

Dark Laurus



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BOB SHAW

special issue



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FRONT COVER PHOTO: Shows Ian and Judy Watson relaxing at the Novacon in Birmingham last November. Ian poses with the British Science Fiction Association Award for 1978, which was presented to him for his novel, THE JONAH KIT.

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Heartache, hardware, sex and the system; the science fiction of Bob Shaw

by James Corley

1 : 17 Years, 80,000 Portals

Bob Shaw undoubtedly exists, otherwise it might have been necessary to invent him. He would easily pass for a fictitious character mined by some other author from the folklore of science fiction. The character is well-researched, a composite, Brunner's beard, Asimov's energy – the ambience is mid-Atlantic, since Iceland has no reputation for sf he comes from Ulster, too far east of course but births on Pan-Am clippers are difficult to arrange.

He begins early, a fanzine kid, goes on to prozines as soon as age makes it decent, sells in Britain, sells in the States. Then Nebula – who remembers it? – rejects a story. He quits for ten years, but he grows from the experience. When he returns he's travelled a little, learnt a lot, has his own style. He builds up a reputation, writes the famous *Slow Glass*, cares about the quality of his stories. When the magazines start folding Jim White is looking at an idea Bob has, suggests it's strong enough for a novel, Shaw writes *Night Walk*, goes on to write more. Wins the BSFA Award for *Orbitsville*. His reputation expands, people like Aldiss, von Vagt and Martin Amis (whom God preserve from nepotism) give him glowing reviews. Despite this he doesn't lose contact with the roots, still produces the wittiest articles in fanzines, goes to Conventions, drinks with the boys, reflects an archetype. You'd have to invent him if he didn't exist.

It may be he was so steeped in the ambience of sf he had no choice about who he became, from reading the data you see the horizons of *Astounding* and *Amazing Wonder* overwhelming the drabness of Belfast. Equally probably the creation is his own, born through a perception of the parameters of demands. So his novels have something for everyone, an amalgam of careful characterization and racey adventure. This is his strength and it's seldom a compromise, the actors have depth but never sit when they ought to run, the actions have energy but always directed, they change the players like life does. It is a formula which has not, so far, produced a great Shaw novel, but which usually guarantees a good one. A right trope which belongs to him because no one else, so far, has been able to balance an it very successfully.

Shaw took a long time before writing his first novel. It was seventeen years after the first short story when *Night Walk* came out in 1967. He still considers it one of his best. The plot's about an interstellar spy, Sam Tallon, captured and blinded by the Security Policy of Emm Luther after stealing the co-ordinates of a new colony planet. Tallon has to escape back across one thousand miles of enemy country and then across the 80,000 portals through null-space to Earth. A typically strong plot, danger all the way.

In one form or another *Night Walk* established the themes which later became the Shaw hallmark – problematic relationships with women, diffident heroes, black-hearted villains, a hard line in gadgetry and a remarkable mistrust of organisations.

Shaw's a traditionalist and, you get the feeling, proud of it, but he's not a cliché. The traditional technological extrapolation is there in force, but to grasp the full flavour of his work it's best to start with that facet which isn't traditional – the concern to invent well-rounded human characters is what marks him out.

2 : Men, Women And The Space Between

That word 'rounded' brings to mind one of my favourite Shaw quotations. It comes from his fourth, and in many ways his most ambitious, novel, *Palace Of Eternity*. Near the opening of the book Lissa Grenoble roars up to Mack Tavernier's forest hideaway in her hovercraft:

"As always the sight of her almost-too-rounded body and almost-too-full lips turned his inside into a volcano which had its base somewhere in his loins and its flame-belding apex right behind his eyes.

"Engine still sounds good," he remarked for want of something better to say. *

The diffidence of this sublime collapse is a recurring trait in Shaw's protagonists. Time and again the message comes home: women feel nicer but machines are safer to handle. It's an even chance whether male and female will get together in the last paragraph of these books, but always circumstances, or more often personalities, conspire to set up well-nigh impossible blocks along the way. Bob has claimed that his literary career began because of an exposure to pessimistic books – whenever he came across one in his youth he'd re-write



It with a happy ending. I always get the impression that when hero and heroine do make out on the last page it's because this habit has triumphed over an unconscious conviction that the real aliens are the females of our species. Integrated circuits are putty in the hands of his males, women cause no end of problems.

But what can you do? Show's heroes are men enough to know you have to try – they like women, at least theoretically. They do their best.

Hal Tarrant of *Medusa's Children* is a deserter from the air force of the kingdom of South New Zealand, a part of the world where these days they define the perfect woman as a nymphomaniac who owns a pub. This idealized conception is not the way things really are, though Tarrant is the sort of man who'd prefer it if it was. Even in this book, which is one of Show's most optimistic treatments of the subject, there is no certainty that pair bonds are made in heaven. Tarrant is at odds with the sexual repression of the fish farmers of Cawley Island. Frustrated by his fiancée's declaration that she is not that sort of girl he plunges into the receptive arms of Myrah, a girl herself precipitated into the sea by an antediluvian matter transmitter from a watery asteroid where nudism and free sex are the norm. Show presents this latter culture in a much more favourable light than Cawley Island, but there's no libertine polemic about his attitude, as always there's the recognition of outside forces.

Cawley is the way it is because Earth is in technological decline and uses puritanism to control population. Myrah's dying world has a birthrate below replacement level, sex is to be encouraged. Individuals too are under the influence of uncontrollable forces – in Tarrant's case his sex drive – yet his own attempts to end the frustration get nowhere. It takes a mutated medusa parasite controlling his actions before he achieves satisfaction, with a woman also under the influence of the monster. But his drives are complex and at the end it's Myrah that Tarrant returns to.

So far they had found only one thing in common – that their previous lives had been lonely and unfulfilled – but in his view that was quite good enough for a beginning.

No real communication, no conjunction of souls, the beautiful, nubile Myrah is the closest thing to a nymphomaniac Hal has ever encountered.

Show stops where he does, I suspect, because he wanted that happy ending. And sex alone, though it blankets the loneliness for a while, isn't enough. Tellingly, while watching a sub-aquatic copulation on her asteroid Myrah had 'discovered in herself a profound emptiness', has been 'as spent and lifeless as one of the fragile mollusc shells she sometimes saw drifting down into the dark heart of the world', had felt 'trapped in her own intangible bubble of loneliness.' as are all Show's characters, they all seek togetherness, they all, given time, find the gap between them and the opposite sex wider than the gap between the stars.

Myrah of *Medusa's Children* takes us back to a peripheral character named Myra in *Night Walk*, an ex-girl-friend of Sam Tallon. Peripheral and ex because long before the story begins she was smothered with a pillow by her father 'a sad, mumbling giant who had been deserted years before by Myra's mother'. He then opens his wrists with a portable circular saw.

Tallon's memories of this are mind-wiped by the policeman Cherkasky, but Myra's auburn hair and whisky-eyes re-appear in Helen Juste, a prison official. At first she seems a friend; she provides him with an assembly robot to make the eyesheet which solves his blindness by picking up vision from the eyes of nearby people and animals. But then she perfidiously confiscates it. Using a duplicate set he escapes from prison only to fall prey of Amanda Weisner:

How, out of a million or more inhabitants in the city of Sweetwell, had he unerringly picked out Amanda Weisner? But then, he reflected sombrely, Sam Tallon had always found the Amandas everywhere he went.

Amanda uses Sam in a peculiarly perverted way: she gets her kicks by having sex with him while using the eyeset to spy on the nocturnal matings of her cats. Understandably Tallon ends this bizarre feline voyeurism in a somewhat direct fashion:

He then subdued Amanda by holding her throat with his left hand and driving slow, rhythmic punches into her face with his right.

Sexually abused, injured in the eyes, shot in the back and clawed by a falcon (a talon in a Tallon?) Sam comes across Helen again and this time, as you can imagine, elicits a genuinely sympathetic response. Like Tarrant and Myrah these two need each other. Helen, like Myrah, is carrying around 'a tremendous sense of inadequacy and loneliness'. They fall in love, are separated, are re-united.

We hope they'll be happy ever after but, quite honestly on past performance, the chances are against it.

Unexpectedly, what's perhaps the most explicit expression of the poignancy of human relationships comes in *Ship Of Strangers*, a book compounded of several related short stories ranging from the entertainingly juvenile to the frankly obscure. The woman, Christine Holmes, has a tragic past, lost child, lost husband, hysterectomy, has created around herself a shell of toughness, has rejected her femininity. Even so the man, Dave Surgeon, has to admit to her 'I'm a bigger expert on loneliness than you are.'

It takes the threat of imminent extermination to crack the shell and for them to achieve a temporary intimacy. They try to re-establish it, with more reticence than probability of success, at the novel's end:

Surgeon picked up his own case and he and Christine – separated from each other by a short distance – walked towards the field's far-off perimeter.

Not even sex binds these two together, only the admission of individual insufficiency, and still distance separates them. Show's novels usually end at the beginning of a new relationship, the couple walk into the future arm in arm, or at least with an arm's length. Hopeful endings. But though Bob might disagree I find it hard to call them happy. They've invariably been preceded by other couplings which ended tragically.

