

Some of the comments in *60/61* concerning music almost made me ill! I can't believe *anyone* can enjoy crap like Neil Young! Anyone who can stoop to 'singing' 'Hey hey, my my,/ Rock and roll will never die' out of tune and continuously for ten minutes doesn't deserve to have good vinyl wasted on him! Pink Floyd's *The Wall* seems to be a sellout to me, and how in hell can Robert Day call it 'punk'? It took me a long time to stop laughing. Bowie? I don't think much of him. His current album is a regression, if you ask me. I don't agree with your 'electronic swish', though. I'm twenty years old, grew up on electronic music. I've always enjoyed bands like Hawkwind, King Crimson, early Floyd; Brian Eno has done some excellent solo albums. The German Kraftwerkish stuff is bearable in small doses. The best of today's bands are 'electronic/ new wave' stuff—Ultravox, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, XTC, Talking Heads. The synthesiser is an unsurpassed instrument when used with intelligence. Unfortunately, and to my horror, it is being plundered and used robotically in idiotic disco songs. (It's all *so* much simpler with an electronic beat and percussion.) It's this kind of music that makes today's music seem so bad. Along with the Neil Youngs and 'Kiss'es of the world!

I found your favourites listing interesting. Can't say I thought much of Randal Flynn's story, though.

(20 January 1981)

Here I have been typesetting this letter, and spitting and moaning at the heresy of it, in a way that would never happen if somebody made rude remarks about my favourite sf writers. Maybe I just care more about music than about science fiction. . . .

But rude remarks about Neil Young! And—unkindest cut of all—comparing him to Kiss! To judge Neil Young by listening to one song is like dismissing the Beatles after hearing only one song ('Octopus's Garden'?). Among the many reasons why I like Young's stuff is that he has changed style with every record, ranging from unapologetically pop (*Harvest* and *Comes a Time*) to the dirge-like and near-incomprehensible (side 2 of *On the Beach*) to the lyrical ('Will to Love' from *American Stars and Bars*) to the contemptuously defiant ('Cortez the Killer', originally on *Zuma* but with a much better version on *Live Rust*). Neil Young has done everything in rock music, and he's one of the few left willing and able to try what he has not done. Best for me is that recently he has made a number of magnificent rock and roll tracks—keeping the Real Faith alive.

The groups you mention as liking? Recently, I've found a few other people who like that sort of stuff. I'm interested to know how you heard it in the first place! I've never heard any of that sort of rock on the radio. I suppose 3RRR plays some of it now, but that hardly explains the real interest in electronic music which grew up in the early 1970s. I heard early Pink Floyd only by accident, for instance. I still can't see why anybody likes the likes of Kraftwerk, Hawkwind, etc. As Nik Cohn said in what is still the best book on the subject, *AWopBopaLooBop ALopBamBoom*, good popular music should 'carry its implications lightly'. Electronic music groups seem to be claiming seriousness; there's certainly no fun in what they are doing! If I want serious music, I listen to Bach, Shostakovich, and Haydn. If I want fun music, then I listen to people who sound as if they are having fun (Neil Young, even when his lyrics are morbid or maudlin) or as if they passionately care about what they are doing (Bob Dylan, in all his odd phases). But electronic music? It doesn't give me any sense of passion or fun, just a sense of the Inexpressible Boredom Of It All.

Keep writing, Peter. Anybody who gets me so worked up about anything must be doing something right.

You asked in a PS: 'And when is my subscription renewal due?' Like anyone else, you can tell by looking at the S- number on the envelope in which you receive your latest copy. That number is the last issue you will receive on the current subscription. Other designations are T = Traded magazine; P = Permanent recipient (but there are not many of those and, despite the label, you are always liable to be struck off the P list if you don't keep in touch), and L = Letter-writer (and anybody who is 'paying' for copies in return for marvellous letters will really need to keep in touch).

STEPHEN HITCHINGS
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As I have not read much sf for a couple of years, I am amazed to find that I appear to be in fashion—or at least in good company. I had been wondering what had happened to Ms Le Guin, and I find the truth rather sad. Her letter also re-awakened my *Great Disappointment*—my failure, through insurmountable circumstances, to attend the famous Le Guin workshop (followed by the horror of finding that circumstances were probably not as insurmountable as I had thought). As for Lem, I usually enjoy him less than some of the writers he condemns. Per-

haps I just don't like Polish writers—I haven't read enough to be sure; I greatly enjoy the works of Karol Wojtyla, but for very different reasons. And as for Rottensteiner—his sneering cynicism blinded me to anything valuable he might have had to say.

I disagreed with most of the reviews, as usual (though I am fascinated that some reviewers nearly always find something nice to say, while others are all nastiness; wonder if you really give some people all the good books). One exception: noted with pleasure your approval of 'Under the Garden', which I encountered in 1980 in Greene's collection, *A Sense of Reality*, from which I would also recommend 'A Discovery in the Woods' as a superior post-holocaust story. In fact, I'll recommend the whole book, short (112 pages) though it is. I have become a very great Greene fan: recently I agonised over *The Heart of the Matter*, the most agonising book I have ever read, and hated Greene for torturing his character like that. Since then I have read that he says he *loved* Scobie; if that is love, may I never glimpse hatred.

I thought 'Holland of the Mind' a disappointing postscript to 'The Heat Death of the Universe'. But if you had not read it before, that means (gasp!) that you had not read *The New SF* (ed. Langdon Jones), the book than which Michael Moorcock had never 'read a better collection of original fiction before'. (Though my disagreement approaches 100 per cent; oh well, tastes differ). I was unaware that D M Thomas wrote novels. I'm afraid I find little of interest in his poetry.

Apart from that, I'm simply amazed that anyone can compare *Rocannon's World* favourably with *The Dispossessed*. *Rocannon's World* is the one Le Guin novel that bored me.

(6 January 1981)

Perhaps Graham Greene loved Scobie for the suffering he could not escape. From reading interviews with authors, I get the impression that often characters bring dooms down upon themselves.

I've had *The New SF* sitting on the shelf for a very long time, and I still haven't read it. I don't know why. By the time I tracked down a copy, it was too late to include stories from it in my 'Best Of' whatever-year-it-was. Maybe that's it. Maybe I just want to save up some jewel from the late 1960s to tide me over the early 1980s.

I liked D M Thomas' poetry quite well when it appeared in *New Worlds* in 1967/68, but I've not seen any of his more recent works. He's a wonderful novelist.

In a postscript, Stephen, you asked about some reviews you wrote some time ago. There's nothing wrong with them! They're fine stuff. The trouble is that I have about 500 pages of fine stuff still sitting in the files. A lot of it concerns books which have gone out of print, or it's material which is in some other way out-dated, at least for the purposes of the new, slimline *SFC*. My real problem is to find a way to publish much of that brilliant stuff. I have not yet found a solution. I have 50 reams of duplicating paper awaiting conversion into fanzines. My good old trusty Adler Gabriele has been cleaned and repaired. Everything is ready for another *Supersonic Snail*. Instead I produce another *SFC*. Instead I keep working on the Reprint issue (80,000 words typeset so far). Need I go on?

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Thanks for *SFC 60/61*. Please note the new address. Nienke and I are renting a house with another couple and their 1½-year-old daughter. The place is within about a hundred metres of the beach, and the University of Victoria, where Nienke is studying (violin performance) is just a ten-minute walk up the hill. Our yard has apple trees, pear trees—even a peach tree and a (!) grape vine. This may not sound unusual to you, but in Canada, Victoria has the mildest climate of any city. It seldom snows in winter, and the summers are sunny but mild. This makes it a haven for retired people, but also pretty nice for anyone in general—and at the moment land and housing prices are shooting up astronomically as demand far exceeds supply. While back in Toronto, for instance, they're suffering minus 30°C temperatures (usually it's not *that* bad in Toronto, though it is elsewhere), here it's plus 10°C (50°F) and joggers are to be seen in shorts and T-shirts. There are even stunted palm trees to be seen here and there—though these are more a curiosity than anything else, rather like they are in Brighton, England—no doubt planted just to show it can be done. Victoria is about the size of Brighton, though a pleasanter city, and with a more spectacular natural setting. It's at the southern tip of a huge island—Vancouver Island, several hundred miles long, with its own snow-capped mountain ranges, and largely an uninhabited wilderness. To the south and east across the water can be seen mountain ranges in the state of Washington, with Mt Baker clearly visible on any good day.

Victoria has the reputation of being a very 'English' city, and as such it is an attraction for hordes of American tourists during the summer. What they see, however, is mostly a kind of Disneyland facade: they are overcharged for tea in the Empress Hotel, take bus tours in double-deckers imported from London. But behind this facade there *is* a certain Britishness, in places. Some of the streets and shops away from downtown do remind me of Britain (ordinary, everyday Britain, not tourist Britain), and in the small local shopping centre near us there's even what could pass for an authentic British pub (a rare thing indeed in North America). Victoria is the capital of British Columbia, and has a university, which means it has more going for it culturally than most cities of its size. For example, there's a film series at the university: a different movie every evening six nights a week, and they're all *good* movies, which means mostly European, Japanese, and the like. They even showed a number of Australian films a month ago. Coming up is a number of German films: Fassbinder, Wenders, etc. And these are all at about half the price of commercial cinema tickets.

I'm afraid I no longer read science fiction, so I can't contribute much in that line. I found myself agreeing with Brian Aldiss about the present state of sf, which is partly why I no longer read the stuff. Like Ursula Le Guin, I find the 'larger world' (the 'real' world) endlessly new, and so much more interesting than the little world of sf. I think that in a real sense I've outgrown science fiction: now, when I want to think about 'ideas' I go straight to the hard stuff—non-fiction philosophy, political science, etc. If you get into classical music, then eventually you stop listening to the Boston Pops and start listening to Bernstein. Or if you're into rock, then you come to prefer Jethro Tull to the Carpenters. On the other hand, my appreciation of good 'mainstream' fiction is growing, though at the moment I read comparatively little fiction of any kind. Perhaps mainstream fiction, with its focus on the interpersonal, cannot be 'transcended' in the way that sf can be. Sf is ultimately *science* fiction, and if you're seriously interested in the science (natural or social), then you quit the fiction. But mainstream fiction deals

CHRIS PRIEST: 'Someone like Spider Robinson could only rise to eminence in a genre where literary standards, and critical standards, have become derelict.'

with emotions and interpersonal relations in a way that cannot be replaced by scientific inquiry. You don't graduate from Nabokov to a psychology textbook; *Lolita* is art, not a poor person's psychology textbook; it is not watered-down science, or even imaginatively presented science. No doubt I'm presenting this argument in too bald a form. It needs qualification, but I think there's something to what I say.

Which brings me to a book I'd like to recommend to you and everyone else: *Burger's Daughter*, by Nadine Gordimer. This is an exceptionally fine novel; I haven't read anything that's impressed me so much in a long, long time. It's about South Africa, and it was banned there when it first appeared. Could anything this powerful and profound be written in the medium of science fiction?

(28 December 1980)

Well, of course, something profound *could* be written within the bounds of science fiction. *The Malacia Tapestry* has real artistic profundity (as opposed to philosophical profundity, which is a quality which one sniffs at suspiciously in *any* novel). So has *On Wings of Song*. I'm not sure that many people in sf are too interested in the qualities you mention. The impression I get from the authors interviewed by Charles Platt in *Dream Makers* is that sf authors in general *don't like people very much* (that is, people outside the sf fraternity), which may be the simplest possible explanation of why they write as they do.

I don't think science fiction has much to do with science. It has something to do with the future: but, if we have any possibility of controlling our own futures, then science fiction is about our dreams and aspirations—what we want the future to be like. It's the tawdriness of the dreams and aspirations of most sf writers which is so depressing. But I still like the fact that they are dreaming and aspiring, even in a naive manner. I just don't see why the limitations of the sf medium should be so limiting. The limitations of the children's fantasy medium don't stop the best children's writers from being great writers. The best mystery writers are much better writers than all but a very few sf people. I don't see why we have to put up with all the rotten apples in the genre fiction barrel. Enough.

Thanks for all the personal news. You would probably like living in Melbourne, although this heartbreak old town hardly specialises in spectacular scenery. (It does specialise in idiotic politicians, but that's a story which will have to wait.) There are quite a few repertory cinemas in Melbourne now (all, it seems, with recurrent Fassbinder and Herzog seasons). Chris Priest thought that parts of Melbourne's northern suburbs were very English, but I think any Englishness in the place is more in its temper and pace. Parts of Melbourne's outer suburbs are just like the outer suburbs of any American city, complete with Kentucky Fried Chicken and Macdonald's stands. Boring big skyscrapers litter the inner city. St Kilda and Carlton are still the sections of greater Melbourne with some character, but recent developers' plans in Carlton will probably change all that. I like living here because I could not imagine living anywhere else —but I'd like to visit Victoria, Canada, some day.

