

# THE TEXAS SF INQUIRER



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HARVIA

# the Texas SF Inquirer

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## CONTRIBUTORS THIS ISSUE

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IMPORTANT CORRECTION: The flying fingers of dumb managed to leave out an important phrase in the review of Connie Willis' *Lincoln's Dreams* last issue. The insulting-sounding sentence at the bottom of page 20 *should* have read, "Willis presents the reader with just that -- too many clues, yet they seem insufficient to solve the riddle."

# WILLIAM GIBSON:

## Hallucinating On The Present

an interview conducted by  
A.P. McQuiddy

*This interview was conducted in mid-October at the 1986 ArmadilloCon in Austin, Texas. Mr. Gibson was the Guest-of-Honor. He is the author of Neuromancer, Count Zero, and the forthcoming novel, Mona Lisa Overdrive. Most of his short stories have been collected in Burning Chrome, just out in paperback from Ace.*

### ON THE SHAPE OF SF TODAY...

It's really flattering to be credited with having made this radical synthesis of existing forms, effecting a breakthrough of some kind, but what I think it indicated in this case is just how lame the field was. The thing that bothers me is that I don't see that much stuff happening now that really gets me off. I'm not a very good critic, and I'm not at all a theorist, but there's still only a very small trickle of stuff that I like.

People tend to forget -- you could come away from one of these panels and get the impression that Cyberpunk is like the "Big Thing" in Science Fiction. And the Big Thing in Science Fiction is like "punk elf"

books, or whatever. It's the braided mega-novel. I'd like to see someone look at that stuff with some sort of critical openness, because I think that's a fascinating thing. Not so much what they're doing with it, but the fact that it's happening. It's a very radical concept. That might be the future of commercial fiction, the stuff produced by committee. We've all had, I think, our suspicions that some things -- like the last Robert Ludlum book or something -- could easily have been produced by committee. And if I were Robert Ludlum, I'd just cut forty grand out of two million, and hire a team of people to pre-assemble the thing.

### ON AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES...

I find that stuff kind of boring, myself. I was born in South Carolina, and my father worked for a construction company. He made a fair bit of money supplying flush-toilets to the Oak Ridge Project. We moved around what was sort of the nascent Sun Belt -- we lived briefly in Chattanooga, and Charlotte, and other places. And we were living in Norfolk, Virginia, when I was about 8 and he died suddenly. My mother moved back to a very small town in southwestern Virginia, and I stayed there until I was about 16, and went to a boarding school in Arizona for a couple years. I got kicked out. I was like the first kid kicked out for smoking pot at my boarding school. Years later, I ran into this guy who had taught at this same place, and he said now they get like a weekend detention if joints are found in their room.

I was sort of at loose ends after that. I was just draft age, so I wound up going to Toronto and just staying there. But I was never legally a draft-dodger, and I was never sure why they didn't call me up. You were legally required to inform them of your whereabouts, and I used to write and send postcards, and say, "Here I am!" I think they figured it was a waste of time. If they draft the guy, he'll just stay there in Canada. So, I lived there a while, met my wife, went to Europe for a while, got married and moved out to Vancouver, where I've been since. I'm still an American citizen, but I have a sort of permanent Green Card.

When I went to Vancouver, the easiest thing I could find to do was get a B.A. in English. I didn't have any kind of career goal in mind, it was just that I could do it standing on my head, and get grants, and bursaries, and things. That's when I started writing SF, although I did it in this very round-about way... I had a professor I liked whose specialty was Fascism in Literature. I was doing some research for him, and I thought, "Now, wait a minute -- I know where there's a whole body of Fascist literature that I'm quite familiar with." I hadn't read any SF in a long time, and I went back and re-read Heinlein

and stuff for these papers I was writing. But I thought, "Well, I guess people are writing Science Fiction now, let's see what they're doing." So I read a bunch of other stuff, and wasn't real impressed. But around that time, a couple entry-level writers got huge advances, so I thought,

"Gee, you could make money doing this, I should try it." I remember one of the cruelest parts of my education was learning how little money established science fiction writers made, and how everybody had like a day job. When I

used to meet these people, I first thought they were keeping it quiet because they were making so much money.

### ON FUTURE WRITINGS...

I don't know. I've got a good thing going, here.

I'm very interested in hybrid literary forms. I think that's where the action is in the 20th century, this sort of cross-genre fertilization. And I sometimes think that it might be possible to figure out mutant forms of Science Fiction and something else that would be really good, but that you could get out in the New York Times Book Review kind of market. I was fascinated by that comment of Stephen King's in an issue of *Time* magazine where he said he could clearly recall reading *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *Peyton Place* in the same week, and seeing even then if he could combine these two things. He says that that's what he's done ever since, combine these two sensibilities.

### ON WRITING SF...

I started in -- I think it was '76 or '77 -- and Science Fiction was all I ever tried to do. And I don't know what it was, like I felt that I already knew the basic licks or something. I knew that when people who don't have a background in science fiction try to write it, they'll often reinvent existing things. Apparently, that's a problem Tom Disch had. When he first started writing science fiction, he'd get brilliant ideas, but they'd be things that Heinlein or somebody had thought of 20 years before. Yet it was something Disch had thought of by himself. So, I knew that

that wouldn't be a pitfall for me, because I was sort of "grounded" in the genre. Something that I did have to overcome was a very strong feeling that I was regressing, that I was going back to my adolescent fan-nish obsessions. I saw this as being a geeky course to take. And I really think that that slowed me down for a long time -- it didn't seem a very cool thing to do.

One of the most important things for me, about first meeting Bruce [Sterling] is that he had this sense of it being sort of "hip" to do. That was nice. I met John Shirley around that same time, and he had a different sense of it, but it helped. You know, like having different role models or something, not broken-down old guys working for a penny-a-word.

I don't see myself too much as a Science Fiction writer, which people would find kind of strange. My concerns aren't always the same concerns as SF. I know how to put in the things that I'm required by convention to supply, but I don't extrapolate very much -- not in a classical Campbellian sense. I think what I do is sort of hallucinate on the present. A lot of stuff in my books doesn't make a whole lot of

sense, from the Aristotelian gaming level. Like there's no particular reason something like the Sprawl should make much sense. There are parts of the East Coast that *feel* like that, but if you look at a map, it doesn't work. You know, why are they connected by a subway like that? I was going more for poetic validity, than genuine usefulness.

I was talking with some computer games guys who are working on the *Neuromancer* movie project, and they were asking me questions about the background in *Neuromancer*, and they were appalled that I couldn't answer them! They'd say, "Well, where are the Turing Police based? What are they?" And I'd say, "I don't know." I'd have to make it up. They went off shaking their heads. So, it's not world-building, not in the same sense as most SF.

#### ON THE "BURNING CHROME" AND "NEUROMANCER" MOVIES...

The *Burning Chrome* guys paid off all the money, not just the option, but everything. They don't have a director yet, and it's been going on for years. They tried to get me to go down to L.A. and talk to some director, but I was too busy. So, that one I don't know. They wanted to start as soon as they could, shooting in Hong Kong, but there's almost nothing of my original story left in the screenplay at this point, except the names of a couple of the characters. But, it's an amusing screenplay, and it could be a very good sort of B-movie. It was never going to be much else -- I think it's like a \$7 million film. They dropped all the Cyberspace stuff because it was going to be too difficult to mess with all that.

The *Neuromancer* thing is such a strange deal that I just sort of sit back and watch. It's the opposite of the other one, because these guys have all kinds of money, but they have to line up all the people to do it. They're giving it all kinds of hype. Like *People* magazine said it was going to be released in 1987, but I doubt it somehow.

**My concerns aren't always the same concerns as SF... I don't extrapolate very much -- not in a classical Campbellian sense. I think what I do is sort of hallucinate on the present... I go more for poetic validity, than genuine usefulness.**

#### ON HIS NEW-FOUND POPULARITY

It hasn't been real hard for me. I don't think it would have been good for me if it had happened ten years ago, but it sort of came along when my life was sufficiently settled in most ways. So, it hasn't jarred me around too much. There is a certain unreality to the whole thing, but you become very sophisticated about it. Like, it's when you see a little squib in *People* magazine, and it'll have something to do with some movie producer having hired Rogers & Cowan, P.R., to somehow twist someone's arm to mention this thing... It's good material -- you get to see the way the deals are done, and it turns out that they're done pretty much the way I thought.

It's not been that bad. It worried me more when I was doing those stories in *Omni*, and no one knew who I was -- I wanted

to be mobbed then. It took time for the long autograph lines to build, and stuff. When I was in London, when they were launching *Count Zero*, I did a signing just before Anne McCaffrey, and I had like twelve people, and Anne McCaffrey had a line that went around the block *twice*! So it seems like I'm real popular, but I'm not compared to people like Anne McCaffrey. And anyway, it's almost impossible for a writer -- even one who's making megabucks in the mainstream -- to be a celebrity to the point where it makes you uncomfortable. You know, John Updike can walk around anywhere, and even Stephen King can put on dark glasses and go out. It's not like some mid-range rock star getting his jacket torn off every time he walks through a hotel lobby.

