

SF Commentary 86

February 2014

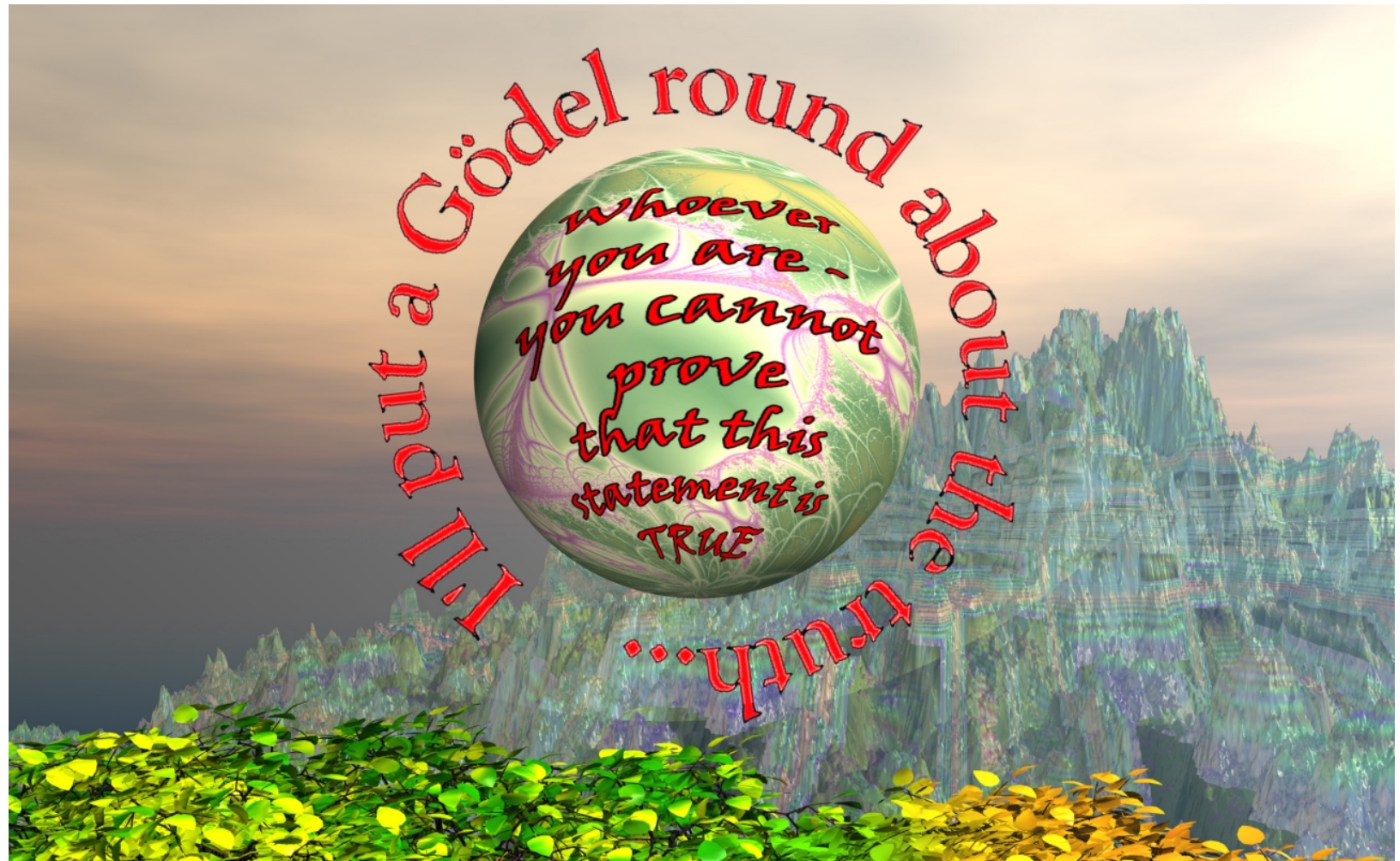
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Ditmar ::
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Bruce Gillespie ::
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Ditmar (Dick Jensen):

Cover story

It took a few years, but fortunately not too many, for me to recover from the forced ingestion of Shakespeare thrust upon me at school. The main problem was simply my immaturity and a difficulty in understanding people and behaviour, a difficulty which still persists and which is why, probably, I find humans and their motivations much more comprehensible in novels and films than in the complicated clutter and 'white noise' of reality. But luckily our English Literature teacher was very enthusiastic regarding Shakespeare, which meant that as I grew older I had a positive response and memory to guide me. Also, on leaving school and entering University I discovered new friends, some of whom were a decade or two older than I, and who loved the plays and poems of Shakespeare. One of them was clearly much more mature than I for he had been reading the plays while still at school — which, so Rod told me, had one passing teacher exclaiming: 'My God, Timmins, you *are* a strange boy. You read Shakespeare.'

I found many passing references to Shakespeare in unexpected places — the pages of Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland*, for example, where a quote from *The Tempest* appeared (a play which I consider to be Shakespeare's finest). And in two of the 'best' films I have seen there is, again, Shakespeare. Thus *The Tempest* is quoted by Ralph Richardson in Zoltan Korda's *The Four Feathers*, and a wonderful bit of business from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appears in Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (aka *Stairway to Heaven*). And so I fell in love with Shakespeare.

But I also became somewhat passionate about mathematics, even

if I never entered its more esoteric chambers (Third Year university maths was the last formal training), and my interest was fanned by 'popular' mathematical texts and scientific magazines. It was through them that I discovered Kurt Gödel and his incompleteness theorems. He was a fascinating, and rather sad, character (Reference 1) who surprised the mathematical world with his two *incompleteness* proofs (Refs 2, 3). There are *many* discussions of these in *many* books (Refs 4, 5). Gödel is largely regarded as a logician — perhaps the finest of the past century or more, but he was also a mathematician. In that regard he showed that there were solutions of Einstein's equations of general relativity that allowed for time travel (Ref. 6). He was great friend of Einstein, and the two would walk every day to their homes from Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study in order to engage in scientific and philosophical discussions (Ref. 6). Gödel also managed a proof of the existence of God (flawed) and showed that the American Constitution allowed for the creation of a dictatorship (Ref. 7). (He was told *not* to bring up such a proof when he went for his admission for US citizenship).

Gödel's two incompleteness theorems were, as stated above, reasonably shocking inasmuch as they showed that there were limits to mathematics and mathematical knowledge (see also Ref. 8). Simply stated, they say that there are undecidable truths in mathematics, and that the internal consistency of mathematics cannot be proven within that system. Thus there are some statements that are obviously true but cannot be proven and that mathematics cannot be shown to be free of inconsistencies. As

Weinstein puts it (Ref. 9):

Informally, Gödel's incompleteness theorem states that all consistent axiomatic formulations of number theory include undecidable propositions. This is sometimes called Gödel's *first incompleteness theorem*, and answers in the negative Hilbert's problem asking whether mathematics is 'complete' (in the sense that every statement in the language of number theory can be either proved or disproved).

Gödel's second incompleteness theorem states that if number theory is consistent, then a proof of this fact does not exist using the methods of first-order predicate calculus. Stated more colloquially, any formal system that is interesting enough to formulate its own consistency can prove its own consistency if, and *only* if, it is inconsistent.

A simple way of demonstrating a statement that is *obviously* true, but cannot be so proven, is the subject of the cover. If you replace the words 'whoever you are — you' with, say, 'Bruce Gillespie' the statement is still true and provable *by you*, but if you replace 'whoever you are — you' with *your* name then it's still true but you cannot prove it.

Finally, the circular text 'I'll put a Gödel round about the truth' is a pun on Puck's words, 'I'll put a girdle round about the Earth', as spoken in Shakespeare's glorious *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And I make no apologies for the pun, since I consider a pun to be *not* the lowest, but the highest form of wit, for it conflates two disparate things (concepts, ideas, words, phrases, even images, as in some of Salvador Dali's paintings, where visual puns abound) and creates something new. The groan response to a pun is because the listener realises his or her failure to be so creative. There is no such groan when Einstein conflates an accelerating lift

with gravity and creates General Relativity; rather, there is an abundance of awe and admiration. The basic substance of a pun is part of what scientists and mathematicians do. So there!

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All correspondence: gandc@pacific.net.au. Member fwa.

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Front cover: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'I'll Put a Gödel Around the Truth'.

Back cover: Elaine Cochrane: 'Tiny Dancer' (using DJ Fractals).

Artwork

Elizabeth Darling (p. 7).

Photographs

Gary Mason (p. 6); Chris Nelson (p. 16); Mervyn Binns (p. 27); Judith Clute (pp. 36, 42); Mike Glyer (p. 49); David Dyer-Bennett (p. 51); Ileen Weber (p. 63).

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I must be talking to my friends

Farewell to Peter Darling

In the October mailing of ANZAPA, I wrote a brief note about my sense of loss when I heard that **Peter Darling** had died suddenly on 2 October 2013. Two weeks before his death, his work colleague Peter Gerrand, brother of Rob Gerrand, had visited him in hospital. Peter died unexpectedly of heart failure, while he was recovering from severe upper respiratory tract infection. He was cremated after a private family ceremony. **Peter Gerrand**, **Miranda Foyster**, and **Elizabeth Darling**, with the support of **Telstra**, organised a celebration of Peter's life in Melbourne on 25 November. More than 100 work colleagues, family members, and old friends (including a contingent from fandom) turned up.

Peter and Elizabeth Darling had little to do with fandom after Aussiecon 2 in 1985, which they helped to organise and run, but they were members of ANZAPA for many years, and remained in touch with some of us through their annual Christmas card from the Ponderosa (their farm near Kyneton).

During all that time I had little idea of what Peter Darling actually did at Telstra (or Telecom as it was called for some years). Only during the Celebration did I and many others discover the true extent of Peter's achievement. **Bishop Barbara Darling**, Peter's sister, spoke about his early life, and **Miranda Foyster** delivered a witty and revealing talk on behalf of Elizabeth and herself. Most of the time, however, was taken up with a description of Peter's career achievements from **Peter Gerrand**, **John Costa**, and



Peter Darling, 1981. (Photo: Gary Mason).

Mark Armstrong. The presentation began with a slide show of photos of Peter's life, and a number of others, including **David Grigg** and me, spoke after the end of the official program. Some absent colleagues sent messages.

Mark Armstrong, former ABC Chairman and colleague of Peter at the Network Insight Insitute, spoke glowingly of him:

Of all Peter's many good qualities, his generosity of intellect stands out. Over the years, he shared his vast knowledge with dozens of communications organisations.

Peter did it so well because he went to so much trouble. He just spent more effort than most of us would, to prepare diagrams, illustrations and text which would help people understand. It is hard to think of anyone who consistently attracted so much interest and so many questions from all kinds of audiences.

There is no tangible measure of knowledge contribution. It's not like capital contribution. But if there were a measure, then Peter would be celebrated as a billionaire donor to Australian communications.

Time and again, contributors to the Celebration emphasised Peter's patience and his willingness to take endless trouble to develop plans and carry them out. **Peter Mullane**, for instance, writes in the program for the Celebration:

Peter was intent, right from the start of his career, on getting quality outcomes on time with creative technical problem-solving often being personally developed and then applied widely. He became a much-respected expert in this field quite early on and was sought after for his views and knowledge.

I was always somewhat in awe of Peter and his colleagues and their capacity to move into the evolution of world telecommunications and the future directions, and the necessary rules and standards to ensure the future was always well prepared both in Australia and globally.

All the other speakers at the Celebration attested to Peter's 'great vision and passion'. A friend from Peter's schooldays said that Peter's great talent was for reconciliation and the integration of viewpoints. 'The boys at high school were on the side of the Rolling Stones. The girls were on the side of the Beatles. Peter persuaded me that Simon and Garfunkel were better than either of them.'

Thanks very much to Peter Gerrand for sending me a copy of his speech and of the Celebration program.



Illustration by Elizabeth Darling.

Peter Darling chronology

21 May 1946	Peter Darling born.	1984–1987	Worked in national switched network planning.
1957–1963	Epping Boys High School.	1988–1989	Member of Telecom's team to develop strategies for network competition, providing technical input for 1989 legislation that led to the creation of AUSTEL.
1964–1967	Attended University of Sydney; graduated Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Engineering (Hons.)	1991–1997	Responsible for technical regulation in Telstra and coordinating technical work with the regulators.
1967	Joined the PMG Department as a cadet engineer.	1997–2002	Played key role in establishing industry technical self-regulation through the NIIF and ACIF. Founding chair of the ACIF Network Reference Panel.
1968–1974	Worked as professional engineer in the planning of country networks (NSW and Canberra).	2000	Retired from Telstra and founded Pondarosa Communications consultancy.
1971–1973	GEC Overseas Fellow, UK.	2000–2003	Manager, International for ACIF.
1974	Moved to Telecom Australia's Head Office in Melbourne.	2000–2003	Adjunct Professor at RMIT University.
1974–1978	Participated in selection of Telecom's first stored program local exchanges (Ericsson AXEs).	2001	Organised Global Standards Collaboration in Sydney.
1978	Married Elizabeth Foyster	2000–2008	Senior Research Fellow, Network Insight.
1978–1982	Contributed to planning of an integrated network, combining digital switching and transmission.	2000–2013	Member of Editorial Advisory Board of TJA.
1978–2000	Contributed to international standards development in ITU and ETSI as a delegate for Australia.	2 Oct. 2013	Died suddenly at Epworth Rehabilitation, Melbourne.
1983	Network advisor to Department of Communications.		

Peter Gerrand

My colleague Peter Darling 1946–2013

1

Peter was my friend, colleague, and, on several occasions, a close collaborator on particular projects, over a period of more than 30 years. Over the past 20 years Valerie and I also came to know Elizabeth and we became good friends with her as well. Peter and Elizabeth were a great partnership.

The first time I visited Peter in his office in Forward Network planning in Telecom, which would have been back in 1985, there was a painting on his wall, obviously an original, of a galah sitting cockily on an overhead telephone line. This was my first introduction to Elizabeth's painting, and I gradually became aware of Peter's delight in using her sketches and paintings of telecommunications artifacts and the people using them. Over the years Elizabeth's sketches appeared more and more often in Peter's Powerpoint slides and even in his Telecommunications journal articles, to entertain his audience. It was a bit like having your paper published in *The New Yorker* and having an in-house cartoonist available to illustrate it.

So of course for today's event we wanted Elizabeth to contribute a sketch of Peter for the commemorative program. And the one she has chosen beautifully captures a major theme of Peter's life from the late 1970s onwards: of Peter the frequent flyer, setting off with his cases to an airport, probably to attend a standards meeting, whether in Singapore, San Francisco ... or Sydney.