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I hope Brian Aldiss doesn't bother to rise to Rottensteiner's unwarranted attack. His long letter, civilised and intellectual (in the best sense), is itself an answer to the sort of cerebral thuggery that Rottensteiner goes in for. Whatever the truth of Aldiss's alleged 'lack of integrity', it is as nothing when set beside Rottensteiner's apparent lack of everything else.

Aldiss's concern for standards is one I share. I hadn't heard that joyless fact about Asimov before: that he tried to suppress the work of New Wave writers. Brian is to be applauded for putting it on record. I'd like to see wider publicity given to such activities: such as Asimov's recent attempts to canvass the SFWA Grandmaster Award for himself. The very fact that this sort of award is seen as desirable is some indication of how far standards have fallen. Brian's other example of mediocrity, Spider Robinson, is one that particularly bothers me. It's not just that he writes in a sub-literate style (which is in itself enough reason to stand against him), but what he says in that low-forehead style is a disgrace. What it amounts to is a total abdication of critical impartiality. Yet this doesn't matter: Robinson is a success, the like of which has never been seen. He is popular. (So popular, indeed, that he is frequently asked to be Guest at sf conventions . . . and so often is he asked that he now uses printed rejection slips!) But the point is that someone like Robinson could only rise to eminence in a genre where literary standards, and critical standards, have become derelict.

Because the writing of sf represents a literary movement, however unpopular the word has become, I have my own beliefs as to why sf has become decadent (some of which I wrote about in my SFWA article), but my own views on this are irrelevant. It would be instructive to compare the sf literary movement with other literary movements . . . you'd find the same pattern, I'm sure. The zeal of the minority, the steady acquisition of confidence, sudden popular success and (hence) supposed justification, etc. But because the science fiction world has always looked inwards, it has never developed a sense of perspective, so that it has never known how well it was doing. The comparisons have always been with commercial genres. ('Sf books sell better than Westerns', etc.) At the same time, and contradictorily, there is the traditional cry of uniqueness, that an sf book is somehow 'higher' than another from general fiction, or to one side of it. So we have reached the paradoxical position that exists today, where someone like Spider Robinson can be treated seriously as a critic, someone like Asimov can be treated seriously as a classic writer, someone like Moskowitz can be thought of as an historian, someone like Darrell Schweitzer can be considered to be a penetrating interviewer, Barry Longyear a promising writer,

Franz Rottensteiner an intellectual, and so on. I don't know if we ever had them, but if we did we lost our standards a long time ago.

It's a difficult position to support, but I'm coming round to the idea that it is no longer possible to write science fiction seriously. Or, to put it another way, science fiction is no longer a place where serious writers are welcome. If you doubt this assertion, all you need to do is look around you. How many serious writers would you say there were in the sf world at the moment? I don't mean writers serious about their writing; you know what I mean. Yet, for all the claims you hear from the middlebrow sf commentator, you'd think that sf was the last hope for literature. And when a good writer appears, no one *really* knows what to do with him. Take Tom Disch. There's old George Turner saying of Disch that he has never had the recognition he deserves (right; so why doesn't Turner give it to him?), and in the same issue of *SFC* you yourself make frequent references to Disch's unparallelled brilliance, without coming to grips with it. The awful truth is that serious writers only embarrass the sf world. Stanislaw Lem's major crime against SFWA was not that he was rude, but that he wrote stories no one could understand! Give the fans a new Simak or Williamson, and the old value-judgments will serve yet again. But give them someone with genuine originality, and they're literally lost for words. By the way, while you're counting the serious writers, you might as well check out how many of them are working on non-sf projects at the moment, and ask yourself why.

The fact is that Spider Robinson and *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* and Franz Rottensteiner and Jerry Pournelle and Jacqueline Lichtenberg and Heinlein's beer-money philosophy and dozens of other independent factors have together created an ambience which is anti-literary, and hence inimical to serious writing. The thing is, a philistine atmosphere drives away good writers . . . but an atmosphere which encourages good writers is also one in which lesser talents stand a chance of improving themselves. At the moment, new writers have to be only just-so to win the Campbell Award, and with nothing to kick against they can go on seemingly forever thereafter, giving a new breadth of meaning to the phrase 'barely adequate'.

But thanks for a stimulating issue to read through the barren desert of Christmas. (29 December 1980)

CHRIS PRIEST: 'Stanislaw Lem's major crime against SFWA was not that he was rude, but that he wrote stories no one could understand! Give the fans a new Simak or Williamson. . .'

Little I can say to that, except things I've said already to Angus Taylor and others. I do think it's odd to link the name of Franz Rottensteiner with those other names on your list, especially as his expressed opinions during the last fifteen years add up to much the same as your own. Franz's satiric sally at would-be superstar sf writers in *60/61* was both horribly true, and not necessarily true. My own disagreement with Franz Rottensteiner is his constant assumption that there is now only one worthwhile sf writer, and that is Stanislaw Lem. I've enjoyed Lem's translated-into-English material better than most people have, but there are aspects of science fiction which Lem does not cover, eg, social comedy of the future, which some English-language sf writers do quite well.

However, Franz can still produce the odd brilliant item, such as his review of *The Language of the Night* in a recent *Science Fiction Studies*. I'm just annoyed that he didn't send the article to *SFC* instead. ('Because he knows it won't get published for a year or two, stupid.' Oops. Yes. Quite probably.)

As you can see, Chris, I've had a crack at *On Wings of Song* after all. I put it off because I didn't think I could do justice to the book. Probably I haven't. I've found that many local reviewers are hesitant about reviewing the better sf books for much the same reason. It's easy to shaft John Varley, but it takes me weeks to put together a review of, say, *On Wings of Song*. It might make a difference if I had some money to pay the good reviewers.

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Brian Aldiss and I have rarely shared more than qualified agreement on matters science-fictional, so *SFC 60/61* marks some kind of a pleasant first, even if it must be at Samuel Delany's expense. Poor Chip? Nonsense. Novelists become rapidly accustomed to having their children trampled to death in public and usually have enough friends (Jerry Kaufman, for instance) on the 'yea' side to hold them from despair. There are a few sf writers who scramble into hysterical print at a breath of criticism, but it is more often fans who become outraged when a god's toes are stamped on, feeling that their literary appreciation is being impugned.

However, Jerry's point about the 'bitchy lies' may well be correct. Wild horses will not drag me through that book a third time just to check the point. For the rest, Jerry should re-read the essay and make certain what I wrote; he misrepresents me as seriously as he claims I misrepresented Delany. On the fifty-odd sexes matter, I think my parody was as valid as the Delany original, and for the purpose of the exercise you can read sex/gender interchangeably without altering the sense of what I wrote—save to become more confusing. And if flim-flam being 'clever' makes it acceptable, there's no quarrelling with the other bloke's taste; I prefer to call it supercilious, silly, and possibly dishonest. As regards the 'parting shot' about Delany's supposed lack of support: *Dhalgren* was in fact one of the surprise big sellers of its day and gave rise to republication of *all* his previous titles. Support was there in strength and, in cash terms, still is. Come off it, Jerry! Check your facts and references.

Back to Brian. I don't know if his left-hemisphere/right-hemisphere idea will hold psychological water but it sounds reasonable at first reading. In fact, it sounds so science-fictionally reasonable that I expect its appearance in a story sooner or later. (Busy for the next two years—no time to pinch it for myself.) On the need for walking a mile in the other bloke's moccasins—Concise Oxford spelling; black mark to whomsoever [*brg: Probably me.*] —I must agree, but felt that I had trudged a marathon through eight Delany novels, a volume of short stories

GEORGE TURNER: 'There is room on one planet for Jerry Kaufman, Brian Aldiss, Samuel Delany, and George Turner—even if we all feel a touch of claustrophobia at times.'

and half *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* before mental cramp suggested I had kept company long enough. I tried for years to locate a viable talent there. Nor do I now call him pretentious or a trickster; I am sure that he genuinely believes in the worth of what he is doing, and that there the sadness lies.

Before Jerry plants a hobnailed boot on my limited number of typing fingers (four on a good day), be it admitted that I also believe in the worth of what I am doing and also may be utterly wrong, and that maybe *there* a sadness lies.... However, once belief sets in, you mustn't shut up for simple fear of being wrong. Which means there is room on one planet for Jerry Kaufman, Brian Aldiss, Samuel Delany, and George Turner—even if we all feel a touch of claustrophobia at times.

There's room for Chris Priest, too, though he isn't reading so well these days. I dug out and re-read the *Shikasta* review he complained of and found it a plain, descriptive effort, tailored to the needs of the magazine it appeared in, with a very soft pedal on everything in the way of value judgments. So where's the complaint? What statements needed supporting? In a different publication for a different readership I gave it fuller treatment, with all the argumentative stops out and all the references in. Chris seems to be getting his jollies lately by lashing his tail and growling, and that's just how I started in the fanzines, back in the old roneoed-sheet days. Keep it up, Chris! You too can become a monster of obloquy to your enemies and a burden to your friends. From one who knows!

I propose to break a rule now and discuss one of my own novels, *Beloved Son*, not because Cy Chauvin is curious about my attitude towards it but because of what seems to me an extraordinary comment by Andrew Weiner. But first, this: A writer tacitly forswears argument when he charges the public money to read his work; he has to put up with whatever criticism he gets after having, so to speak, asked for it. The one excuse for his talking back to a reader is that of finding his work *factually* misrepresented in criticism, and I think Andrew's comment falls just within that limit, though it is plainly a matter of misunderstanding rather than misrepresentation.

He writes of Albert Raft as a 'Van Vogtian superman'. Well, he was a character for whom I had some sympathy because he was anything but the superman needed to cope with his situation; he got the dirty end of every stick in sight and finally died because he was in everybody's way. (Including, at that point, the author's—but his removal was structurally and psychologically inevitable; he never had a chance.) He was *not* a superman, Van Vogtian or otherwise—very much the reverse. Almost all of the long first chapter is devoted to building him up as a repressed, neurotic, paranoid personality ready to blow at the wrong touch. I did everything but use those exact phrases to drive it home, and here's the crunch: nearly all the mainstream reviewers caught this point, colouring their view of all that followed; practically none of the sf reviewers did. I leave the implications for others to elaborate on.

Further to Andrew, I did realise the danger of wiping Raft out of the story, but making the points which had been building throughout the novel would have been almost impossible with him ranting and bellowing through the final chapter. He was an unfortunate, but hardly a sympathetic character. Also, it was time for the reader to see rather more of the Ethical Culture in its own terms; therefore the viewpoint shifted to the eyes of Campion, Parker, and the clones (with Lindley as last whipping boy), all of whom had been featured strongly enough to allow them to take over and demonstrate the truth about their unpleasant culture. I had counted on readers making the change smoothly, but many didn't. The fault has to be mine—it's no good blaming the reader for not using the perspectives you demand of him—but you can never know how these technical moves will succeed until somebody tells you they didn't.

Critical reception varied so violently from delight to damnation that I feel inclined to take refuge in Oscar Wilde's dictum that 'when the critics fall out, the artist is at peace with himself'. (Don't take 'artist' too seriously.)

That's enough of that. If Cy Chauvin would care to write personally, I'll answer what questions he may have. I prefer that to public essay-writing, which inevitably smacks of excuse-making.

Ursula's opting out of sf reading is no surprise. Her fiction of the last few years has suggested it. I must admit that I haven't been quite so exultantly enthusiastic about her output since *The Dispossessed*, but I still grab them as they appear. That puts her with Disch, Wolfe, Aldiss, and the Strugatski brothers; no others need apply—one accepts the occasional disappointment, knowing that the basic value is there.

Lem, too? Well, he never could find anything to interest him in sf, could he? Why did he read it? I am reminded of Gustav and Alma Mahler ashamed to be seen attending *The Merry Widow*, afraid someone would discover that they *loved* Lehar's bouncy, second-rate, middle-class tunes. (So do I. And Mahler as well.)

To add to all these mountains of disillusionment, I also read little sf beyond what is given to me for review, and find most of that close to unbearable. Older and wiser? Well—older, anyway.

But I *do* read *SFC*. When there is one.

PS: Bruce, you are the first person who ever claimed that I unblocked his sinuses. I shall treasure that for my autobiography. And Franz Rottensteiner also paid a compliment—at least I think so, but you can't ever be sure with Franz.

(6 January 1981)

And I shall treasure the paragraph in which an author actually admitted that readers who were puzzled by one of his books might have actually been right, and the author might actually have done something wrong! This must be a first in an sf fanzine.