Even at conventions, people are pretty cool about it. I don't mind a little adulation. It's good for the soul... I keep waiting to see teenage girls with Xacto knives glued to their fingers, mirrored sunglasses stuck to their heads -- when you've really made it, you see little teams of people dressed like your characters at the WorldCons.

#### ON COMPUTERS AND VOOODOO...

I think my total ignorance allowed me to view computers with total romantic freedom. And I love the language that has grown out of it, and the intensity. I'd go to conventions and sort of eavesdrop on the drunk computer guys, listen to drunken hackers at four in the morning. I wasn't interested in the meaning of what they were saying, so much as the poetry of the jargon. I de-constructed the jargon, and invented things. Without bothering to confirm any of this sort of thing, I just said, "Oh, that means this..." I don't think I knew, when I wrote *Neuromancer*, what a "modem" was. I just overheard the word. So there's this scene where a character says, "Bring me a modem." And in the scene, it's this ridiculous, archaic thing -- they don't need a modem! It just doesn't make any sense at all, but I didn't

know that.

I did check it with some people who knew a bit about computers. I had them look at it afterwards, and they said it makes a weird sort of sense. And sometimes it really turns the computer people on, they get real excited. Stewart Brand (from *Whole Earth Software Review*) is a big fan of *Neuromancer*, and he told me that it captures the passion that these guys have for what they're doing.

One thing that I realized I was doing in *Neuromancer*, is that I was eroticizing computers in the way hotrod songs eroticize cars.

I think the computer is the spaceship of the '80s. In the '40s, the spaceship was the vehicle and the symbol, and in the '80s, the computer is the vehicle and

the symbol. I just found a sort of concrete way of showing it as a means of travel, and it seems to work. I know that other people have done those notional computer-realities before, but I still think that the way I worked out Cyberspace was probably the only *original* thing I tried to do in the first book.

The voodoo tie-in was totally off-the-wall... That was like radical lateralization; I had no idea it would become so large a part of the books. When I started writing the outline to sell *Count Zero*, I mentioned something about a "cybernetic religion" forming, and I really couldn't get anywhere with that. And then I just saw something somewhere, in *National Geographic* maybe, and I said, "All right! Voodoo Gods!" But afterwards, I found that very satisfying, and there's more of it in *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. I like the idea of the matrix intelligence, in its search for a template with which to communicate with mankind, battenning onto something that's so non-White, so non-European. And in a screwy way, the more I read about the roots of voodoo and the anthropological extrapolations of the world view underlying it, it's all very appropriate. Particularly AI. In the *Overdrive* book, I'm trying to work out a crisis I've written myself into... I think that the idea of Artificial Intelli-

gence that I started working on in *Neuromancer* is weirdly close to the classical voodoo view of where the Gods come from. It turns out that the whole serious worship part of those African religions has to do with dividing different parts of the soul -- this knot of different kinds of energy -- and dispatching them to different places. And the very highest stuff goes back down the time-line to where there's this pool of energy. The idea is that if you cease to worship the Gods, the Gods die, and then the Universe stops, and there'll be no more god at the back of the thing. And it's just sort of throwing back these pieces of information. But, you know, I've been reading a lot of great crackpot books lately...

#### ON COLLABORATIONS...

I shouldn't talk about the Sterling-Gibson novel project until I know what Bruce is into with it -- I haven't had a chance to talk to him about it this weekend. I feel very happy about it, and look forward to working on it. Should be very strange... *[The book is now in progress. -- APM]*

But for the short pieces, they're always different. When I did "Red Star, Winter Orbit" with Bruce, it was like editing film. I actually felt guilty taking half the money, because I just took a long manuscript of Bruce's and sort of chopped it down, streamlining it a little bit.

That piece I did with Shirley ("The Belonging Kind"), that was when I'd just started writing, and he sent me this very long, deadly serious piece of Kafka-esque horror, and I thought it was a load of balls. So I wrote this very short parody of it -- which is in effect the story as you've seen it -- and I sent it back to him as a private joke, and he sold it immediately. He sent it off to Charles Grant for *Shadows*. Grant, oddly enough, had a market report at the time that always said "No Humor," no joke-stories. And I felt that was a very funny story, I meant it to be very comical.

The one with Swanwick was a very weird process... I got drunk at Denvention, and somehow ended up telling *[Gardner]* Dozois

about this dream-image I had of these little airplanes in a redneck bar. He went to some other convention, got drunk, and repeated this to Swanwick, who I didn't know at the time. And like two years later, Swanwick sent me this note saying, "I have figured out a rationale for that image, would you like to do a story?" So that one actually started from scratch pretty well, and it was tough going in some ways. I still feel that that story is moralistic in a way I'm uncomfortable with, and it's also in some very basic way much more misanthropic than my own stuff usually is. Although it's a strong story. It's very interesting to me that Scott Card has pointed that out as the piece of my work that he most admires, and that embodies good, human values, and I've always seen it as being kind of the opposite!

#### ON JAPANESE DOMINANCE IN FICTION...

Well, at the time I was doing it, I thought of this as a cliché. Maybe it wasn't done much in Science Fiction circles, but it was just *around* -- you'd hear it in bars, people talking about it in this dumb kind of way. And I don't know if it's going to go that way, but it just seemed to be a very obvious move. Ian Watson wrote a story a long time ago, when he was living in Japan, called I believe "A Programmed Love Affair." It's very, very short, but it's set in Tokyo and he was using, I think, the "hallucinating on the present" technique. There's also another one called "Sitting On A Star-Root Stool" that was written around the same time. They both have these incredible Japanese backgrounds, and those were very influential.

My wife teaches English to Japanese students who come over to U.B.C., so for years we've had this constant turnover of right-off-the-plane Japanese kids, most of

whom are pretty wealthy. I get to meet a lot of them, and watch them change as they go through. Vancouver's also a big tourist Mecca for the Japanese -- it's cheaper than the United States, it's real easy to get to, the visa

regulations are more relaxed, there are a lot of direct flights... So, in Vancouver there's a lot of Japanese bars where busi-

**I'd love to link minds  
telepathically with the  
Japanese readers and see  
what [reading *Neuromancer*]  
is like for them.**

nessmen get up and sing and stuff, and they're really for the Japanese transient tourist population. I've never been to one. I'd like to go sometime, but it might wreck it for me.

I've been real surprised by how they've responded to *Neuromancer*. Now that's where Cyberpunk is a big deal -- they've bought it hook, line and sinker. You know, they've got this special Cyberpunk issue of

*Hayakawa's SF Magazine* which has

the best illustration of my work that I've ever seen -- this terrific little black-and-white picture of Molly and Johnny -- and I want to have one blown up for a tee-shirt or something. It's really good!

Some Japanese critics, when I asked what the Japanese translation of *Neuromancer* is really like, have said, "Ahh, it's very *punk*!" and I said, "What does that mean?" And they said that there's no nuance, it's just this kind of flat, glittering, prickly thing. I'd love to link minds telepathically with the Japanese reader and see what it's like for them. All the street names in *Neuromancer* came from periods of pottery on a Japan Airlines counter, so I always thought for the Japanese reader it's kind of like "they ran down Chippendale Street" or "Tudor Alley" -- these really unlikely names for classical pottery periods.

#### ON CYBERPUNK...

Well, I think the most interesting thing about all that, to me, is that I never would have thought that I'd get the opportunity to watch literary history being made -- even in this very small branch of literature. But, having seen what's happened with this, I'll never be able to read any kind of literary history account without a very big grain of salt.

There's something going on here. I don't know quite what it is. It's like there's a process of mythmaking that's quite independent from the rhetoric of some

of my colleagues. It just has some strange kind of momentum. When you look at the sort of grouping that Swanwick established, the sort of split -- before I read that, I wouldn't have known who to put into which camp.

One thing that bothers me about it, and this came up in the second Cyberpunk panel we did -- is the business of Cyberpunk-Humanist poles. This is a total waste of energy, because the real differences are

elsewhere. There

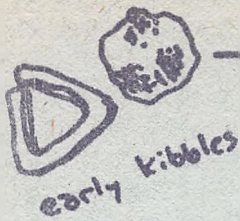
are other groups that are *really* antithetical to what both of these supposed "groups" are doing.

I don't know, it's been an odd thing for me. There's been times that I've resented it, because I felt that I was being pigeonholed too early on. And that's the down side of having a very successful first novel... People forget that it is a *first* novel, and that you want some space to work in. I think I'm pretty much done with that cycle of my work, but I don't really know whether that might partly be a response to all the fuss, you know? I want to go off and do something else so that people will realize that I'm not some kind of "one-chord wonder" or something.

#### ON ARMADILLOCONS...

I had a great time, that should get in here somewhere... This is my third ArmadilloCon, and I'd like to make it an annual thing. The first one I came to here (1982) was the real breakthrough for *Neuromancer*, because I had the first thirty pages or so, and *nobody* had seen it. I was very paranoid about it, and I wound up doing this reading up in the Bradford, and we were up in like the con suite or something, and all these people filed in. I did this insane, very intense reading. I was so scared people wouldn't like it or understand it. And I *knew* when I had finished that I was onto something, because I had dropped jaws and stuff, you know. After that, I had a really good time...