If you read the interview that Peter gave Liz Fell for the *Telecommunications Journal of Australia* in 2000, mentioned in the program, there's an amusing account by Peter of how he first got to attend meetings of the ITU in Geneva:

Liz prompted: *In the late '70s and early '80s you started your long involvement with ITU and the standards process...*

Peter responded: *There's a personal story here, because in 1978 I went on a honeymoon in Europe with my new wife and my nine-year-old stepdaughter — the usual blended family-type honeymoon (said Peter nonchalantly) — and on that honeymoon, when my wife and stepdaughter went home, I stayed on for my first ITU meeting.*

Liz: So you stayed on in Geneva?

Peter: *No, I stayed on at a place called Darmstadt with Karl Heinz Rosenbrock, a young engineer in the Deutsche Bundespost who is now the head of ETSI, the European Telecommunications Standards Institute.*

2

This anecdote brings out Peter's talent for friendship, particularly with engineers from many other countries that he met at ITU

meetings, who became lifelong friends, and several of whom rose to quite useful senior positions. Karl Heinz Rosenbrock sent his apologies for today and his best wishes to Elizabeth; as did Dr Sadahiko Kano, who rose to become Head of Network Planning for NTT Japan (the largest telecommunications company in the world). Karl Heinz and Sadahiko were amongst many of Peter's overseas friends who accepted his invitations to visit him and Elizabeth on their small property near Kyneton, when they came to Melbourne for major meetings.

You will see near the back of the program [next page] a chronology of Peter's life, largely focusing on his career. Amongst the tributes, you will read from Denis Mullane how Peter was a cadet engineer with the PMG who became an exceptionally knowledgeable engineer in NSW Country Installation; and how he was talent spotted and promoted by Blair Feenaghty into national Telephone Switching Planning in Melbourne.

This was the period when new digital technologies began moving out of the laboratories into the networks. Peter was a great asset, because he's always had the rather rare ability to understand both the big picture, of what the technology is meant to provide, and the detailed picture, of how the technology actually works. It was this ability, plus his extensive knowledge, that helped Peter become such a successful provider of tutorial presentations to inform his colleagues and, later, such a successful writer of tutorial articles for the benefit of the whole industry.

But there were other factors contributing to this ability, of course. One is that he was such an intelligent person, who read widely, and followed the world's political events: the broader background, after all, for so much regulatory change. A second was his hands-on approach to understanding new technologies.

A third characteristic of Peter's was his ability to work by gentle persuasion. This was a natural ability, but it was enhanced through his years of participation in international standards groups of

technical experts. In those meetings, there were no hierarchical relationships; you had to persuade others by good technical arguments and also by engendering trust.

Peter's trustworthiness and integrity were always obvious. This assisted him enormously in the 1990s, when the industry was opened to competition. Peter's frequent role was to provide leadership in the cooperative development of Australian industry standards, amongst fellow experts working for telcos competing vigorously with each other, and often being suspicious of whatever the incumbent carrier, Telstra, was proposing. I also noted at first hand how he gained the trust of the industry regulator, AUSTEL.

So far, I've mentioned Peter's talent for friendship; his ability to see the 'big picture' and relate it to the detailed implementations needed; his ability to provide really valuable tutorial presentations and tutorial papers; and the trust he engendered across the industry.

The last thing I want to note about Peter's character in this five-minute talk was his habitual generosity, especially in spending time explaining complex new technical developments to lay people. This is exemplified by Teresa Corbin's words within the program, of how helpful Peter was to consumer advocates.

Peter's contributions to the modern telecommunications networks we enjoy today were huge: partly through his work as a network planner in the 1980s and 1990s; partly in providing the arguments for freeing up radio spectrum and freeing up the national telephone numbering scheme for new services; later in helping make industry co-regulation work within an intensely competitive industry; and finally as a prolific author of valuable tutorial articles on new developments in telecommunications.

But Peter also had a strong commitment to the broader community. He was, as John de Ridder comments in the program, known as the long-term defender of the standard telephone service,

because he knew this service is still critical to people in rural areas. And he was always willing to share his exceptional knowledge with others, to the common good. He was a great contributor to

Australian telecommunications; and he was a very good man.

— **Peter Gerrand 25 November 2013**

Miranda Foyster

The art of being Peter

First, I'd like to thank Peter Gerrand for his wonderful work co-organising today's event. I'd also like to thank, on behalf of both Elizabeth and myself, the many people who have sent messages of support and condolences, and for the images and tributes many have shared with us in memory of Peter.

Of course it's impossible to put into five minutes all that I have to say about Peter as a family man. Each person in this room will remember him in their own way, and for different things — and that's really the ideal way to carry someone with you when they've gone. For us, he was a loving husband and father, a true gentle man, and we miss him dearly.

But today I'd like to pay tribute to one of his great abilities, one of the true life skills inexplicably left out of the great sagas and history books: the art of being an incorrigible punster.

When Peter met Elizabeth he was clearly guided by the old adage: it's better to love a short girl than not a tall. Unconfirmed rumour has it that he was worried his sense of humour would be an

impediment to a serious relationship, so he presented her with his 10 best puns to see if any of them would put her off. Fortunately, no pun in ten did.

They married in 1978 at Pondarosa — it was an emotional wedding: even the cake was in tiers. He committed to not only a new wife, but also a ready-made family, including a pre-teen daughter and rather stubborn beagle — perhaps he should have *been* committed.

He brought many improvements to the family — many of them technological. For example, his inspired rewiring of the cigarette lighter electricals on a car trip in the late '70s (this was before the Walkman) so that I could listen to my ABBA tape on headphones, and Peter and Elizabeth could drive in the Sound of Silence (he was a Simon and Garfunkel fan).

In the early eighties, he created, with the assistance of Dick Smith Electronics, a home computer out of an old desk, a few circuit boards, a tape deck, and hundreds of bits. He even installed a

computer game for me — a text-based precursor of Sim City/Sim World. We called it 'Negative Peasants', because if the kingdom was managed poorly, the number of peasants would run into the negative and keep on doing so.

He thought it a good life lesson for me and my schoolfriends: You can't escape being a peasant because resistance is feudal.

He took being a father very seriously, and in school parenting duties he was in a class of his own. Over the years, he drove me and my friends to countless school events, including early morning rowing practice, hockey matches, debating competitions, dancing classes. Sadly, however, not to gymkhanas — he refused to pony up for a horse.

Although much of our home life was at the family farm Pondarosa, Elizabeth could never persuade him to love gardening as much as she does. He just didn't dig it. And despite his other skills in husbandry, he was not a natural farmer, either. But he usually had a nifty solution to the various problems of country life. For the paddocks, he traded in his trusty Volvo for a four wheel drive Daihatsu Rocky, which made his driving a little boulder. And eventually he invested in a ride-on lawn mower — albeit one without cutting hedge technology.

Peter was something of a gourmet — he was particularly fond of highly fragrant fromage. One year, when the three of us went for a holiday in a houseboat on the Hawkesbury, Elizabeth and I became increasingly concerned by an overwhelming pong from the box of grocery supplies. It was, of course, a vintage Stilton — and we made Peter put it in the lifeboat, which we towed behind us. To his credit, he was only slightly cheesed off.

Peter travelled a lot for work, and every trip back from Geneva he would bring back, stuffed in his shoes, a kilogram bag of tiny,

individually wrapped Swiss chocolates. The covers were like miniature chocolate boxes — and we would ration them out as after dinner treats over the months between his trips. Although we missed him when he was away, we always knew when he returned, he would return with at least one shoe choc full of boxlets.

Peter did put in very long hours at work.

The ancient Romans only gathered once a week, because that was enough forum. But the demands of the modern workplace are significantly greater. One year the ABS recruited Peter and Elizabeth as part of a sample set for research into work/life balance. But the interviewer was deeply concerned when she looked at the tally of Peter's working hours, telling him that he had wildly skewed the average upwards. I guess at that time it was unusual to work 24 hours straight and then call it a day.

When he retired in 2000, Peter didn't really stop working. He was tireless in his efforts for community and charitable organisations. He was all for giving — and sometimes you have to be very forgiving working in volunteer-run organisations.

After his stroke in 2006, Peter embarked on a more personal journey of embracing innovations: taking up Pilates, Feldenkrais (with me), and taking part in a trial experimental kidney procedure to lower blood pressure — deeply enriching his knowledge of workings of the human body. Right to the very end, the fact that he chose cremation over traditional burial shows how much he thought out of the box.

I'll leave you with some advice Peter gave often gave me:

Be alert — the world need more lerts.

— **Miranda Foyster, 25 November 2013**

Bruce Gillespie

Memories of Peter Darling in fandom

It tells a lot about Peter Darling's reticence and modesty that I had been able to find only one scanned photo of him, taken 10 years ago. It tells a lot about Peter Darling that only a few months ago, when we met at an exhibition of Elizabeth's artwork, he seemed to have overcome the effects of a stroke a few years earlier. He was enjoying life, and we took up the conversation we have been having for the last 45 years, interrupted from time to time by real life. Therefore it was a very great shock that I heard the news of his death, because I considered him very much of my generation, still very youthful.

I've been asked to speak about Peter's connections with that worldwide group of people known as science fiction fandom. Some people in this room are better qualified to speak than I am, but I do have many pleasant memories of Peter's years of greatest involvement with fandom.

I first heard his name in 1967, when I met the people who surrounded the magazine *Australian Science Fiction Review*. John Bangsund and a group of fans had travelled from Melbourne to Sydney to meet a group of young people who wanted to revive SF activity in Sydney. They included Peter Darling, Ron Clarke, Gary Mason, Robin Johnson, John Brosnan, and John Ryan, among others. When John Bangsund and company returned to Mel-

bourne, they reported that the Sydney Science Fiction Foundation now existed, with Peter as one of the most active members.

In 1969, I met Peter for the first time at Easter Convention held in Melbourne. He was very likable, very enthusiastic, with lots of ideas for developing SF activity in both Melbourne and Sydney. He was the first subscriber to my new magazine, *SF Commentary*. In 1969, he stayed briefly at my flat in Ararat while travelling from Sydney to Melbourne. During New Year 1970, I was one of a large number of Melbourne fans who travelled to Sydney for Syncon 1, their first convention in many years. A highlight of the convention was a party held in the backyard of Peter's parents' house. That's the only time I've met Peter's family.

Peter became part of the group who were seeking to bid for Australia to hold the World SF Convention for the first time. His commitment to the bid was confirmed when he moved from Sydney to Melbourne to join the Postmaster General's Department here in 1974. As well as becoming very successful in his job, he became part of an inner circle who devoted much of their spare time to holding the convention. With 400 attending, it was then by far the largest SF convention held in Australia, but was for the overseas visitors a smallish, even intimate occasion.

During and after that convention, Peter was a member of ANZAPA, the Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association. This is an organisation of people who publish science fiction fanzines for each other, much like the internet, only much slower. Elizabeth joined Peter in publishing a series of highly enjoyable fanzines.

Elizabeth and Peter were also members of the organising committee of Aussiecon 2, which took place in 1985. By now the overseas fans had become used to the idea of travelling to Melbourne for the type of convention usually held in places like Los Angeles or Chicago, so the attendance was 1400. The numbers were greater; the problems were greater. The convention itself spread to four

venues. It was the convention that really made Australia part of the international SF community, so much so that we won the bid again for 1999 and 2010.

Peter seemed to me the ideal 'old-fashioned gentleman': always friendly, but always private. Although Elaine and I would sometimes not catch up with him for five years or more, we could always take up the conversation with him. Damn it, he was only a year older than me! It's very hard to take in the knowledge that we will not see him again.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 24 November 2013**

Chris Nelson

Graham Stone:

Born 7 January 1926; died 16 November 2013

Bruce Gillespie's introduction:

Graham Stone was a mover and shaker in Australian fandom long before any of us were involved, and can bear much responsibility for all that has happened in Sydney and Melbourne over 60 or more years — even if, in Melbourne's case, much of our activity was in reaction to the centralised model of SF club activity that Graham wanted to install throughout Australia.

Now that he has left us, many fans have been posted on the internet stories of Graham's great kindness. This is in contrast to the rather combative image he left behind in the 1950s.

Graham visited Melbourne a few years ago. He was a very quiet, pleasant man, who spoke not much above a whisper. He sent me his *Science Fiction Monthly* during the last decade. It contained much information about the late 1930s, information unavailable anywhere else. His huge *Australian Science Fiction Bibliography* is considered one of the most important reference books of the science fiction world. In 1999, he received the A. Bertram Chandler Award for Lifelong Service to Science Fiction. Thanks to Pauline Dickinson, his collection is to be curated by the same Sydney library that houses the Ron Graham collection.

Chris Nelson's obituary is from *The Canberra Times*. A longer version will appear in Chris's fanzine *Mumblings from Munchkinland*.

Graham Stone spent a decade at the National Library in Canberra.

A leading authority on Australian science fiction, librarian and bibliographer Graham Stone died on 16 November after being incapacitated by a serious illness in January.

Graham Brice Stone was born in Adelaide on 7 January 1926, the youngest of Jeannie and Nelson Stone's three surviving sons. His father was an electrical linesman and, later, a telephone technician with the Postmaster-General's Department until his death in 1933.

His mother received a small pension but it was not enough to support her and the boys during the Depression. The family moved to another suburb, where she ran a boarding house and then a rental library. Both Stone's brothers left to look for work in Sydney.

By this time Stone had already developed what would become a lifelong interest in science fiction via futuristic tales appearing in the weekly English story papers like *The Champion* and *The Modern Boy* and through following the comic strip adventures of Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers.

But he also found adult works by Jules Verne and H. G. Wells at home, and he sought out more in the local Mechanics Institute and rental libraries, finding the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and John Wyndham, among others.

The vast interstellar vistas of his reading contrasted sharply in the young boy's eyes to his surrounds in suburban Adelaide. In late 1939, however, he and his mother also moved to Sydney, and Stone was elated at finding 'civilisation' at last — and an abundance of imported science fiction. Through a bookseller he was contacted in 1940 by Bert Castellari, one of a small group of schoolboys who had founded a science fiction club the year before. Stone soon joined in the activities of their Futurian Society of Sydney with enthusiasm, but before long the older members were called up for military service and the society fell dormant.

Stone would have liked to have pursue a career in journalism, and worked as a copy boy for the *Sun* and *Sunday Sun* newspapers for 15 months until his mother took him back to Adelaide in 1944. There, he joined the Citizen Air Force and later the RAAF, becoming an equipment assistant stationed variously in Townsville, Melbourne, and Laverton. He gained the rank of leading aircraftman

before seeking discharge in 1947 to pursue university studies.