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Taking your statement in the most recent *SF Commentary* (that no one had been able to explain, in coherent critical terms, just what they liked

about Delany's last few books) as a challenge, I present the following:

One of the major problems facing non-American readers of Delany (and Americans who only read sf) is that Delany has recently been using a fictional mode that seems to be current only among American mainstream writers (Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and Gilbert Sorrentino, to name three offhand examples). This mode is ultimately derived from Joyce: not the typographical-trickery Joyce who is so easy to imitate (as the late sixties 'new wave' school of sf proved), but the Joyce who was interested in a very precise and naturalistic presentation of the way that human beings think and perceive. This attention to detail is carried over into other areas, for example, the impression of a great deal of knowledge about some scientific or academic discipline which Delany refers to as 'expertise', or such techniques as the catalogue or list. The resulting text (in Joyce, the American mainstream, and in Delany) is *not* the broken-up series of set-pieces most people think of as 'Joycean', but a seamless barrage of tiny bits of data, some of it 'irrelevant', except as it contributes to the full *gestalt* of a character's perception, and some of it part of a pattern of references that are not organised in any linear way, but rather in what might be called 'mosaic' fashion; the writer leaves it to the reader (and re-reader) to make the connections between all the bits, and this web of references is an important part of the overall meaning of the text.

Discussed:
TRITON
by Samuel R Delany
(Bantam Y2567. 1976. 369 pp. $US 1.95.)

TALES OF NEVERYON
by Samuel R Delany
(Bantam 12333.5. 1979. 264 pp; $US 2.25.)

The appearance of these texts, to the superficial eye, is chaotic, turgid, obscure, dense, difficult, wordy, dull, without forward momentum, and extremely self-indulgent. But to those who are willing to give the writer the benefit of the doubt, and read slower and work a little harder, the result is extremely rewarding: a heightened perception, a considerable lucidity in conveying extremely complex perceptions and ideas that would be impossible in a simpler style, and a tremendous large-scale grasp of systems of various kinds. It is a style that is exactly parallel to legal lnguage: it has to be difficult as it is in order to say with precision what it needs to say.

DON KELLER: 'Any writer of books such as *Report on Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head* has a lot of gall referring to another writer as obscure and difficult.'

Apparently what is happening is that people who read both mainstream and sf have two entirely different modes of reading. For mainstream (say Proust or Joyce or name your favourite) they are willing to take their time, read slowly, pay close attention to subtle nuances: in short, do a lot of work to get to the writer's meaning. But for sf, they relax their attention, and get impatient if there is any demand on them greater than linearity of event and straightforward accessibility of style. It is very hard to believe that this is the case, but there seems to be no other possible explanation. (And any writer who has written books such as *Report on Probability A* and *Barefoot in the Head* has a lot of gall referring to another writer as obscure and difficult.)

Another problem is that Delany has been studying some extremely obscure philosophies and critical theories, particularly structuralism; and while a lot of what he is trying to say would probably be clearer to someone who has been studying in the same area, I feel that Delany explains his context clearly enough that even an uninitiated reader, if attentive, can follow him. This problem is more in evidence in Delany's criticism, but it also affects his recent fiction: each section of both *Triton* and *Tales of Neveryon* is prefaced by a moderately abstruse quote which is a specific elaboration of it. The purpose the quotes serve is to direct the interested reader to the source of Delany's ideas, which can only expand the reader's education. The problem of how much a writer should demand his reader know before reading his work has been long debated with reference to Eliot, Pound, and Joyce, among others; the answer in their case (virtually no limit) should be extended, out of courtesy, if nothing else, to Delany until it can be proved by a *knowledgeable* reader that he is writing nonsense.

As for specific works: I can't say a whole lot about *Dhalgren* for the simple reason that—for purely external reasons—I have never gotten around to finishing it. I enjoyed it page by page, but as of yet I am not completely convinced of its success.

Triton is another matter. I regard it as possibly the most complex sf novel yet written. In it the post-Besterian Delany of *Babel-17* and *Nova* meets the post-Joycean Delany of *Dhalgren*, and the mixture is explosive. It does have its flaws (what doesn't?), but the incredibly dense texture of both the prose and the society he invents puts it very high on my list of best sf novels. The second chapter, with its counterpoint of at least three or four different discourses (as Delany would call them) is absolutely dazzling, and this is only one of a number of excellences. The ideas he is playing with (the modular calculus chief among them) are of a depth of thought few sf writers can match. Parts of it *are* hard to follow, but even the most difficult section (the final appendix) becomes, with careful rereading, quite comprehensible, considering the complexity of the thought. And Delany's portrait of a truly free (in most senses) society, where barriers of sex, race, age, orientation, fashion, etc, do not exist, is very convincing. Although I haven't had an opportunity to reread it, every time I casually peruse it I am astonished all over again by the power of its technique. I am not going to try to defend it against George Turner (whose opinion I had until now respected), though I will say that many of his objections seem to be either trifling or the result of misunderstandings, and the paragraph he quotes seemed perfectly lucid to me.

The two books of criticism, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* and *The American Shore*, are some of the best critical writings on sf I have seen. Delany has an unusual approach and attitude toward the writing of fiction and of

science fiction in particular, and I find his arguments compelling. He shows by atomising and dissecting fiction to its ultimate components just how it has its effect on us, and how science fiction differs utterly from mainstream fiction. Again, the complexity of the prose is completely justified in view of the complexity of the thought.

Tales of Neveryon seemed at first to be a somewhat lighter series of sword-and-sorcery stories (and have been roundly criticised as though that was all they were), but a careful reading proves the book to be of a level of complexity hardly less than *Triton*'s, though much less intense and forbidding. Here Delany manages to discuss some of his more difficult ideas in a primitive situation where a certain degree of simplification via concrete demonstration is both necessary and appropriate, and the ideas are just as strongly conveyed. The protagonist of the book is the culture itself, and it is presented in a piecemeal and totally non-linear way (the mosaic technique again), so that the reader's understanding of the ecology of the culture (especially on the economic level) is built up gradually. It also gently suggests some reasons why the modern world is in its present fix, without being blatant about it. As fiction in the ordinary sense—ie, linear plot and characterisation—it is almost obstinately lax, but as metafiction—fiction about the experience of fiction—it is a remarkable success.

In conclusion, I simply cannot understand why Delany's reputation has sunk so low among fans, since to my mind he is writing better than ever. I had thought that the readership had gained in sophistication and literary taste over the last decade, but apparently I was wrong. It is a shame that a writer of his achievement is so constantly maligned by people who, with a little patience, could find the qualities in his fiction readily enough.

(2 February 1981)

Don Keller published some good fanzines with Jeff Smith some years ago, but I had lost track of him recently. So he was not even an official reader of *SFC* when he sent this letter! Turns out he moved to Oregon, like everybody else in American fandom. Quite a compliment to me to get this letter from out of the blue. It's a pity that I must cast doubts on its contents (but not without assigning George Turner to answer it in detail).

I appreciate the effort that has gone into this letter, but it still does not answer my request for some coherent critical statement which justifies the adulation often given to the works of Samuel R Delany. For a start, Don, you do not examine any particular book of Delany's in sufficient detail to give me much idea of what he is on about. But maybe that's not what I want. Maybe I want from someone, somewhere, a single-sentence summary of what Delany has to say. I know such a summary would sound banal, but the fact that it could be made might convince me that there is something in Delany's work worth searching for.

I looked up the reference to *Dhalgren* in the *Magill Survey of Science Fiction Literature*, and the essay on *Dhalgren* hardly made me want to get it from the shelf and start reading it. On the other hand, I looked up the reference to Delany in Peter Nicholls' *Science Fiction Encyclopedia* and found that Peter himself had written the entry on Delany. This was impressive, but not as much as the fact that he had actually tried to make some summary statements about Delany's writing. For instance: 'All SRD's mature work begs the reader to reconsider his social conditioning; to strive to see how even through pain or lust or cruelty some kind of fruitfulness can be achieved, and conversely, how even the lords of creation, the arrogant successes, suffer their own griefs.' Maybe that's not much, but it's better than saying, as Don Keller appears to, that 'I like Delany's work because I cannot understand it.'

I could go on for pages, answering Don's letter sentence by sentence, but I don't think it'd get us far. The picture which Don presents of Delany is that of a pedant who depends upon his readers' incomprehension of his sources. I must admit that that is my picture of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as well, so maybe the comparison with Joyce is not mis-placed. But Don takes in vain the name of a writer like Proust, whose first allegiance was to the artistic god of Beauty. Does Don find Delany's works beautiful? If he doesn't, why does he bother with Delany's books? If he does, what are the elements in Delany's books which combine to give that impression of beauty? (Hardly as vague a question as it sounds: aesthetics seems to have been developed well as a discipline over the years.)

On another tack: proof is given that Delany is knowledgeable (although I have heard aspersions cast at Delany's expertise in particular subjects). But is there *wisdom* in Delany's work? This is another quality which is difficult to pin down, and yet it seems another essential ingredient of any great work. A writer who is better than Proust or Joyce is Robert Musil. His *The Man Without Qualities* (now available again after being unobtainable for more than a decade) could hardly have been written without the author's complex knowledge of European history and aesthetics during the last thousand years. However, little *information* is offered pedantically. Instead, the author rises above his sources and spins out a long web of wisdom which is much more than any bits of information. Even then, the essential quality shown by Musil is his love of human beings—all people and all their endeavours. Musil and Joyce and Proust —and Flannery O'Connor and Stanley Elkin in USA—are great writers because they know people, and they can make beautiful patterns out of that knowledge. Does Delany match these criteria?

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It remains a matter of some wonderment to me that I find most of the authors you most recommend in *SFC 60/61* totally unreadable. And most of the ones you dislike to be just the spot for filling in an hour's journey on a crowded, uncomfortable train. So, are the judges of the Nebulas and Hugos, who will assuredly all be affected by lobbying, reading with great care and consideration, or are they sitting on the train? I say they are sitting on the train; what is more, that is where they should be. After all, of what possible merit is literature? As far as I can see, it is a pointless and futile attempt to make over the world into something other than what it is. It therefore seems much more reasonable not to bother with literary merit (which, provided I continue to read books at 1000-2000 words a minute, I wouldn't in any case notice—I'm not at all sure I would notice, even if I read with care), but only to concern myself with whether the story-line is exciting.

Well, there have always been a host of people who have taken my lists of favourites, reversed the order, and come out with their own favourites. Just shows that *SFC* can be of service to any sf reader. For myself, the best works of literature I ever read were consumed on the tram from East Preston to Melbourne and back—and that's noisier and more uncomfortable than the Katoomba-Sydney train. I recom-

ERIC LINDSAY: 'Most of the authors you recommend are totally unreadable. Most of the ones you dislike are just the spot for filling an hour's journey on a crowded, uncomfortable train.'

mend what I enjoy reading; I can do no more. As Elaine said to me recently, good writing (literary type) is just easier to read than bad writing (Larry Niven type). Obviously we will never agree on this matter.

I want to comment on the alleged merits of micro-computers, as described by Robert Day. I once believed that they would do everything but butter your bread for you, until I tried to make use of them for one simple task, namely, word-processing. As you found out in relation to typesetting, commercial equipment was too expensive to be cost effective. So I tried using 'home computer' equipment to do the same sort of thing, knowing that several people, like Peter Darling and David Grigg, had succeeded in so doing.

Do you know, in the past twelve months of effort, not one commercial piece of equipment has been able to work as specified? Not one interconnecting device has worked at all. And in the only two cases where I have had things repaired, the 'repaired' devices have still not worked when returned. So far, the only things that have worked have been things that I have built or altered myself . . . and I never wanted to get involved with the mechanics of micros. It would be all the same to me if they worked by manipulating a ouija board. What the user wants is a means to an end; what you buy, with micros, is a continuing set of problems, with no indication that you will ever be able to get enough help to solve them. As far as I am concerned, the micro-computer 'revolution' is just another rip-off, with the people making most of the money being the distributors and dealers. I don't believe that, in the hobby computer field, the people making the money are the overseas manufacturers—it is our home-grown rip-off merchants who are charging 50 per cent more than overseas prices, for inferior equipment. Things may be different in the business field, of course.

Basically, I've wasted the best part of eight months trying to make commercial equipment do the things it was supposedly designed to do. I've given up now. I'll be selling the commercial junk, and building the entire thing myself, to work the way I want it to work. But I resent the time wasted, and the effort involved.

(3 January 1981)

I don't want to start in *SFC* the never-ending discussion of computer equipment which has made parts of ANZAPA incomprehensible over the last year or so—but Eric's is an interesting point of view. My own interest is in photo-typesetters, and I keep hearing intriguing snippets of information about the photosetting industry—for instance, that Australia always gets the tag ends of the new technology; that really the machines currently available in Australia are downright old-fashioned. 'New' laser-setting equipment is just about to be demonstrated for the first time in Melbourne by one organisation we know of.