Or which didn't end. Perhaps Show's most unusual contribution to the genre is a series of novels in which the hero is married, 'so deeply, even obsessively attached to a woman that they stick with their partners when most other men would holler cruelty and get a divorce.' It was a daring experiment and brought problems: though Lewis Huchman could simultaneously detonate every nuclear device in existence in *Ground Zero Man* the nagging presence of Mrs Huchman undoubtedly contributed to Show's British publishers refusing for a long time to believe the novel was science fiction.

To avoid marriage acting as an anchor on the action it's usually necessary to arrange a separation: Mrs Garamond of *Orbitville* walks naively into a trap set by the glaringly malevolent Elizabeth Lindstrom, Athene Carewe walks out on her husband in *One Million Tomorrows* rather than level with him about a rape by his boss.

It would be unwise to attribute the poor showing of these ladies to auctorial mysogyny, obviously it's necessary as a plot device. There are vanishingly few books in any sort of literature which centre on a happy marriage: working in the sf field Show has been courageous to introduce the subject at all. But whatever the underlying reasons, the marriages fall well short of perfection, the relationships are better symbolised by a boxing ring than a wedding ring, the message that comes through loudest from the tumult is that, at least during the course of the adventure, all men are fated to be islands.



And there's an anti-gravity island in Shaw's third novel, *Shadow Of Heaven*. To balance the picture and avoid chauvinism, to point out that if it's tough for men and women it's the same for men and men, we'll take a look at it - because what comes under the microscope in this book is brotherly love.

There's a woman in it of course, the beautiful Melissa, but the principal interplay of emotions occurs between the newspaper reporter Vic Stirling and his half-brother Johnny Considine. Considine has established himself as the chief of a primitive settlement on a floating farm three miles above the over-populated US east coast. He wants the existence of the community on the robot-maintained platform to remain a secret. Stirling, who followed him up after his mysterious disappearance, isn't allowed to return to terra firma. But there's more to it than a political disagreement, as the younger brother says:

"There's nothing for you to feel guilty about, Victor. You were only a kid when your father disappeared. You couldn't have been expected to defend your mother's bed; so there's no need for you to feel anything at all when you look at me. The only connection between us is that my father took your mother to bed and..."

Stirling threw the rifle aside and dived for Johnny's throat with clawing fingers.*

Sex does seem to be a touchy subject.

When the platform crashes into the Atlantic after Johnny tries to fly it to the Moon, Stirling survives, Considine doesn't. So it's Victor who wins the girl Melissa, though up to this point she's been closer to the dominant Considine. But this isn't their story at all, and interestingly, in the one book centred on the relationship between two men, the principles show the least inspection of any Shaw novel. Stirling is never given much depth, isn't lonely at all. It must be significant.

Before we finally leave this subject let's pay a brief return visit to the promising couple we started with in *Palace Of Eternity*, Mack Tavernor and Lissa Grenable (whose name reminds us of Melissa in *Shadow Of Heaven*).

There's a single night of passion resulting in Lissa getting pregnant Mack, for complicated reasons, is reincarnated as his own son and discovers that Lissa, who once filled his loins with fire, has become a drunk who can now only express her love by stuffing stomachs with chocolate bars. Yet again true romance turns out a cruel joke.

Relationships? 'A volcano which had its base somewhere in his loins and its flame-belching apex right behind his eyes.' A tale told by an idiot. Full of fire and fury, signifying nothing.

The idiot, I had had better make this clear, not all sf fans read Dickens, is not Bob Shaw but the human psyche, fighting against emotional nihilism as well it might under the parameters of its programming.

What's left to fill the gap? Shaw's heroes are pretty well agreed on the answer, though there is some variation in brand names. While waiting for Miss Right they all drink heavily.

3 : Wounded Heroes

Gilbert Snook of *A Wreath Of Stars*, who gets nowhere at all with the girl, hits the gin in half-pint glasses. Both Surgeon of Ship Of Strangers and Rob Hassan of *Vertigo* have a preference for whiskey. Medusa's Hal Tarrant drinks wine, less, one suspects, from sophistication than from lack of access to a distillery.

As we've seen, there's a recurring awareness of loneliness in these people. Like Gary Cooper in *High Noon* they are often men who walk alone, as heroes must perhaps. They have abandoned, or been abandoned by, a mundane and normal life for some, often not perfectly understood, grander vision.

It is never courage which drives them into danger, rather self-preservation, a need to impose meaning by walking the edge. There is a procession of wounded heroes driven by some internal damage-control mechanism to overcome the kicks in the groin

which life has delivered. In the first book, *Night Walk*, the spy Tallon must fight his blindness to eventually achieve a literally grander vision by being able to see null-space. In the latest book, *Vertigo*, the air-policeman Hossan - who had been left hurtling down into Birmingham with a sabotaged counter-gravity harness at the end of the short story 'Dark Icarus' (AKA - A Little Night Flying) - has to fight both his repaired but painful body and a phobia of flying. And in-between:

Tavorer of *Palace Of Eternity*, physically as close to a van Vogtian superman as any of Shaw's heroes but with 'a soul that had been shrivelled by hatred and self-pity', suffering the indignity of being reincarnated as the bed-wetting, ham-fisted weakling, Hal Farrell.

Snook of *Wreath Of Stars*, an aimless 'human neutrino' wanting finally to relate to others but somehow lacking the positive qualities to do anything about it.

Garamond of *Orbitville*. It's never courage which drives him into adventure, rather blind panic and then blind hatred.

Surgeon, the least purposeful of all the incomplete, flawed crew of *Ship Of Strangers*, ageing, thinking of retirement, but lacking the sense to do it.

Why does Dave Surgeon go on? He doesn't know.

The great majority of the planet maps he helped to construct would never be put to any practical use; but at the same time he understood that the maps had to be gathered and banked - even though he found it difficult to say exactly why.

Typically there is this lack of insight into actions, into the purpose of life, but again there is often profound insight beyond the mask of human interaction. The cartographic ship is Surgeon's life, his only commitment, and yet:

*The men he called his friends, with whom he spent all his waking moments, were not really his friends. It was true that they treated him with amiable toleration and respect, but no other attitude was viable in the close confines of the ship, and were he to retire his replacement would be given exactly the same consideration.

Willful strangers, he thought, recalling an old fragment of verse which for decades had served him as a personal creed.*

Would it be fanciful to say that it's the awareness of their weakness which makes them so weak? And which eventually allows them to overcome it?

Though the female characters suffer the same slings and arrows they usually react less dynamically. But remember we're avoiding chauvinism, and it's the most well-defined of all Shaw's women, Myrah from the watery asteroid, who expresses most succinctly the motivating force of adventure she realises 'only by surrendering her life had she any hope of giving it real meaning.'

Mentally, spiritually, they are all damaged in some way. They don't only fight implacable aliens, they fight themselves as well.

Where Shaw, the mid-Atlantic writer, most exhibits his North European heritage is, I believe, in the psychology of his characters. Contrast the New York Freudian mess of the hero of Pohl's *Gateway*, with the figures in Shaw. In Pohl the neuroses are event-driven, the motivators are sex and money; survival is a powerful inducement to inaction. But in Shaw the events are a way of escape from the problems, the past a handle for fate to grab, the adrenalin-surge an antidote to the existential loneliness. Not that Shaw is concerned with any definition of existence, he operates on a different level, smaller or greater, the working out of lives on a human scale. Human failings, human strengths, human complexities.

Complex the heroes certainly are. Not so the villains as we'll see later, they're depicted with an almost juvenile verve and gusto. But first a word from our sponsor: science fiction.

4: The Million-Ton Spaceship, The Million-Day Man

Verve and gusto seems an appropriate description for traditional sf. For instance.

A million-ton spaceship came storming in from the depths of space at an incredible 30,000 times the velocity of light.

A million tons! 30,000 times the speed of light! The quote comes from *Palace Of Eternity*, the strange, complex, flawed book which needs to be read more than once and which, in spite of its faults, perhaps because of its ambitious over-reaching, is Shaw's most accomplished to date.

A million tons at 30,000c! Sophisticated it isn't, fun it is, and possessed of high energy. It points out a paradox in Shaw, his books really do say a lot about people, at least about the specific kind of individual he chooses to write about, but it's possible to read one of these novels without even noticing any psychology.

He writes, to coin a phrase, on two levels. The surface is action, drama, gadgets. Fights and flights all the way. Very american, very traditional. In an interview in SFM Shaw was asked who his favourite writers were. He was cagey. When pressed he mentions Heinlein, and especially van Vogt - 'he quite often, in one sentence, threw out more ideas than some modern writers use up in their entire careers.'

van Vogt would have to move fast to throw out more ideas than Bob Shaw. A random survey shows that *Night Walk* uses no less than 17 science fictional devices ranging from brain-brushes to laser-rafts. *Shadow Of Heaven* has 19, from Venus terraforming to Roast Beef perfume (it's a world where herbicidal warfare has limited the staple diet to plankton steaks). The winner though must surely be *One Million Tomorrow*, with all of 28 inventions from the immortality drug E80 that is the basis of the story - which extends human life to a million days (over 2000 years) - all the way down to the detail of self-chilling glasses.