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# OUR 21ST CENTURY WRITERS, PART II

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Hood River Social Complex, Oregon  
6/15/26

by Allen Varney

*(EDITOR'S NOTE: In this hundredth-anniversary year of modern science fiction, 2026, our footloose reporter is visiting the leaders of 21st-century sf. The last installment told of his trip to Heinlein Colony in California's Recovery Zone.)*

The *Inquirer's* chartered blimpiner floated in over a giant desalination plant and moored at Portland Intercity Airport. A glorious summer afternoon showed off the Cascades to best advantage. Heavy winter snows have all but concealed the blast craters, and of course the Pacific Northwest's radioactivity has long since declined to insignificant levels. This scenery, benevolent and outwardly unchanged from the last century, suits the home, the work, and the private entertainment studio of one of the 21st century's greatest writers.

I was greeted at the airport by the great man's own chauffeur, an elderly Thai lady who (I learned) has been blind since birth. "Enchanting!" I thought as I ushered her behind the wheel of her hill-crawler. To find such an unfortunate in a position of responsibility affirms the values of her employer's work. Hasn't he led the way in promoting respect and equal treatment for the handicapped?

Though I admit to one or two ruffled moments on the bumpy mountain roads west of

Portland, Miss Hung's cheerful banter did much to calm me on our journey. I wish I could convey to my readers her chipper spirit, her enthusiastic tone in describing Hood River Social Complex. Sad to say, her congenital speech impediment rendered Miss Hung's monologue indecipherable to my untrained ear.

But the sympathetic reader will understand my joy at this heartwarming confirmation of the human spirit, caught so well in the author's work. In these circumstances, it was an honor to carry my own luggage.

## *Encountering the Complex*

We careened down toward a green valley near the ruins of Hood River. Below, a cluster of tasteful geodesic domes in many sizes showed we had reached the Hood River Social Complex. Around them grew fields of vegetables. Herds of cattle roamed rolling pastures.

Beyond the domes and the fences stretched a long, low building, the largest entertainment studio of our time. More impres-

sive than Skywalker National Ranch in northern California, more profitable than a hundred McCaffrey's Dragonburger franchises, this was a combination of both: Varley Studios. As the reader may know, the entire Social Complex is an updated "company town" of Studio employees and their families.

Our exciting ride halted at the base of a fortuitously placed statue of Heinlein, in front of the Hood River School of Progressive Education. Climbing from the still-intact hillcrawler, I found by the statue's base none other than the Social Complex's founder, owner, and chief director, John Varley.

At age 79 Varley has lost none of the robust good looks of his youth. Gray hair has migrated from his pate to his beard, while the years have added a Falstaffian prominence to his bearing. Even casually dressed, in denims and one of his famous Hawaiian print shirts, Varley projects a jovial, Santa-Claus-like profile.

The great man, seated on a reinforced park bench, greeted me with a hearty handshake. "I don't usually give interviews, but the *Inquirer's* impeccable reputation, along with your record of brilliant, unbiased journalism, changed my mind," he said. "And now maybe people will stop getting our names confused. Too bad, since I figure the confusion increased my sales twenty percent." (Despite the similarity of our names, Varley and I are unrelated.)

As we talked, the author surveyed a class of schoolchildren, who displayed their cross-dressing techniques. Hood River prides itself on advanced educational reforms, such as having all children impersonate the opposite gender at regular intervals.

"Breaks down sex barriers," Varley explained. "We teach our kids that physical attributes are unimportant, if the thinking is right." So Varley spreads, in the real world, the values that made his works some of the cornerstones of modern science fiction.

His novels and collections have sold millions of copies, won countless awards, and guided the enlightenment of Oregon civilization. And having one's own studio eases the path from page to screen: All of Varley's fiction has been filmed, except for one unpublished story. That work (from 1979) should get cinematic treatment shortly after its publication in the long-awaited anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*, scheduled to appear next spring.

The great author has triumphed over a few shortsighted critics of the last century, who slighted his works for their allegedly "shallow" characters and "insane" plots. As careful reassessment over the last three decades has shown, Varley's characters actually embodied his profound concern with the dehumanizing influences of 20th-century society.

"They're supposed to be shallow," the multiple-Hugo-winning author confirmed over a hearty luncheon. "For instance, when the hero of 'Blue Champagne' -- referring to



the Uninquirer

his famous (and twice-filmed) 1984 novella -- "calls 1960s sitcoms like *Gilligan's Island* 'witty,' that's the giveaway right there.

"The people in my future histories have had personality, taste, and common sense bulldozed out of them by a century or more of mass media. Why else would they be haunted for years or decades by ordinary human tragedies that real people readily cope with? Why else would they make love with one another on two hours' acquaintance? How else could so many be utterly ignorant of literature and art, with hardly a thought about religion or philosophy or

the state of civilization? How else could they live in cultures of staggering uniformity, where cultural diversity and ancestral heritage are completely unknown?

"Likewise, the heroine of *Millennium* is shown to be insane at the end of the book. That's the only conceivable way to explain any of her actions in the story. And that she was from 5,000 years in the future, but thought only in terms of idiotic pop-culture references from the postwar Baby Boom -- that was explained in the book as her conditioning. I was making the point that if we hadn't been careful, the last century could have turned us into the same type of witless dolts.

"I don't know why it took the critics so long to realize what I was doing. But thank goodness my readers understood, and we have avoided that fate today."

I was glad to agree. The high-minded literati of a defunct culture called his work simplistic banality, but Varley's countless fans immediately spotted it as sophisticated cultural futurism. Luckily, some of them heeded his warnings. Guided by his work and the values it espouses, Hood Riverites (including other famous sf writers whose work has much in common with Varley's) have achieved a saner society, and an unequalled total of Hugo and Nebula awards.

### *A Tour Of The Complex*

Varley cheerfully waved away his afternoon appointments and took me on a personal tour of his community. Powered by clean fusion generators far underground, ergonomically sensible in its slidewalk layouts, landscaped, manicured, and quiet, Hood River seemed as idyllic as a theme park. It was lunchtime, and I saw many people walking the pedestrian malls, chatting, nibbling ice-cream cones, having sex, or admiring the sturdy oaks shading the slidewalks.

As we walked, Varley nodded and smiled at his fellow citizens. They waved to him like old friends and, due to his impressive presence, moved out of his way. Their expressions didn't generally show the serene happiness of the citizens in Heinlein Colony; rather, the Hood Riverites often displayed the satisfaction of earnest commitment to a cause.

I commented on the evident racial balance among Hood River's citizens. Discarding the wrapping of his ice-cream cone, Varley said, "Twenty point eight percent

black or mulatto, eleven percent Hispanic, eighteen percent Oriental (further subdivided according to cultural background), one percent Amerind, and there are three Inuit Eskimos. We aim for a representative mix of racial characteristics, modified every decade when the new census appears. We try to mirror society as a whole."

Hood River is perhaps the only small community in North America that employs an official demographer. The town strictly regulates new arrivals (and occasionally enforces departures) according to requirements of race and age. And needless to say, the numbers of men and women in Hood River are exactly equal. I thank the anonymous male clerk who charitably left the town for the two hours that I was there, so I would not disrupt the balance.

Passing down a line of clean residential domes, Varley ate a chocolate bar and pointed out some of the community's landmarks: commemorative statues of the great sf writers Damon Knight and Kate Wilhelm, who helped found the Complex in the last century, and of onetime spiritual leader Orson Scott Card, who (as is well known) achieved beatitude and was transubstantiated directly to Heaven in 1996.

Further along, we saw the creche where all the town's children are communally raised, kibbutz-fashion, and the windowless re-education center, for those backward citizens who have difficulty grasping proper ideology.

After a time the aged author stopped at a sturdy concrete park bench to rest his feet. While he munched on a cream tart bought from a passing vendor, I spotted a cluster of sheds in a distant cornfield. Varley confirmed my hunch: this was, indeed, the Joanna Russ Memorial Center for Applied Feminist Studies. "We support them financially, but they seem more comfortable out there alone," he said.

He ticked off some of the Center's famous sf writers -- Jessica Amanda Salmonsen, Octavia Butler, Suzette Haden Elgin, and many others (Russ herself died of a bile attack in 1993) -- and reminded me of the entrance requirement: Applicants must write a story wherein women take charge and do a better job than the men did. "Ursula Le Guin is an honorary member," he finished, "but she lives in Portland, and she never visits."

### *Studio City*

The last stop on our tour was the enor-

mous ranch-style concrete building at the far end of town. This structure, so like a movie soundstage, produces more print, motion-picture, and television entertainment than an entire publishing company or studio lot of the last century. Inside it are no actors, no sets, no complicated lighting and sound equipment ... just an awesome collection of computers, and the imaginative geniuses of Hood River.

Ordinarily no outsiders are allowed in, but the *Inquirer* press pass worked its usual wonders. Inside, the building looked like a darkened aircraft hangar. Long rows of technical consoles, lit only by the phosphor glow of their monitor screens; circular supercomputers at the end of every row like bookends, their thick cables rising into the darkness above; low mutterings of the console operators nearby, contrasting with exotic sound effects generated at the room's far end.