To your main point: we are not sure whether the equipment we have been looking at is defective or not. That's a problem for the local technicians. If you buy photosetting equipment (or word-processing equipment, etc) in Australia, you pay for the continued services of the organisation which keeps the machine running. This seems somewhat different from the approach of the micro-electronics supermarkets, which merely want to get rid of bits from their shelves. Good luck with your own efforts, Eric—maybe you should add organising fannish micro-electronics conventions to the list of your other triumphs, such as the by-now-famous Medvention.

SNEJA GUNEW
Deakin University
Victoria 3217

I noticed that Elaine mentioned *Frankenstein* in her list of favourites for last year, and one of the things I was doing as part of the myth course I was writing up for third-year students at Deakin University was to 'discover' Mary Shelley. This occurred within the context of a more systematic exploration of women writers and this last has also absorbed my energies for the last two years.

The result is that I'm researching a book on female utopists, ie, the way women writers have projected utopian societies. I could start with the Duchess of Newcastle and finish up with people like Russ, Le Guin, and the later Lessing, but that will sort itself out. The net result is that in a roundabout way I have travelled back to sf via feminism and am highly optimistic about it in this respect.

Let me just say that I was most interested in Elaine's comments on *A Woman of the Future* and wish she would write a longer piece based on her very sound demurrals.

(6 January 1981)

Ireland's *A Woman of the Future* keeps coming up in conversation. The basis of my liking of the book is its unpsychological approach—in other words, I've never thought that Ireland meant for you to think that he was really proposing that the book is the diary of an adolescent woman. And, as Elaine keeps saying, if that was so, he probably guessed wrong. Damien Broderick put up the better notion that perhaps *A Woman of the Future* is Ireland's way of showing what one Australian man thinks of other Australian men. In either case, the book might not have much interest to feminists. In fact, the book has aroused some interest among feminist reviewers—but it's hard to tell, since most newspapers and magazines gave their copies to male reviewers.

Welcome back to these pages, anyway, Sneja. I had begun to think that I had lost contact altogether. Any news of developments in your female utopists course would be welcome.

NEVILLE J ANGOVE
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Canberra City, ACT 2601

With *SFC 60/61* came the personal attack on me by Lee Harding. Well, not personal. Rather, an impersonal

ANGOVE battles HARDING

●

A farewell to SFC. GILLESPIE gets frightfully upset.

attack. If it wasn't for the fact that you seemed to have understood my point, I would have spent agonising hours soul-searching, to see what I had written that would have inspired Lee to such an attack. [*brg: Yes, I'm still puzzled about what Lee was *really* upset about.*]

Contrary to Lee's assertions, I am neither a neo-publisher, nor am I misinformed. Australian publishers on average print *and sell* in excess of 5000 copies of most paperback titles (although a sale of 1500 copies of a mainstream hardcover is considered usual in order to break even). A good paperback title sells in excess of 10,000 copies, and an Australian bestseller will sell in excess of 25,000 copies (that is quite rare, and is considered newsworthy). But if a mainstream paperback title does not sell at least 3000 copies (out of the industry standard of a 5000-6000 copy print run), then it is considered a failure. New titles by Australian authors do not sell well. New titles by US authors in the US do not sell well, either. Both Lit Board grants and the book bounty help pay for such titles, but they still must sell enough or else the author does not get his next title published.

Lee appears to be one of those many Australian authors who believe that library sales will affect book sales, to his detriment. There is very little commonality between library users and book-buyers, excepting that a reader may buy a good book if he or she either wishes to have it for repeated readings, or if it will not be available in a library soon enough. The truth is that it is only in a library that a particular title is available on display after it has been withdrawn from sale in a bookshop. The truth is that library sales have kept US publishers solvent for more than a decade. The truth is that it is possible for Australian libraries to absorb up to 700 copies of a particular title, if that title is in demand. Such a guaranteed sales figure, even before the general release of a particular title, would also be a guarantee of a profit for the publisher (and a guarantee of a welcome mat for the author's next manuscript).

Librarians are normally given a yearly budget, with part of this budget earmarked for new or replacement books. Some titles *must* be purchased (like some journals, the best-sellers, *Australian-Bookweek*-promoted titles, and such). But the librarian is then left with some discretionary funds, to be applied as he/she sees fit. If no other guidelines are available, the librarian will normally purchase, from a library bookseller (like Bennet's in Sydney), a broad range of books which, from his or her experience, would be acceptable to the library's users. Some titles that he or she feels will be well-received will be purchased in sufficient quantity that each branch of the library will have a copy (children's books and best-sellers, generally). Other titles will be purchased singly. But what the librarian needs is some direction—and any reasonable request by a library user will normally be met. Some requests will be satisfied through an inter-library loan, but if the title seems to be in demand (for example, if two readers separately ask for the same title), then it will be purchased. My point is: how does Lee think librarians decide what titles to buy? How discerning does he think they are? I have a standing order in my files for any hardcover detective fiction by popular authors, two copies each, please, for one library, just because the librarian knows that several readers will borrow those titles as soon as they become available (but none of them will ever buy the same titles for themselves, because $17.95 is a little too rich for the average reader).

Lee may care to verify my remarks by speaking to any librarian from a large town/city/municipal library; he may find some exceptions (I know one town where the total new book budget was $25).

Next point: I know that most UK publishers are printing less than 1000 copies of some titles. Why? According to reports from the 1980 UK Book Fair, it is because libraries have been cut in their discretionary funding, and will no longer automatically purchase their titles. (As an aside: in Canberra, the library is purchasing more paperbacks instead.) Print runs are down (and prices are up) because the guaranteed library sales are no longer guaranteed.

I may have done Lee an injustice, because some of his remarks to my original letter may be accurate *when applied to sf publishing alone*, but the general tone seems to apply to publishing as a whole.

(5 January 1981)

I've forgotten what the dispute was all about, so I hope it ends here. Speaking as a publisher (one third of Norstrilia Press), I would say that, if the libraries lose too much of their current funds, then we, and most other Australian non-textbook publishers, might as well give up now. At the moment, library sales on any reasonably widely reviewed book will cover the most basic costs; an Australian hardback 'best-seller' is almost any book which sells more than this.

PHILIP STEPHENSEN-PAYNE
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Epsom, Surrey KT18 7EQ,
England

Many thanks for *S F Commentary 58* and *59*. I had intended leaving this loc until *60* (which, I believe, sees the end of my subscription) and then writing one final loc on the lot. But six months have passed since *SFC 59* arrived, with no sign of *SFC 60* at all, so, as we are heading on for pastures new in two weeks' time and I probably won't have much time for loccing, I thought I'd best write now instead of waiting. Has *SFC* folded, or what? If not, maybe it is time it did. I expressed concern in my last issue (as you quoted in *SFC 59*) about the declining standard of *SFC*, and these two issues just bear out my fears.

In 32 pages (itself a pretty poor offering for $US3), we have 5 pages of articles, 7 pages of letters, 1 (poor) cover, 3 pages of you, and 16 pages of reviews. Let's look at them one by one.

The only article in both issues was Chris Priest's SFWA resignation piece. It was quite interesting, but hardly of sufficient import to warrant front-cover exposure and a third of the issue. In recent months, Chris Priest seems to have taken more and more to appearing in fanzines, usually attacking some other established author or body—one

cannot help but wonder why. Too much of it sounds like sour grapes—and whether it is or not, it has much the same effect (to me at least) as if it was.

The letters were, for once, pretty mundane. 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' used to be one of the most interesting sections of *SFC*, but the comments in *SFC 58* were rather dry and uninteresting.

The one cover was horribly amateur. There always seems a danger when a faned gets married that future issues will suddenly be inundated by mediocre work by his/her spouse, and you seem to be succumbing to the ills.

The same sort of thing happens in the reviews. Of the fourteen reviews in the two issues, seven of them are by Elaine who, to be honest, is not really a very good reviewer—rather too prone to the 'long plot summary, followed by brief exiting chat' formula. Next comes the perennial George Turner, with three reviews (covering, however, 8 pages). If I had to pick out one item that characterised the decline of *SFC*, it would be your increasing worship of and obsession with George Turner. He is not a particularly good critic (and certainly in these three pieces he shows himself capable only of waffling) nor, despite your continued protestations, is he a good novelist. (Since I last wrote, I have read *Beloved Son* and find myself in agreement with almost all the reviews I have seen—it is an average book by an average writer.) By comparison, the other reviews are superb—though perhaps only by comparison. David Grigg *is* interesting on *The Language of the Night*, though perhaps a little subjective. Gerald Murnane merely illustrates that a poor review of a book (his) can be better than a Turner review of the same book. As for Mark Mumper, I give up. You think *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang* is a poor book. I think it is a poor book. On reflection, Mark thinks it is a poor book. Then why on Earth waste three pages (20 per cent of the issue) on it?

Which leaves the one bit I did enjoy —your three pages in *SFC 58*—a sample of what *SFC* used to be. I particularly enjoyed your summation of what is good about *In Memory Yet Green* (and *In Joy Still Felt*). Long after the rest of the issue has faded into obscurity, I shall retain your description of Asimov—particularly valid now that Asimov-bashing has become so fashionable (mainly by Chris Priest)—as 'a nice man, naive and wise, who has some good stories to tell'.

Well, that's it. I've insulted your friends, your wife, and your fanzine—so I guess it's time we parted company. I would not have renewed my subscription after *60*, so I guess there's no point in your even sending me that if it appears. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.

Once upon a time there was a superb Australian fanzine called *SF Commentary*, edited by a wise and friendly man. Somewhere in the last couple of years it vanished. A pity—but it happens to all fanzines eventually. I won't forget the enjoyment and pleasure it gave me while it lasted.

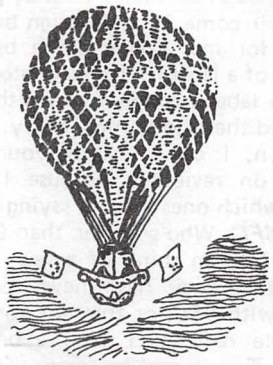
(29 November 1980)

Oh, shaddap ya face!

But seriously, folks: I've printed this letter just in case there are any poor deluded soon-to-be-ex-readers who believe the same thing. (Also, I rather like foully waspish letters, even when the sting is directed at me.)

This is a very clever letter, really, since it gives no idea of what (in PSP's eyes) was The Great *SFC*. In other words, I deny that I've changed much. I deny that *SFC* has changed much, except to get smaller. (The really great issues were in 1969-72, long before Philip ever saw a copy, so I really don't know what he's talking about.)

Ah well: maybe size is the heart of the problem. Phil is the victim of an optical illusion. The contents of, say, *SFC 59*, when printed by stencil-and-duplicator, come out at about 40 pages of material. That *looks* nice and chunky and safe to curl up in bed with. So it was likable. Why did I change from putting x amount of material in 40 duplicated pages into 16 offset pages? Because I no longer have the time to stand in front of a duplicator turning the little handle and collating for weeks at a time. Why don't I have time to run off duplicated fanzines? Because I am a freelance, and not salaried. One of the problems with being a freelance is that one must do every job that is offered. This leaves little time over. If there is time over, I know what it costs: $10 an hour, say. If I were salaried, the problem would not arise: each hour of my free time would be worth the same amount—nothing. Instead of spending all that money/time standing in front of a duplicator, I spend the money to



get a much better job from an instant offset place (Print Mint, Bank Place, Melbourne). Then readers like PSP complain because the magazine looks small. Think again: *SFC 60/61*, all 32 pages of it, is *huge*. It's the equivalent of all but the very largest of the duplicated issues. And yet you will probably sneer at that!

My message remains the same, Phil: if you want large duplicated issues, send money—lots and lots of it. Without some sort of grant or gift, I will have to stay in budget. The *real* cost of a 16-page issue is $A4 ($US6) per issue, but of course you whinge about paying $US1.50!

Most of your other points are crap, but I might as well answer them anyway. As I say, the 32 pages of which you complain contain at least 60,000 words, perhaps more.

Your comments on letters are incomprehensible. What do you think *SFC* is? It is basically a journal which concerns itself with criticism of science fiction. It is also my personal journal, but this function has always been secondary. (Except when I've really gone off my head with misery or *weltschmertz* or whatever. This is another suspicion of mine—that all you want is for me to be blindingly, gaspingly, utterly horribly miserable, just so you can have your fanzine to fluzzle over! Okay, have your way: I *am* miserable, because I never have enough money to publish the current *SFC*, let alone the 100-pagers I could publish every other month with the material sitting in the files. Elaine is miserable because she hasn't enough money to buy a vast house with a vaster garden. We have a lovely time being miserable together!)

Chris Priest was, I thought, trying to give an explanation of one of the factors leading to the general ghastliness of most current American science fiction. It was a pretty fair explanation.

I designed the cover of *SFC 58*. I have never claimed to be a cover de-

signer, but I don't have a handy person who will come in and design brilliant covers for me. Elaine did a brilliant tracing of a leopard from a photograph, but my label wrongly implied that she designed the whole thing. Sorry.