The breakthrough was bound to come sometime. Think of the research effort that's been poured into it for two hundred years Another reflection on the nature of the writer is that this clever aside comes in the middle of a fight between the protagonist and his wife.

Every last one of the inventions is used for something. They're not simply background colour. People drink from the self-chilling glasses, inject themselves with E80. One of them even dunks in a vat of friction-free ball bearings.

It is rather unfashionable to be a traditionalist. A prejudiced view. There are very few writers who have something startlingly original to say, the frontiers of experimentation belong to them, others should stay clear of it. Take the case of Joe Haldeman. He is a modern writer, no mistaking it. The plots have not changed since Heinlein, but the treatment has. He is a man of his times, or at least no more than five years behind them - things move too fast for anyone to get closer. He knows the novel is dead and fills his book with duty rosters, diary extracts, personnel reports, graphs, tables and little playlets. Like Pohl in *Gateway*. Probably they're promoting this style in Writing Seminars. Nothing wrong with it, nothing right with it either used for its own sake. He is in touch with Women's Lib and takes it for granted that the ladies are every bit as good as the gentlemen at zapping gooks. He has heard of the permissive society and allows his characters a free and

unashamed attitude to sex, though presumably the boys and girls have a rota for who gets on top. He is fashionably politically liberal and the fighting turns out to be A Big Mistake. You see, he knows what is going on around him in the wide world outside sf.

The question is, does this make his books any more relevant to the last quarter of the Twentieth Century? And the answer is that it all seems vaguely ridiculous. His ambitions outstrip his soul, his awareness limits his vision. He is turning the novel, the sf novel, into a sort of meaningless anthropology. Worst he is 'lazy, he is not asking questions. I have nothing against Haldeman - he won the Hugo and Nebula, it proves he was the best American writer of 1976. Their culture is at fault, that's all. Instant obsolescence. How long will this year's fashion last? Entertainment needs to stand a little apart from its own time. Unless it's good enough to impose its own culture. Few things are. Certainly it's impossible to pin Shaw down as being a writer typifying either the sixties or the seventies. His early books have lasted a decade and will have no trouble lasting a while longer. Like Heinlein and van Vogt. Reliable. Traditional.

'I'm not terribly strong on science,' he claimed in that interview in *Foundation*. True enough, the science is often built on uncertain premises, but the technical possibilities which attract him to science fiction provide a lot of grist for the mill.

The novels, to be purist about the subject, are authentic science fiction in that there is always some major piece of science or technology at the kernel of the plot. This isn't an universal law in sf. Would it have mattered in Pohl's *Gateway* if the analyst had been a man instead of a robot? Not a scrap. Would it have mattered if the hero had gone on a singles holiday to Tijuana instead of to some star via mushroom ship? Not a lot. It is a more mature novel than anything Shaw has produced but for better or worse it is not what the game is all about. Whether you see Pohl's hero as a common neumatic or a thinly veiled mescaline experimenter the fact is that the sf aspects are mere trappings, as unfortunate as gift on a lily.

Not usually so in Shaw. *Night Walk* as a story couldn't exist without the prosthetic vision and the laws of null-space. *Orbitsville*, which like *Night Walk* is based on the search for new colonies, wouldn't be viable without the Dyson sphere.

Well, there may be one or two exceptions. You could take the counter-gravity out of *Vertigo*, a story about a man recovering his self-confidence, and be left with a plot if you substitute some more mundane fear to be overcome. But generally the inventions are so numerous, so finely woven into the thread it would be hard to extricate them. A necessary thing, whatever its other shortcomings, will always have the elegance of its integrity.

A million tons at 30,000 times the speed of light. Like Heinlein and van Vogt, the same gleeful celebration of untrammelled technological power. No need to worry incidentally, the S_{10} can be stopped by the deployment of 8,000 nuclear devices. Women may feel nicer but machines are more fun to play with.

A purist though would have to agree that Shaw's claim not to be a scientist is no false modesty. He picks ideas for their potential, their size, their impact value, not their feasibility. He is not in the prediction business. He goes to no great lengths to provide a formula justifying time travel or, his favourite device of all, counter-gravity.

It is not, I think, a contempt for science, or even ignorance of it - though no scientist he does have a technical background. It is simply tradition again, an old tradition, the notion that science is the servant of science fiction and not the master. So why not defy the laws of gravity? Scientific fact has been open to revision ever since the Wright brothers defied conventional wisdom at Kittyhawk.

Anti-gravity, or counter-gravity as he persists in calling it, is one addition. The spaceships *Lyle Star* in *Night Walk* and *Sarafand* in *Ship Of Strangers* are equipped with it. In *Shadow Of Heaven* it floats the gigantic agricultural platform three miles above the Earth and scaled down to a man-sized harness in *Vertigo* it replaces most other forms of transport. Because Shaw's characters are almost always

chasing or being chased by something transportation is important. And though a good idea is sometimes re-used there is no lack of variety.

There are hovercraft, beta-space drives, bullet cars, ballistic shuttles, floaters, vertijets, bubble-cruisers, flicker-transits, screw-driven railways, ion-drives and, most wonderful of all, in the comic *Who Goes Here?*, the nissen-hut spacecraft that travels to the stars by having a matter transmitter at each end and continuously teleporting the rear to the front.

And mixed up with the transport there are remnants of lost pre-human civilisations, time-travellers, hallucinogenic entertainments, aliens both hostile and inscrutable, revised economic systems, blotch guns, rad rifles and laser rafts, and, as you'd expect, beautiful women wearing visor-perfume and light necklaces and getting men into trouble.

It is easy to overlook how effortlessly Shaw integrates the sf gadgets and the human story. The two elements, so often antagonistic, are combined with a craftsman's lack of seams. Shaw, as he admits, is no Hemingway, but for a science fiction writer his characters stand up pretty damn well beside the special effects. And they need to be sturdy to do that. He is capable of producing some memorable images, as, for example, when the spaceship *Sarafand* enters a dwindling region of space and begins to oscillate uncontrollably between zero and infinite size:

'A continuous rain of galaxies was spraying up through the floor, passing through the table and chairs and human beings, and out through the ceiling.'

A continuous rain of galaxies. Spraying up through the floor. Think about it.

There have been good books and not so good. Significantly, the best are set far from Earth. Shaw is a writer with an unfettered technological imagination. He thrives best with the freedom and vistas of space. There he can expand into the Dyson sphere, create the million-ton spaceship, the rain of galaxies and the shell of exploded moons around Mnemosyne, the 'frozen stream of broken diamonds... forming a curtain that reached from pole to pole.' There are equally grand visions set closer to hand - the entire ghost-like anti-neutrino planet inside the Earth in *Wreath Of Stars*, the watery asteroids siphoned off from the Bermuda Triangle in *Medusa's Children* which were 'a pale blue universe of transparent water in which spherical air bubbles of all different sizes drifted like globes of silver foil.' But usually it's too constricting to be so near home, inside the solar system; a man can be more outrageous in distant parts.

It's science more than anything else that confirms his claim to be an optimistic writer. In his article in *Foundation* he wrote 'Science Fiction was always a passion with me because of its message that the good times were a-coming... somewhere just around a wrinkle in the space-time continuum there were worlds of colour and glamour and excitement.' And sure enough in Shaw's vision of the future we either overcome or learn to live with our global problems. The engines pull us away from the brink. The world never ends. The matches sometimes burn our fingers but never set fire to the house.

Sometimes, yes, it detracts, the piling of wonder upon wonder, the overload, the pulling out of surprise after surprise like magicians from a rabbit's hat. It's harder to suspend disbelief in Shaw's Bussard ramjets as they carve through the immaterial egos that are the soul and genius of the human race in *Palace Of Eternity* than it is to suspend disbelief in Larry Niven's as the latter simply wend their way across the galaxy. Easier too to concentrate on Niven's Ringworld, uncomplicated by kidnapping there than it is to grasp the enormity of Shaw's *Orbitsville*. There can sometimes be an excess of riches. But who in Larry Niven's work ever drank so hard to solve a broken heart? Nobody's perfect.

nobody's perfect? Except perhaps Show's villains. They are perfectly reprehensible. True there may be mitigating factors, unhappy childhoods, that sort of thing, but these black-hearted monsters have outgrown excuses, have put it all decidedly behind them as they look forward to a future of unmitigated evil. Pity the social worker who might ask Colonel Freeborn of Wreath Of Stars if the ugly, ball-shaped hole in his shaven skull had given him a complex. His fingers would be soundly broken by Freeborn's gold-topped cane for his trouble.

And who would dare search for a heart of gold inside the repulsively fat and hysterical Elizabeth Lindstrom of Orbitsville? Even if she could be reformed there'd be nothing left, an empty shell, without an underling to crush the meaning would go out of life.

Show pulls no punches over his villains, they're lunatic psychopaths, fiends in human guise. And to crown it all they're ugly. Crude but effective, Mr Bond. As always it started in Night Walk when 'Tallon recognised the narrow face, the vertically wrinkled neck, and the incongruously lush wavy hair of Lorin Cherkasky.'