Returning to Sydney, he studied, contributed to trade journals, and helped to revive the Futurian Society of Sydney. He also became involved with the Book Collectors Society after meeting Stan Larnach, who was compiling a bibliography of early Australian fantastic fiction.

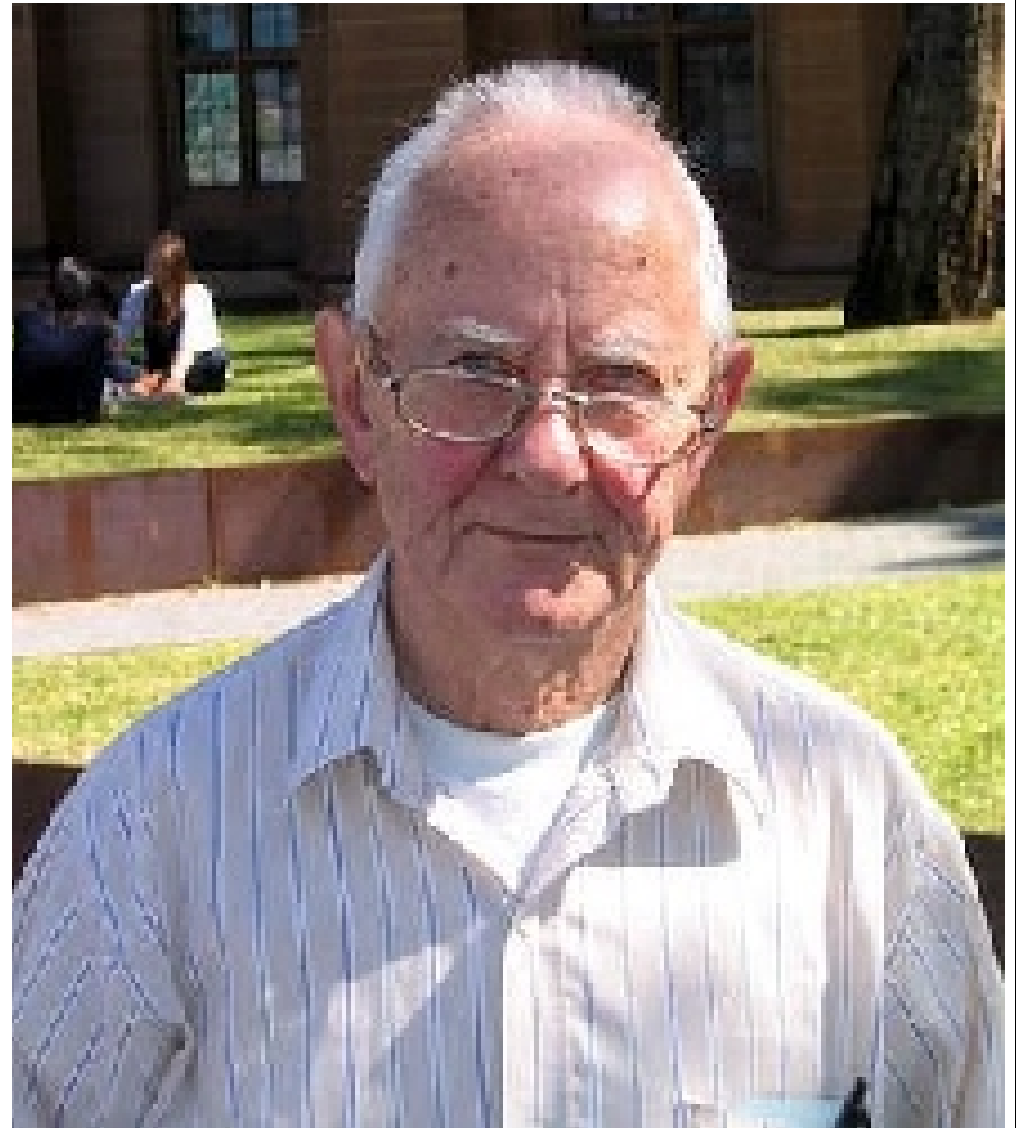
In 1951 Stone established the Australian Science Fiction Society, which kept fans around the country up to date through a regular newsletter. This contributed to a resurgence of interest in local SF circles, and the next year, the first Australian science fiction convention was held in Sydney.

Annual conventions continued in Sydney to 1955, each attracting more people to the SF scene. One was Joy Anderson, whom Stone married in 1956. Unfortunately, factions began to grow among SF fans and an acrimonious split occurred in 1954. Stone contributed to these events; he was never shy about expressing his views. He and Joy were also involved in *The Push*.

The conventions moved to Melbourne and activities in Sydney dwindled. Stone maintained the Futurian Society library and his *Science Fiction News* (1953–59) kept fans in touch. He published an index to Australian SF magazines and wrote or compiled material for several titles including *Future Science Fiction*, *Popular Science Fiction*, and *Science- Fiction Monthly*.

In 1962, Stone was awarded his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Sydney. He had been working for the Public Library of NSW for more than a decade when an opportunity for him to join the National Library in Canberra arose in 1964. His marriage to Joy was over by then and they divorced in 1965.

At the National Library, Stone was placed in the bibliographical section before becoming a cataloguer in the film collection, work he greatly enjoyed. In 1965, he married Patricia Cowper, who had



Graham Stone. (Photo: Chris Nelson.)

a son. They had a daughter in 1968.

Stone's period in Canberra was very productive for his SF research also. He published two editions of his *Australian Science Fiction Index* in 1964 and 1968, the *Journal of the Australian Science Fiction Association* (1965–70), the first edition of his *Index to British Science Fiction Magazines 1934–1953* (in seven parts, 1968–75) and an index of book reviews (1973). He also contributed reviews of SF books to *The Canberra Times* for five years from 1972 and began a second series of *Science Fiction News* in 1969, which he continued irregularly over the years.

With a promotion in 1972 Stone became responsible for the overall operation of the NLA's film division, including a lending service with 40,000 loans a year. After missing out on further promotion the next year, he resigned. In 1976 he separated from Pat, and returned to Sydney, where he assisted with another revival of the Futurian Society and sold secondhand books. He also set about searching past newspapers and magazines for previously unidentified works of Australian SF — a long and arduous task that yielded significant discoveries.

He recorded the results of this work much later, in *Notes on Australian Science Fiction* (2001) and his magnum opus, *Australian Science Fiction Bibliography* (2004).

Stone received the A. Bertram Chandler Award for Outstanding Achievement in Science Fiction from the Australian SF Foundation in 1999.

Stone collapsed in January from what was diagnosed as tubercular encephalitis. He later suffered a stroke and died at the Prince of Wales Private Hospital in Randwick. He is survived by his stepson and daughter and five grandchildren.

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Daniel King, also known as David King, is best known in Australian SF for the anthology *Dreamworks*. Lately he has been focused on poetry, with poems in England's *PN Review*. He has a doctorate in philosophy but has not worked in academia for some time. He recently joined the Catholic Church. His short story 'The Quarry', which is a sequel to J. G. Ballard's 'Zone of Terror', was published in issue 22 of *FourW*, the literary magazine of Charles Sturt University.

Daniel King

'Again Last Night':

A previously unpublished Vermilion Sands story

As J. G. Ballard died only a few years ago (in 2009), it is not surprising that the great amount of unpublished documents he left behind have only recently been pro-cessed by the British Library, where the documents were deposited by the Ballard Estate. Fortunately for Ballard enthusiasts, among the many documents is a previously unpublished and untitled story set in Vermilion Sands, the surrealist desert resort that is the setting for his collection of stories of the same name. The story, which the library has assigned the catalogue reference number Add MS 88938/3/2 and which may be read or copied for a fee, was written in 1958, and is therefore among the earliest of the Vermilion Sands stories to be written. In this article I shall describe the story and attempt to provide readers with some indication as to how well the story fits with Ballard's published oeuvre.

Before I do that, however, it is worth mentioning that the story is preceded by a few paragraphs of handwritten notes that suggest *Vermilion Sands* was originally intended to be a novel. In the interests of scholarship I reproduce here these notes in their entirety:

After first meeting with Lunora Singing Sculptures — point where he walks out, chastened. Then tapes blow across — he then becomes involved with Aurora-Jane. Through the death of Tristram — film co. arrives and they hope to revive her with no success. Charles is killed.

Open with trio driving out to Lagoon West. They play screen game, then hear sonic sculpture playing. Flashback to previous summer. Arrival at V.S. — He is sonic sculptor and poetry editor. First meeting with Lunora in gallery. Singing sculpture story follows, to the point where he leaves her sobbing over her sculpture. Then they learn

something of Lunora when they go to live in her former house at 99 Stellavista. She was formerly married to Van den Starr and possibly killed him. Then he moves to Studio 4 the Stars. Tapes blow across. Through the death of Tristram, which Lunora has arranged (Van Stratten knows him) — Janice goes off, after working at his flower shop.

Readers familiar with *Vermilion Sands* will be struck here by the links Ballard proposes between the stories. For example, rather than Gloria Tremayne it is Lunora, the female protagonist of 'The Singing Statues', who is married to Vanden Starr, the architect in 'The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista'. Also of note is that 'Studio 5, The Stars' was originally titled 'Studio 4, The Stars', and that 'The Singing Statues' was originally titled 'The Singing Sculptures'.

To return to the untitled story itself, the first observation that probably should be made is that, though a first draft (as is evidenced by the frequent crossings-out of different turns the narrative could take), the story is polished, and from this perspective could easily be added to the existing *Vermilion Sands* collection. Exactly why Ballard chose not to publish the story is, so far as I am aware, unknown; but I shall offer some speculations towards the end of this article.

The plot is easily summarised: the narrator, Max Caldwell, is prompted by a woman with whom he is having a casual affair to work as private secretary to an eccentric millionaire, Samuel Hardoon. Hardoon's passion is to commission ever more bizarre architectural extensions to his home, a fortune teller in Alexandria having told him that if he ever stops building he will die. Hardoon shares his home with his 25-year-old daughter, Emerelda (Emerelda's mother, Julia, it transpires, died at childbirth). The other characters include architect Hugo (Emerelda's casual boyfriend) and Lizabeth (Hardoon's sister). All are sketched quite briefly but are nonetheless instantly memorable and recognisable as Ballard 'types'. Emerelda, for example, is the inscrutable femme fatale; Hardoon the obsessive recluse, etc.

Apart from his architectural obsessions, Hardoon has an interest in time; and Caldwell's task is to catalogue the documents arising from Hardoon's various temporal experiments and enterprises. Hardoon commissions people to take part in sensory deprivation and other temporal perception experiments; and Caldwell quickly cottons on that most, if not all, of these people are conning Hardoon. Caldwell speculates that Hardoon's temporal and architectural obsessions are linked; but he quickly subordinates this idea to a consideration of what will prove to be the story's main conceit: that Hardoon's architectural folly is a contemporary counterpart to the labyrinth in the Theseus myth.

Discussing Hardoon's situation with Emerelda, Caldwell soon develops an attraction for her. The reader learns that Emerelda feels trapped in her father's world; so, when Caldwell thinks that her relationship with Hugo is cooling, he decides to rescue her. Emerelda conceals herself in her blue Maserati and allows Caldwell to drive her away, contriving at the last moment that they go to Hugo's beach house in Lagoon West (Hugo, after giving Hardoon a guided tour of the now-finished and 'insoluble' labyrinth, will be spending some time in Red Beach). After unpacking, they decide to spend the night in the nightclubs of Vermilion Sands; but shortly after their return Caldwell has an epiphany that Hardoon is in danger: either from Hugo (Emerelda, Hardoon's heir, is worried that Hardoon's fortune is being squandered on all the architectural additions; and Caldwell clearly suspects Hugo and Emerelda's relationship may not have cooled after all) or from Hardoon's having trapped himself in the 'insoluble' labyrinth. Hurrying back to Hardoon House, Caldwell finds that Hardoon is indeed dead: lying on his back, in a pool of blood, in a narrow gully of the maze. The story concludes with these words:

Walking away around the maze, I made my way slowly through the temples and pavilions, the great green dragons with their curling red tongues reaching across the narrow streets above my head, the dead city clasping to itself the now vanished spirit of Hardoon, the master-builder, man of many enigmas and unsolved sorrows, who for twenty years had unwittingly, day by day, set the stage for his own death and

entrance.

At this point, the question posed towards the beginning of this article needs to be asked: why did Ballard decide not to publish this story? It has all his painterly trademarks: Emerelda, for example, has blue hair, wears a turquoise swimsuit, has blue-painted toenails, drives the blue Maserati, and is seen in a turquoise Rolls. (The fact that the character's name is Emerelda, a word that connotes 'green', also cleverly cues the reader into suspecting that Emerelda is not what she appears to be.) Moreover, all the settings are described in the sort of detail that readers associate with Ballard. True, there is less emphasis on the typical aspects of *Vermilion Sands*: while sand-rays abound, outside of one paragraph there is only a single occurrence of the word 'reef', and nowhere does Ballard's favourite mineral, quartz, put in an appearance. But these attentions to detail, together with the already mentioned more-than-competent writing, suggest strongly that Ballard had other reasons for not proceeding with the tale.

In my opinion, the reason must be that, soon after finishing the draft, Ballard realised that he had got several key aspects of the Theseus myth wrong; and as the narrative structure of the story depends on those aspects he had no alternative but to abandon the story. So what are these key aspects? Hugo sets up the analogy as follows:

'Has it ever occurred to you how our roles here correspond to the old legend of Theseus and the Minotaur? We have the insane bull-king hiding in his labyrinth, his beautiful daughter Ariadne, and — here Hugo bowed expansively — the superlative architect, Daedalus, who designs the maze. All the roles fit exactly, even the atmosphere. This place as about as decadent as Minoan Crete must have been.'

But this is wrong; it is the Minotaur, not King Minos, the creator

of the labyrinth, who is trapped in the maze. Further, Ballard has narrator Caldwell report the following:

The next day was my last at Hardoon House, and I was more interested in trying to devise a method of taking Emerelda with me, as the original Theseus had rescued Ariadne from the labyrinth 40 centuries earlier.

Again, however, Ballard has the myth wrong; it is Ariadne who helps Theseus to escape from the labyrinth (although it is true that Theseus does take her with him when he flees Crete). It is my guess that Ballard realised this soon after finishing the story, and, seeing no way of saving it, abandoned it. (Significantly, a line of dialogue from the beginning of the story finds its way into 'The Screen Game'.) The myth is such a major structuring device in the story that attributing the inaccuracies to (say) an unreliable/unknowledgeable narrator would hardly have been an option for Ballard.