Again, I can't answer your comments on reviewers because I don't know which ones you are saying should be in *SFC*. Who's better than George Turner? I can think of a few names, but either they have never been in touch with *SFC*, or they are too busy to write reviews. I send a book to George Turner and he reviews it. That doesn't sound too great an achievement, does it? And yet I can name any one of about a dozen very good reviewers in Australia who, having received a book to review, will then squirrel away the book for six months, forget about it for another six months, and eventually hand back the book (or often, *not* hand back the book) and say that he or she didn't like it all that much, and why don't I send something better next time? George has some sense of duty.

George has been loyal to *SFC* ever since it started. If anything, his number of contributions has dropped during recent years. There's just nobody like him. I suppose it's partly personal loyalty which makes me particularly angry about the ploy of condemning a critic because one does not like his fiction. What's the connection? A critic writes as the Ideal Reader, not as a competing novelist. (And even then, the remark about *Beloved Son* is ridiculous. When did I ever praise it here? I don't even like it particularly. To my mind, George's reputation is forever guaranteed by his earlier, non science fiction books—the ones I have read are *Transit of Cassidy, Young Man of Talent*, and *A Stranger and Afraid*.)

Elaine appears here because I like her reviews, and again—because she actually does the reviews of the books she takes to work on. She does not push anything at me, mainly because she has never been able to see the point of publishing fanzines.

I'm not quite sure how one would get better reviews, from two such different viewpoints, of *Transmutations*. Explain, please!

Yes, I didn't like *Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang*, and you didn't like it, Phil, and eventually Mark didn't like it. But vast numbers of science fiction fans did like it. (So do other people; somebody told me that it had been set as a novel to be read by senior high school students in Victoria this year!) If *SFC* has a constant theme at all, it's our concern to disabuse people of their current favourite notions about science fiction.

And why don't I write more for *SFC*? For a start, almost anybody can write better than I can. I write only when I see that something must be reviewed or commented upon, and nobody has done so. I have a very clear idea of the field of *SFC*'s interest, and I get annoyed when time/financial restrictions prevent me from doing the job.

So what happened to the 'wise and friendly man' from *SFC*? He never existed, if you think he is any different from the frustrated and not-very-energetic character who is typing this now. I'm still puzzled. What *is* the difference? Maybe you are the one who has changed, not me.

A downer note on which to finish this column, but it started solemnly as well. Let your letters decide the shape of next issue's outpourings. Seeyuz.

Last galley typeset: 9 March 1981.

THE LATE MAIL

As I noted earlier in the issue, this issue is not really late—it's just taken a long time to be published. This has had one desirable effect: I've actually managed to put into the issue most of what was planned for it. But . . . since the letters section was finished, a deluge of interesting responses has appeared in GPO Box 5195AA. They will have to wait until next issue.

Not a great deal has happened in the last three months that I would want to write about, but the following letter must be published. It's been a long time since *SFC* has received a letter of comment from:

JOHN FOYSTER
21 Shakespeare Grove,
St Kilda, Vic. 3182

Here's my list of the best ten books I read in 1980.

1 Henry James: *The Europeans*
2 Doris Lessing: *Stories*
3 Oscar Lewis: *Living the Revolution*
4 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie: *Montaillou*
5 Edmund Wilson: *Upstate*
6 Jacques Donzelot: *The Policing of Families*
7 E P Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class*
8 John Franklin Bardin: *Omnibus*
9 V S Naipaul: *A House for Mr Biswas*
10 Gilbert Sorrentino: *Mulligan Stew*

I guess the order towards the end isn't too certain. I was surprised to find that this came out half fiction and half non-fiction. I would have expected a higher proportion of non-fiction.

A few comments. Re-reading *The Europeans* was a result of seeing James Ivory's film and thinking to myself: 'But James's novel was *much* better than that'; and it was.

'Discovering' Doris Lessing was one of the most pleasant experiences of the year. I did not so much like her African stories.

Living the Revolution is actually a three-part study (*Four Men, Four Women, Neighbours*) planned by Oscar Lewis but largely written by Ruth M Lewis and Susan M Rigdon, and is based upon field work in Cuba in 1969-70. The volumes are presented primarily as a series of first-person narratives, and are *very* hard to put down.

Montaillou is a study of that village in the early 1300s.

I suppose that you would have the same high opinion of *Upstate*, so there's no need for me to say much about it.

I could make similar comments about the second half of the list, but they wouldn't tell you much. Let me just say that I recommend them all to you.

(17 April 1981)

I had always thought that John and I had very different tastes in books, but I was surprised to find on this list quite a few titles I recognised or had read. I don't put together my fiction and non-fiction lists, however.

I had the same reaction to Ivory's film of *The Europeans* (see 'Best Films' section), but have not yet been back to the book.

I 'discovered' some of Lessing's work a few years ago, but have not yet followed up. Real soon now.

Yes, *Upstate* was very interesting reading. I've had recommendations from others about *A House for Mr Biswas* and all of Oscar Lewis' work. And *The Making of the English Working Class* is sitting there, waiting to be read Very Soon Now.

I will look for the others.

The Reprint has 200,000 words set. Reagan hasn't declared war yet (I did not send him a get-well card).

Last last stencil typed 20 June '81.

Oops—old habits—last galley set . . .

Elaine Cochrane:
SINS OF MY OLD AGE (3)

Haven't done as much reading lately as I used to. One reason is that I no longer have to travel to and from work by public transport, and so do not have those nice long uninterrupted stretches in tram and bus. The only exceptions this year have been going into the city twice a week for Latin and German classes, but that time has tended to be occupied with doing homework and learning vocab. set the week before. I do tend to do things at the last minute.

Recently I got a three-week part-time proof-reading job, and had an hour of tram travel twice a day to use. That would have been fine, but after proof-reading legalese I found myself virtually word-blind. I would look at the individual letters, or individual words, but in no way could I read an entire sentence. I tried crochet but, while the trams to work were usually empty enough, the trams home again tended to be too crowded. I can read, but not crochet, standing. In desperation I resorted to the solution I used in my bus conductor days—light, trashy science fiction.

The trouble is, I don't appreciate trash like I used to. A compromise that worked rather well was to dig out various short story collections, and I made discoveries that surprised me.

A Sheckley collection was as delightful as only Sheckley can be. I expected that.

Next was **The View from the Edge**, the Norstrilia Press book from the 1977 Writers' Workshop, run by Kitty Vigo, and with Vonda McIntyre, Chris Priest, and George Turner as writers-in-residence. The book is edited by George, and includes his usual astringent comments. This is not aimed to be a collection of polished, professional stories, as George is at pains to point out. Rather, it is meant to show some of the problems and solutions found during the Workshop, and the short-short stories are selected on that basis.

There are a few clinkers, as is to be expected from this approach. Their inclusion is deliberate. Most notable clinker is a pseudo-science effort. I have no objections to pseudo-science, even when the holes are as gaping as this—provided there is a story around it. You can have space warps and time travel and inertialess drives and esp till the cows come home, as long as they serve a purpose. What I cannot stand is pseudo-science without a story because, once I jack up at some almighty gaffe, there is nothing left. 'Retrieval', by Malcolm English, is just such an effort and, to judge from George's editorial comment, it is included for this reason.

There are, however, more than enough stories readable in their own right. Pip Maddern's contributions, especially 'Ignorant of Magic', the various Alien stories, Bruce Barnes's 'The Two Body Problem' (George, you might have made him rewrite it a thousand times, but the end product is worth it), and Graeme Aaron and Sam Sejavka's delightful 'The Rise and Fall of Earth' (see: you can have your science utterly outrageous if you do it right) stand out.

I could go on. Suffice it to say that, published simply as a collection of short-shorts, this would be a most satisfying buy.

Next I read the Kate Wilhelm collection, **The Infinity Box** (Harper & Row, 1975), and I could not help thinking that George (and Vonda and Chris) would not have let the workshoppers get away with padding like that. George's comments on 'The Two Body Problem' particularly apply:

> **. . . the short concentrated thriller. . . . The difficulty is that such stories, depending for their effect on a single revelatory scene, have to be stripped to the bone. . . . Backgrounds in such tales are either so familiar as to need no attention or, if unfamiliar, must be spliced into the action in such a fashion as to be painlessly absorbed by the reader without shifting his concentration from the flow of the story. . . . The same applies to explanations. However complex, they must be spliced in, not delivered in an ungainly lump. . . . Where Bruce possibly thought I was mildly out of my mind was in my ruthless insistence on removal of many bits of 'characterisation' with which he had tried to enliven his people.**

Discussed:

THE VIEW FROM THE EDGE
Edited by George Turner
(Norstrilia Press; 1977; 124 pp; $A 3.95)

THE INFINITY BOX
By Kate Wilhelm
(Harper & Row; 1975; 318 pp; $US 8.95)

The stories in *The View from the Edge* are pared to the bone, and reading Wilhelm straight after was like ploughing through treacle. She is a far more accomplished writer than many in *The View from the Edge* and disguises the essential puzzle nature of her stories fairly effectively, but most of the stories in this collection *are* puzzle stories, depending on the hero discovering some frightening fact about, or realising the terrible nature of, his world, or in some other way depending on some revelation for a resolution. The detailed character delineations and the exquisite landscapes and cityscapes are beautifully written but they are so totally unnecessary. I couldn't help wishing George had got his knife to work on them before they had been published.

But one doesn't workshop the established writer. Or does one? Both Chris and Vonda echo George in saying that they, too, gained from the workshop experience.

Not that the Wilhelm collection is totally bad. 'The Funeral' is a delicate portrait of slavery and repression in utopia. Many of the others have interesting plots but, with this one exception, they are simply too long.

About the time I was voicing my dis-

gust at the Wilhelm collection, and being ordered by Bruce to write down what I'd been saying, I finished the job, and was once more able to read 'real' books. One such is **Le Ventre de Paris**, by Emile Zola. (Still not finished.) I am delighted to report that Zola was a Cat Person. How else would he be able to describe a fat ginger cat purring its head off on the kitchen table in the charcuterie, and then expressing its disapproval of a plate of newly cooked sausages by attempting to bury them? And then rolling over and going to sleep with its feet in the air (still on the table)?

Recipe Time:
Stuffed Green Capsicum (Biber Dolmasi)

This recipe is taken from **Turkish Cooking** by Irfan Orga (Andre Deutsch, first published 1958, my copy printed 1975). I've removed the price tag, so I don't know what it cost. Everything I've tried from it so far has been delicious, so regard this as a book review (favourable).

6 large green capsicums, of even size, preferably squat so they can stand upright.
1 cup of cold water.
Stuffing:
1 cup rice (I use brown rice)
½ cup water
5 large onions, chopped finely
1 tablespoon pine kernels
1 tspn mixed herbs
1 cup olive oil
½ cup cider
1 large tomato, skinned
1 tbspn currants
mint.

Carefully cut out the stem of the capsicums and clean out the seeds, without puncturing the flesh. The stem is the lid. Cover the rice with hot water and leave until cold; drain and wash. Fry onions in oil for 10 minutes, add rice and pine kernels, cover pan, and cook for 20 minutes, stirring to prevent sticking. Add chopped tomato, mint, herbs, water, and cider; stir and cook another 15 minutes. Fill capsicums. Stand them in their cup of water and cook gently for 50-55 minutes, keeping covered. Leave to cool before trying to move them, and serve very cold.

In my usual style, I haven't reproduced the recipe exactly, because I never follow a recipe exactly. Bruce thinks he'd prefer the capsicums served hot, but he's never tried them that way. As it is, this dish is delicious, but very filling. Not nearly as good the next day.

CRITICANTO

DELANY'S DETAILS

by John D Berry

John D Berry discusses:

Tales of Neveryon
by Samuel R Delany
(Bantam 12333-5; 1979; 264 pp; $US 2.25)

Heavenly Breakfast
by Samuel R Delany
(Bantam 12796.9; 1979; 127 pp; $US 1.95)

The two latest books by Samuel R Delany blur the line between fiction and essay. One is a book of interwoven fantasy tales, the other a short memoir of the author's life in a commune on the Lower East Side of New York City in the autumn and winter of 1967-68. They have more in common than you might think.

Delany has been writing science fiction for more than fifteen years, and his novels have transformed the genre. His forte has always been his exotic characters, flamboyant in their eccentricities, who are seriously concerned with the nature of themselves, their society, and the way they communicate.

Tales of Neveryon gives the illusion of being a sword-and-sorcery fantasy of the mighty-thewed barbarian school. It has its full share of action and fantasy, but the way it's presented tends to undermine our expectations of it, and the characters all pause for long digressions on the nature of mirrors, or the money economy, or slavery. In a sense, this is the old science fiction cliche, where the story stops long enough for one of the characters to explain to another the nature of the gadgets they're using, or the society they're in, or whatever. (Delany was the one who coined the term that's used to describe this indigestible mass of information: the expository lump.)