That vertically wrinkled neck is the give-away, elsewhere we're told it resembles the neck of a turkey. And his mouth twitches. The sort of fellow you would not be surprised to discover tying Lillian Gish to the railroad tracks. But he is not the worst of the Emm Luther Security Police:

There was Kreuger, who liked to immobilize his captives by cutting their Achilles tendons; there was Cherkasky, who fl'd them so full of psychoneuro drugs that they never again had a peaceful night's sleep; and finally there was Zepperity. Zepperity and his methods made the other two men seem almost benign.

Take note of those names above, Lindstrom and the EMSP, and include some other villains: Amanda Welsner, Barenboim, Morlacher. Foreigners aren't they. Even Tommy Freeborn is an African. Compare them with some good guys: Tallon and Tarrant and Tavernor, Surgenor and Stirling, Lissa and Melissa and Myrah and Myra, Helen Juste, Carewe. You know who you can trust. Subtle it isn't, but as a semantic trick it works.

We had best trip quietly away from Zepperity before we learn more about his methods than we would like to know. As light relief from the arch-fiends Show has given us several examples of the genus bully. The bullies have none of the flair of the fiends. In situations where the Empress Elizabeth would commit indiscriminate slaughter with her laser ring, the bullies, like Considine in Shadow Of Heaven, tend to make insipid threats about watching out next time. Nor do their inferiority complexes allow them to have turkey necks:

The flat swathes of muscle across (Considine's) shoulders and chest had an inhuman hardness, a crispness of definition which made them look like the body plates of an armoured creature.

They probably take Charles Atlas courses. They go around in gangs like Colonel Freeborn's whining nephew Curt, picking on women, hiding behind their muscles and their guns. Amateurs at the game, in it for money, power or some other ulterior motive, they lack the pure, ascetic dedication to viciousness for its own sake that their mentors display. They are, at best, an irritation and when, like Morlacher and Pidgeon in Vertigo, they have to go up against the hero without the backing of an arch-fiend, they crack easily.

The crawlies are made of better stuff. The aliens. Being alien, of course, they find it more difficult to be blatantly inhuman than the humans do. But they compensate by looking even uglier.

The tall and spindly Syccans, whose million-ton spaceships have been at war with mankind for half a century, are possessed of a loathsome alienness and due to physiology of their respiration need to be kept permanently slimy. Ka is equally repulsive, a telepathic, jelly-fleshed, semi-deity at the heart of Medusa's asteroid who controls cohorts of Horra, giant squids with yellowish plate-sized eyes. Ka began as a microscopic medusa but cosmic radiation made him very big, very intelligent and very nasty.



Show always goes to extremes with his aliens, and here are only three extremes to go to: the good, the bad and the indifferent. In Orbitville were given the totally indifferent sort, a species to whom the arrival of homo sapiens was either a non-event or at best a nine-hour wonder. It was difficult to show much interest in them either. *Wreath of Stars* exposed the Avernians, logical, pacifist and having perfect handwriting, they were too good to be true. It must be a cynical age but the uncompromising monstrosities are easier to believe in, and a lot more fun.

There is something very alluring about these fiends and crawls. They are simplistic, dynamic, potent. Simultaneously they bring to mind characters from Marvel comics and a passage from Schopenhauer ((c) D Wingrove; VECTOR 81):

"I therefore know of no greater absurdity than that absurdity which characterises almost all metaphysical systems: that of explaining evil as something negative. For evil is precisely that which is positive, that which makes itself palpable; and good, on the other hand, i.e. all happiness and all gratification, is that which is negative, the abolition of a desire and extinction of pain."

That, I'd suggest, sums up the distinction between the heroes and villains in Shaw's books, explains their behaviour. Some of those villains can be very positive.

They are certainly very important to Shaw's plotting; they provide the impetus for the action. There are few adventures embarked on here for the good of humanity, the furtherance of knowledge or, to quote Hillary, 'because it's there'. The perilous journey is undertaken because some maniac is chasing the hero with an axe.

It is fairly easy to pinpoint the source of the persecution. It is always the company, the government, the organisation. Not even the fiends work alone. Cherkosky works for the government of Emm Luther, though the opposition, the nebulous organisation on Earth known as The Block, is no better in its morals. Elizabeth Lindstrom heads a company which rivals the World Government in its power and ruthlessly exploits its monopoly in space travel. Tommy Freeborn is a representative of the government of Barand, a loutish, dictatorial regime. *Shadow Of Heaven* has the corrupt Food Technology Authority. And who is attempting to murder the guinea-pig for the new immortality drug E80? Yes, the company that makes it, Fama Incorporated.

Shaw must be some kind of anarchist.

His heroes after all are men who tend to walk alone. They often begin by belonging to the system, they soon reject it. Tal'lon finds that '35000 light years had drained him of the last vestiges of tolerance for the politico-military system'. But the most telling remark in *Night Walk* is almost subliminal in its presentation: "The walls were a kind of bureaucratic green - the colour of despair".

This rejection of established structures seems a characteristically American formula, as befits a mid-Atlantic writer, the gunman against the cattle barons, Ralph Nader against General Motors, James Dean against the world. In Britain even Robin Hood had a bunch of mates. There again the rejection of the existing, of the limitations of reality, in favour of something, anything else is the universal essence of science fiction. Pohl quotes a psychological survey in *Hell's Cartographers*, it shows science fiction writers have a significant lack of identification with group standards. They also score high on manic depression but leave that, they compensate by having bigger IQ's than other authors.

In Shaw the existing happens to be concretized in organisations. Even when they are not overtly hostile they are implacable. A scenario allowing a celebration of the individual, the solitary figure forced to plough through the organisational stasis, and since that figure is the hero the stasis must be to some extent negative.

Yet paradoxically the organisation is necessarily the fount of the technology Shaw is so optimistic about. On a global scale when science occasionally fails it fails soft - like the gradual technological decline in *Medusa's Children*, and usually the setbacks are only temporary, the organisational stasis is too great for things to crash in sudden ruins, and South New Zealand is about to get its hands on the power of dysteleonics to reverse the decline. So, an ambivalent picture.

A complex picture. Less sharp than it appears at first glance. The larger issues presented always through miniature views. The alien within and the alien without both confronted on a very personal level. A technique more powerful than it sounds, closer to individual experience, more real.

6 : A Few Thousand Light Years

The last word belongs to Shaw himself, writing in *Foundation*, one of the most eloquent, aggressive and irrefutable descriptions of science fiction I've come across:

"Science fiction escapism is different because it is an escape to reality."

The world image presented by mundane 'realists' is one in which the invariants are things like mortgages, the TUC, engine wear, national insurance contributions, prostate troubles, Sunday, unemployment figures, newspapers, cemeteries, Harpic, ambition, season tickets, raincoats, Russia, sweat, gamblers, greenfly and so on. What the science fiction buff understands is that all these things are merely local phenomena of a very temporary nature, and that to get them in their proper perspective it is only necessary to step back a few thousand light years."

Perhaps it explains why his best stories are the ones set farthest from Earth and farthest from the present. It finds support from Arthur C Clarke incidentally, who, when asked why he wrote sci replied 'Because most other literature isn't concerned with reality'. Paradoxical, but as true as anything is.

Shaw on Shaw: 'The general aim of my work is... to wrench open a door in the grey circumscribing world of the here-and-now and show the technical infinity beyond it... I regard that as a lofty aim.'

James Carley (1978)



an interview with Bob Shaw

Vector:

Can you provide Vector's readers with a brief, potted autobiography – why you started writing and who your early influences were?

Bob Shaw:

I was born in Belfast in the late evening of 31 December 1931 – which means I am probably the youngest person you will ever meet who was born in 1931. I was slow at growing up – when I was four some of the other boys were eight or nine – but it didn't take me long to realise that Belfast in the Thin Thirties was not the sort of place I would have chosen to be born into. The rest of the world didn't seem much better, judging by the glimpses I got of it via Pathe and Movietone news films, and when I discovered science fiction at about the age of eight it was exactly like that scene in the movies where the wanderer, dying of thirst in the desert, finds a lush oasis. In a metaphor I have used elsewhere, a door was thrown open in the grey circumscribing wall of reality and it revealed a fascinating Technicolour universe beyond. I identified with science fiction immediately, understood it instinctively and seized it gratefully. The coloured, mingling rays that blazed through that door illuminated the rest of my childhood, youth and early adulthood, and they continue to do so to the present day, though I'm getting more used to them now.

The language in the above sentences may seem a little extravagant, but it's appropriate to the subject. I needed science fiction, and without it I would have grown to be a completely different person. I wandered through what was supposed to be my secondary education like a sleepwalker with a BRE ASTOUNDING in every pocket, got a job as an apprentice draughtsman and sacrificed all chance of advancement by refusing to attend night school so that I could help Walt Willis turn out fanzines. Getting married, spending some years abroad, acquiring a family, escaping from engineering into journalism – all these things helped to winch me down out of the clouds and show me that the world of here-and-now has so much to offer, but in a way I wasn't fully convinced until I became a full-time SF writer just over three years ago. Now if anybody asks me what were the happiest days of my life I have to say, "The ones I'm having right now."