The "operators" are the star creators of Hood River. They use advanced imaging techniques to create scenery and characters, animate their movements, and construct the stories that thrill the modern world. The final product, as convincing as the "real" motion pictures of the last century, is uploaded by satellite link to publisher-producer-distributors on both coasts and around the world.

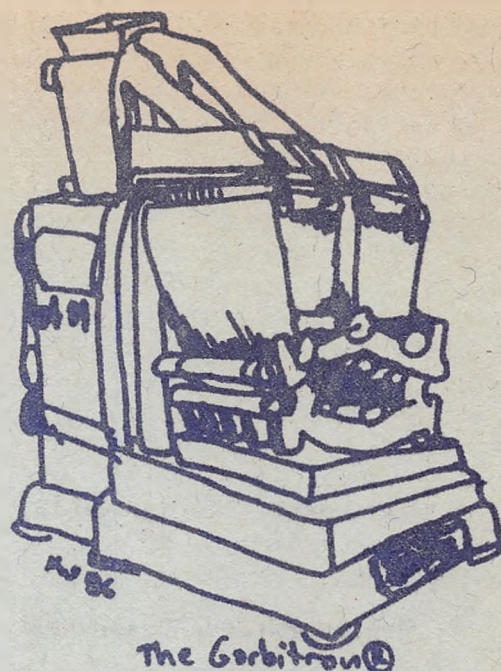
Varley, munching on an apple, described the creative process involved in film work as we walked down a long line of consoles. (Such is the preeminence of his presence that the aisles were recently widened.) "We dream up the storylines, send them to the producers, incorporate the changes they request, and throw everybody available at the project. Each creator takes a scene or two, creates the dialogue, designs the sets, blocks out the action, and does the finishes. It calls for craftsmanship of the highest order."

Looking at the expressions of concentration on the creators' faces, I could well believe it. "What are you working on now?" I asked Varley.

"Oh, lots of things. I try to keep track of them all, but it's such an intricate process..." Varley peered at a console and exchanged a few murmured remarks with its operator. "Here, I can tell you something about this one," he said, straightening up and finishing his apple.

### *The Creative Process*

"I came up with the original plot for



this TV special myself, and George here is working up the key scenes." He slapped the console operator, the renowned sf novelist and screenwriter George R.R. Martin, on the shoulder. "George tells me the network has called for some changes in the story, but the basic idea is a sort of science-fictional romance. The hero is kind of an independent urban-renewal expert, chasing bums and thieves out of condemned buildings and blowing them up so the government will have to build good buildings--"

"Uh, they didn't like that, John," Martin interrupted. "They want him to be a likeable young construction worker, sort of an everyman."

"Oh. Well, okay. Well, he meets the young, innocent heroine, this high school girl who's scared of emotional involvement--"

Martin cut in again. "Yeah, about that, the network says she should be a divorcee with a young son. Better demographics."

"Oh. Yeah, okay, that could work. But the gimmick is, she gets possessed, so to speak, by this alien intelligence stranded on Earth, and keeps getting visions of its homeworld--"

"They didn't like the special effects budget for the homeworld. Finito."

"-- okay, but the government finds out, tries to kidnap her to pump her brain, so they escape. There's this frantic chase up and down the hills of San Francisco--"

"-- Phoenix --"

"-- and in the climactic sequence, he

teaches her how to love, and she learns enough technology from the alien to build this unstoppable super-vehicle that crashes through the army barricades and off into the sky, the end."

"The super-vehicle bit is too much like another project they've got in the works. The network says drop it and make the climax a big battle with kendo fighters."

"Kendo fighters?"

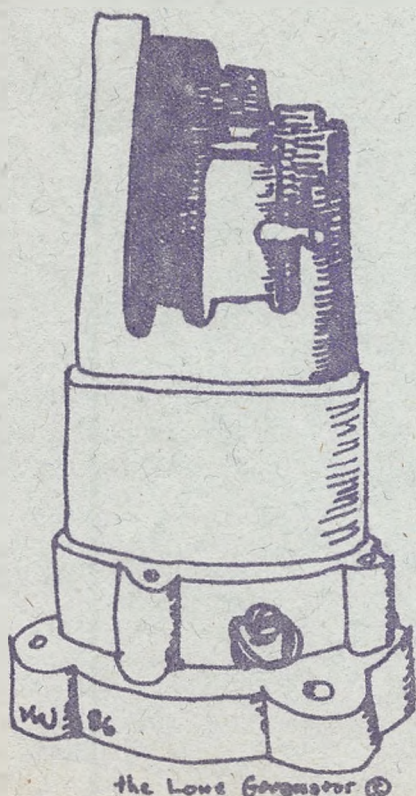
"They're trying to make kendo the next hot thing. But they liked the part where he teaches her how to love. So maybe her kid is adopted?"

"Excellent!" said Varley. "I said this called for the highest craftsmanship," he told me as we headed for a snack bar. "These people have it, and they understand the system that underlies the creative process. They're the best in the world." I had to agree. The Varley studio creators constantly display the flexibility that marks the true artist.

### *Anyone Can Do The Job*

On one wall of the studio lounge an enormous color screen displayed some kind of chart or spreadsheet. Varley described it with pride as he snacked on a candy bar from a vending machine. "We call this our social conference board," he grinned.

"Across the top of this wall," he said,



gesturing broadly, "you see the names of all the novels, stories, movies, programs, and so forth that we have produced in the last decade. Reading down the left side of the chart, there at the far end of the wall, you can find all the occupations depicted in those works -- doctor, demon, cop, king, piano mover, everything from abortionist to zoologist.

"Cross-indexing," he continued, "this electronic display shows the demographic profile of these jobs, as given in any and all of our productions."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It tells how many times we've shown a job being done by a man, a woman, a white, a black, straights and gays, humans and aliens, and so on. We feel a responsibility to show the public that anyone can do any job."

I applauded this worthy commitment. How like Varley, this noble gesture! The author has often said that he tries to include equal numbers of men and women in his stories. When there is an odd number of characters, one character must either switch sexes during the story or be a transvestite. This display was an impressive extension of his beliefs.

"The computer alerts us when a profession's profile (as given in our works) deviates from the statistical norm. For instance, we might find that, by chance, all the doctors in our last few productions have been homosexual black males. Then we'll work hard to make sure our next release has, say, a Hispanic straight male doctor or a white female doctor or a doctor with tentacles.

"It's all to show that race and gender aren't important," Varley finished proudly.

### *No Form Is Too Insipid*

George R.R. Martin, multiple-Hugo-winning author of *The Armageddon Rag*, the thrice-filmed *Sandkings*, and other profound classics of sf, spoke of the colony's television and motion picture production.

"We have to work within the system, of course," says the 78-year-old (but still elfishly handsome) creator. "But I've worked in Hollywood and now Hood River for decades. I know that, by and large, the people in this field are dedicated, serious craftspersons. They -- we -- care about our work a lot. We fight to get as much of our original vision onto the screen as possible. And sometimes there's that magic 'one time in twenty million' when it gets

through. That makes it all worthwhile.

"We also work to ensure the highest quality and sincerity in our merchandising spinoffs," continues the bestselling writer. "I personally employ great care in the creation of our various mosaic novels, shared-world anthologies, comic-book series, roleplaying games, and the copy on the backs of the cereal boxes. I believe that for a writer with something to say, no form is inherently insipid, nonsensical, or destitute."

### *Parting With Regret*

Though I was invited to stay for the evening orgy, my demanding *Inquirer* deadline forced an early departure. Varley escorted me to the hillcrawler in his private electric tram, identical to the standard model save for its reinforced suspension.

While Miss Hung searched for the hillcrawler in front of the statue, Varley became as serious as I had yet seen him. "You're going to write about the assault on Heinlein Colony, aren't you?" he said, around a mouthful of his submarine sandwich. I allowed that the public is still morbidly interested in the Hood Riverites' raid and the subsequent tragedy.

"We still feel Heinlein belongs with us," Varley said firmly. "We still intend to arrange it, too. I can't say anything more than that -- except that Walter Jon Williams did not die in vain." He turned the tram and drove back to the Social Center, the sounds of his chewing lost amid the distant moans and giggles.

I could not remain here, though the Complex is in some ways the quintessence of today's spirit of science fiction. The

true fountainhead of this millenium awaited me in Colorado, the home of the Earth's greatest, most famous, and most characteristic science fiction author. So I regretfully guided Miss Hung to the vehicle and asked her to drive me back to my Portland airship.

But for a quiet moment before we left, I stood looking at the Cascades. The mountains stood serene, blue-gray beneath their white caps, aloof from the groans in the complex behind me.

Seeing a blast caldera rising stark through the snow, I thought of the people of the last century. As we know now, their fears of cultural oblivion proved moot. Could they have foreseen the happy world their authors helped bring about, or having seen it, recognized its glory?