A second reason is that it is simply not credible that Emerelda is unable to escape from Hardoon House: she is far too strong-willed and resourceful. In 'The Screen Game', we find a similarly entrapped character called Emerelda; but this character is introverted and downtrodden. In the light of this, I think 'The Screen Game' must to an extent be considered to be a reworking of some of the present story's preoccupations.

So there we have it: a previously unpublished *Vermilion Sands* story. Fans of the early Ballard (and I, for one, lost interest in his short stories after *The Terminal Beach*) will almost certainly enjoy it and should seek it out. If the Ballard Estate ever decides to add it to the present *Vermilion Sands* collection, an obvious title (though lacking the floridity of 'Cry Hope, Cry Fury!' and 'The Cloud- Sculptors of Coral D') would be 'Hardoon's Folly'.

— **Daniel King, July 2012**

Science fiction's people: Part 1: Robert Bloch

James Doig works for the National Archives of Australia. He has edited several anthologies and single author collections of supernatural tales, such as *Australian Ghost Stories* (Wordsworth, 2010) and *Ghost Stories and Mysteries of Ernest Favenc* (Borgo, 2012). Doig also writes research articles on obscure writers of supernatural and pulp fiction for journals like *All Hallows*, *Wormwood*, and *The Paperback Fanatic*. Most recently he has contributed an introduction to a reprint of Frank Walford's *Twisted Clay*, which is due to be published February 2014. He contributes to the Wormwoodiana blog at wormwoodiana.blogspot.com.

James Doig

Robert Bloch in Australia: Cinecon 1981¹

From time to time Australia has made it onto the fantasy and horror writers' gazetteer of preferred holiday destinations. Stephen King has famously made a couple of road trips into the outback. Once, in Alice Springs, a bookshop owner thought he was a yobbo defacing Stephen King books, when in fact he was signing them; the books were later auctioned for charity. However, the main reason why fantasy and horror writers have ventured to these shores is to attend conventions. At the science fiction Worldcon in 1975 the great science fiction and fantasy writer, Ursula Le Guin was guest of honour.

Australia's first science fiction and fantasy film convention, Cinecon, was held in Melbourne from 17 to 21 April 1981. The Guest of Honour was **Robert Bloch**, billed in the program as 'The man who has written so much more than *Psycho*'.² Bloch, who died in 1994 at the age of 77, was one of the great modern writers of horror and dark fantasy; his writing career began during the golden age of the pulps and was a member of the celebrated 'Lovecraft Circle' of weird fictioneers. Bloch's 1935 story, 'The Shambler from the Stars', features a narrator modelled on Lovecraft who comes to a nasty end; Lovecraft returned the favour in 'The Haunter of the Dark' (1936), which features a 'Robert Blake'

who comes to an equally appalling end. Of course, *Psycho* (1959) immortalised Bloch through Alfred Hitchcock's classic film adaptation in 1960. Apart from his professional standing, which included multiple awards in various genres and the Life Award at the inaugural World Fantasy Convention in 1975, Bloch was a brilliant raconteur. Cinecon offered a rare opportunity for an Australian audience to hear him speak about films, especially early films (about which he had an exhaustive knowledge), writing and fandom, amongst much else.

The organiser of Cinecon was **Merv Binns**, book dealer and lifelong fantasy and science fiction fan, and he was helped by **Robin Johnson**, another well-known fan and recipient of numerous science fiction awards and honours.

1981 proved to be a difficult year for Bloch, and his preparation for the conference was interrupted by illness and the death of some old friends and colleagues. On 12 January 1981, he wrote to Graham Flanagan:

For the past two weeks I've had the flu: matter of fact, narrowly escaped pneumonia. And I'm still not recovered: haven't been out of the house for 15 days! ... I must gather strength enough to reply to letters from Merv Binns and Robin Johnson, who are trying to formulate a schedule for my trip. Lots of details to be ironed out, and I hope that we can get things straight on my itinerary and just what they want me to do in Sydney as well as Melbourne. At this precise instant I confess I dread the trip — fearful that it's going to be too much for me. As you know, travel in itself can be rather exhausting — but when one is also expecting to make half a dozen speeches and public appearances, plus possible radio, TV and paper interviews, plus being available to fans, etc, it requires more stamina than I possess — certainly at this moment! Of course I'd not mention this to Merv or Robin, and hopefully my strength will return in time, but right now it all seems a bit much.³

Just as disruptive was the sudden death of some old and dear friends. In January and February **H. Warner Munn** and **Robert J. Fish** died, but it was the sudden death of **J. Vernon Shea** that

affected Bloch most acutely. In a letter of 11 February he wrote:

When I started this letter I was determined not to write about this, because the realisation of his passing still affects me strongly. But you should know he is gone, and it may be that there is no one else who'd be informing you of his passing.

Vernon and I corresponded for 47 years — perhaps a thousand times apiece — and although we only met four or five times face-to-face, I felt that I knew him as well or better than most. It's fortunate that we *did* visit as recently as October at the Fantasy Con, but his sudden death — apparently with little warning except for what he diagnosed as 'gas pains' in a letter written to me just a few days before he died — has set me to realising that there are now only seven or eight members of the 'Lovecraft Circle' still alive and most of them only corresponded with HPL briefly during the final years of his life ... In any case I'll miss Vernon, always. He was a good friend and a good human being, and I only wish he'd gotten a better break in life. With his abilities and intellect he deserved far more than he ever received.⁴

Notwithstanding these setbacks the planning continued apace. On 24 February Merv Binns rang Bloch to say that *People* magazine would be contacting him for an interview; the interview was conducted by phone a few days later. Bloch's planned itinerary was quite heavy. He was to arrive in Sydney after a long flight with several stopovers on 12 April, where he would present at a seminar at Sydney University. He would leave Sydney late on 14 April for Melbourne, and have the 15th and 16th free before Cinecon began on Friday 17 April. His guest of honour speech was scheduled for 8–9 p.m., and would be introduced by Graham Flanagan,⁵ the Bloch bibliographer and well-known fan and book collector. The next day he would participate in a panel with other film buffs about their early cinematic influences, and in the evening he was to judge costumes at the fancy dress party. On Sunday 19 April he had a 3.15 p.m. panel on the horror film, and another at 8 p.m. on the fantasy and science fiction film in Australia. On Monday, the last day of Cinecon, he had a 9.30 a.m. panel on science fiction fandom, and a 4 p.m. panel on the future

of science fiction and fantasy films. The next day, Tuesday 21 April, he was scheduled to give two talks at a seminar on 'writing science fiction and fantasy for the cinema, television and publication' at the State Film Centre. He was to fly out of Sydney early on Wednesday morning.

In fact, the exhausting itinerary was worrying Bloch. In March he wrote:

Actually it seems like a pretty heavy schedule — interviews, at least 5 speeches at the two seminars and convention, plus 5 panel appearances and then, of course, the costume judging and the opening introduction. When I can possibly find time to prepare I don't know — haven't even had all the topics given to me yet! I may have to ad lib my entire trip!⁶

As it happened, the itinerary went smoothly, and Bloch himself was a great success. In his charming autobiography, *Once Around the Bloch*, he writes with fondness and affection of Australian fans, like **Graham Flanagan**, who made his trip memorable and successful, and he writes at length of a visit to the Old Melbourne Gaol where Ned Kelly had been incarcerated: 'Nowhere is the ambivalent Australian attitude better exemplified than in the gaol, where symbols of law and order are displayed alongside artefacts associated with the lawless and dis-ordered career of its most famous guest.'⁷

A lengthier appraisal is given in Graham Flanagan's report on Cinecon, which appeared in the Robert E. Howard fanzine, *RE-Hupa*.⁸ The report gives a sense of the frenetic activity of Cinecon and the events surrounding it, and the good-humoured and magnanimous way in which Bloch accommodated unanticipated rescheduling. So, when John Pinkney failed to show for the seminar on science fiction and fantasy writing at the State Film Centre, he was happy to extend his presentation from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. And there were other extracurricular activities:

Around 11 p.m. [after the guest of honour speech] I adjourned to the suite which the convention organisers were using as their headquarters. There I had a few quiet drinks and a most enjoyable discussion with Paul Stevens and Robert Bloch, but this was eventually broken up by a small but rowdy group of fans who had discovered in an earlier meeting in the hotel lobby that Robert Bloch is a singularly delightful and interesting individual. When I left at around 1am they were still engaged in deep conversation with their new-found idol.⁹

A fascinating record of Bloch's speeches and panels at Cinecon and the writing seminar at the State Film Centre survive in the form of audio recordings made by Graham Flanagan. There are five 90-minute Sony tapes that comprise all of Bloch's presentations. They provide an entertaining and often hilarious insight into twentieth-century science fiction and fantasy literature, film, and fandom.

One of the most interesting pieces was the panel on fandom, where Bloch was interviewed by Australian fans on his involvement in fandom since the 1930s. He describes his involvement with **H. P. Lovecraft** and the 'Lovecraft circle' of writers:

It's pretty generally known that I got into writing because of Lovecraft. He's taken a lot of blame for a lot of things that he's not really responsible for. But I did send my first fan letter to him because I'd read in the letter column of *Weird Tales* about his stories that had been published previously, but I didn't know where to get them. They weren't reprinted, they weren't available. So I wrote to him and asked whether he knew where I could find some of this stuff, and he offered to let me borrow all of his published works. And then at about the fourth letter on he suggested that I try my own hand at writing. He'd be glad to read it and comment on it, and he gave me also a list of correspondents that formed what was later known as the 'Lovecraft circle'. As a result of that I got in touch with **August Derleth**, who lived out in Sauk City about 125 miles from where I was, and **Clark Ashton Smith**, **Eddie Hoffman Price**, and **J. Vernon Shea**, who was not a professional writer but certainly one of the most avid fans and one of the most knowledgeable. And this increased my area of operations considerably, and some of the people I remained in

correspondence with for many years to come. It was a very rewarding experience.

Some of Bloch's most insightful comments were on Australian fantasy films and the Australian film industry, and his comments could equally apply more broadly to Australian fantasy fiction.

He obviously had a special affection for Australian films and Australian actors. In January 1981 he had written to Graham Flanagan, 'Yes, I saw *Breaker Morant* and was tremendously impressed. It is a fine film, beautifully conceived and executed (perhaps an unfortunate, but rightly appropriate word under the circumstances). Really one of the all-time best!'¹⁰ At the panel on early cinematic influences he mentioned various Australian actors who appeared in silent movies in Hollywood during the 1920s, as well as his association with the likes of **Fritz Lang**, **Rouben Mamoulian**, and **Boris Karloff**. However, his most important comments were made in the panel on Australian films:

I haven't seen too many, I'm sorry to say, but what I have seen leads me to want to see a great many more. The films in the fantasy genre, and the realistic films, both exhibit a common characteristic thus far. They are definitely Australian films, there's no doubt about it. *The Last Wave*, *My Brilliant Career*, *Breaker Morant*, I think succeed by virtue of the fact that they all, on their own separate levels, tell a coherent, consistent story derived from the Australian experience. *The Last Wave* is not another imitation vampire or werewolf horror film. It draws upon the legends, in the background, of the Australian experience and succeeds on that basis. There are some flash-cuts in it, some flash-backs, flash-forwards, flash-middles, but they are all used intelligently to further the story. By the time the story ends you understand how all of the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are fitted together and you see the whole finished canvas, or picture. It serves a purpose. *My Brilliant Career* has very little of this sort of technique; you stay with the heroine, but by the time the film is over you know her, you know her background, you know her problems, you know her point of view, and you see the very, very believable consistent human drama enacted by virtue of the talent of the performers, the perception of the cinematographer and the director, and the craft of the writer. And it

works on that level. *Breaker Morant*. Again we have some flashbacks. We have a few things that are not exactly subliminal, but which seem to be a dream sequence, or flight of imagination on the part of the principals on occasion. But again, they work because they are set against the context of a totally believable and very gritty realistic story. It takes much more ability to create this illusion of reality than does the merely 'dragged in all directions for special effects' incoherent fantasy. So I think this is something you can well address yourselves to. Consider what's been made here, that it has enjoyed a certain international acceptance, then realise that this is only the beginning.

Robert Bloch had obviously thought long and hard about the message he wanted to convey to Australian fans, writers, and the film industry. It is a positive message that stresses the importance making honest, unselfconscious films that use the unique Australian background and experience, and which do not make concessions to American tastes:

I don't think there are things that are that strange or alien about the Australian background or milieu. I think you can safely go ahead without self-consciousness, dig in to that rich vein of fantasy and reality and not worry about the danger of not being understood. Audiences are greatly more sophisticated in that respect today, and what they are looking for is something different, something 'now'. And what you've got now is the Australian fantasy and superstition lore in the background, and the physical background of the Australian landscape.

His final comments on Australian fantasy are just as appropriate to fiction as they are to film:

In fantasy, fear, terror, suspense are all part of an international language of emotions that we share everywhere. It's a matter of presentation. And, again, in utilising the Australian background, the (for lack of a better word) aboriginality of the concepts that are foreign and mysterious to American audiences, I think that something very, very interesting can evolve. I think that one of the things, and I'm speaking primarily about fantasy rather than science fiction, that is always being looked for is a new type of fantasy, a new type of legend,

a new type of mysterious quality. And certainly in the Australian background this exists. As far as science fiction is concerned you have the physical landscape that lends itself so greatly to the production of science fiction films here. And all it takes is convincing the money people to let somebody with imagination go ahead with it. If someone has the concepts, the technical aspects can easily be supplied. The main thing that films require is a fine story-line, an idea that really reaches out and appeals to the emotions of an audience. And I say that the emotions of an audience are pretty much a constant whether the film is made and distributed in Australia, the States, Great Britain, or continental Europe. That to me is what is important.

It is interesting to reflect on Bloch's comments in the light of subsequent developments in Australian fantasy fiction and film. There is still an entrenched belief in Australia that a book or a film can only be successful if it draws off American culture, values, and attitudes, and that films must be driven by special effects and sudden shocks, rather than by characters and plot. In the global village, social, economic, and psychological forces affect us all alike, and the implication is that horror and suspense, which often plays on the extremes of these forces, has become homogenised. In a similar way, once distinctive national cultures are becoming homogenised, subsumed by the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Just as the regional supernatural tale that was so prevalent in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has largely dis-appeared, there is a danger that national traditions will go the same way. Too many Australian films and books have their roots in American popular culture — Stephen King, Hannibal Lector, *Night of the Living Dead*, rather than Australia's own rich traditions. Australian fantasy and horror still takes its cue from what is, or what has been, popular in the United States, and as a consequence much of it contains little of lasting value. Bloch's plea for a distinctly Australian voice in fantasy and horror is critical, but is yet to materialise.