I'm not quite sure why I started writing, but I know that one of my main ambitions is to do for some readers what people like A. E. van Vogt did for me back in the days when Astounding cost 9d. Van Vogt is one of the most noticeable of my early influences because he, above all others, transcended all the inksome limitations of space and time. Some of these days I'll attempt a major article explaining what it was like and what it meant to read a van Vogt book in the 1940s, and why to me he was Mr. Science Fiction.

Vector:

Outside of SF, what things do you enjoy most? (I should perhaps extend that and say 'outside of sf fandom' perhaps). I know you're keen on the odd small tipple, but are there any unfulfilled desires lurking in the Shaw bosom?

Bob Shaw:

Small tipple, indeed! All these rumours about me being fond of booze started some years ago when somebody saw me at a Convention with a pint of beer in my hand. What they don't know is that the beer actually belonged to Peter Nicholls and I was only minding it for him because he had nipped upstairs to write a few chapters of his encyclopedia of science fiction.

One of the things I enjoy most outside SF is do-it-yourself work around the house. The physical activity involved is good for a sedentary worker, and I get a real kick out of planning and executing home improvements. I also watch too much television, especially comedy shows, but I try to cut down on the waste of time by recording TV programmes and watching them late at night when I'm too tired to do anything productive.

I have a heartfelt yearning to win a fortune on the pools, but as I neglect the necessary preliminary of sending in coupons this ambition is likely to remain unfulfilled.

Vector:

You seem to possess the idea in your writing that the creative process is something given:

"Many men visited by inspiration sense the existence of a great outer power which presents them, often when they are asleep, with a complete solution to a problem. Inspired people lay stress on the given nature of the message. Musicians and poets repeat how compositions will come to them complete in every detail, instantaneously, without any effort on their part – the real work of creation consists of getting as much as possible onto paper before the vision fades." (Palace Of Eternity – Page 109)

How much has that affected you personally? Does your own work frequently arrive as a given thing, or do you often have to work at the ideas?

Bob Shaw:

I've been affected considerably by the phenomenon. In fact, the reason I laid stress on it in one or two books was that I was quite thrilled with my then new discovery that people like R L Stevenson had had the same kind of experience and had reacted in the same way as myself. It's one of the most marvellous feelings there is when an idea simply arrives behind your eyes with a kind of silent explosion. The effect is, of course, at its greatest when the idea is complete, but the more common experience is to get a partial idea, and when that happens it is necessary to work very hard on it to get it into useful form. The trick in writing is to be able to distinguish between ideas that are worth working hard on and the ones that aren't.

Vector:

Do you ever, having received a partial idea, jot down a few notes and then let the thing alone to mature, or do you (if the idea strikes you as worthy of the effort) try to 'twinkle it out' at the onset?

Bob Shaw:

I always let the idea mature for at least a month. Psychologists have recently come round to what I have maintained all along – that practically everything Freud said was a load of tripe – but I do feel that I have a subconscious mind which beavers away on my behalf to get story ideas up to a usable condition.

Vector:

You have varied the emphasis of your novels considerably – from the strange aquatic world of *Medusa's Children*, through the contemporary vistas of *Ground Zero Man* to the alien-but-familiar worlds of the *Palace Of Eternity* – yet here are certain elements that are constant throughout your work; the focusing on the emotional hassles of the protagonist, for example, which are inextricably and realistically bound up in the plot. Are you conscious of these predilections? And do you work to achieve this intermingling of the mundane and the adventurous – to make it a deliberate effect?

Bob Shaw:

Yes, I am conscious of doing that, and the reason I do it is that I make an effort to people my stories with "real" human beings. (I used quotes there because we use the word real in a very special way in this sort of context.) Everybody I know has emotional problems of one kind or another, therefore if the

characters in my stories are going to have any semblance of being real they have to have problems as well. The theory couldn't be simpler – but then so is the principle of the jet engine, yet when I look at one of those things I'm amazed at its physical complexity. There is the problem of deciding on the type of problem a character has. It would, of course, be possible to avoid the decision by equipping the central characters with emotional or personality problems chosen at random, say by drawing scraps of paper from a hat. But the author is God in the universe of his story, and he would be abdicating from a very enjoyable job if he didn't take a hand in this thing and provide his creations with idiosyncracies which somehow conspire to wring the most drama, etc., from the story's central situation or idea.

Vector:

Taking the idea of the author being "God in the universe of his story", do you feel tempted/compelled to comment on the morality of your "creations"? I felt that one such example was in Medusa's Children, when Hal Tarrant encounters the strict moral codes of Cawley Island. And how much actual "conscious control" do you find yourself exerting once the novel is in full swing (which also begs the question – which are the characters you felt developed most as independent creations)?

Bob Shaw:

No, I never comment on the morality of my characters – I present them and their actions for the reader's consideration, and leave it at that. Whenever it is possible, I ensure that the wrong-doers bring an appropriate punishment down on their own heads, and this has led Mark Adlard to comment that my work shows a strong moral sense – but I make a point of never stepping into a book as Bob Shaw and indicting certain characters. One of the things I try to impress on my students (in the evening classes I teach on creative writing) is that they should never reveal a personal dislike for any characters, because as soon as they have done so their authority is suspect.

The question of conscious control is a tricky one – especially if the book you are writing has been sold in advance on the basis of an outline. That is one of the reasons I avoid doing long and detailed outlines. They help convince editors that you are in earnest about doing a decent job on the proposed book, but I find it impossible to visualize characters fully in advance, and if a character's part in a book is not modified by his development there seems little point in developing him in the first place.

In recent books, one of the characters who got out of my control was Prudence Devonald in A Wreath Of Stars. The outline of the book had her, at the very end, make an exceptionally hazardous transit into the other universe to be with Snook. When I was writing it, however, she developed into a cool, self-interested personality – not an unworthy person by any means, but one who had her head firmly screwed on – and at the end of the book I had to let her do what came naturally for her, i.e. to disengage from the situation and slip quietly away. This seemed only fair and reasonable to me, but I learned on a recent visit to New York that the "highly unsympathetic" treatment of womanhood I used in the story was the main reason it was rejected by the SF Book Club of America. The same book club has just taken Medusa's Children – so I don't know what to think.

Vector:

The communication between male and female characters in your books is often blurred (intentionally so, it seems), thus creating an area of emotional tension. Do you feel that there is a real communication gap between the sexes – perhaps one that is fostered by our present-day society (even extrapolated into our visions of the future), but still genuine enough?

I feel that there is a real communications gap between everybody. It's somewhat more noticeable between men and women, that's all. The reason is that when a man and woman are in love they experience a desire for complete communication, forgetting for the time being just how unreasonable that ambition is – then when something brings them face to face with the realities of the situation they can feel bitterly disappointed and trouble can ensue. That's one of the reasons I love

humour so much. When somebody makes a really good joke I feel strangely warmed by it – as if, against all the odds, we have managed to achieve genuine communion of the mind. Did you ever wonder why comedians' catch-phrases like "Didn't he do well?" are so popular? If you watch people's faces closely when they're laughing at a thing like that you'll see that there's an element of gratitude in their reaction. For a brief moment somebody has opened a door and brought them inside.

Vector:

The scientific innovations in your books possess a strong element of practicality (with the obvious exceptions of the central plot elements in Medusa's Children and Ground Zero Man), which is related very much to everyday living. Do you think that technology will solve more problems than it creates? And do you feel that the common man will experience the changes in technological sophistication only in terms of household goods? Your fictional attitude seems rather ambiguous – the technology works and people use the items created, but whether or not they enhance their lives is not certain. Is it a question you have ever attempted to explore seriously?

Bob Shaw:

It would be possible to write a long and thoughtful article in answer to that question. Briefly, I don't think technology is a bad thing. I'm so much in favour of it that I couldn't even bring myself to watch that recent TV series in which a group tried to set up a stone age commune. To me the whole idea was pointless, preposterous and distasteful. I do recognise, however, that the great problem-solving power of technology has to bring new problems in its wake, and that is something we have to come to terms with. I like that point about household goods because in a way it illustrates both sides of the coin. When I'm sitting at home watching something good on TV I'm aware of the benefits of sophisticated technology, but when an aircraft passes over I sometimes recall crouching under the stairs listening to WW2 bombs whistling down and hoping like hell that the technology they represented wasn't going to have too much influence on my state of existence.

Vector:

You seem to share the distaste of organisations and institutions that is to be found in the books of Phil Dick and Mike Coney. Is this distaste an essentially anarchistic mistrust of government in you, do you feel?

Bob Shaw:

I don't think so. I'm a firm believer in law and order – it's just that I've never been happy with the selection procedures we have devised for putting people into positions of authority. In many cases the procedures might have been designed to ensure that individuals who are totally unfit for certain jobs are precisely the ones who get them. I'm not in favour of all aspects of law and order as we know it, though. To me it seems a gross impertinence that somebody else should lay down rules about when I may or may not buy alcoholic drinks. I'm an anarchist to that extent.

Vector:

There are bits of Protestant Belfast in Emm Luther and Cawley Island, and parts of your Canadian experiences in Vertigo and Ground Zero Man. How much of your past goes into your writing – both directly and indirectly?