I recalled lines from the Jimmy Dorsey song "Blue Champagne." Though nearly a century old now, the song is familiar to modern readers as the title of Varley's famous novella. The song embodies the same sincerity and level of emotional understanding the mark the master's own work. I sang it to myself, looking over the ruins of the city below:

*Each old refrain  
Keeps returning as I remain  
With my memories and blue champagne  
To toast the dream that was you.*

o o o

.....

### *NEXT:*

*The Greatest Of Them All*

.....



*enjoying the exhibits*

## BOOK REVIEW

# *All about* **STRANGE MONSTERS** *of the Recent Past* HEAT STONES BY **HOWARD WALDROP**

122 pages. \$35 from Ursus Imprints, 5539 Jackson, Kansas City, MO 64130

reviewed by Howard Coleman

You have to be seriously crazy to pay thirty-five dollars for a bunch of Howard Waldrop stories.

That's what I told myself when I first saw that Ursus Imprints was bringing out *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past*, a signed, limited edition collection of Waldrop's recent short fiction. Sure, I like Waldrop's work, but thirty-five bucks? Sheesh.

I mean, I'll do what's reasonable. Did I hesitate one tiny moment when Waldrop's first collection, *Howard Who?*, appeared? I did not, in spite of its typical Doubleday packaging: a mensroom blue cover adorned with what Gardner Dozois describes as a vomiting dodo bird. But that was only twelve ninety-five. (For one of the best collections of the decade, I might add.) We're talking thirty-five bucks here.

So I was tough about it. Science fiction, I told myself calmly, has its place in the budget, and you will not get carried away to the tune of thirty-five dollars, even if it *is* a Howard Waldrop collection. If you hunt and poke around, you can find most of these stories in magazines and best-of-the-year anthologies. Just stay cool.

I held out. Then those sly devils at Ursus resorted to the lowest of low tricks: they started advertising the book. Every time I saw an ad, I told myself: Stand your ground. Make your decision and stick with it. And I'd hear this whiny little voice, a sort of inverse, perverted conscience, answer back, "But it's a *Howard Waldrop* book!"

I lasted almost four months. By then, I was seeing ads for *Strange Monsters* in my sleep. In Dreamland, the ads were in full color, and appeared not only in *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*, but in *The Sporting News* and the *Astrophysical Journal*. I was surrounded.

I know when I'm licked. Off went the thirty-five dollars to Ursus Imprints, and back came *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past*. Now, it's a very nicely built book, to be sure. Beneath the Punchatz-illustrated wrapper lies a cloth cover, with suitably electric blue lettering on the spine. The book is signed not only by The Man himself but by all eight artists who have illustrations in or on the volume (Punchatz, Blackshear, Kirk, Haas, Jankus, Lee, Mason, and Miles) and by Gardner Dozois and Lewis Shiner, who wrote an introduction and an afterword.

The illustrations themselves are gorgeous, with several reproduced in glowing color on high-quality stock and tipped in. (If that's what you call it -- glued to the page, anyhow.) Even the black-and-whites caught my eye, and I generally don't look at illustrations much.

But the goods, as far as I'm concerned, are in the stories. Each is preceded by a page or so of explanation, or history, or a suggestion for further reading, or sometimes all three, by the author. There are seven stories, of which two appeared originally in *Shayol*, two in *Omni*, and one each in the anthologies *Light Years and Dark* and *Afterlives*. One appears for the first time in this book.

What are the stories like? Well, they aren't like anything, except maybe other Howard Waldrop stories, sometimes, a little.

Try this: What Waldrop does (in case you've only just become literate) is to write alternate histories (or histories you devoutly hope will turn out to be alternate) about some very odd things. Except, sometimes he doesn't.

No, that's not it. How about: Howard Waldrop is one of the premier fantasists of our day. His elegant fables, woven from the threads of contemporary life and a richly realized sense of history, are thoughtful and comic commentaries on the state of myth-making at the close of the twentieth century...

Never mind. All you need to know is this. (Trust me.) Waldrop writes some of the finest, most original stories appearing in sf today. Also some of the neatest.

<<< ooo >>>

The title story, "All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past" is a description of the last stand against the fears and dreams of fifties monster movies, all come to unexplained life at once. On the screen, we survived the onslaught of our monsters from the id with a little courage and a lot of luck. In real life that can never be, and the only chance we might have is to be "the best James Whitmore ever."

Reading the droll journal of a robotic plague year, "Helpless, Helpless" will make it impossible for you to look at industrial robots without thinking of them going "gitchee, gitchee, gitchee," or maybe shouting "Vile jellies!", with blood in their photo-detectors. Be warned.

A darker tale, "Fair Game" resurrects

Ernest Hemingway to hunt the deadliest, most cunning prey known to any man. The result is a somber story and a fine and moving tribute.

"What Makes Hieronymus Run?" combines the history student's defiant "How do I know that what this book says is what really happened?" with a case of mild insanity brought on by looking at 2,000 Renaissance paintings. The result is purest Waldropian madness.

"The Lions Are Asleep This Night" is one of the few stories of an African civilization free of European domination sf has produced. It's also one of the best alternate histories sf has produced, unobtrusively filtering the details of the culture and how things came to be through to us without disrupting the story of Robert Dinenke, budding playwright.

What can I say about "Flying Saucer Rock and Roll"? The "piss drinking story" has arrived. The only thing to watch out for is that your lips will move as you mouth the song lyrics, so maybe you'd like to read this one alone, or with people who understand you.

"He-We-Await", appearing for the first time here, crosses genetic engineering with "The Mummy's Curse" to describe the beginning of the last days of mankind.

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Once most writers have published as many stories as Howard Waldrop has (not that there are nearly enough), you know what to expect before you pick up a new one. Okay, she's going to spin me a creditable space opera, or he's going to tell me a funny story about wizards and things with furry toes.

The only thing you can be sure of with Waldrop is that he will surprise you. There will probably be a dash of humor. (Maybe even a bottleful.) There may be careful nostalgia for the movies or rock-and-roll of decades past. If the setting is historical, there will almost certainly be a fascination, a devotion, an obsession with the details of the thing.

After that you're on your own. The man doesn't do sequels -- and if he did, they wouldn't be like anybody else's sequels. ("Return of the Ugly Chickens" or "Hieronymus Redux"? Not likely.)

He also doesn't cut his readers much slack. As noted already, Waldrop produces some of the very best "what-if" historical sf going. (Like "The Lions Are Asleep This

Night", or "...The World, As We Know't.", in *Howard Rho?*, which is also as fine an end-of-the-world tale as has been written.) But he's not going to lecture, to point out that this or another crucial turning point in history is Where Things Changed. He'll give you the story and let you figure it out. That makes for exciting reading, but exercising the brain doesn't fit everyone's idea of what sf ought to do, and Waldrop's popularity probably suffers for it. God help us if he ever comes to his senses.

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So I'm sitting in my office, unwrapping my brand-new book, when a fellow inmate walks up just in time to see the price on the jacket.

"Wow, thirty-five dollars! Wouldn't it have been cheaper to wait for the paperback?"

This is exactly what I need to hear, right? I explain, calmly, that there isn't a paperback, that if you want to possess your very own copy of *All About Strange Monsters of the Recent Past*, you have to shell out, er, thirty-five dollars, and that it's a pretty swell book, anyhow.

"So who is this Waldrop guy?" he wants to know.

Just the author of "The Ugly Chickens", and "God's Hooks", and "Ike at the Mike", and here, in my very own hand is a copy of "Flying Saucer Rock and Roll", and...

"Never heard of 'em. Is he as good as Douglas Adams?"

I ponder the possible justifications for homicide. I consider pointing out that this is a collection of stories by one of sf's few truly unique voices. I think about explaining that these wild yarns about how things are, these lovingly detailed examinations of how things might have been, these lucid insights into our hopes and dreams -- that these are what sf is all about. Maybe I should just tell him that if there were a Hemingway on Bizarro World he would be Howard Waldrop.

Finally I just say that there isn't anybody like Howard Waldrop, and let it go at that.

You have to be seriously crazy to pay thirty-five dollars for a bunch of Howard Waldrop stories.

And if you qualify, it's worth every damn cent.

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## TABLE TIRADES

### by Paul D. Ortega

Overall, my year and a half of operating a dealer's table at various SF conventions has been fun, if not always profitable. But, like many a street in Texas there have been a few potholes.

I believe it to be a bit hasty to take over a neighboring dealer's empty table at 2 p.m. on Friday of a three-day con. Some of us have mundane 40-hours-per-week jobs which prevent us from arriving very early.

Advance information about guests and programming is greatly appreciated. "We are going to have guests, movies, and panels" does not cut it as advance information.

Set-up times and dealers' room hours information also aids one when making travel plans. Fans are an important part of the con and I would prefer not to bump them in the aisles with my wares during set-up. This, unfortunately, is slightly better than the alternative of watching the sun

rise over McClown's golden arches while waiting for the con to open.

An accurate estimate of expected attendance is probably the hardest thing to provide a prospective dealer. However, a dealer has reason to be upset when he pays increasing table costs and does not see the estimated con attendance.