Cinecon was a successful convention, and much of this success was due Robert Bloch's tireless contribution. As he makes explicit in his autobiography, notwithstanding the burden of an exhausting

international flight and an exhausting schedule, his Australian sojourn was a memorable one, thanks largely to the enthusiasm and warmth of Australian fans. However, within weeks of returning to the United States events had overtaken him and memories of Sydney and Melbourne were already fading:

Is it only three weeks today that I left Melbourne? So much has happened since then that I can only synopsise.

The return flight — with stopovers — lasted 28 hours — and I arrived in a rather bedraggled state. Elly and her visiting niece met me, and that helped a lot when once I saw her again. The next day, however, I was still more bedraggled. The dog got loose and ran into the neighbour's patio. Elly followed him — I followed her — and, mistaking a hanging curtain for laundry on the line, fell headlong into the sauna. I hit my left temple as I landed in the water and passed out — fortunately, only for a moment, or else I might have drowned. I was hauled out with a lump above the left eye literally the size of an egg. Again luck was with me: my eye wasn't damaged and the doctors found no fracture or concussion. But the thing took all this while to heal.

Next day I started work again and in ten days completed the first draft of the Readers' Digest opus — after demolishing a waiting stock of mail about two feet high.¹¹ Then I picked for Writers Guild at Disney Studios, along with Ellison and van Vogt. Next got a call to do a long in-depth essay and introduction to a collection of Lovecraft stories I selected and which del Rey books intends to publish. Working on that now, since I must picket again tomorrow and another of Elly's nieces may arrive shortly. After that I'll get around to the tribute to Fritz for you.¹²

Very pleased to hear from you — and delighted with the photos and the con-report arriving today. I would very much like copies of the later (with the accompanying pictures) for University of Wyoming and for my daughter, who has developed a morbid interest in her father's activities. I think your account is excellent, though much too generous in its attention to me and my big mouth.

Tonight we get over to Ackerman's for dinner with some Italian producer-director whom I don't know. Trust that you've had a chance

to recuperate from all your travels, and Elly joins me in thanking you for everything you did to make my stay pleasant.¹³

The picture of Robert Bloch that emerges from his letters, speeches, and presentations is a warm, kind, and witty human being with an exhaustive knowledge of twentieth-century popular fiction and film. He also had a sharp, incisive mind that cut through the trivial and irrelevant into the heart of a matter, as exemplified by his telling insights into Australian fantasy. Certainly, he will be remembered as one of the great twentieth century writers of weird fiction.

Notes

- 1 I am very grateful to Graeme Flanagan for his help in the preparation of this article, especially in making his correspondence with Robert Bloch, and his audio tapes of the convention, available. Needless to say, most of the sources for this article are from his collection. The transcriptions from the letters and audio tapes are my own and any errors are my own.
- 2 Graeme Flanagan, 'Introducing Our Guest of Honour: Robert Bloch, The Man Who Has Written So Much More Than Psycho', *Cinecon Program* (1981), pp. 4–6.

- 3 Letter to Graeme Flanagan, 12 January 1981.
- 4 Letter to Graeme Flanagan, 11 February 1981.
- 5 Graeme Flanagan, *Robert Bloch: A Bio-Bibliography* (Canberra: Graeme Flanagan, 1979).
- 6 Letter to Graeme Flanagan, 11 March 1981.
- 7 Robert Bloch, *Once Around the Bloch* (New York: Tor Books, 1993), p. 375.
- 8 Graham Flanagan, 'Cinecon', *Bunyips in the Mulga #3*, in REHupa, 52nd mailing (July 1981), pp. 3–13. I am grateful to Rusty Burke for sending me a scan of the report.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 10 Letter to Graeme Flanagan, 27 January 1981.
- 11 Bloch was commissioned to write a chapter on the American serial killer H.H. Holmes for a non-fiction book, which does not appear to have been published. Holmes was the subject of Bloch's 1974 novel, *American Gothic*.
- 12 i.e. Bloch's friend and colleague, the great fantasist Fritz Leiber.
- 13 Letter to Graeme Flanagan, 12 May 1982.

— James Doig, May 2010

Robert Bloch, with John Foyster

Fandom panel: Cinecon 1981:

20 April 1981

Recorded by Graeme Flanagan; transcribed by James Doig

Chair: As I'm not knowledgeable about this period of prehistory I asked a couple of resident Melbourne prehistory experts, John Foyster on my left, Paul Stevens on my far left, to cross-examine our guest of honour about this. I'll hand over to John Foyster

Foyster: Of course, one of the things about prehistory is that we have one of the survivors with us; and indeed he is far more expert on the subject than we are. So we thought that perhaps one of things Bob might talk to you about is what it was like to be a fan in the 1930s, which some of us may recall and some of us may have more difficulty recalling.

Bloch: What was it like to be a fan in the 1930s? Lonely! That's what it was like. There weren't too many.

Actually, fandom as a phenomenon started as a result of the letter columns in the very few magazines that existed — *Amazing Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder*, and in the *Eyrie* in *Weird Tales*. As a result of this fans got into communication with one another as

letterhacks. As I have referred to briefly throughout the convention in other contexts, everybody was broke. Nobody could travel. There was very little hitchhiking in those days; people would actually hop onto a freight car and travel that way to avoid payment. Most people just couldn't get out of their immediate areas.

There was a nucleus of fans in New York, a nucleus of fans on the west coast, a few in Chicago, and people in other cities were pretty much out of luck. There were many places in the early '30s where somebody living in a fairly large town, like say, Kansas City, would think that he or she was the only fan in town. They might run across another name in a letter column; they would get together, then pretty soon the two of them would form a fan club: one would be President and the other would be Vice-President. And there would be crosspollination and before you know it there would be four or five of the little beggars running around and it's pretty hard to stamp them out! But that's what fandom consisted of, and they corresponded with one another independent of the letter columns.

Then someone invented fanzines. I don't know who that person was; there are a lot of disputes about it and you'll get various interpretations. But I didn't get into fanzines until I got into correspondence with H. P. Lovecraft and he encouraged me to write. My first few efforts were rejected by prozines and generally got into fanzines. And some of them — two or three of them — have been reprinted, and one of them — 'The Black Lotus' — is still around today in recent incarnations. It was through this that I began to come into contact with other fans, largely through the so-called 'Lovecraft Circle' of writers, and corresponded with them.

Also, in Milwaukee I was fortunate, because when I turned 18 I was invited to join a group of professional writers called Multifictioneers, who mostly had full-time jobs and wrote in the evenings. Very few of them were full-time writers. This group included Ralph Milne Farley, who had been a very prominent science fiction author in the '20s, and Raymond A. Palmer, who later became editor of *Amazing Stories*, and Stanley Weinbaum, who of course was one of the early greats in the field. So I got my knowledge of science fiction writing from them.

Fandom was a lot easier to be a part of in those days. It was a lot easier to become a big name fan in those days. Think of it. There were basically three magazines — *Amazing*, *Thrilling Wonder*, and what became *Astounding*, and also *Weird Tales*. All issued monthly. You could buy them all for less than a dollar a month. There were no books: there were no hardcovers; paperbacks didn't exist. Once in a great while something would come along from the so-called mainstream, like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. You would buy that for \$2. Also you would occasionally find a science fiction film. But primarily you could get along on a budget



John Foyster (l.) and Robert Bloch (r): Cinecon, Easter 1981. (Photo: Mervyn Binns.)

of say a dollar and a half a month and get everything that was being professionally published in the fan world. Probably even including the first publications in England, which of course Forry Ackerman would acquire, being a completist.

You could also put out a fan magazine with a mimeo machine. In

those days first class post in the United States was 2 cents. So you could send out your fan magazine at the bulk mailing rate for very little. And you'd only have to print out 25 or 50 copies, because there were not that many people you could get onto your mailing list. So you could a fan, a complete fan: get everything that was published, read everything that was published, if you had the time to, see all the movies, and put out your own fanzine, and indulge in correspondence with as many fans as you like, and the whole bundle would cost you under \$100 dollars a year, about \$2 a week.

There were many people who came up in fandom that way. Today, of course, there isn't the time let alone the money to keep up with everything that's going on. There are so many splinter fandoms that are much larger than the entire caucus of fandom in those days. In addition to which there are conventions to attend, and that cut into your finances considerably, particularly the liquor bill.

So being a fan in those days was an experience you could afford and enjoy for very little. And it was extremely rewarding because you were a member of a very elitist group that spoke your own language — I suppose many of you are familiar with the fan-cyclopedias that were put out, two editions of them. And all of this gobbledegook that was invented, all of this fannish nomenclature, and neologisms and other dirty things that I won't talk about, were available.

In those days there were giants on the earth — Ackerman, of course, who is still with us. Even the older people, people who were approaching senility were still active, like Tucker.

Foyster: One of the things that you mentioned briefly there, Bob, one of the things that I think is important, in getting you involved in science fiction, is the fandom around Lovecraft. Would you like to say a few words about that?

Bloch: Well, it's pretty generally known in the States that I got into writing because of Lovecraft. He's taken a lot of blame for a

lot of things that he's not really responsible for. But I did send my first fan letter to him because I read about his previous stories in the letter column of *Weird Tales*. There was nowhere to get them. They weren't reprinted; they weren't available. So I wrote to him and asked whether he knew where I could find some of this stuff and he offered to let me borrow all of his published work. And then at about the fourth letter on he suggested I try my own hand at writing — he'd be glad to read it and comment on it. And he also gave me a list of correspondents that formed what would later become known as the 'Lovecraft Circle'. The result of that I got in touch with August Derleth, who lived out at Sauk City about 125 miles from where I was, and Clark Ashton Smith, Eddie Hoffman Price, and J. Vernon Shea, who was not a professional writer, but certainly one of the most avid fans and one of the most knowledgeable. And this increased my area of operations considerably, and some of the people I remained in correspondence with for many, many years to come. It was a very rewarding experience.

Bear in mind I'm talking about times when I was 16, 17, 18 years old, and it was quite a thrill to associate with such people even through correspondence, or know people like Weinbaum and Farley and work with them in the Fictioneers group, where we didn't read stories or anything but helped each other with plot problems. That was very, very interesting.

But I had not met another fan, a pure and simple fan (in those days we had fans whose purity was not questioned, and whose simplicity was self-evident). By about 1936 a very prominent fan — about as prominent in the midwest as Ackerman was in the East — a fan named Jack Darrow came to Milwaukie and visited me. That was first time a saw one of these specimens face to face. In spite of this I carried on.

Foyster: Jack Darrow was the kind of fan we don't really have too many of these days. His speciality was letter writing rather than publishing or anything else. One of the things you didn't do in the 1930s was go to science fiction conventions. They weren't held in

your territory. But you'd heard about them. Can you recall some of the things you'd heard about those early conventions?

Bloch: They were rather crude, primitive affairs, scarcely a cut above this one ...

The first WorldCon in New York attracted a grand total of 150 people, and I guess only three or four came from any distance. Forry Ackerman came from California along with young Ray Bradbury. A two-day session was held at a place called Workman's Hall, which they must have rented for all of \$10 for the two days. They laid on a banquet because they had attracted so many writers from the area. The banquet cost one dollar, and only 32 people could afford to attend it. Money was that tight in those days. I know that in Chicago in the following year attendance was about the same and I live in Milwaukee, which is only about 100 miles away, but I couldn't afford to go down there and stay at that convention, so I missed it. As far as the third one in Denver was concerned, that was way past anybody's finances at the time, though people like Heinlein and a few others who were already affluent were able to get out there. It's a good thing Heinlein did go because if he didn't it would have been embarrassing, as he was the Guest of Honour.

I didn't hit my first convention until 1946, because during the war there was a hiatus on conventions. In '46 I flew out to PacifiCon2 in California. They had something of their own on the West Coast, just as the Lunarian Society started Lunacons on the East Coast. These were the only regional conventions. PacifiCon2 was the WorldCon of its year — A. E. Van Vogt was there, and Bradbury, and Leigh Brackett and two or three other writers. We met in the hall there, and attendance was about 200 or so. Mr Tucker was there too, because I met him in the middle of McArthur Park across the way. He had a young lady in one of those electric boats that went out across the water, and he bumped into my boat and juggled my young lady, and from that point on we were fast friends — we seemed to share the same interest in pursuits.

The early conventions were extremely unorganised. Two years later, when I was Guest of Honour at the first Torcon in Toronto, again the attendance was down between about 150 and 200. There were more pros. Doc Smith was there, George O. Smith, David H. Keller, Sam Moskowitz, a couple of others, again Tucker — I couldn't shake him. I had to pay for my own ticket to the banquet, though I was Guest of Honour. And there was no planning whatsoever for the entertainment. We improvised, and after the banquet almost ad-libbed — it was a very 'catch as catch can' affair, though there were a few formal programs.

But the main thing in those days, and the thing that was most fascinating for all of us, and the reason most of us attended these conventions, was that it was an opportunity to meet writers, or other writers if we were professionals, and to meet fans. It was an exhilarating experience. We were, of course, outcasts and pariahs. By this time Buck Rogers had come on the scene, and Superman, and everyone was saying science fiction was just Buck Rogers, and it was being equated with comic books. We got the worst possible publicity in Toronto, and I suppose deservedly so, because a couple of fans ran around in propeller beanies and making the usual noises with zap guns and water pistols. It must have shocked the reporters considerably. All that changed when the '50s came along, but that's another story and has nothing to do with early fandom, and has everything to do with early second childhood on our part.

Foyster: There were quite a few traditions that emerged as more and more conventions began to take place. One of the traditions that I've heard of was the food at convention banquets. Could you make some comments about that?

Bloch: There was a great deal of difficulty with food at convention banquets because people would be served the usual chicken and they'd be repulsed by the tire marks. I remember when they made a switch one year out of deference to orthodox Jews like Ike Asimov and a few others and they served kosher chicken — chicken that'd been run over by a rabbi. Oftentimes convention

banquet attendance was below what they expected, so there would always be a little surplus that the committee would save until next year.

I remember the terrible feelings of indignation when banquet meal prices went up to three dollars and a half, and then, heaven forbid, five dollars. Fans of course were not getting any younger, but neither was the chicken. It was traditional for the food at banquets to be atrocious but the hospitality on the part of the convention committees was great. In those days convention extracurricular activities are a little different than they are now. I know I used to stay up all night every night playing poker with Tucker and other people; a lot of boozing went on and a lot of pranks being played. They'd fill bags with hot water and throw them off the top of the building, and you should have heard how some of those bags screamed.