Bob Shaw:

Tricky question! On one level, anybody who writes anything puts all of his past into it without even realising he's doing so. The only way you can give any kind of credible description of human actions in fiction is by dredging up analogues from your own memory. Normally the focus is very narrow and nobody makes any comment about it. If I'm writing a scene in which a brick falls on somebody's toe I might think back to a similar incident in real life and put down something like, "Higgins turned pale and hopped to the nearest chair, swearing volubly." Nobody would ever ask me

afterwards if that was an incident from my own past – it's only when you open up the focus to encompass something like a little scene from a play that readers begin to suspect that you are describing a real event. In general, I don't use many undigested or unprocessed chunks from my own experience, possibly because it doesn't lend itself to that approach as a rule. Oddly enough, my comic novel, *Who Goes Here?* – which is the most removed from reality – is probably the one book in which I have been able to include the maximum number of vignettes lifted from my memory. Possibly it's because that sort of novel contains a lot of ridiculous incidents and I store up memories of ridiculous incidents the way other people collect antiques.

Vector:

Have you ever been tempted to write your autobiography? Or are the 'comic' references to your past experiences (written in fanciful articles, for example) enough to satisfy any urges in this respect?

Bob Shaw:

Yes, I'm hoping one of these years to write an episodic autobiography, and many of the articles I have written for fans' magazines could be regarded as first drafts of chapters. It's a question now of finding time and an interested publisher.

Vector:

How does commercial pressure determine what you write? The need to turn out a book a year could be a "bad thing", especially if the inspiration isn't there. Do you feel that it has been a bad thing, or has it been a good thing for you? I understand that you had the experience of a four book contract for an American publisher – was that a successful venture?

Bob Shaw:

Commercial pressure doesn't determine what I write. To me the business of being an author doesn't consist of putting words on paper – it's about putting words on paper and having large numbers of people read those words. If two story ideas popped into my head simultaneously and I thought that one of them would please only a hundred people in the world and the other would please a million, I would automatically, naturally and instinctively reject the former and accept the latter. I wouldn't be doing it for commercial reasons, though the effect might be the same as if I were commercially motivated. The point is that I get many, many ideas, but only by choosing the ones I think that other people will be interested in sharing can I have any hope of slinging a rope bridge across that communications gap we were talking about earlier.

Obviously, it's a bad thing if any writer is forced to write too quickly, but on the other hand I'm deeply grateful that so many writers have been forced to produce more than they would have done if left to their natural inclinations. If some galeatic philanthropist had taken an interest in Earth and slipped a million quid to all our great writers in recent centuries, the net result would have been that our literary heritage would only be a fraction of its present size.

I would say that the economic need to keep producing has been a good thing for me, though I'm very much aware that some of my work would have benefited if I'd had an extra three or four months in which I could have done a final and more leisurely draft. The four-book contract I had with Ace doesn't really count in this context because there weren't any deadlines specified.

Vector:

You are obviously very conscious of the 'mechanics' of writing, and can evaluate the success or failure of certain elements within it. Do you ever deliberately attempt innovative approaches in terms of style and structure or are you content with the present boundaries of your style? Does it allow you to express all the ideas that occur to you, or do you discard many because any approach to them would be far too obtuse?

Bob Shaw:

I'm pleased you said I'm very conscious of the mechanics of writing, because I work hard at achieving effects and I also work hard at not being noticed while I'm doing it. It's a bit like those puppet shows where the operators dress in black and stand behind the puppets –

the show is spoiled when you notice them working. I'm a believer in the old adage that a good literary style is undetectable except in its overall effect, and I don't go in for obvious innovation of style, because it is fatally easy to end up with another kind of style, i.e. a barrier which the reader has to climb over to reach the story. The success of a work of fiction depends on that old suspension of disbelief, and when the author starts doing verbal handstands in front of me the fragile picture fades away quite abruptly and is replaced by an intrusive image of somebody sitting at a typewriter.

The same goes for innovations in structure, unless some quality in an idea demands special provisions to display it properly. I remember reading an article by Piers Anthony in which he described how he wrote *Chthon*, read it over and was dissatisfied because it was too linear. He then divided the book into three sections – A, B, and C; divided each section into eight chapters; and had the work published in the sequence A1, B1, C1, A2, B2, C2, A3, B3, C3, and so on. The bafflement I felt on reading about this literary device was almost as complete as the bewilderment I had felt some time earlier when I was reading the book under discussion. I'm sure Piers won't mind me saying this, but when I get around to re-reading *Chthon* I'm going to cut it up beforehand and reassemble it in its correct order. Nyahhh! The third part of this question seems to me to be a non-starter. I write the way I do because I think the way I do, and thinking the way I do I don't get ideas that are incompatible with the way I write. I think.

Vector:

What direction do you want your writing to go in? It has often been commented that you have the makings of an excellent thriller writer: does the best-seller aspect of that genre ever tempt you to forsake science fiction? Or do you feel it will remain your focal point?

Bob Shaw:

I don't think of myself as having directions in my writing – I take ideas as they come along and give each what I believe to be an appropriate treatment without conscious thought to such things as my "development as a writer". For no reason I can put my finger on, I've recently become interested in horror thrillers and the novel I have just finished – *Dagger Of The Mind* – reflects this in that it is very much a horror story with science fiction underpinnings.

The idea of perhaps making a goodly lump sum through writing a mainstream thriller has an undeniable appeal, but I can't imagine myself deserting the sf field. In the thriller field they don't have conventions or fanzines, and even if they had the people concerned with them would all be mundane. That's no way to live...

Vector:

What are you currently working on, and what are your plans for the next few years? Now that you seem to have a degree of financial security and an oeuvre of work continuously in print, will you now take those extra three or four months each time to produce more leisurely final drafts? (For example, have you ever been tempted to try your hand at writing radio plays or anything of that sort?)

Bob Shaw:

I'm writing this during the Christmas break, having just handed over a novel called *Dagger Of The Mind*, which I think is unlike anything I have done previously. That means my brain is still too numb for detailed consideration of the next major effort. But, things on the slate at the moment are a sort of 24th Century travelogue of the galaxy that David Hardy and I are doing, a couple of short stories I have promised people, and a radio adaptation of "Waltz Of The Bodysnatchers" which the BBC has suggested that I do. Lurking in the back of my mind is a notion that I wouldn't mind doing a fairly big novel – say 100,000 words or more – but I just have to wait and see what the future brings. That's a hell of a thing for a science fiction writer to say, isn't it?

((Questions posed for Vector by James Cortey and David Wingrove))

THE INFINITY BOX

BOOK REVIEWS

1985 by Anthony Burgess; Hutchinson; £4.95; 19/8; 240pp

reviewed by Richard Cowper

This book contains two sections of almost equal length. The first is a re-appraisal of George Orwell's significance, with specific reference to 1984; the second is an attempt (to quote the author) "To see where he (Orwell) went wrong and where he seems likely to have been right. To contrive an alternative picture - using his own fictional technique - of the condition to which the seventies seem to be moving and which may well subsist in a real 1984 - or, to avoid plagiarism, 1985." I propose to examine these sections in the order in which they are presented to us.

At this point it will, I think, be helpful to state my own position. I appear to be an almost exact contemporary of Mr Burgess, though, unlike himself, I also happen to have met George Orwell. This gives me a somewhat different status both on the world of 1948 as Burgess depicts it and on the character and personality of Orwell himself as Burgess presents it. For instance, Burgess states that Orwell "was known as a kind of comic poet of the run-down and seedy... Down And Out In Paris And London, The Road To Wigan Pier, Wigan Pier - that was always a great music hall joke..." But hang on a minute. To whom was he thus known? To the Left Wing Intelligentsia? Not on your life! He was loathed and feared by the Left Wing Intelligentsia. His running war with Kingsley Martin, the editor of The New Statesman, who first commissioned and then refused to print Orwell's despatches from the Catalan front in the Spanish Civil War because they told the truth about the Communists is well known - now! The truth is that Orwell was never known as "a kind of comic poet of the run-down and seedy," until Burgess thought of it. Having disposed of that point, let us take a look at another. Burgess states, with reference to the Labour "landslide" victory at the polls in 1945, "Orwell was a good socialist and was delighted to see a Socialist government in power at last." But, in the sense Burgess here implies (i.e. that Orwell was a doctrinaire Socialist) this is manifestly untrue. Orwell was not "a good socialist" in that sense at all. His refusal to toe any party line; his refusal to accept that the political ends justify the means, set him apart from all his fellows. Of course he rejoiced in the Labour victory of 1945 because he was a humane man and had first hand experience of the miseries of the Slump. A return to the appalling social conditions of the 30s would have been unthinkable to him.

Those are just two minor points taken at random. From a text littered with my pencilled queries I could easily have taken a dozen such. Nevertheless they will serve to show what Burgess is up to in this part of the book, namely cutting Orwell down to size, proving to his own satisfaction that Orwell is just another professional writer on the lines of Burgess himself. It is precisely this sort of smear technique that Orwell had to endure during his own life time. The irony is that this time the smear is coming from the Right Wing rather than the Left.