When it's time to close the video room for the night it is not very polite for a con member to merely say, "That's it" and turn off the sets. We paid for our con passes and are therefore not intruding on your private party. This unfortunately happened at Aggiecon 17 last year, of which I usually expect better. (Also on the subject of videos, I believe that showing multi-generational 6-hour VHS format tapes as "daytime films" should be a capital offense.)

The guilty know who they are, and the innocent need not be offended.

# MIDNIGHT EXCURSIONS

## Horror Book Reviews

by Lawrence Person

**The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of The Three**

by Stephen King

Donald M. Grant, 1987; \$35.

**Misery**, by Stephen King

Viking, 1987; \$18.95.

**Masques II**, edited by J.N. Williamson

MacLay, 1987; \$19.95.

**The Legacy of Heorot**, by Larry Niven,

Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes

Simon and Schuster, 1987; \$17.95.

As the title might indicate, this column (which I hope becomes a regular -- or at least semi-regular -- feature within these pages) is dedicated to reviews of horror fiction. And what better way to start such a column than a look at the latest works of the number one best-selling horror author in the known universe, Mr. Stephen King?

Though King has had at least three books on the New York Times Hardback Bestseller List this year (*II*, *The Eyes of the Dragon*, and *Misery*), the first book I want to talk about is the only one that will *not* make that list. That book is *The Dark Tower II: The Drawing of The Three*, and the reason that it's not going to sell five million copies is that there are not five million copies to be sold -- publisher Donald M. Grant has limited the trade run of the book to 30,000. As the title indicates, the book is a sequel to *The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger*, a tale about the last gunfighter in a dying world and his quest for the Dark Tower.

Though more characteristically King than the first volume of the series, *Drawing of The Three* is still very different from the bulk of King's work. There is suspense in this book, but little real horror. Instead of writing for fear, the *Dark Tower* books have a very mystical, mythic feel to them. That mythic feeling is even more apparent in this volume, though King is still a good ways from fully realizing his vision.

In this volume we find Roland the gun-

slinger walking along a beach in search of the three companions he needs to help him complete his quest. He is hampered in this by the loss of two fingers (and the resulting infection) brought on by the attack of giant lobster-like creatures. Each of his companions comes from our world (not Roland's), and he reaches each by means of magical doorways along the beach that provide a channel into the world (and mind) of the needed companion.

The three companions he seeks are The Prisoner, The Lady of Shadows, and The Pusher. The Prisoner turns out to be a quick-witted heroin addict running drugs for the mob, The Lady of Shadows a half-crippled black woman whose schizophrenic personality alternates between that of a charming, intelligent, saintly lady and a screaming banshee of a witch from the worst nightmares of a Ku Klux Klansman. And The Pusher ... well, you wouldn't want me to spoil all the surprises, would you?

King has always been a master of characterization, and it is character that drives this work. All of the players, both major and minor, are well and sharply drawn. Both Eddie, the hip, quirky addict, and the Italian-American mobsters who want the drugs he smuggled in, are characters that could have been two-dimensional cardboard dummies in the hands of another writer. However, King brings them alive with unequalled skill.

That aside, the book suffers from two significant flaws. The first, a somewhat weak plot, is to be expected in the component books of a unified series (King projects that the *Dark Tower* saga will take six or seven books to complete). The other problem is the thematic dichotomy between the humorous, earthbound parts of the book that King is so skillful at, and the mythic level that he seems to be reaching for. This too should be less of a problem in future books, once King leaves our world behind and moves fully into Roland's.

Still, there is enough here for any King fan to make it worth your while. If you

want this book, you'd better hurry. It's already sold out on the retail level, and at least one dealer at the recent Austin Fantasy Fair was selling copies for \$85! It's too late to get *Gunslinger* for less than \$100, so just imagine what this book will be worth when King gets around to finishing the series!

The other King we're looking at this month is not nearly so rare or odd. In fact, even though it was intended to be the last of the Bachman books (before the secret got out), *Misery* has all the characteristics of King's most famous works: a huge press run, #1 on the NYT Bestseller list --

And pure terror.

Paul Sheldon is an author who writes two kinds of books -- good ones and best-sellers. Annie Wilkes is a large, somewhat odd ex-nurse who doesn't quite have all of her wheels on the tracks. She also happens to be a big fan of Paul Sheldon's *Misery* books, the best-selling ones. Normally, the two would never have met. However, Paul has an accident that shatters his legs and Annie happens to find him. Once she finds out who he is, she decides that it would be fun to keep Paul all to herself. That is, until she reads the latest *Misery* book and finds out that Paul has killed off her favorite character. Then she gets very, very mad...

*Misery* is a tightly bound torture box of a novel that highlights not only King's skill with characterization (his portrait of a manic-depressive, paranoid psychotic is both skillful and chilling), but also his mastery of suspense. As he did in *Cujo*, King manages to keep the tension strung to a breaking point throughout the novel, a feat that no other author could match. Like all his best work, it's almost impossible to put *Misery* down: he has the *gotcha* (as he calls it) working throughout. The scenes of horror here are well done, and a couple of them even manage to evoke an intellectual shudder of revulsion, the way a truly disturbing work of fiction should.

However, *Misery* is not "just" (to use that oh-so-condescending phrase that all the literary critics are bandying about in reference to this book) a horror novel. It is also a book about the creative process involved in writing a novel. Soon Paul finds that he is not only addicted to the drugs that Annie is feeding him, but to writing the novel that has been forced upon him. And it is his ability to write, and

of Annie's need to read his work, that keeps Paul alive. However, time soon starts to run out on both of them...

All in all, this is a very good book. Still, it is not King's best, as some critics have ascribed. It has neither the sheer power of *The Long Walk*, nor the almost perfect pace and plotting that King achieved in *Salem's Lot*. But it is a damn fine horror novel, and highly recommended.

Also highly recommended is *Masques II*, edited by J.N. Williamson, a sequel of sorts to the highly praised anthology of original horror fiction that came out in 1984. Mr. Williamson seems to have done it again, since this is the best anthology of original horror fiction that I have seen all year, and possibly (he said cautiously) the best ever published.

Right off the bat, there are at least three great stories in this collection. The first is James Kisner's "The Litter", a chilling tale of unnatural pet birth in the suburbs. Kisner has a clean, swift prose and knows how to use it to get under your skin. Also excellent, and even more nightmarish, is Mort Castle's character study "If You Take My Hand, My Son." This dark-humored yarn is probably the most disturbing of the lot, having an evil twist ending that is absolutely midnight black. And speaking of twist endings, Thomas Sullivan's skillful "The Man Who Drowned Puppies" has one that falls on the very last word.

To pick the next best stories after that is a difficult task, because there is an embarrassment of riches here. Douglas Winter turns in an excellent and idiosyncratic tale in "Splatter", a political debate that amounts to a non-polemical polemic. It's a hard-hitting and intelligent look at the questions of violence and censorship, and one that refuses to insult the reader by giving you any easy answers. Ray Russell's sardonic "American Gothic", a wry and humorous story of a father, a son and their most peculiar female hired hand, is also good. The same goes for David B. Silva's "Ice Sculptures", Dennis Hamilton's "Fish Story" and Alan Roger's "The Boy Who Came Back from the Dead": all are sharp, well-crafted horror stories.

In fact, it is hard to find a story in the collection that is not good. The only one that really fits in that category is "Nothing from Nothing Comes", the first sale of Katherine Ramsland that just isn't well-crafted enough for publication. "Popsey" is also disappointing, mainly because

more is expected from the pen of (there's that name again!) Stephen King.

The one criticism that might be pinned on this volume is that Williamson & Co. are playing just a little too safe. All of these are good, solid stories but none seem to be trying to expand the boundaries of the genre the way that, for example, Dennis Etchison's *Cutting Edge* did. Though overall more consistent, *Masques II* is less ambitious than the Etchison anthology, and there is nary a splatter-punk story in the lot. Still, this collection does go to show you that the work of the old-style (pre-Clive Barker) school can still be quite effective.

And that leads to my other gripe about what's not there. Or rather, *who's* not there. Barker is one of the absent, as are Ray Bradbury, Etchison and Robert R. McCammon (all three present in the first volume), not to mention Peter Straub, Whitley Strieber, and Dean R. Koontz. However, all this is little more than quibbling, wishing that an excellent volume was a perfect one.

The final book to be reviewed may not strike some as a horror novel, especially since it is set on an alien world and is a strong piece of science fiction in its own right. But *The Legacy of Heorot* is also a damn fine monster story, and is as much a work of horror as John W. Campbell's "Who Goes There", or George R.R. Martin's "Sandkings". Not only that, it has excellent plot, characters, writing, and action so seamless that you would never guess that it had been written by three authors.

Really, what more could you ask for?

Authors Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes have turned in a tight, action packed novel that both science fiction and horror fans alike will enjoy. The colonists on the earth-like planet of Avalon find the environment hospitable to human life -- in fact, almost too hospitable. All of the colony's inhabitants become complacent after living there for two years and finding nothing dangerous. All of them, that is, save for security chief Cadmann Weyland, who feels like a fifth wheel in the growing community. Like many a 1950s monster movie, the rest of the colonists ignore Cadmann's warnings until it's too late. And that's when the killings start...