In 1952 in Chicago, suddenly, out of nowhere, from a situation where conventions attracted 150–200 people almost 1250 people descended on Chicago. And the Guest of Honour at this convention was Hugo Gernsback and the Toastmaster was Murray Leinster (Will Jenkins). I went down there to do a little a little speech, a presentation, and I did a business as I recall about a moon landing that had been sponsored privately, and the discovery of palaeontological bones of prehistoric monsters on the moon, and I presented one of these bones to the convention Chairman. It looked very much like a white toilet seat. I finished that and thought, 'I'm home free, they didn't lynch me!' Suddenly I'm told at 4 o'clock in the afternoon that Will Jenkins had a change of heart, recovered his senses, and isn't coming and would I please be toastmaster at the banquet? Well, that was shocking. I got up next to Gernsback and did my thing.

The awards giving was pretty primitive in those days. It was just beginning to evolve as a concept. The following year I gave them out in Philadelphia with Ike Asimov — it was very much like the Academy Awards in Hollywood. I remember being told that at one

time the Academy Awards were given out at a little banquet similar to the ones we had at the early conventions. A few hundred people would attend and at the end of that someone would get up and do a little toastmastering thing and hand out these awards. It wasn't broadcast. Then radio picked it up a little, but still it didn't need a large layout — maybe 50 or 60 people would attend. This was similar to science fiction conventions. At Philadelphia there must have been about 70 or 80 people, and Ike and I just gave them out in an impromptu fashion. Nobody was meant to pay too much attention to the awards in terms of acknowledgment. But from then on it grew. Some people began to take particular interest to the awards as the main feature of the convention.

In 1959 in Detroit, I again found myself on the platform with Ike to do the presentations. I opened the envelope to read the short story winner and I found it was my short story! I was flabbergasted because, and this is the truth, I didn't even know my story had been nominated. That's how much attention some of us paid to it. And of course it shouldn't have won because it was a fantasy story, but that didn't seem to make any difference. I remember that as a particularly horrifying moment, because naturally I had nothing to say and for once I kept my mouth shut — I call that a memorable moment at conventions.

From then on it got to be very big business. A year or two after that, when the science fiction boom really began, Hugos became valuable adjuncts for a writer because they impressed publishers and publishers began to promote them. Then the Science Fiction Writers of America came along with the Nebula Awards. It became a very big and important thing for some writers to accumulate a lot of these tokens and trophies because publishers would increase their advances accordingly, thinking that this meant they were the most popular writer. In many cases of course this was true. I myself deplore the fact that conventions have gotten so big and that there is a commercial element in them that didn't exist formerly. It's taken some of the fun out of it to realise that there are people who manoeuvre their attendance and try to get

themselves in a position where they will win awards and will make public appearances and impress publishers and editors accordingly. I remember the days when publishers and editors were rightfully regarded as the scum of the earth. But I'm afraid that those good old days have passed.

Foyster: Perhaps this was a result of your close association with a particular publisher in 1957 when you and Tucker modestly tried to take over the whole science fiction universe with a magazine called *Science Fiction World*, which I think you have blissfully almost forgotten. But it was a revolutionary sort of publication at the time and I don't think there has been one since. Perhaps you can say a few things about it.

Bloch: Marty Greenberg, not the Martin H. Greenberg who is currently operating, but the infamous Marty Greenberg who as the publisher of the books put out by Gnome Press in association at the beginning with David Kyle, decided it would be a nice promotional idea to send out a fan magazine to his mailing list, which was quite large, maybe a thousand names on it; I never did find out. And then he sent it out to other mailing lists of people who were not necessarily subscribers. So he got Tucker and I, not to edit the thing, but to write the whole thing. It was an eight-pager, printed in very small type so it required quite a bit of work to get this thing up. Naturally, Tucker being illiterate, I had to do much of the work. He lived in Wilmington, Illinois, at that time, in a post office box. I lived in another post office box. He would do several pages and provide some ideas and send them up to me and then I would do the rest of the pages and work on those ideas. Sometimes I'd turn an idea of my own back to him and there was collaboration by long distance. We'd get the stuff off to Greenberg and he'd publish the thing.

We had an opportunity to go absolutely wild with this thing; we could write anything we wanted about anything, and we certainly did. The only time that he and I really collaborated was a period of about a year and a half while this thing was in business. We had a ball doing it. And oddly enough, since this thing went not

so much to fans, but to book buyers, it's not so well known in fandom *per se*.

There's another thing I want to get in just for a moment. Get right back to what I was saying earlier about how easy it was to be a fan. In those days a fan and a reader were synonymous, and when you got into fandom all you did was add letterhacking to your reading. Later on you might have added collecting to your reading — you keep the magazines and bought the books. Then all of a sudden came along all these splinter fandoms — there were certain film freaks who were interested only in that aspect of it. Television came along. Paperbacks suddenly appeared on the scene. And there was a renaissance of interest in various phases as science fiction and fantasy splintered up into Swords and Sorcery, and Burroughs fandom got very big for a while, and we had all of the other mutations including the *Star Trek* phenomenon.

Today we have at least eight or nine very distinct groups of fans, and each of them outnumbers in totality science fiction fandom in the old days, and sometimes they are mutually exclusive. Naturally, each of these groups hate the other groups, and to see them all gathered under the tent of WorldCon is quite a phenomenon now days. They have their own separate events and their own secret rites and their own human sacrifices. It's a lot different, and I don't think anybody keeps on top of it. Just before I left, Forry Ackerman was telling me regretfully that he was going to give up buying material because he can no longer keep up financially, or in any other way, with the flood of stuff that keeps coming out, not just year after year but month after month and week after week. There's just too much. You can dedicate your whole life to this thing. There's Westercon that you've probably heard of, which Tucker appeared at and I went to six or seven of them in Ohio during the late '40s and early '50s. I can recall driving back from them with Doc Smith — he'd drive me as far as Chicago and I'd catch a train to Milwaukee. And Doc used to say he was looking forward to the day when he retired: wouldn't it be wonderful if he got himself a camper — what you'd call a van over

here — and just go around the country to a convention every couple of months or so. He loved those events. And Anthony Boucher, the editor of *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, a year or two later was voicing the same wistful desire to go to conventions. There was WorldCon, the Midwestcon, the Lunacon, the Westerncon, and that was about it. Both of those gentlemen passed on, sadly enough, before living to see the day when there was at least one convention every week of the year somewhere in the United States. I've not kept track of the number of them. The ones you see announced in the prozines are not necessarily all that exist by a long shot. Now it is possible to do what those two wanted to do, but never lived to do. But, again, nobody can keep up with all the conventions; nobody can go to them all. If they did there'd be some kind of new Guinness record set for sheer endurance.

Chair opens the floor to questions. The first question is inaudible, but seems to be have been about hoaxes and practical jokes at conventions.

Bloch: I've mentioned this story several times privately and some of you may have heard it. When I committed matrimony in 1964 my wife was totally innocent of fandom. In 1965 we went over to England because we were doing a film over there and it coincided with the British Worldcon. I was asked to appear at it and I dragged my wife to it. I had explained very carefully what science fiction fandom was about. I say carefully because I expurgated and censored and edited it. We didn't stay at the convention hotel because I had to keep in touch with the film people, and I know that's difficult to do at convention hotels because the switchboard gets fouled up during the weekend and various hotel employees get hysterics and have to be carried off kicking and screaming. British fans are very rowdy. One thing I warned her about in my briefing was about hoaxes.

Sure enough, one morning, one very rainy and dismal morning when it was just about like night outside, I was called over to the convention hotel because I was going to be interviewed by the *Manchester Guardian*. I saw no reason to inflict this on my wife

because she has to listen to me talk interminably, even in my sleep. Maybe she listened to me carefully then.

So I said, 'Honey you stay here and have breakfast in bed and I'll be back as soon as I get done with these yo-yos.' And so she did. And she told me what happened later. She was lying in bed and the room was dark, finishing her breakfast, and suddenly the phone rings, and a voice says 'Is Mr Robert Bloch there?' And she said, 'He's over at the hotel being interviewed.' And the voice said 'Are you Mrs Bloch?' 'Yes.' 'This is Boris Karloff.' It so happens that Ellie had been very frightened by *Frankenstein* when she saw it, so she knew who Boris Karloff was all right. She also knew what fans were and she thought someone was having her on. 'Oh, yes, what do you want?' 'Well, I was wondering if you and Bob would be available to come over to the house for cocktails this evening.' And she thought 'Oh, right' again. But then it occurred to her that this voice was just too good an imitation. And there she was sitting in this dark room listening to this voice over the telephone, the voice of Frankenstein's monster. So she did accept and we did go over. That was her introduction to conventions and that was the closest she came to a hoax being perpetrated. Since that time, fortunately, I've never been involved in one. I've often been accused of hoaxes. Today it's dangerous to perpetrate those things. When they were part of a little in-group affair it didn't matter, but today you can get in all kinds of trouble because a hoax will spread not to 100 or 150 people but to many many thousands and can inflict a great deal of damage. I'm glad to see this tradition has vanished from fandom and I hope it is not revived.

Foyster: The conventions in the US in the 1940s seem a bit like Australian conventions today in that they were small. Is this size convention nostalgic for you?

Bloch: Very much so, but with one distinction. Australian fans are very much better behaved, let me tell you. There was a tendency of American fans at that time, in those formative years, to act a little bit wilder, really because they were letting loose for the first

time. Remember in those days young people weren't very tolerated in an era of depression when they were in direct competition for jobs with older people. Not only did they have no money but they had no sense. And they were pretty well supervised. It was only after World War II that they had any freedom. For most of them this was their first experience of travel. They didn't get around in the country, they didn't have wheels of their own, they certainly had no allowance or income to enable them to attend conventions. So when you had the opportunity to attend a convention in adult surroundings, especially in a large metropolitan hotel, and you get your hands on beer, you tended to get a little out of hand, and live it up. As a result, while it was harmless enough by anybody's standards, it was a great deal noisier and many were not interested in the convention at all but in room parties.

But as far as the general ambience, the feeling of the convention, this is more characteristic of those early conventions where the hardcore fans got together and listened and where interested and wanted to meet some of the people that they otherwise would not get an opportunity to meet.

Question: Tell us something about *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*.

Bloch: *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*, which I imagine they called the *Seventh Stage* over here because they're selling it at a lesser price, came out of the diseased brain of a fan named Earl Kemp. At that time he was with Advent publishers, a small specialty press, at that time one of the few of the early science fiction specialty presses that became reasonably successful.

I had gone down to Chicago a year previously to appear at a university symposium — there were four of us, Alfie Bester and a few others — and this was published as a book by Advent. I guess it's still in print over there after all these years — a science fiction novel. As a result Earl came up to me and said, 'You've done so much in fan magazines. Why don't you collect them?' And I said, 'Okay, go ahead and do so.' And he did. He put it out in paperback

and in hardcover and they disposed of all the copies and now it's become a collector's item. What we call over there, a garbage collector's item. But it was kind of unique at the time because I don't think anyone had had a professionally published book of fanzine writings. As a result it is a companion volume to all the good stuff that has come along since, Walt Willis's thing. That was a Golden Age of fanzine writing and some things were well worth preservation: not my stuff, but things that were written by people who actually knew how to do it. Some day I would like to see one of these one of those books that you only read about — a book, say, two feet wide and four feet high — the *Collected Letters of Harry Warner Jr* — that kind of thing.

Question: Tell us a bit about how your article on Fandom in *Fantasy and Science Fiction* came about

Bloch: I'll lay the blame on Tony Boucher, God rest him. This wonderful, warm, brilliant renaissance man, who not only edited *F&SF* but wrote science fiction and wrote fantasy and was a fine editor, a fine critic, a fine reviewer, and was knowledgeable in a dozen other fields — opera, football, chess — he was an expert on anything that he turned his hand to. He got the idea when he was editing that magazine and he thought that it was time we explained a few things. So I did two articles, one on conventions and one on fandom *per se*. He allowed me for first time to present to a general readership, many of whom had no knowledge of fandom, or of conventions, a fairly accurate picture of what these things consisted of.

And I was very, very pleased to get this chance because we weren't getting the publicity or the attention from the media. It was perhaps the first time that this had ever been done. All I can say about it is they I wrote it and Tony printed it and it served its purpose at the time. Now, today a great many people know about science fiction. I was pleased to see in the Melbourne press that we have been receiving far better write-ups and more respectful treatment than we did in the old days. I think it's gratifying — the one thing that has happened as fandom has proliferated and

spread — that we're no longer second-class citizens, and a certain respect is accorded. I don't think we've done anything, but some people in science fiction have become commercially successful and the media always listen to success — believe me! But in the long run that redounds to everybody's benefit because there is less united opposition to it. I was glad to see yesterday so many parents had brought their children along. There was a time when they had to sneak out of the house to attend one of these things. They'd tell their parents they were going out to steal cars or something. It's a very gratifying thing to see the young man like the gentleman on his knees here and the young man sitting here — I'm glad to see that their formative minds are being warped and twisted ...

Question: It used to be that science fiction wasn't respectable — you'd hide the science fiction inside the algebra book. Now it's become respectable; now you hide the algebra book inside the science fiction magazine.

Bloch: Well it's true with *Weird Tales*. I know that when I started reading it because it had lurid covers. Fortunately if you lived in the midwest you could hide it under your overcoat. Ironically enough, many people who read it would tear the covers off — that way nobody knew if they were reading this horrible stuff. *Weird Tales*, in case you don't know it, was regarded as a sort of *Playboy* for psychopaths. Instead of a centrefold they had a picture of a slave maiden of the month. I used to get *Weird Tales* — I used to run down at 6.30 in the morning on the day that it was distributed, sometimes the day before the 1st of the month, hoping the shipment had arrived. I would go through an alley to a little cigar store, which was run by two old maids, one of whom sold magazines and also cigarettes and cigars, and the other who would smoke them. I would go in there, pick up the magazine, put it

under my coat, and run home and read it generally cover to cover before breakfast.

To a certain extent the world caught up with us. After the moon landing people were more interested in reading science fiction. Science fiction writers are now more acceptable. If we were gathering this group somehow back in the 1930s or 1940s we'd be very careful to conceal where we were going and what we were doing — like a witches' Sabbath — you don't want to let the word get around too much. But now we can walk into a hotel like this with our heads high and we don't have to slink about. It's a marvellous feeling to be actually accepted.

Question: I wonder if Bob could explain his association with the beginnings of the auction clock.