But that's not what Delany is doing. His characters' discussions aren't digressions from the action, because his novel is not really an adventure story. The philosophical passages reflect on the action, and the action reflects on the ideas. Delany is a conscious writer: he not only writes a story, he writes about the act of writing about. His stories are dense; if you look beneath their surface you discover that everything connects to everything else. He's like Thomas Pynchon without the paranoia: with Pynchon, the fact that everything is tied together is frightening; to Delany, it's a delight and a game.

The central image of *Tales of Neveryon* is a simple children's rhyme chanted to the bouncing of a black rubber ball. The children of the city of Kolhari chant this rhyme each spring after the red ships from the south bring their cargo of rubber balls to the city:

I went out to Barbara's Pit
At the crescent moon's first dawning.
But the Thanes of Garth had covered it,
And no one found a place to sit
And Belham's key no longer fit,
And all the soldiers fought a bit,
And neither general cared a whit
If any man of his was hit . . .

. . . And the eagle sighed and the serpent cried
For all my lady's warning!

When it's introduced in the first few pages of the book, both the rhyme and the annual voyage of the red ships from the south seem like trivial details, merely included to make the setting more three-dimensional. Delany is a master of inventing details for his worlds that imply a vast array of other details beyond the edges of the scenes he illuminates; in that way he creates worlds that feel real, larger than the parts of them contained in his books, as though

Photo: C N Brown

SAMUEL R DELANY

there's more to them that he just hasn't chosen to focus on.

But Delany has also said that he writes his novels as elaborations on the explorations of their very first sentences. The opening sentence of *Tales of Neveryon* is too specific to evoke the whole book, but the opening pages do: that rhyme, in many variations, recurs throughout the five tales, each time shedding more light on the original opening image; and the aspects of the red ships, the rubber balls, and their annual journey are explored through all the characters and their interwoven stories.

Through a children's rhyme and a shipment of rubber balls, Delany writes about the origins of money and its effect on the way people deal with each other, the beginnings of written language, the nature of being a slave or being a slavemaster, and whether a reflection is the same as the thing reflected. His world is one of prehistory, a society just inventing the things that we take for granted—one in which living people can remember when money was first in-

vented, and where a potter, for instance, can think for the first time of making four-legged instead of three-legged pots. Delany obviously assumes that, no matter how gradually an idea may have been prepared for, it had to be invented all at once, and at some time must have been brand new.

Just to throw further reflections on the tales and their telling, Delany adds a fictional appendix to the book, tracing the history of the 'Culhar' text', supposed to be what the story is based on, and using it as the focus of a discussion of the nature of language and early civilisation that ties in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the decipherment of Linear B, and Naming, Listing, and Counting theory. By the time you get to the appendix, Delany has got you so caught up in his story and his speculations on the meaning of it all that you're liable to go right back to the beginning and read the book again just to see how many connections you missed the first time around.

Unlike a mystery novel, say, where it all comes out in the end, Delany's are the real mysteries of how we talk to each other, how we know anything, what we assume to be true. They aren't resolved; they can only shed more light on each other as we see more aspects of them. Since the reflections are not confined to the created world of the novel, but spill out into our lives and our real world, the reflections-of-reflections continue to bounce into our eyes after we've put the book down, wherever we look

Tales of Neveryon may be one of the most fascinating books of philosophy you'll ever read.

Heavenly Breakfast purports to be a memoir, not a novel, although Delany claims that the characters do not correspond exactly to real people. The book is subtitled 'An Essay on the Winter of Love', and it's an examination of the experience of living in a late-sixties commune. 'I'd . . . tried to analyse the communal process formally,' says Delany of an earlier draft, yet in this book of non-fiction there are hardly any passages of philosophy or reflection, far fewer than in *Tales of Neveryon*, a work of fiction. *Heavenly Breakfast* functions best as a loosely told story. It's almost all dialogue and action, a series of scenes out of the life of the commune.

The Heavenly Breakfast is both the name of the commune and the name of the rock band that four of its members comprise. In both its forms, the Heavenly Breakfast existed for a few months in late 1967 and the beginning of 1968, and Delany was a part of both. He takes his experience as somehow archetypal of the communal experience, and he tries to get at the essentials of it by describing incidents and by portraying the ways in which people interact. But what works in fiction doesn't seem to work in non-fiction; rather than letting his characters speak for themselves through their actions, he writes self-consciously, analysing as he describes, worrying at each incident and each exchange of dialogue, trying to find its meaning. Although in *Tales of Neveryon* he achieved a synthesis of philosophy and action in a fictional world, in *Heavenly Breakfast* the two fall apart and, rather than shedding light on each other, they remain unreflecting, incomplete.

There are intriguing insights, though. For instance:

> **If you've never indulged the fantasy of being invisible, you'd probably like communal life. It allows you to enjoy the part of the fantasy that's healthy play, and forces you to terms with the part that's neurotic escape—if you want to keep playing. Not everyone, though, who would like such a life can actually live it.**

For another instance:

> **. . . living as constantly close as one does in a communal situation, almost all exchanges are between 'I' and 'you'.**

But there aren't many memorable scenes. The dialogues are too scattered, too much happening at once with no focus, and Delany indulges his penchant for sticking parenthetical remarks—sometimes whole conversations—into the middle of sentences.

There's a clue to the bewildering tangle of characters and simultaneous conversations: a small remark buried in a scene in which Delany is visiting a co-operative house near Columbia University: 'Everybody said hello and told us their names in a ring, and we laughed about not being able to remember them, only, I did.' If Delany really is one of those rare people who remember names the first time they hear them, perhaps he doesn't mean to confuse us by introducing a series of characters all at once, weaving them and their conversations together using only names to identify them. Perhaps he expects us to be able to follow them. Even in a book, where you can re-read the printed page, it's confusing.

Writing anything as ambitious as 'An Essay on the Winter of Love' is opening yourself up to the smallest scrutiny. Everybody has their own version of the sixties, their own theory on what it meant and how it went. Lots of people are looking for the definitive essay on The Communal Experience. Delany hasn't written it. What he has written isn't quite a successful work of fiction, nor does it have the intellectual grace of his essays. It's a kind of memoir, interesting mostly for its insight into Delany himself and his experience, occasionally entertaining, all too often frustrating.

'Look beneath the surfaces of Delany's books and you discover that everything connects to everything else.'

THE WATSON THEORIES

by Cy Chauvin

Cy Chauvin reviews:

Miracle Visitors
by Ian Watson
(Gollancz; 1978;
239 pp; 4 pounds 95.
Ace; 1978; $US 1.95)

> **. . . That imminence of a revelation that is not yet produced is, perhaps, the aesthetic reality.**
> Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions*

Miracle Visitors is perhaps Ian Watson's most outrageous novel. Yet Watson always tries to make his outrageous ideas appear intellectually plausible; what is so frustrating about his 'synthesis-fiction' is that there are so few aesthetic considerations. *Miracle Visitors* seems an intellectual rationalisation of an Alfred Bester novel: Watson is as outrageous, but not as colourful. Where Bester mythologises, Watson theorises.

Each of Watson's novels has been a synthesis, but they are amazing ones (except in *Alien Embassy*, which is dreary). I cannot tell which ideas are his own and which are borrowed, but their combination in science fiction is original.

Watson seems to prefer to match the structure of his novels to his ideas, dividing the viewpoint of a novel between three characters. Gradually, or climactically, their viewpoints come together, producing a revelation in the character and (hopefully) reader.

After five novels, this method seems to have many limitations—*vide* James Blish's comment about Frank Herbert: 'as he tells an already complicated story, he complicates it further by jumping from one point of view to another.' But it is more than that. Watson has great difficulty making the reader care about his characters; in *Miracle Visitors*, this problem is worse than usual. The characters lack real individuality and distinction: making one a university professor, one an Egyptian, another an ordinary bloke with girlfriend problems, only makes it seem like they are each wearing funny hats. It does not matter what happens to them. Splitting the viewpoint between three characters when he has difficulty getting the reader to empathise with one compounds the problem. Perhaps Watson finds it difficult to express (plausibly) enough ideas through one viewpoint—most of the ideas are presented through exposition. Watson has yet to achieve the feat of Doris Lessing and a few other writers in rare moments who can put their readers *through* the changes of consciousness he only describes. The mystical moments in these books are mystical moments for the reader, too, because they have an emotional charge, not just an intellectual rationalisation; they have a touch of the commonplace, or put feelings that we have often felt but never realised into words: 'That imminence of a revelation' (Borges).

However, Watson has strengths in other areas that these writers lack. He is able to make the outrageous plausible. He mentions the Tibetan *tuplas* ('living creatures created by a prolonged act of thought . . . they're supposed to be actual tangible things . . . able to function independently in the real world' (p 53, Ace edition), and links them with UFOs, and hypothesises that UFOs are projections of the human race in a similar way, just as angel and devil figures might have been from earlier ages, but are *real*, too. (Watson does not write timid books; he does not pull his punches and have characters' experiences turn into dreams or the ravings of madmen.) Just as our bodies are made up of cells which in turn support our 'conscious' and subconscious minds, so too the earth-mind, the consciousness of earth, is made up of all the living creatures on earth; and the UFO events are projections of this earth mind.

Watson has complained that sf is now taking refuge in literature; it is not willing to ask the outrageous, to explore:

'Where Bester mythologises, Watson theorises.'

> **The point is that the human condition isn't enduring; nor is art; nor is Man. . . . Literature is part of the evolutionary process. It only has meaning within this biological and social context. And what is unique about sf is that it consciously takes as its subject matter this sense of Man changing within and by contact with the physical universe at large. . . . Most great literature assumes that the human condition is unchanging down the ages.'**
>
> Ian Watson, 'Whither Science Fiction?', *Vector 78*, p. 8

Watson, I believe, wishes to write sf that has importance outside of literature. Literature (at present) has limitations set on what it is meant or at least generally expected to achieve. (Although many of these limitations may only be ones thought to exist by sf fans and writers.) Literature, however, is often considered an end in itself. Watson rejects this idea for (his?) sf.

But if he writes fiction, he should use the devices and apparatus of fiction in more than a rote fashion; characters should be more than viewpoints for ideas. Furthermore, it is obvious that Watson realises this, even if he has not acted upon it in this novel. What is not so clear is whether he realises that more aesthetic care would give the ideas in his novel more power. The manner in which they are presented in *Miracle Visitors* is almost unfailingly awkward.

He manages some good scenes. When Michael meets the turtle-alien 'Gebraudi', the alien's conversation and manner is an odd mixture of the fairy tale, affected Chinese-English, and *Alice in Wonderland*. It is convincing and oblique. When John Deacon meets a stranger who carries a map, offering a way to another state of consciousness, Watson describes it this way:

> **The map stretched vastly now, becoming in reality what it had hitherto been the emblem of. As it became fully real to him, he stepped inside it with the stranger. . . .**

The map of a city becomes the city: this makes aesthetic sense. At other times, the awkwardness of the novel is horrifying. Salim is an engineering student in Egypt, and the family life descriptions sound like a naive English schoolboy's description of what life might be like in modern Egypt. It carries no aura of conviction; no real detail. When Deacon becomes Khidr, the green man, 'with grass hair, bunched sprout cheeks, translucent grape eyes, tapering tuberous chin', his experiences are valid but the vegetable man is not: he is a salad, not a viable symbol. Watson seems blind not only to the resonances of words, but to images in fiction.

Miracle Visitors contains some frightening ideas, but it has no grace; it cannot be reread. Some would accuse Watson of rewriting the same novel over and over, but this is untrue—Watson is merely a man obsessed by his ideas. *Miracle Visitors* is the structural framework for what could be one of the most important sf novels; unfortunately, it was published before Watson finished writing it.

CHERRYH'S COMPLEX CULTURES

by John D Berry

John D Berry reviews:

Well of Shiuan
by C J Cherryh
(DAW; 1978;
253 pp; $US 1.95)

The Faded Sun: Kesrith
by C J Cherryh
(DAW; 1978;
252 pp; $US 1.95)

C J Cherryh is being spoken of as a notable new talent in science fiction, a description well earned by her first books but, with her fourth and fifth paperback novels in two years, she doesn't seem to be using that talent and stretching it.

Cherryh writes within the framework of the adventure story, bursting with action and with characters who are always on the move. But her strength lies in the worlds she creates, the complex cultures that she invents with apparent ease in each book. Although sometimes her alien civilisations seem to borrow from foreign cultures of our own world, and in that sense to be not quite 'alien', the least of them are inventive and convincing, and the best are wholly original. She is expert at portraying the individuals formed by those cultures; she reveals them by creating a world and then showing it in a state of collapse, a condition of flux that forces its people to come to terms with their cultural heritage. In each book, she invents at least two utterly different cultures, each with its own bias, its own traditions, its own ways of thought; and she delights in rubbing those different cultures together to see what the friction produces.