The monster that Niven & Co. have created is the nastiest alien seen since, well, *Aliens*, and one that is much more believable to boot. It's big, powerful, and unbelievably fast. And in their attempts to

wipe it out, they set off an ecological chain-reaction that makes the original monster seem like a picnic compared to the horror they unleash.

The final chapters, where they have to face a veritable horde of the creatures, is both harrowing and gripping. The scenes of the colonists preparing to defend themselves against enormous odds is reminiscent not only of the last third of *Lucifer's Hammer*, but also of similar scenes in Akira Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai*. This is full-tilt writing at its very best. In fact, many of Mr. Pournelle's most vocal detractors could learn a thing or two about pacing and action from this book.

*The Legacy of Heorot* is a masterfully written novel, as both science fiction and horror, and easily ranks among the best works that all the authors have ever done. It is at least as good as Niven & Barnes' *Dream Park*, and as good or better than all of Niven & Pournelle's work save *Lucifer's Hammer*. Gripping reading from beginning to end and, again, highly recommended.

Next issue:

Still more horrible nastiness!



# From the Recliner

by Edw. A. Graham, Jr.

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I'm introducing a rating system, 0 - 5,  
with this edition of "From The Recliner".  
The system goes as follows:

- < 5 > - Best thing since sliced bread
- < 4 > - If you don't read it, you'll  
probably be sorry
- < 3 > - Not good enough for a Hugo  
award, but don't ignore it
- < 2 > - You'll probably regret spending  
the money, a little
- < 1 > - You ain't gettin' what you paid  
for
- < 0 > - A waste of paper and time.

I always welcome comments on my reviews and  
hopefully this will make them easier to  
understand.

-- Edw. A. Graham, Jr.

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Well, folks, the rain has stopped (for  
now), the temperature is starting to rise,  
and my recliner and I are both sweating.  
However, there were some books that managed  
to keep me in my chair. Nasty habit,  
that...

The AI War, by Stephen Ames Berry

(paperback, TOR, \$2.95)

Rating: <1>

This book looked like a pretty good bet.  
It might have been (might be?), except for  
the fact that it's really a sequel or "sec-  
ond in the series". And, nowhere is this  
fact mentioned. It makes it hard to follow  
as some critical matters were apparently  
decided in the previous volume. Anyway,  
this book has nothing really to recommend  
it. Straight stuff, even if most of the  
names were hard to get past. (Why must  
everyone use apostrophes and glottal stops?  
Why not just anthropomorphize the names,  
huh?) Maybe with the first book (and, of  
course, the next) there might be something  
decent here.

Circuit Breaker, by Melinda Snodgrass

(paperback, Berkley, \$2.95)

Rating: <3>

Melinda Snodgrass almost shares the same  
problem. *Circuit Breaker* is also a sequel,  
and the fact is barely mentioned in a cover  
blurb. But this time the book can also  
stand by itself. I would suggest reading  
the first book, *Circuit*, though, because  
Ms. Snodgrass is developing her characters  
beautifully. She has picked a real touchy  
subject ("the law and justice in space")  
and is doing it credit. Judge Cabot Hunt-  
ington of the Fifteenth Circuit Court real-  
ly has his hands full this time, on Mars.

Two by Walter Jon Williams:

Ambassador of Progress

(paperback, TOR, \$3.95)

Rating: <3>

Hardwired

(paperback, TOR, \$3.50)

Rating: <4>

*Ambassador* is an older book, back in re-  
print. Williams has some real interesting  
ideas and one really good (and somewhat  
radically different) culture. Scouts from  
a more technologically advanced world trav-  
el to a lost colony and attempt to bring it  
into the re-emerging association of humans.  
With ulterior motives. Not shabby at all.

*Hardwired* is now out in paperback. One  
of the "c-word" books, this is a not-too-  
different look at the near future, sup-  
posedly standard for this "sub-genre".  
Cowboy, a panzer-boy (tank driver, kind of)  
becomes a reluctant revolutionary against  
the Orbitals, the owners of the sky,  
through stock manipulation and hard fight-  
ing. I imagine this book would have had  
more of an impact on me a couple of years

ago, when Cyberpunk (oops! I said the c-word! Sorry!) first came on the scene. Along with Gibson, though, Williams must stand as a forerunner in this "field".

**An Emperor for the Legion**

by Harry Turtledove

(paperback, Del Rey, \$3.50)

Rating: <4>

Another sequel (proudly labelled as such), *Emperor* is the second book of *The Videssos Cycle*. The Roman legion, transported mystically to Videssos (where real magic exists), have their work cut out for them. Not only is the Videssian Empire fighting enemies in the West, but there's a little matter of two different revolutions going on around the capital. Turtledove is blending historical fact (the Romans) with a fantastic setting to test his protagonists. Good reading.

**Probe**, by Carole Nelson Douglas

(paperback, TOR, \$3.50)

Rating: <3>

A think-tank psychologist, Kevin Blake, is almost driven insane himself by a mysterious Jane Doe. I started really sympathizing with him. The SF part doesn't manifest itself until the very end, but that doesn't detract from some realistic plotting and characterization. And there's more to it than what you see...

**In Conquest Born**, by C.S. Friedman

(paperback, DAW, \$3.95)

Rating: <0>

I'm going to apologize to C.S. Friedman in advance. It's not his/her fault, it's the editor's. *In Conquest Born* should never have been printed as it stands. This book is a monster for a paperback (500+ pages) and stinks. It has its moments, but they're very few and far between. Most people I've talked to that have tried to read it never finished. The idea is fine, just needs a lot of re-writing. And a real ending.

**In the Ocean of Night**, by Gregory Benford

(paperback, Bantam Spectra, \$3.95)

Rating: <4>

Benford gathered together some short stories, rewrote the whole thing, and voila, *In the Ocean of Night*. This is a chronicle of one man's drive to find out everything he can about the aliens that once visited Earth, eons ago. Mankind is still within the solar system, but we're finding all sorts of artifacts from an un-

known race. Believe it or not, Benford even brings in... No, I'm not going to tell you. You're gonna have to read the book for yourself.

**The Artificial Kid**, by Bruce Sterling

(paperback, Ace, \$2.95)

Rating: <3>

You have to give The Chairman credit: he'll try anything. He's built another, radically different (but understandable) culture, and then takes glee in trying to destroy his protagonist. From decadence to jungle survival and back to civilization. Sterling is not easy to read, but if you can fall into his rhythm, the book will carry you along with it. Oh, and by the way, congratulations Dad (and Mom, too, of course)!

**The Media Lab**, by Stewart Brand

(pre-publication copy from Viking Press)

Rating: <4>

This is not SF or Fantasy, but a straight account of the newest things happening at MIT. Not long ago, I wrote an essay on some impacts of computers, etc. in the coming years. After reading this, I know I didn't stretch far enough. The Media Lab is where MIT is studying and pushing the limits of computers, video, all of the brightest trappings of technology, to the humanistic threshold. Brand takes us on a whirlwind tour of this new facility, talking with the people that are making things happen and the possible consequences of our increasing pace of technology. If you're into this kind of thing or just want to know what you're missing, buy this book when it comes out.

\* \* \*

So much for that stack of books. I finally got a head start on the next, but the pickings are getting difficult. There are a lot of books being published in the SF/F genre, some of which, in my opinion, don't belong there. All of those "after-the-war" books, for example. I counted six different series, all set in post-holocaust America. That kind of stuff is getting real tired, but apparently people are buying them. I wonder what the next "in-thing" is going to be? Hopefully, not more of the same. 'Til next time...

\* \* \*

# Life is All a Rerun

by Neil E. Truden

*whose job on the TSFI is supposed to be limited to providing moral support, but occasionally he lapses, and actually writes something -- or solicits an article or illo from someone much more talented.*

Ever notice, how when you "once-in-a-blue-moon" (like, we all know that you only have cable tv so you can watch Pavaratti on BRAVO, and Masterpiece Theatre on PBS) turn on the boob tube to watch something mindless, like *Charlie's Angels* or *Hardcastle and Macormick*, it turns out to be the very same episode that you watched the only other time you ever watched that show? Was this just a coincidence (even when it happens 23 times in a row), or was the great Ghod Mhurphy giving you a heavenly sign that YOU have been singled out to be his (or her -- with Mhurphy you can't be sure of anything) messenger to mankind? Well, the truth of the matter is, the local cable company isn't broadcasting the same couple of hundred MegaHertz of signal over a series of co-ax cables to everyone in the neighborhood. Instead, strange and unknowable powers (if they were knowable, we'd know who they were -- so I'll just call them the Secret Masters of Futuredom) are *individually* programming your cable converter!

Just apply Occam's HydroElectric Shaver principle. When faced with stranged and warped-seeming phenomena, for the *real* cause choose the most outlandish (and amusing) theory to explain it all. A more commonly used corollary of this principle is that *Truth Is Stranger Than Fiction*.