Bloch: As late as the late 1950s conventions, even Worldcons were worried about whether they were going to break even. And things have not really changed that much, in some instances. With the Worldcons, the situation has changed and usually they come in with quite a profit. There were all kinds of devices for raising money. I made the suggestion: why not auction a writer's time? He or she would become the property of whoever bought him or her at auction. Naturally I was the first to be auctioned off and I was turned over to a very tall, statuesque, and intelligent blonde. And I spent the hour in that fashion. That seemed to popularise the thing and for the next few years there were quite a few auctions. The thing that killed it was when Harlan Ellison was won by a little old lady — that sunk it for good, especially when she came running to get her money back.

— **Transcribed by Graham Flanagan, 2010**

Science fiction's people: Part 2: John Clute

John Clute

interviewed by Darrell Schweitzer

John Clute has written science fiction, most notably the novel *Appleseed* (1999), but he is best known as the field's pre-eminent critic. His work as co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (with Peter Nicholls) and *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (with John Grant) has been particularly influential in influencing how we think about and describe fantastic literature. He has coined a good deal of what is now becoming the standard critical vocabulary. Books of his reviews and essays include *Strokes, Look at the Evidence, Scores, Canary Fever, and Pardon This Intrusion: Fantastika in the World Storm*. His constant ongoing project is a revision of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, available only online, launched in early October 2011 in conjunction with Orion/Gollancz.

This interview went live on *Card's Medicine Show* in late 2011.

Q: Let's start with your general background, how you got into the science fiction field, and how you became a professional critic.

Clute: By accident. It is a very slow process, becoming a professional critic, certainly if such a career descriptor did not actually exist before you started becoming one. In 1960 or so I began reviewing semi-professionally, and in the '60s when I was reviewing amateurishly and professionally — both at the same time — I do not think one have then pointed to any career track for someone who hoped to 'move up' in the sf world from doing occasional

reviews to doing reviews and review-essays in a venue that recognised this as a role not a succession of accidents. So there was no beginning point for me. And it never became a day job, even though it took all day ...

Q: So what were you doing before that?

Clute: I was too young to be doing anything of interest to anybody except myself. I was 19 when I wrote my first review, early twenties when I wrote my first SF review. I did the usual various



John Clute (photo: Judith Clute).

odd jobs that most people did back in the '50s and '60s. I worked for six months on a coast freighter. I was a fork-truck driver, supply teacher, research associate for Professor Taduesz Grygier, whom I disappointed grievously I think ... things of that sort. Really fascinating to recount. [He speaks with obvious irony.]

Q: Was it always your ambition to be a critic, or were you one of those people who started out writing stories and then found yourself writing more and more about fiction?

Clute: Yes, I was first a short-story writer and an exceedingly bad poet. Writing reviews was not for quite a while anything I really felt I could get my teeth into and actually make me proud of doing. I wrote a few stories that were published here and there. Not very many of them. I am not a fiction writer by instinct or compulsive drive. I did publish two stories, or three, in *New Worlds* in the mid '60s. A few others since. And I wrote a very inevitable first novel that was completed in 1964 and Michael Moorcock purchased in 1965 for Compact Books. It was an astonishingly fortunate fall for me that Compact Books went immediately bankrupt, because it was not a good novel, and might have locked me into the hetero-naturalistic pretentiousness that I have so obviously avoided in my later career. Michael was doing what Mike always did, but he didn't say what he was doing then and I didn't quite catch on. Mike's publishing policy embodied, as it were, the dictate 'Do what thou wilt. And pay for it'. Later on this became extremely useful, as I began to write seriously explorative nonfiction pieces for *New Worlds*, which any traditional editor would have blue-penciled into oblivion. (Maybe rightly.) But the only other novels I've written are *The Disinheriting Party*, which was published in 1977, although it had been finished quite a while earlier, and *Appleseed*, which was published in 2001, a genuine SF novel. That's basically it. So in reality I've been a non-fiction writer from the beginning.

Q: It is a complete different talent, isn't it? In non-fiction you're writing about ideas, and in fiction you are writing about experiences. There is a kind of narrative in non-fiction, but it's not the same, is it?

Clute: No, the narratives are different, but I find they're closer together and less distinguishably mixed for me than for a lot of people. I think, to be honest, there is a lot of moat-defensive nonsense talked about the distinction between creative and non-creative writing. I do think there are obvious, significant differences, hey, but novelists who do not like to be understood (being understood is not exactly the same as being praised, hey), and who use the argument that only a creative writer can get what creative writing is to defend their moat; critics, in this view,

especially critics like me who try to hijack the guts out of the page read and make it right, are those who can't do, and therefore teach. (I doubt anyone who ever actually had to teach would ever suggest afterwards that teaching was the soft option, or that in any way successful teaching could not be accomplished without creative fire.)

Q: Then again, I heard from any number of professors when I was in college that the essay is a creative form too. They felt they were just as creative as the fiction writers.

Clute: Frankly I think that writing a novel at the peak of one's skill, which is certainly what *Appleseed* took, which is every jot and tittle of my skill, and writing a book like *The Darkening Garden*, which is subtitled *A Short Lexicon of Horror*, which came out in 2006, are both books that required very similar intensity from me. It felt to me like a creative intensity.

I have published three or four times a comparison between the two different kinds of writing. I can repeat it very quickly if you like. It's based on the works of Georges Simenon. In very, very short compass, what I argued at longer compass, is that the Simenons that do not feature Inspector Maigret are the pure novels, *Romans purr*, I think he called them. They start off with a situation that seems more or less stable. They usually have only one protagonist and one point of view, and something happens to knock that person off the existential perch of his or her life. By the end of the novel, you have reached the cold gaze of the abyss, as it were. Somebody has been murdered, somebody has gone to ground and can't find the exit; somebody has committed suicide. Some desolation has occurred. That's a form of novel that can be called pure, creative writing, pushing to the edge of chaos, and then ending at some resolution that feels like an aesthetic resolution: an icy formality that is the next thing to chaos exploding. The other side of Simenon's oeuvre is the Maigret. The Maigret novels begin where the pure novels end, where some devastation has already occurred — almost always in the Maigrets, this will have been a murder. Maigret arrives on the scene (the chaos of

a world frozen shut by the artifice of an art that knows how to stop at the brink) and creatively intuit the broken lives, reweaves them, allows them solace and forgiveness, solves the murder, and by the end the world has become an operative thing again. That's the act of criticism. In a piece I wrote about this at length, I called criticism 'a surgery of the Fall'. There.

Q: When you wrote *Appleseed* after so many years of writing criticism, did this give you a different perspective on writing fiction? Surely you have thought more about what fiction is and how it works than most regular practitioners of fiction.

Clute: Maybe thought, maybe mused in a corner: but certainly listened. I think *Appleseed*, if it shows the non-fiction writer, the writer about SF, shows us not so much cognitions about the field, although obviously I have thought about things, as it shows a sensitised ear to the sound of SF being told, what other stories underlie it, what kind of echoes can be heard in the aisles of the story. It is in that way that *Appleseed* is multiplex, multilayered. It is full of echoes. This isle is full of noises, and it is, at my own level, which is at a moderate, but hugely less significant level than the man I am doing to mention, it is how William Shakespeare wrote. He in his high maturity could somehow create a passage of verse that meant three or four things with the same words, because different corridors of narrative passed differently through the same words; there were different connections back and forth, sometimes way more than we can be hear and be conscious of hearing, but always so that we are enriched by what we hear or read. We know something is happening, and at its deeply epigonal level, *Appleseed* is a novel where you should feel more comfortable with things not clear at a glance than you can quite work out why.

Q: I should think this would give you a great sense of deliberation. You've thought so much about theory that nothing would happen in that book by accident.

Clute: That is the case if the theory itself is what you might call a house of taxonomy. But if it is the kind of theory that I generate,

and it works right, it usually comes as a series of apertures, of strobes, of incompletions. I don't think I've ever had a theory or a big think that was not more or less open-ended and subject to change. When you are writing a novel, you are changing the meaning of every word you lay down, so there is a lack of ordinary, denotative closure to the presentation of ideas; certainly this conviction, or hope, is visible both in my non-fiction and my fiction. In my non-fiction, there is a deliberate refusal of monadic theme criticism, and in a fiction that refusal is inherent to the way fiction should be written. You close as many doors as you can, or you can never start. But then you start and those closed doors or those half-opened doors turn out to be your material. They're not the locks. They're your material. They are the lock, you are the key. They're how you begin to tell, as Stravinsky said in the early twentieth century that, within limits, every constraint is a freedom. He was most free to do exactly what he wanted to when he was following rules.

Q: In a sense that there is more freedom in a sonnet than in free verse?

Clute: Yes.

Q: But the sonnet requires a higher level of expertise.

Clute: It may take a higher level of expertise, but it has a higher rate of return, too. Anyway I'm not very Tea Party about knowledge being an interference in every American's constitutional right to embody Higher Truth in whatever he says (because he says it). Terrible sonnets are not that usual, because the form hoists your pants up, though I suppose the only really popular American sonnet writer was Edna St Vincent Millay, who used the form to pull her pants down. And there are also great sonnets. But it is radically easy to write bad free verse. At the same time, I think it would be presumptuous of us in 2011 to say that what T. S. Eliot was beginning to create in terms of his scansion in 1911 with 'Prufrock' was free in the sense of undisciplined, free in the sense of eschewing difficulty, eschewing the hard course to the

most economical utterance possible.

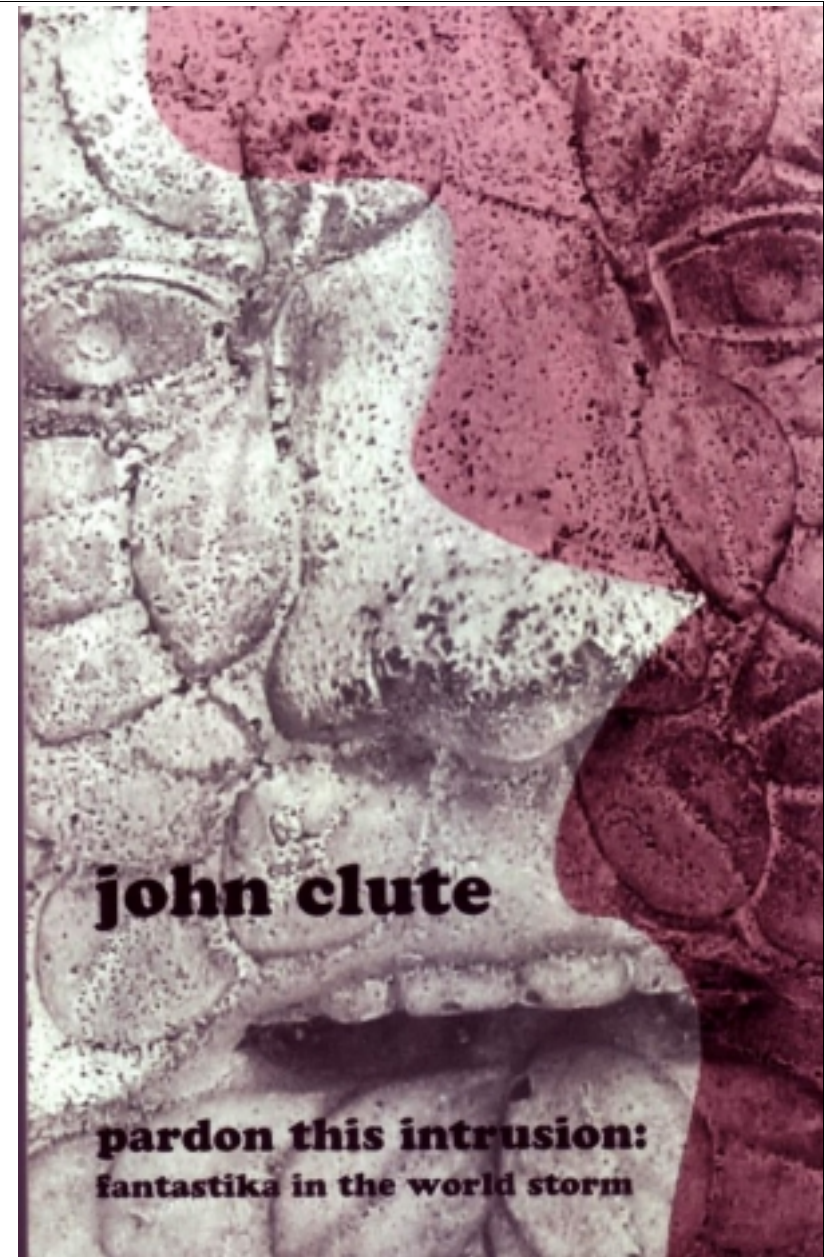
Q: I suppose this is more true in poetry, but it may be so in other forms of writing too. What looks completely free in one generation — tennis with the net down — looks classical to the next. Would you agree?

Clute: Yeah, the perception thing, reader perception issues. But if you define free verse technically as verse without a fixed scansion, verse without a rhyme scheme, verse without stanzaic form, then there are certain things that can be called free verse, as opposed to more constrained poetic form. That doesn't change that much, but our perception, our understanding of that which makes something which is uttered in free verse meaningful may well deepen over the years, because we begin to learn. It becomes part of our language of understanding. Certainly T. S. Eliot became quotable.

Q: Concerning literary theories generally, do you think literary theory is description of what has been done or what can (or should) be done? Which way in time do they point?

Clute: I think, as I suspect you know, it is a question that is answered 'Yes and yes' or 'No and no'. Or, as one might put it, 'It's immiscible, old son.' Though a lot of scholars attempt to understand what has occurred and perhaps with them the element of prescription is less foregrounded. Attempting to properly define the Elizabethan sonnet in terms of rules they obeyed and we have to relearn is probably not going to be as world-shattering in terms of intent as the work of someone like Northrop Frye, who was trying to create a four-part model of the various forms of prose fiction, a model that encompasses and predicts and shapes everything it touches. That's a huge difference. I'm way on the Northrop Frye side. Probably most people who try to analyse SF at all are so. We are prescriptive all the way through. We have to be in part because SF is difficult to describe taxonomically — and the taxonomies of SF or fantasy are fantastic as a whole, I find relatively boring. I find it much more interesting to try to give

CANARY FEV-
ER: REVIEWS
JOHN CLUTE



Two recent collections of John Clute's reviews and critical essays: *Canary Fever* (Becon; 2009; 415 pp.) and *Pardon This Intrusion* (Becon; 2011; 369 pp.).

verbal, narrative understandings. Which are the only way to touch the tale. To touch is to inform. Narrative understandings always move into the future.

Q: If you are saying how science fiction should be written according to your theory, then surely some creative type will come along and ignore you completely.