One of Cherryh's greatest strong points is her treatment of languages. This shows up especially in contrast to the common mistreatment of linguistic differences in sf; although there are other writers who pay serious attention to the problems of language, it has been common to see authors ignore the whole question, or sweep it under the rug with a 'voice coder' or a 'universal translator'. The implied assumption behind such a cavalier attitude is that all people (including invented alien beings) think alike, and that language is merely a code to be deciphered. Cherryh prefers to pay attention to the nuances of alternate ways of thought, and to express them in wholly different vocabularies with different cultural implications.

Cherryh introduces her words and phrases, usually descriptions of social rank or cultural institutions that reflect the way her people think and act, so gradually that you learn their meaning the same way you learn your own language: by context; and you become quite proficient with terms that you had never encountered before you began reading. In one of her earlier novels, *Hunter of Worlds*, she accomplishes in 250 pages what James Clavell achieved in *Shogun* only after nearly a thousand; she feeds you new ideas and the words to go with them so slowly and so cunningly, always in context and always building upon earlier understanding, that by the end of the novel you can read entire conversations in an unfamiliar language and make perfect sense of them.

This concern with language is part of Cherryh's fascination with the different patterns of thought that grow in different cultures, and with how those patterns clash or interact. Her understanding of alternate, mutually contradictory ways of seeing the same problem is so fine that I suspect she would make a superlative diplomat. Her books could at least teach would-be diplomats much about the skills they will need to cultivate.

Her best novel to date is certainly *Brothers of Earth*, published in 1976. It possesses an emotional depth that is touched in the others but never so deeply plumbed nor so richly displayed. She has not achieved that level since, and I can't help feeling that the early praise she got from reviewers starved for intelligent prose, and her rapid pace of writing, have combined to discourage her from stretching her abilities, from taking her time over a novel and concentrating on its depth rather than its surface. She is capable of more, but she is settling for less.

The Well of Shiuan, one of her latest, has considerable depth and complexity, but it is wedded to an inherently weak form. It is a sequel to *Gate of Ivrel* (1976), her clumsiest and least original novel, and the two seem to be set up for a potentially unlimited series of sequels. I detest series books, finding that they usually get weaker the more of them an author writes. By their nature, series books are incomplete, and their fascination lies in the continuing characters and endless twists of plot, rather than in the creation of a whole work of art.

In Cherryh's case, the second book of her series far transcends the first; it shows the development of her talents in the interim, yet the series form confines her. *The Well of Shiuan*'s theme is not to be found in the details of plot, in the call of high adventure; it is rather in the peculiar relationship between the two principal characters, and the way that relationship grows and changes shape. Cherryh applies great subtlety to unfolding this development. But the framework within which she weaves her tale—the quest, the unending adventure of the series book—is an encumbrance, a stricture she has locked herself into that does nothing but limit her.

'In each book, C J Cherrhyh invents at least two utterly different cultures . . . rubs them together to see what the friction produces.'

Morgaine, the central figure of *The Well of Shiuan*, is a neat turnabout of the mythic White Lady. Cherryh, in fact, is playing with archetypes, and seems to be deliberately mixing them: Morgaine, the dangerous, cold queen, mistress of the deadly sword *Changeling*, wears white and is identified by her silver hair.

She is presented as emotionless, or nearly so, ruled by her quest so that everything else must be sacrificed to it. Her companion, Vanye, is clearly held to her not only by his sense of honour—he has given his word and owes service to his *liyo*, his liege—but by love. Yet the anticipated end of loving partnership never comes about; even though, at the end of the first book, when he abandons his own world to follow her through the Gate on her endless road, she greets him and hugs him with tears in her eyes ('It was the second time he had ever seen her cry'), the next book shows them still in the liege-and-faithful-servant mode in which they began—albeit with a new degree of mutuality and trust. For all the emotional tangle in between, at the end of that second book Morgaine's reaction is much the same, only less demonstrative, when Vanye succeeds in following her through yet another Gate:

> **She would not speak yet. There was a time for speaking. He saw the weariness in her, her unwillingness to reckon with this land. She had run a long course, forcing those she could not lead.**
>
> **'I needed an army,' she said at last, a voice faint and thin. 'There was only one that I could manage, that could breach his camp. And it was very good to see thee, Vanye.'**
>
> **'Aye,' he said, and thought it enough. There was time for other things.**

Cherryh's characters live always on the verge of collapse. In any single story, it's easy to accept: the protagonist is dropped into a strange, harrowing reality, buffeted by alien winds, and must somehow survive. But that pattern reappears in every book. It gets wearing for the reader; you begin to wish that the characters would quit pushing to the limits of their strength, would stop for once and take a rest.

The Faded Sun: Kesrith is incomplete. It is the first half of a two-book story and, although it is intended to stand alone, it doesn't. Cherryh creates another series of marvellously complex cultures, and sets them to the task of understanding each other. But the dying culture that she introduces in the first pages, the warrior Mri, is simply obliterated in the end; all the meaning invested in their struggle to survive is wiped out with a gratuitous disaster in the final pages. The intricacies that Cherryh has woven through her slowest novel come to nothing at all: neither a tragic conclusion nor a satisfying one. They may find their meaning reflected in the second book of the pair, but the final metaphor of *The Faded Sun: Kesrith*, that of the game of *shon'ai*, is too weak to carry the rest. *The Faded Sun: Kesrith* reads like a less flashy replay of Cherryh's earlier novels—slower, less rushed, but without the spark of inspiration.

The Faded Sun: Kesrith also displays her only failing in the creation of cultures. When she invents wholly alien societies, she does so flawlessly; if they sometimes take one trait of human beings and centre on that, they do so with such complexity and thoroughness that we cannot object. The one culture that is not convincing, both in *The Faded Sun: Kesrith* and in *Brothers of Earth* (where it only appears in the first few pages), is the human. Her 'human' culture is merely contemporary Western civilisation tossed out into space. In a conversation between the two human characters on Kesrith about the peculiarities of the other cultures' responses to the planet:

> **'If you have a lot of labor you can keep rebuilding, I suppose.'**
>
> **'Humans can't run a colony that way.'**

Later, from the viewpoint of one of the Mri:

> **The world was lit in constant flares of white and red, swirled in mists and steam and smoke and clouds of dust, like the Hell that humans swore by—that of mri was an unending Dark.**

This is an odd failure of imagination in a writer whose forte is the invention of new cultures that are *not* merely reflections of our own.

C J Cherryh's imagination is in no danger of failing, nor is her writing liable to stagnate if she will continue to push the limits of the form she has chosen to write in. The danger is that she will receive too much facile praise for her talents without sufficient criticism of her skills and their faults, and that she will keep turning out books that work on the surface, that sell and find a readership, without rising above the level she has already achieved. *The Well of Shiuan* is a hopeful sign, because it is so superior to the book it follows; yet it's disturbing to see Cherryh tie herself to such an unchallenging form. *The Faded Sun: Kesrith* is merely a disappointment. I would like to see what Cherryh could do if she moved away from action-packed adventure and put her energy into the emotional complexities that she displayed early on in *Brothers of Earth.*

'It's disturbing to see Cherryh tie herself to such an unchallenging form.'

ANOTHER RARE BOOK FROM HARNESS

by Tom Whalen

Tom Whalen reviews:

Wolfhead
by Charles L Harness
(Berkley 424-03658; 1978; 217 pp; $US 1.75)

In 1949, the sf magazine *Startling Stories* published a novel entitled *Flight Into Yesterday*, by Charles L Harness, pseudonym of the Texas-born author, Leonard Lockhard. *The Paradox Men*, as the novel was later called, is science fiction raised to its highest power, comparable in manner and quality to Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. Brian W Aldiss, in his study of science fiction, *Billion Year Spree*, aptly refers to *The Paradox Men* as 'Wide Screen Baroque', that is, a type of science fiction that utilises as its setting almost all time and space within the framework of an ornate eschatological plot. In Harness' early novel you find a phantasmagoric display of sf devices—there is the telepathic talent, the giant brain, even a surrealistic plunge into the sun—in short, everything a reader could ask for in an sf entertainment.

Now, almost thirty years later, Harness is back with a new novel, *Wolfhead*, and, it pleases me to say, he's back in good form.

On the surface the two novels are different. *Wolfhead* is told in the first person, *The Paradox Men* in the third person. And in *Wolfhead* Harness has limited his setting to a single planet. But both novels contain the same fast action (the Wide Screen Baroque novel is nothing if not action), same richly filigreed plot-line of pursuit, and a hero with hidden powers.

Wolfhead takes place on Earth in the distant future, long after the 'Desolation'. Man had adapted to his environment; plants and animals have mutated. Beneath the earth's surface, however, another civilisation, the remnants of the US Government in Washington, DC, has survived. It is the cataclysmic coming together of these two cultures that makes up Harness' eschatalogical plot, and it is his narrator, Jeremy Wolfhead, who must either resolve the conflict or see one of the two cultures destroyed. But Jeremy's first concern is rescuing his wife, Beatra, who has been kidnapped by the president of the undergrounders. With the dire wolf Virgil (the allusions to Dante are more playful than intrusive), he descends to rescue Beatra. Their adventures underground are, in the narrator's words, 'breathtaking'.

Sound like standard sf material? It is, but the treatment isn't. Harness writes well. Here, a descriptive passage chosen almost at random:

> **We were halfway to the valley when I looked down in the dim dawn light and saw the earth moving. Giant ripples were advancing across the surface of the land. It was like watching the sea. They were leisurely waves, perhaps a hundred yards from crest to crest, and eight to ten feet high. As they came on, I could see what they were doing to the trees. At first, the tree tops would seem to move majestically with the advancing wave-front, leaning at first to the front, then to the rear, and then, within a few seconds, a great many of the individual trees seemed simply to pop out of the ground. There they lay, stricken and broken.**

But what really distinguishes Harness from many sf writers is a quality I can only refer to as poetic depth. I don't think I can define it, at least not in this review, but perhaps with Harness it has to do with the fact that the experiences his characters have are *felt* experiences. And perhaps, too, it's that a theme radiates from both *Wolfhead* and *The Paradox Men*: Hang on as long as you can, life is precious. It's a simple theme, but no less true for being so.

The Paradox Men has been recently available in the Aldiss/Harrison SF Masters Series published by NEL in England. *The Ring of Ritornel*, another Harness novel, is out of print in both USA and England. *The Rose*, a short novel which was published only in England, is also out of print. The only book by Charles L Harness available in the United States is *Wolfhead*. Science fiction novels, as we know, disappear fast; best get *Wolfhead* while you still can.

SCHLONGS WRAPPED AROUND THE WAIST

by Rowena Cory

Rowena Cory reviews:

Asterix and Flondrix
by Seamus Cullen
(Pocket Books 82256; 258 pp; first published 1976/this edition 1979; $US 1.95)

Asterix and Flondrix, subtitled 'An Erotic Fairytale', is a bit more than that. The Elves, it seems, are aliens from another star system, and the Evil Threat is trapped back in the last day of earth, doomed to relive forever the atomic holocaust as it is replayed every afternoon. Even atomic missiles and cloning are thrown in to suit the author.

But the story still fits the description of 'erotic fairytale'. Perhaps for this reason, the author does not concentrate on plotting (no more than adequate) or characterisation (non-existent, except for some of the minor players, particularly the Evil Threat's cohort, Brumbee, who is drawn in amusingly revolting detail).

Of eroticism there is much detail, and some humorous moments. For humour and ingenuity, the Dwarves take the prize. Their schlongs, as they are called, are several feet long and shaped like cork screws when erect. When not in use they are wrapped around the waist and held in place by a pin. These schlongs can be very useful in everyday life, eg, thrown one end over high branches and used for climbing. Some dwarves are left-handers and some have a right-handed thread; the same goes for lady Dwarves. They must be wound down on the member, and the males produce the eggs. During the mating ritual, the Dwarves use a swing with elastic ropes, and the effect is better than a ride on the Octopus at Luna Park. Masturbation is an art. In fact, all this book offers, if anything, is erotic variety.

REPEAT THAT FORMULA!

by Rowena Cory

Rowena Cory reviews:

The White Hart
by Nancy Springer
(Pocket Books 83148; 1979; 222 pp; $US 2.25)

This book can be classified as High Fantasy: it deals with the battle between good and evil, and the main characters are terribly-beautiful and beyond the ken of ordinary mortals. There is a threat, and the young warlock must defeat it. There is a beautiful girl, loved by him. Treachery is plotted by someone near and trusted. The final battle is fought with the aid of mythical weapons.