Throughout my reading of the first section of 1985 - that part dealing with 1984 - I had to keep pausing to ask myself whether Burgess and I had read the same book. So determined is he to prove that 1984 is "a kind of comic fairy tale" (comic, for God's sake!) that he turns a series of nimble intellectual somersaults, thus - "The telescreen is perhaps no real menace - any more than bugging is to those who know it is going on." Bugging - invasion of human privacy - is, you see, no real menace. Simple, isn't it? Yet nothing could more clearly demarcate the difference between Burgess and Orwell as writers than a statement like that. To have made it calls for a sort of moral obliquity on the writer's part, an ability to doublethink and can your reader. Hence it does not come as a surprise to find, a little later, Burgess producing a passage of the sort of quintessential glibbedoodle that could have served Orwell as an illustration for one of his essays on the corruption of language: "The working man opposed to amply life non civilian freedom

so much as the infusion of geniality into regimentation." That is just the kind of turgid stuff which might have been expressly designed to conceal meaning rather than elucidate it. I think it means that ordinary soldiers tend to make fun of the officers behind their backs, but I wouldn't care to bet on it.

As he proceeds upon his merry way it becomes increasingly obvious that Burgess has either not understood why 1984 is such a powerful and moving book or is willfully refusing to accept it as any such thing. Like the frog in the fable he puffs himself up and up and, naturally, is not averse to a little misrepresentation if he thinks it will help him to score a point, thus - "he (Orwell) read The New Statesman while the workers read Blighty and The Daily Mirror. The workers did not buy his books. The workers do not buy my books either, but I do not repine..." In fact the workers did buy Orwell's books. The Road To Wigan Pier actually sold 43,000 copies in the Left Book Club Edition in 1937, and, since Animal Farm and 1984 both have world wide sales running into millions and are 'set books' for 'O' level, 'A' level and C.S.E. examinations, it would be naive to suppose they were being read only by the bourgeoisie. But since it suits Burgess' purpose to pretend this is so, he states that it is. Quod erat demonstrandum.

One might be forgiven at this juncture for supposing that what Burgess is suffering from is an acute attack of old-fashioned, Grub Street jaundice. It would certainly help to explain why, towards the conclusion of his critique, his voice becomes so unpleasantly shrill. "At the end of his literary career (i.e. his life) Orwell dropped all pretence of believing in the working class. This, inevitably, meant loss of belief in all men and women, in the possibility of love..." If Orwell had loved men and women O'Brien would not have been able to torture Winston Smith. The great majority of men and women look on like munching cows while Winston screams and the death of freedom is confirmed. This is a monstrous travesty of human probability." Well, for my money that passage is in itself a monstrous travesty both of 1984 and of the character of the man who wrote it, but by this time one expects no better of Mr Burgess. Nevertheless, let us take a closer look at what is being said. First the non sequitur disguised by the 'con' word "inevitably". Orwell ceases to believe in the working class ergo he no longer believes in men and women or in the possibility of love. Next, isn't it? On this evidence Burgess is obviously well qualified to hold an important position in the upper echelons of the Ministry Of Truth.

But that of the spurious "proof" with which he backs up his contention? "If Orwell had loved men and women O'Brien would not have been able to torture Winston Smith." Shall we try the same method on some other writer? How about "If Shakespeare had loved men and women Iago would not have been able to torture Othello and Othello would not have murdered Desdemona." Absurd, is it not? Yet Burgess offers us this sort of insulting rubbish as self-evident truth. As for the "monstrous travesty of human probability," what does Burgess think is happening in the world today? has been happening ever since Plato first taught the great lie of Ideals? The concentration camp guards, the torturers, the professional murderers are all among us just as they have been for thousands of years. I cannot believe that Burgess does not know this, though apparently it suits him to pretend otherwise.

The point is, of course, that Orwell loved not only men, women and children, he also loved the truth. It is this that sets him apart from practically every other political writer of the 20th Century. It certainly sets him apart from Burgess. A perceptive critic writing of Orwell way back in 1946 said: "His values are evident in everything he writes. I agree with them; particularly with his conviction that a certain basic human decency is the most precious

thing in the world. How to define it I do not know – it might be called plain goodness, or kindness. It is warm; and it has a horror of cruelty of any kind towards a human being – above all, of the atrocities that are committed in the name of love, of one kind or another: from the parent who worships the children and the wife who makes life a burden to her husband to the modern Monster of the Loam who destroys millions for the sake of Utopia."

It is, I think, this all-but-indefinable quality in Orwell which so infuriates Burgess and his ilk, just as it infuriated the time-serving intelligentsia forty years ago. Orwell is a moralist. You must hang on somehow, he tells us, to morality – to the moral law. He maintained this passionate conviction with all the skill and intellectual vigour he could muster against what he saw as the two major influences working to undermine it: viz the belief that all things are lawful in pursuit of a political ideal, and the belief that aesthetic excellence compensates for moral obliquity. What gave (and still gives) 1984 its tremendous force was the intensity with which Orwell expressed in fictional terms his passionately held belief that the moral conscience of the individual human being was the most precious element of his humanity. To profess to see in this book nothing more than a "comic fairy tale" is either to be willfully obtuse or critically myopic.

Now let us move on to Burgess' own prophetic vision of the Britain he has imagined to be lying in wait for us around the corner in 1985. His denigration of Orwell's vision – specifically Orwell's supposed failure to love men and women and his inept performance as a short-term prophet – would lead one to assume that Burgess is about to put matters right. I am afraid that anyone who assumes anything of the kind is in for a disappointment. 1985 is at best a rather feeble Ring Wraith satire on the lines of Constantine Fitzgibbon's *When the Kissing Had to Stop*.

Curiously enough, Burgess has himself put his finger accurately on what is fundamentally wrong with his own tale when, in a recent review of it in *The Observer*, he complained: "Why is most science fiction so damned dull? There are various possible answers. You practice the genre if you have fancy but no imagination. Bizarre things matter more than such fictional staples as character, psychological probability and credible dialogue." Really that says all there is to be said about 1985 and says it cogently.

Bev Jones, the protagonist of 1985, is an ex history teacher who, as the story opens, is working as a machine minder in a chocolate factory. Bev's wife is burnt to death when the hospital in which she is about to undergo an operation is set on fire by (I think) the L.R.A. The firemen who should have dealt with the blaze are out on strike for more pay. Bev decides to initiate a one-man crusade against the monstrous tyranny of the Trade Unions. It should be a strong enough story line to grip anyone by the throat but it doesn't do it. The reason is simple enough. By the second or third page Bev has already become firmly fixed in the reader's mind as a mere cypher. His grief at his wife's death is so supremely unconvincing as to be totally ludicrous. If this is supposed to be an in-depth portrayal of love between men and women I can only observe that it cast the gravest doubt in at least one reader's mind, as to whether the Author had ever had the first hand experience of the emotion he is attempting to portray.

We follow Bev and his over-sexed, mentally retarded, teen-age daughter (she was, of course, drug-damaged at birth) through a series of adventures in Arab-dominated London while the theme of Union 'closed shop' tyranny and Government punitiveness in the face of it is hammered home relentlessly. Bev forfeits his Union membership (tantamount to becoming a non-person) and encounters various underworld groups. Some of this is quite funny but not necessarily in the way the author intended, such as when a group of adolescent yobboes called Kumins, who are about to beat Bev up, are stunned by his flinging a line of Vergil at them and then following it up by a quick right-cross in the form of a snatch of Sophocles. And if you can believe that, man, you'll believe anything!

Cought shop-lifting, our hero is sentenced to a period in a correction camp but declines to sign the document of recantation which would regain his Union membership. Having conveniently disposed of his daughter into the harem of an Arab oil sheikh (how's that for love!) he joins the Free British Army but, disapproving of its strong-arm methods during the General Strike he deserts and is nicked for shop-lifting again. This time he is incarcerated in a mental institution where, ultimately, for no very good reason, he commits suicide by chucking himself on the electrified fence. *Sic transit gloria*.

This is very sorry stuff indeed and is, I suppose, offered as an exercise in what Burgess likes to think of as science fiction. As any sort of answer to Orwell it is patently pathetic. Yet in his Epilogue, Burgess asks us to accept his story as a dramatisation of certain tendencies prevalent in Britain today, presumably as they appear when viewed from his home in Monaco. In fact, at the very kindest estimate, 1985 is an expatriate's sour, intellectual proposition, illustrated with cartoon figures, on the theme of power without moral responsibility. Love does not enter into it anywhere. None of the people in it are real; nothing is intensely imagined. Even the note on *Waker's English*, which is intended to counterbalance Orwell's famous essay on *Newspaper* is but a feeble parody of its original. Burgess has totally failed to realise that to Orwell language and its corruption was a matter of paramount importance, not just another game to be played by members of the intelligentsia while hob-nobbing in the BBC canteen.

Which brings us to the ultimate question: "Why was this book written in the first place?" The answer, I can but suppose, is: "To make money for its author." Well, that is a perfectly valid reason for writing a book, but not, I submit, for writing this particular book, though it does explain the choice of the catch penny title. However, I imagine it is just conceivable that 1985 might send people back to re-read Orwell – and not just 1984 but the four volumes of the *Collected Journalism, Coming Up For Air and Homage to Catalonia*. I cannot believe that such an outcome would prove flattering to Burgess, but at least it would demonstrate effectively the difference between gold and pinchbeck.