I remember reading another installment, in *F&SF*, of "Harlan Ellison's Watching" -- that entertaining column where Mr. Ellison repeatedly spills the beans on how the

forces of evil and darkness, using the resources that only can be controlled from Southern California, tried to subvert and destroy some example of the *Higher Art*, lest it enlighten and uplift all of humanity (or something like that -- I really have a bad memory for details). In it, he wrote a bit on how modern media-masters used to lag a few years behind what was happening in the world -- but how they're starting to warp what they now portray.

He was close to the truth, but not quite there. The SMOFs are trying to warp our perceptions of what is going on around us -- that much is true. But *this fan* is way too smart to fall into that famous heresy that allows forces of Evil and Nasty Badness to actually create new and innovative things (the SMOFs, of course, get all their super-science technology out of crackerjack boxes). These evil creatures are only able to cloud our minds with what has already happened. Yes, they are trying to forge a Vision of Tomorrow based on Yesterday. How insidious!

I first had my eyes opened to this strange but bizarre truth while trying to catch up on some of the fanzines that have for some reason (but more probably for another) been sent to me by unsuspecting faneds. For some time I have been piling them on my desk (after first looking at all the pictures, and scanning them to make sure no one has written anything nice about me) -- so as to properly age them. I particularly enjoy writing locs to fanzines published a

while ago -- it not only lets the faned know that his or her works have made a lasting impression on the world, but saves them mimeo ink. Since whatever I'm commenting on is sure to no longer be timely -- or they are sure to be safely gaffiated, and so need merely read my LOC, and be thankful that they have seen the light, and gotten out of this stuff.

I was logging into my database all the zines that have arrived since I started getting bogged down with organizing the Fan Rooms at ConFederation. I'd read the zine, and sometimes sent back a one-shot (if I felt that I was falling behind in our all-for-all trading, what with my less-than-prolific output of general-mailing zines). On the other side of the house, in the living room, I had MTV playing on the TV (and thus over the stereo, what with my strange electronic hook-ups), to provide background noise. And what should I come across, but *Light in the Bushel* #2, from Richard Brandt.

Now, I had first met Richard at Pat Mueller and Dennis Virzi's wedding (which was held in the same town and on the same weekend as ArmadilloCon, so it seemed foolish to not also take that con in too). Richard was that famous exception to the rule -- that active fanzine fans have to come to Texas to first gaffiate, and then once again become active, with a whole new insight. He had actually originally started off in Texas, and was still here for his second incarnation. Being from Texas made this zine special (almost as special as if it was from Canada, where I first started pubbing), so I decided to take it to a more comfortable chair in the living room, to read it cover-to-cover (which is also easier with a small-sized personalzine). It was there that I looked up and noticed something strange on the tube.

The video playing was "You gotta fight for your right to party," by the Beastie Boys. The music was sorta a cross between rap, heavy metal, and punk rock -- and not all that good. I noted this all down, on the back page of Richard's zine, because I wanted to use it as a comment in a loc to a zine from May Sui. You see, one of the band members was wearing a *Stuyvesant Physical Education* t-shirt, and that was the high school I went to.

Then it hit me! How could the band member know that I had gone to Stuyvesant, and that I would be sitting down at that moment to watch MTV, and to see it? Now that I have formulated this outlandish theory

about the SMOFs, it all makes a strange sort of sense.

While I'm referring to my note on *LITB* #2, I might as well mention why I enjoyed reading it (after I had sufficiently recovered from my MTV). Richard wrote almost 6 pages of interesting stuff, the layout interestingly broken by relevant quotes, and Brad Foster fillos -- about getting to, and working at the Austin NASFiC, and what he did there; about helping to put on Amigo-Con, and observing the standard program items of many small southwestern conventions (con-com feuding and improprieties with the con's checking account); and how he actually attended (and seemed to remember more than I usually do) some of the programming at ConFederation -- before digressing and writing about Skiffy books and stuff. Luckily, this was quickly ended, and a loc-col started, with letters of comment from Harry Warner Jr., Eric Mayer, Buck Coulson, Brian Earl Brown, and even WAHFs from a few other well-known letterhacks. Richard has some solid people on his mailing list, and I'm glad to be among them.

Would you believe it, but I never used the comment in my letter to May Sui. May had gotten my name, address, and last zine from *FactSheet Five*, and as well as sending me a few spec copies in case I wanted to subscribe, had asked me about the music scene in Plano, TX. But I had forgotten about the MTV episode when I wrote her back -- not to remember it again until this afternoon.

I was watching some mindless movie on Cinemax, perhaps called *Turk 185*, while I cycled away for about a half hour on my exercycle. I had hoped to cycle at least 100 miles on this vacation, to burn off some of the weight I've recently put on (which is bad, as I was already weighing more than I was happy with). The movie was just like Harlan Ellison's article said recent movies were becoming. It was aimed at a teenage audience, and represented the establishment and bureaucracies as being inherently and actively evil. Bureaucracies are designed to be rigid and constant -- so one that went out of its way to pick on some unfortunate, and then a local press that doesn't pick up on it -- such is the adolescent anti-authority fantasy that so outraged Harlan.

The youthful protagonist was planning to get the attention of all the bad guys by writing more and more flamboyant graffiti, all over New York City -- picking on a

mayor fighting to get re-elected. He was doing it all by himself (an amazingly skilled and talented 20-year-old, it seemed), until he called on a buddy who was a techie to help him re-program a football stadium graphic scoreboard. The friend started out wearing a Harvard sweat-shirt, and in future scenes wore sweats from Stanford, Columbia, and other Ivy League schools -- but in the final scene, when the young protagonist was carrying out his ultimate hack on the Queensboro Bridge, our techie was wearing an MIT sweatshirt.

Now, back in the '70s I went to MIT, and thus I'm no dummy. I can compute probabilities as well as the next engineer (at least I used to be able to -- but I'm sure that with a little cribbing from my old texts, and the use of a few million dollars of computer equipment, I could do it), and this -- coupled with yesterday's episode -- seemed far too strange. Unless, of course, the SMOFs were secretly trying to manipulate my sense of reality. And ultimately, make a stab at my sensawunda!

This unreasonable and irrational fear of Cable TV was enough to make me get back out the last issue of May Sui's zine, the November 1986 *Blank Expression*. BE is a fairly new publication, from Wah Productions, which "publishes impressions and forms of expression worth absorbing." As well as some blank verse, photos, illos and cartoons, it features interviews with musical groups like Mojo Nixon, Gene Loves Jezabel, and Flaming Lips. Reviews of concerts and albums by all sorts of bands that I had never heard of -- but it might be fun to try, discovering the sounds of Tomorrow (rather than the music of Yesterday, which is all my dated record collection holds).

Maybe there is a way, through new sounds, and new ideas and meeting new and interesting people, to beat the SMOFs this year. I first got into fanzine fandom in the late '70s to develop outside (i.e. not career-related) interests and friends. It was through the mails that I contacted people who got me into travelling to cons, and from the things I enjoyed most from those cons-- the parties and socializing -- organizing unorganized fannish activities like frequent parties. And from the above, to becoming a member of Jet-Set Fandom (but that's a future article). Perhaps I should turn full circle, and get back into dealing through the mails again -- but differently, this time, so I will close the circle by crossing over itself, making an infinity sign -- and so foil the SMOFs by making

life new and different, and not repeating the past.

And to do so, looking for new and different kinds of zines, what better place to start than Mike Gunderloy's *FactSheet Five*. Gunderloy has an ENORMOUS mailing list, and receives more (and more diverse) periodicals and zines than most libraries. FSS is primarily filled with short reviews of everything sent to him -- and of lots of other things. To give you a sample, the last issue ended with a review of the Top Ten Zine-Producing Cities! At the bottom of the list was Seattle, and the zines he quoted from there were: *Adopt-A-Beach Newsletter*, *Migganznatch*, *Threadbare*, *Mainstream*, *Northwest Nuclear Exchange*, *Seattle Star*, *Eelskin Comix*, *Storm Warning*, *Avant-Garde World*, *Holistic Animal News*, *Manzine*, *Heretics Journal*, *National Boycott Newsletter*, *The New Times*, *Pigs Plot*, *Catalyst*, *Off the Deep End*, *Cerebral Discourse*, and *Earshot*. A wide and varied look at the counterculture (of which "our" fandoms are just a very small part). There's even a new column on BBS's, which lists such diverse bulletin boards as those catering to UFOs and parapsychology, Dr. Who fans, left-wing politics, immigration to Australia, sexuality and the occult, and the Science Fiction Writers of America! A very DIVERSE zine.

Well, here's wishing all of you the best. Keep those locs and fanzines coming (to 1104 Longhorn Drive, Plano, TX 75023) as well to Pat at the TSFI editorial headquarters in Duncanville), and ENJOY!

--NEK

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*Light in the Bushel*, Richard Brandt, 4740 N. Mesa #111, El Paso, TX 79912. Available for the usual, but he also accepts dead presidents.

*Blank Expression*, May Sui, 1642 24th Ave., San Francisco, CA 94122. Subscriptions are \$6 for six issues (half a year).

*FactSheetFive*, Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144. Subscriptions are \$2 per issue (up to 4 issues in advance, which is how many are published each year).