As formula writing, it works: the characters are usually sketchily drawn; the warlock is quietly self-controlled, his motives incomprehensible; the writing is fluid, does not interfere with the reader's enjoyment, and enhances the tale; the ending is inevitable and the anticlimax typically heavy with foreboding.

INGENUITY AND HUMOUR

by Rowena Cory

Rowena Cory reviews:

A Spell for Chameleon
by Piers Anthony
(Del Rey/Ballantine 25855; 1977; 344 pp; $US 1.95)

Bink: the hero's name tells you what to expect from *A Spell for Chameleon*. This is Low Fantasy of the kind that provides endless scope for amusing writing—a relief from the pretentious and machismo styles which dominate the field.

The conflict is simple: Bink does not have a magical gift, and all citizens of Xanth must be able to demonstrate such a gift by their twenty-fifth birthday. To fail is banishment. As Bink reasons: what use is the ability to make a pink spot appear on the wall? And why should someone with this ability be given citizenship over him?

In desperation he goes to the Good Magician Humfrey's castle to discover if he has some untapped power. Magician Humfrey's gift is divining that all magic follows patterns and laws. It can even be said to evolve. In Xanth, plants are magic. Like their counterparts in Mundainia, they evolved defence systems to protect themselves and even entrap unwary passers-by, but their defences are magical.

As the reader suspects, Bink does have magician-strength power, but it can't be discovered, so he fails his trial and is banished by the senile old king. This comes as a surprise, as we expect Bink, true to the form of this sort of book, to find his power in time to save himself from exile.

After passing the Shield Stone and the Barrier, he enters Mundainia, only to be captured by the Evil Magician who wants to exact location of the Shield Stone so he can nullify it and enter Xanth with his army. Bink and his new-found companion refuse, risking a fate worse than death: Transformation. In the girl's case, her exile was voluntary, because of a magical curse you would have to go a long way to beat. During a struggle in the sea with Evil Magician Trent, they are swept under the Barrier. Finding themselves stranded in the wildlands where dangerous magic abounds, they form an uneasy alliance. Their subsequent adventures lead them to discover that Trent is not as bad as they thought.

Trent argues that the race of true men in Xanth is degenerating slowly as more half-human creatures are born, and that the current policy of isolation will only increase the rate of absorption until there are no true men left. Once upon the throne, he intends to encourage trade and expansion.

Bink naturally (?) objects to this, and foolishly challenges him to a duel, during which the full extent of his power is discovered, although not in any predictable way. This incident shows best the author's ingenious use of magical laws.

Trent is about to stab Bink when he declares suddenly: 'I can't do it . . . my honour . . . it will not let me kill a man who has saved my life, and who is so loyal to his unworthy monarch that he sacrifices his life in defence of one who has exiled him.' So the Evil Magician is reformed at last, and he becomes everything the people of Xanth could want in a king. And all because of Bink's inability to step beyond his childhood conditioning in order to question the basis of his country's

social system! (And Bink is supposed to be intelligent and introspective.)

But principles and motivations are not really the main concerns of the author. Rather, he takes the chance to play with magical concepts, which he does admirably and entertainingly.

STOUT WEAPONS AND THICK ACCENTS

by Rowena Cory

Rowena Cory reviews:

Castaways in Time
by Robert Adams
(Donning Starblaze 5809; 1979; 221 pp; $US 4.95)

It is obvious that Adams knows his era (fifteenth/sixteenth-century Scotland)—the book bristles with authenticity, from the thick accents to the rough customs and the battle slang. And the author takes much trouble to get right the details of weapons used. Ten years ago this would have been described as a man's book, and it still fits this category, with page after page of realistic battle description.

When the characters are introduced, they are brash, abrasive Americans, and those with the strongest personalities either disappear or are shunted to the background. Many spare people are left in limbo, and the number of names and titles of the various lords leaves you a little lost. Adams has no interest in his characters once they are in the alternate past, except as building blocks in his story.

Even the lack of plot is hardly a disadvantage if you are a weapons buff, and concentrate on the abundance of knowledge offered. To give authenticity to the book, Adams has many of the characters speak with thick accents—some sort of reminder that this isn't the equivalent of an American John Wayne movie. There is always the danger that the reader will tire of trying to interpret the written accent, but if one accent is used consistently, most readers will pick it up. Unfortunately, there are at least three distinct speech patterns and varieties of those, ranging from Scottish-English, Old-English, and German-English, to the strong American accents of the main character's contemporaries. I skimmed these passages, because for the most part they tell of improvements to weapons, and my knowledge of weaponry is nil and hardly improved by incomprehensible dialogue.

The climax is something that I suspect he had thought through at the beginning and was saving to round off the novel when he ran out of ideas.

Kelly Freas' artwork is not memorable, and the packaging reminds me of that for a children's novel.

From Page 22

Eden, behind us. Joe Chip is not a Jason or a Heracles. Heroes cannot rescue us because there are none, but the times nevertheless call for heroes.

In Dick's novels, one senses that this age is beginning to wind down. The illusion that being collectively bound together in society produces shimmers increasingly out of focus. Civilisation provides the illusion of shelter, but there is no shelter, only one absurdity piled on top of another. Inhabiting a world which is, *a priori*, impossible to understand, Dick's characters experience natural law as a jabberwockian formulation where it is indeed "brillig (in) the slithy toves". The Music of the Spheres is replaced by noise as the tench turns out cruder and cruder copies.

The world is not orderable or measurable, because chaos mingles with stability, ephemerising the solid, obviating it. We operate under the illusion of stability but there are no solid, rigid, fixed, permanent anythings. All is flux, change. One thing's muddying and blurring another precludes purity; there are no hard edges. Thus does a self-aware doorknob's demand for change momentarily interrupt a life-and-death struggle. The search for truth does not take place in a vacuum but modifies and is modified by its milieu. In the end, Dick sees the real and the illusionary worlds mingling, and side by side, forming the perceived world. A typical paradigm occurs in *Clans of the Alphane Moon*, where the insanity of the "sane" acts as a screen across which flickers the sanity of the "insane". The figure must be perceived in relationship to the ground, because we are beings-in-the-world.

Philosophical pessimism pervades many of Dick's novels. His is a slippery world where naive realism - "'If it's 1939 it's 1939'" (*Ubik*, page 149) - is a hopelessly simplistic view of reality. It is also, of course, a stance which we assume without questioning. If it's 1977, it's 1977. We gain knowledge of the world both through direct experience, empirically, and through an ordering of this sensory data, as through logic. (Dick, of course, also speculates about the existence of the sensory data.) Dick questions these constructs, the modes of analysis on which we base what we call our knowledge of the world. Calling into question our modes of analysis - like Kant, he seems to view time as an ordering something which we impose upon experience - Dick also questions our knowledge of the world itself. If the methods of apprehending reality are faulty, then the resulting knowledge of reality will be faulty.

Not just steps 1 and 2, but entire methodologies, are examined and rejected. Limited to empirical verifiability and logical coherence, our criteria for determining what is real have become too narrow, too blinder-like. It is essence - not statistics about it or its observed behaviours - that is important, and essence is not described by those aspects of it which can be quantified. Measurable attributes do not reflect essence. Certainly, behaviour can be observed empirically, but, while such observations are pragmatically useful, they tell us nothing of self-essence. Behaviour is only a self-manifestation and the behavioural sciences, only studies of manifestations. Dick sees something inner, some human essence beyond the reach of behaviour modification and genetic engineering. Thus, empiricism may yield utilitarian truths but is rejected as a means of gaining Truth. In *Ubik*, that which is incapable of being verified empirically, the Platonic idea, is shown - or, at any rate, hoped - to be more real than those objects whose existence can be verified empirically. Dick implies that there is another dimension of truth, one that is largely ignored today. There exists beyond the absurd world - which can be verified empirically - a real world. Were we to believe the Celtic Druids, we could say that beyond the pile of rocks we call "Stonehenge" lies the real Stonehenge. That which is real is that which has meaning. It is we who impose value and order on the world.

Rather than from a western either/or approach, Dick regards the world taoistically; implicit in chaos is order, and with an increase in order comes an increased potential for chaos. Dick's novels continually search for reality, and it is precisely in their falling short of it that they reveal it to us. Realising that shadows linger in the Cave is far more realistic than pretending we're in direct sunlight. An *a priori* inability to know is for Dick not only something to be believed, but also his authorial stance. His writing is cubistic, substituting all angles for a single, cohering point of view. There is no coherence, only Al's inadequate understanding contrasted with Runciter's, contrasted with our own. For the reader, the inability to know is less something to be deduced from the novels and more something that is experienced. The experience is unaccustomed for beings who act as though truth were easily accessible.

We do not interact with each other. Our self-illusions collide with what we conceive others to be; what they perceive us to be interacts with their illusions of themselves. We do not interact with reality but are buffered from it by our pre-conceived ideas of the world. We see the universe as "sensible" and "logical", but there is no logic so things, to be perceived correctly, cannot be perceived as being logical. It is we who "form" reality, moulding it with our ideas of it. But the ideas we live by—truth is accessible; time moves forward; the rose is red—are false. If we're buffered from reality by false ideas, we're reunited with it by the Form Destroyer.

We live in a world that preaches stability and false value. Language itself expresses neither what we know nor what we don't know. The content of communication has moved far beyond the grunt-point, me-you stage. Certainly, saying that something "is" implies a non-existent stability. We continually forget that what we say a thing is is what it is not. Our language leads us to believe in a world that is not. Since reality is perceived through linguistic concepts, language is a reality support and Joe Chip's rigid insistence upon using it correctly—according to prescriptive rules—is thus an attempt to maintain stable reality, a feeble attempt at sympathetic magic.

The gap between what we (think we) know and possible knowledge has become a gaping abyss. Although a mere 2000 years ago Aristotle knew everything there was to know, we're drowning in information, unable to put sense into "too much" sensation. Omniscience is a thing of the past. As beings-in-the-world we must act—unable to absorb, and distorting, existing information —corrupted by decisions based on damning alternatives.

But the radical increase in available information, in the store of human knowledge, parallels a decline in self-knowledge. With more and more of our experiences vicarious, we lose—assuming self is defined existentially—not only our capacity for experiences but also ourselves, our ability to think and feel within. As our ability to define ourselves diminishes, we become increasingly lost, bewildered. Unable to relate and reach out to others, we become the androids, a menace to ourselves and to humankind.

Dick returns continually to certain themes—the trashy surface world, its population of ineffectual characters who cannot comprehend reality and the splintered hints of a non-temporal reality. All contribute to the absurd tenor of the novels. Dick's portrayal of the absurd is equal to that of mainstream literature: Is Joe Chip's half-life world any less a symbol of the modern age than "waiting for Godot"? As *Ubik*'s never-ending ending implies, in Dick's world, all realities are undermined. What is real? For too many, reality has become limited to "hard" facts, eight-to-five jobs, taking out the garbage, and mere possessions. While such dreams of reality may be false, being purged of them is painful. Half-blind characters cannot tell if they are being purged of false dreams in order to be filled with true ones, or merely to be refilled with more false ones. While the characters experience the effects of the Form Destroyer with aversion and horror, formlessness can be equated with potentiality and lack of rigidity. Form itself implies an already produced, finished something, a non-growing, death-like stasis. While not ignoring the superficial realities of the "pseudochromium" world, Dick is, in the end, concerned with a higher order of reality. As he has said himself, "What I feel is a longing, a nagging need for something other than what is, and also a sense that what is somehow merely fills in to obscure the truth that this is wrong, all this. We don't belong here. The music on the radio is the wrong music. The walls are the wrong colours, painted by someone else ... We must wake up to the meaning of our alienation...be brought back into harmony with our actual natures and the nature of true reality. When we once again agree, the split will be healed... As in *Ubik*, we are actually dead now, and lie in graves, these plastic apartments we live in. It is not life; life lies ahead when we recover our senses and wake up. We sleep in our graves, like inert matter, like lumps... But beyond all this glimmers a real world, with real beauty and love. A lot of that, the latter" (Philip K Dick, letter to Claudia Krenz, 8 January 1975).

Neither denying the utilitarian value of empiricism and its dreams of reason nor advocating a fuzzy-headed return to the past, Dick rejects clean, well-lit explanations. He does not provide a secure—guaranteed and well-marked—alternative to traditional western ways of thinking; instead he marshalls all the evidence, ruthlessly presenting all the reasons why life is absurd. The scene is rendered true—but Dick could be called a post-existential writer. Since everything is tentative, attempts are all we have. Just as the Ubik epigraphs express an unfulfilled need, so Dick's characters only know that something is wrong. Something is missing, and traditional problem-solving methods do not help. More than anything, Dick's characters need to be delivered from meaninglessness. Following the ancient principle of the Yang and the Yin, the empty and the full, Dick would purge us of our false dreams, our trite and mundane views of reality, and fill us with true dreams, those with meaning and significance.

Claudia Krenz
November 1976

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