The International Science Fiction Yearbook edited by Colin Lester; Piatto; 1978; 394pp; £2.95; ISBN 0-905310-16-0.

reviewed by Brian Stableford

I am a great fan of yearbooks, finding a perpetual fascination in such weighty and authoritative tomes as *Widen* and the *Timeform Racehorse of the Year*. I admire their awesome competence in reducing the year's events into a concise and elegantly-patterned statement – and in the former case providing a neat cumulative record of the history of endeavour and achievement within its area of focus. The idea of a science fiction yearbook is, of course, an old one; I possess a copy of the *Science Fiction Yearbook* for 1953, which is an admirable piece of work, listing all fantasy books published in that year, itemising the contents of the magazines, adding competent commentaries on the notable features of both lists and a statistical survey of the past careers of all sf magazines since 1926. There has, alas, been nothing like it since.

At first glance, the *International Science Fiction Yearbook* looks like a successor to the *Destiny Index*, and many readers will no doubt open it with the same eager anticipation as myself. This is what they will find as they begin to turn its pages:

After a token guest editorial which tells us what a good idea the book is we find a commentary section called "The Year in Fantasy Fiction". This turns out to be a weak-kneed four pages of drivel about ghost stories with a passing mention of sword and sorcery fiction. It is not what we expected to find, but we are in too much of a hurry to worry. We read on, and find ourselves enmeshed in a survey of Latin-American sf. We frown and skip a few pages, and land in a heavy pseudo-intellectual tract about the problems of defining science fiction. This is interrupted first by a cursory list of randomly-selected books and essays on the genre, and then by a note to the effect that "The major part of Professor Suvlin's essay is omitted here". We begin to experience a sense of unreality, or perhaps to smell a rat. Anxiously, we skip the section on obituaries to go right to the heart of the matter – the section labelled "Book Publishing", which we naively expect to be about the science fiction books of 1977. We are wrong. Instead, it is a list of publishers, some of whom publish sf and some of whom don't, mostly plagiarised from *The Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, with a few sf titles thrown in to make it look relevant. At last the truth dawns on us. How brilliant! How magnificent! The book is a JOKE – a parody of a year book! We scan on, rapidly, confirming our realisation as we begin to notice the maliciously subtle distortions of fact which turn Stuart Gordon into Giles Gordon, Patrick Woodruffe into Martin Woodruffe and a notable popularisation-of-science book into a piece of crank pseudo-science. We begin to appreciate the sense of humour which has so obsessively gathered together all the information that no sane person

could possibly want to know and equally obsessively ignored all that might be useful or interesting. The sheer ruthlessness of the caricature is breath-taking. At times the satirical tone is so cunningly close to sincerity that one can imagine gauche readers plodding all the way through the turgid morass without ever realising that they are being conned. Laughter breaks out, and for a whole minute and a half we love the book and the sheer audacity of the authors and the tremendous dedication of the editor who collected all this mock-information together. We scan on and on through all 29 of the sections, each one a clever mockery, until we reach the pages of addenda which break off in mid-flow so as to indicate artfully that the burlesque could go on forever and that there might be thousands more pages of the same glitzy garbage. Then, perhaps, we pause to think. Who, exactly, is it that is being ridiculed? Who is the butt of this horrible comedy? (We realise even as we think it that horrible is the word, for it is us, the readers, who are the victims. We have been taken for a ride. We have been made into a laughing stock). We can, of course, take a joke as well as the next man. We manage a last giggle before beginning to resent the fact that this stupid take-off has cost us £2.95 and a good deal of valuable time. We even begin to feel sorry for the trees that were cut down to provide the paper. We growl a bit, and maybe groan a few times. Then (and only then?) do we ask the one important question that needs to be asked about this book: Where, oh where, is the yearbook that this pathetic travesty is caricaturing?

The International Science Fiction Yearbook

reviewed by Chris Morgan

My first reaction on receiving a copy of this for review was one of indignation that anybody should attempt to compile such a book without asking for my help. In fact, Colin Lester has accumulated a vast amount of data from the cognoscenti and has skilfully marshalled it into twenty-nine sections covering the professional and amateur sides of SF, fantasy and horror in all media and in many countries of the world. The period covered is primarily the calendar year 1977, with a few promises and predictions for 1978 (but then, nobody would buy the book if it were labelled 1977, would they?). This information is (or was at the time of collection) very largely correct and as complete as the space available has permitted. In other words I haven't been able to find many errors; except for changes during the seven-to-ten month lag between compilation and publication, the majority of mistakes are typographical.

Ben Bova, in a rousing Introduction, is adamant that there is a need for such a yearbook as this, and also a market for it. I am less certain, especially about the market. To the professionals and more active fans it offers a great deal, but I doubt whether there are enough of these, even world-wide, to ensure the book's financial success. To be viable on a regular basis it must sell, year after year, to many of those who wish to read without becoming actively involved in fandom. It seems to me that what these people want to know is what their favourite author did during the year, whether it was to churn out six novels or to write an autobiography or appear as G-0-0-1 at a Worldcon, and this is what The Yearbook does not do. An author listing covering perhaps two hundred names, with a few succinct comments on each, need only have occupied three dozen pages. Perhaps Colin Lester will consider something on these lines for future years.

The big problem with some information contained in The ISFY is that it has become incorrect since it was gathered at the end of 1977 or early in 1978. Some magazines and fanzines have folded; their editors have moved; some SF groups have new committees; some book publishing and market information has changed. Obviously, details of this kind habitually alter from year to year. There is no remedy except for Colin Lester to keep his files as up-to-date as possible and to consider omitting some of the more trivial (and thus evanescent) entries such as minor fanzines and the smaller local SF groups. On the other hand, I was pleased to find an entry in section 8, Organisations, for the Astral League (sic).

The Introductory essays prefacing most sections are generally adequate within their space constraints without achieving any very high standard, although some of these were written by guest experts (not always credited). Only Ramsey Campbell, writing about the fantasy of 1977, rises above the commonplace, and even he manages to

ignore Stephen Donaldson's *Chronicles Of Thomas Covenant The Unbeliever*, a major event in 1977's fantasy publishing by any standards. Perhaps the Yearbook's editor and contributors should take lessons from Charles N. Brown (of *Locus* fame), whose excellent article on the SF of 1977 appears in Terry Carr's *The Best Science Fiction Of The Year No. 7*.

To break up its dryly factual listings, the Yearbook has many black and white illustrations, some of which have reproduced badly and many of which seem to have been inserted with a total disregard for appropriateness. Hence, a picture of Dr Who with monsters heads Professor Darko Suvin's academic essay on SF, while a Flash Gordon illustration interrupts a piece on Tolkien. Even if intended satirically, this is not very clever. At the end of the book there should have been, but isn't, an Index. I hope that The ISFY will prosper, and that next year's will be free from the shortcomings of this year's.

* A 35-page index for professional activity noted in ISFY 1 was prepared but omitted from the publication from lack of space. It has been duplicated privately and is available at cost: Europe and UK £0.40; North America \$1.00 surface/ \$1.40 air, inc. p&p. From the editor, Colin Lester: Pierrot Publishing Ltd., 17 Oakley Road, London, N1 3LL UK.

Fugitive From Time by Philip E. High; Robert Hale; 1978; 188pp; £3.95; ISBN 0 7091 7016 5

reviewed by Andrew Darlington

When I visited High in Canterbury last year for an article/interview (and homage to a guy whose stuff I'd been reading for twenty years) he described two novels he was then working on: *Fugitive From Time* and the as-yet-unpublished *Blindfold From The Stars*. He also expressed private doubts about the relevance of his traditional Space Opera style in a decade characterised by outlandish experiment and by media-orchestrated consumer Sci-Fi overkill. This novel – his most compulsively accomplished to date – immediately renders any such doubts obsolete. Although it remains within the distinctive parameters of his earlier writing – the wars fought across galaxies and across 'parallel universe time-tracks', the nuclear holocausts triggered by evil alien intervention, the planet-wide conflicts carried out by rival computers long after their creators have become extinct, the Nietzschean growth and transfiguration of an ordinary man into sudden uber-mensch powers – it all comes out refurbished and vibrant. The action never flags as the novel's protagonist, David Lancing, pursued by mysterious non-human enemies, flits from star to star 'like a ghost', materialising blind onto a vortex of bizarre and hostile worlds – never staying long enough on one planet for it to become tedious. The action opens up 'down in the tube-station at midnight' with Lancing being stomped on by punkish assailants, the trauma releasing self-imposed mental blocks, and as early as page nine he is using the unleashed extra-terrestrial memories and abilities to slip time-tracks into an alternate Earth. From that point on the novel comes at you relentlessly with an almost irresistibly naive enthusiasm exploding up out of every page. There's some conservation satire (a world totally wasted by pollution), and some of High's typically inventive artillery described with surreal-poetic nastiness – but basically there is no philosophical artifice or cumbersome message, just brilliantly eclectic effectively written high-adventure SF. At this rate Philip E. High is good for another ten novels.



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