Clute: Oh, yeah, if it were the case that I was in a position of saying that I think SF should be written in a particular way, rather than saying that particular kinds of SF look to me as though they are doing a particular kind of thing and the particular kind of thing is best done this way. I don't think I have ever suggested in any of this stuff I've done that X is the way to do Y, as though any formal description of SF were a haiku that would cover the whole of the reality of the thing examined. I have certainly made suggestions, of course, like anyone. We had a panel today on urban fantasy, and my way of understanding of urban fantasy proved quite different than that of most relatively young writers. But when I said urban fantasy was a way of narrating a modal understanding of how we live immersed in the world cities of our time, I wasn't suggesting that the only way to write it was in conscious adherence to that diktat. Urban fantasy in the hands of 2011 is a narrative vaguer and far more profound [Clute speaks in an ironic tone] than that.

Q: What I have in mind is the relationship between the definition and the actual creative act. If you set out to write sword and sorcery, for example, writing to the definition, then you are probably defining the story form by its clichés. It's defined as having these elements, and if you take them away it's not sword and sorcery. I should think that the thing for the writer to do is ignore theory and ignore the prescribed model, and just write.

Clute: You sound like a fish that has managed to escape the aquarium and thinks it can continue to breathe without some really good advice about oxygen. I don't see anybody can write — certainly in the twenty-first century, equipoissally thrusting your

way through that genre and shrugging aside this one and wallowing in them all — I really don't see how anybody can write anything as an idiot savant, as someone who doesn't know or pays no attention to any of the rules. I think we are always paying attention to the rules. I think this does not mean that we are rigidly adhering to a written-down set of maxims. But we're paying attention to the rules all the time, especially in the fields that we work in.

Q: Do you think that there are simply certain universal traits of narrative which work and really don't change? I think so myself. If you read, say, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, which is almost two thousand years old, it reads remarkably like a modern fantasy novel, a Terry Pratchett novel, at least until the last chapter.

Clute: This seems to be absolutely clear, when you see it at that level and hugely difficult to put into words. I keep on trying, myself, to work out ways to lay down a few things. I lay them down, and I forget most of them, thought they seemed good in context. I have certainly laid down for my own satisfaction a variety of ways of trying to get at — to use a term that apparently I invented, though I was not aware of inventing it because it just seemed to be a word — what makes material storyable. To discover what is storyable and how it becomes storyable out of discourse and what is the particular, intense, magical affinity between a story and the way the human psyche works, that's sort of like, beyond me to capture, but I don't know if it isn't beyond a lot of people. Though it may be. All we know is that it's there. And as we get older and older in our culture — this may almost be a paradox, but it's not really, I don't think — we begin to intuit that the more purely visible the story is when you're telling it, the more story is like magic. The more story is like magic, in a sense paradoxically, the more we live in it like fish in an aquarium, without being able to say what is we are breathing. It may be a species anosognosia not to be able to see the story within us. But this we do know. We are story creatures. We live in story-shaped worlds. We tell story-shaped stories. 'And then, and then, and then.' Then is miraculous. One could imagine some species not being able to hear the gap between then and next, in terms of

words, in terms of narrative. How could we ever arrange to meet?

Q: What do you make of various writers who attempt to dispense with narrative? How far can you cut away narrative forms and still have something of interest?

Clute: For me, not very far. I am very glad to know that certain extremisms do exist. It's like knowing that there is a lighthouse warning you not to go in a particular direction. The light shines brightly. It's a benefice, but it's also a warning. But I find most forms of that kind of experimental writing — and in music too, experimental music that has pushed the various acoustic and mathematical non-narrative potentials to the uttermost — seem to be a kind of cultural moment: not a discovery that is the road forward but a marker of our extremity and confession of nearly fatal self-consciousness; but also a clearing of the communal throat. The adventurers of the twentieth century didn't like to think of themselves as clearing the throat, but although we write now with greater knowledge of all of the discoveries made, we do not adhere to those discoveries. I don't think there are very many successful anti-roman science fiction novels. I don't think Robbe-Grillet's science fiction novels are very widely read at the moment.

Q: Or Aldiss's *A Report on Probability A* for that matter.

Clute: As you say.

Q: This suggests an idea which has caused some controversy at times, which is that experimental fiction is actually a very familiar path. That is, once in a generation someone says, 'We will get rid of all that narrative stuff.' Then they try, and the audience goes away, and the writers who survive are the ones who learn to write narrative. Then another twenty years or so goes by, and it happens again.

Clute: I don't think that's an eternal law. I think it's historically grounded. I think this had been legitimately been going on since the end of the nineteenth century, in waves, but not exactly repetitive. Testing the mould in 1920 was to uncover a world that

more and more sophisticatedly writers were understanding as perhaps not amenable to narrative forms, or perhaps requiring far more difficult forms of writing which verged on non-narrative, or else we were all insane: in 1920 (and now) we would be insane if we believed a word of the official Story, the story that still tells us that our Terminal Badlands is progress. The twentieth century required, I think, that we recognise that to describe things had become suddenly more difficult. Our world is difficult, and that difficulty of the world, that problematicness of the world, is a body English of the pure ontology of the epistemological unlikelihood that we will ever get it: ever get it right. So therefore there are all sorts of modernist redoubts, fictional redoubts, like *Finnegans Wake*, or many other difficult books that are meant to be difficult, because difficulty is the nature of the Thing Itself, once exposed. That I find interesting, but obviously SF (this is another topic) is anything but modernist. It took us readers decades to suss a mildly disruptive text like *Gormenghast*. I do think that the greater texts of fantastika, from Franz Kafka to Gene Wolfe, are intricate with a modernist understanding that the world is shite, and the world cannot be understood, and that we lack a matter and we lack a history and that we are in the badlands. But the difficulty they force upon us is making us see.

Q: I think we can safely say that any serious story comes out of the writer's vision and the writer's life, not a matter of being self-consciously experimental, but more of 'I'm going to write this story and this is what this particular story requires. To hell with the rules.'

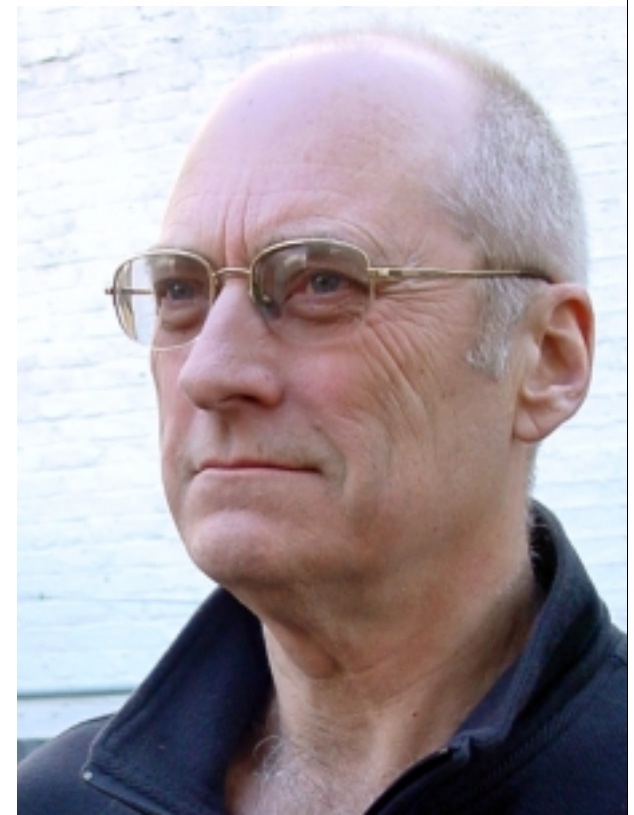
Clute: Yeah. OK. I did think for a second you were moving toward a critical fallacy, conspicuous over the past 100 years or so, which states basically that the writer cannot write about what the writer does not know or has not experienced. This weird presumption drives most of the idiot theories about Shakespeare not being Shakespeare, and is enable through a deep misapprehension of what it is a writer does: because although a writer can theoretically reflect in some direct way direct knowledge, most writers never really try to climb that asymptote: the closer you get to a

recovered truth, the more abyssal the gap between you and telling it. Shakespeare did not have to see the seacoast of Bohemia to write about the seacoast of Bohemia, where we live more fully than in Brighton.

Q: I always want to know how they can prove that the Earl of Oxford didn't write the works of Thomas Dekker. That is, if you apply the same level of scrutiny to the reality of any other Elizabethan author, you will get the result. We know less about most of them than we do about Shakespeare. So how do we know that all the works of Elizabethan dramatists were not ghostwritten by noblemen?

Clute: Because someone would have confessed to the cops: much of Elizabethan/Jacobean drama risked being treated as seditious. What kind of fool would let the Earl of Oxford get away with anonymity, if the rack threatened? There are, of course, other reasons. Whatever, it didn't take very long for historians and critics to start getting the Elizabethan world wrong. So we get all of this stuff about doesn't it seem unlikely that somebody like Shakespeare was supposed (by us) to be would have given the second-best bed to his wife? Or, why does his will not mention his library, which he must have had? The first being of course a convention that had nothing to do with the value to the widow of a certain object. The second — Shakespeare's not having a library in Stratford — is another misprision: Elizabethan or Jacobean wills didn't list things like that. They were listed in separate codicils that were physically handed over to the probate court and destroyed. Certainly, after we get rid of all this crap, there is actually so much known about Shakespeare. He was the most popular playwright in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. More Shakespearean plays were pirated than anybody else's, more than two or three other authors' work put together. It is extraordinary how much there actually is about him, now that it's possible to study the record for what it contains, not for what it doesn't.

Q: I get deeply cynical about this and suspect that the reason the nutcases go after Shakespeare is the same reason the science



cranks go after Einstein. They always pick the biggest target. If you debunk an obscure figure, no one will care.

Clute: It reminds you of people with recovered memories. Always Cleopatra or Caesar.

Q: Yes, it is never the kitchen maid. Well ... so, how do you think they'll misunderstand science fiction in a couple of centuries?

Clute: I think SF will be misunderstood, certainly American science fiction of the pomp years from '25 to '75 will be misunderstood if it is understood to be a fair representation of — how to put it politely? — if it is thought that somehow or other that the people who wrote engineering science fiction in the twentieth century were doing so in entire good faith. I think almost all of

them are denying something. I think their works whiff of denial. I think they know damn well that the futures they were advocating were not only pretty monstrous, but also impossible to achieve. In the real world, engineering solutions are drowned by side effects. You can't create utopia by pre-planning. You can't prophesy the field of the future very well if you're an engineering mind, because engineers solve problems. They don't anticipate side effects, which is to say they don't get the world. That's not their job.

I think SF will be properly understood in its great years as the most astonishingly incompetent attempt to understand its subject matter that any self-articulated genre has ever managed to present. Science fiction writers did an astonishingly bad job of prophesying the field of the future. I brought this up in a talk I gave a few weeks ago in Norway about Clifford D. Simak. The 'City' stories that were published in the mid-'40s in *Astounding*, in which it was made clear that Simak thought and that Campbell thought and that his readers thought and that the episteme thought that it was a fair cop to say cars would start dwindling away about 1960 because they were no longer necessary and people became bored with them; that human beings would begin to abandon the great cities of the world — the 'huddling places', which is what Simak had the effrontery to call them — into what seem to later readers to be nothing more than McMansions with trout streams, decorously spread across rural regions, dislocating the farmers who aren't needed anymore because we had yummy hydroponics now, that loyal robots would replace the nine-tenths of the world population who still (2011) starve that our golf course be irrigated; and that this was not only a plausible representation of the changing world from 1944 on, but one that any rational American properly longed for. In 1944, which is to say, Americans in particular were demented. They thought that their future was going to work without side-effects. They thought, most of them thought — now I am interrupting myself, but remember that survey I did on Fictionmags asking whether there was a single SF story from before 1960 or 1965, or any illustration for any such

story, that depicted a traffic jam or anything like the catalytic transformation of America, which one can cartoon as solely because of the Interstate Highway System, but which was more widely caused of course? We didn't find any. We found nothing. Science fiction, the genre that was going to shape our dreams so that we could shape the future, did not notice the interstate system. It did not notice Walmart, did not notice the catalysis of America into eviscerated patches of 'wilderness' eaten into daily by viral tracts with Progress billboards hiding the dead fauna. It didn't notice. Didn't notice.

Q: It didn't notice the internet either. Not even ten years out. Did anybody write about the internet in 1980?

Clute: By then they were beginning to write about something like it, but they should have been writing about information in terms of miniaturisation, through the transistor long before that. John Brunner did a little bit, but having a John Brunner around is a bit like Chinese civilisation. How many times do you have to invent gunpowder before gunpowder actually starts to actually blow up the enemy's forts? It takes several times in Chinese civilisation. It doesn't matter if there's an occasional example, touted by a contrarian. What never happened was that Brunner etc made any real difference to the way stories were being written. You may get hints of an information explosion, but pretty tentative. To return to my own *idee fixe*: there is no hint of the transportation explosion, the catalytic explosion that occurred between 1900 and 2000 that we are still busy normalising ourselves to, just in time for the oil to run out.

Q: I must have missed most of this on Fictionmags, because the most bizarre example I would have brought up would have been David H. Keller's 'The Revolt of the Pedestrians', which, if you read it very carefully, comes off as a Gernsbackian technological story as written by Poppy Z. Brite. Do you know it?

Clute: I don't know the story.

Q: It's one of those great ex-classics. It used to be regarded as a

major story in the field. It was published in 1928, and is set in a future in which the automobile has totally revolutionised everything, so that no one ever gets out of their cars. They spend their entire lives in little personal go-carts. Cities are transformed. There are no stairs anymore, only ramps. It's as if everybody was in handicapped carts, all the time. Their legs wither away. But there is one tribe of Pedestrians in the Ozarks somewhere, and they are the last walking people on Earth. It also turns out that all this civilisation runs on broadcast power from one source. There are no backups. No one has any batteries. As the Pedestrians feel threatened, they ultimately shut off all the power and leave everyone to starve to death in the dark. It's one of those feel-good-about-genocide stories that you get in the early pulps. But it's even more bizarre than that. There is a young man of the Pedestrians who infiltrates the Automobilists. How he gets into one of those carts and hides his legs is difficult to imagine. How he goes to the bathroom, we won't ask.

Clute: Perhaps he would have told us if his editors had allowed him to. Keller was a piece of work.

Q: He would. The young man goes and gets a job. He becomes a secretary. Of course women's roles have not changed, so he has to pretend to be a woman. Then the secretary next to him starts to find herself attracted to him, without understanding why.

Clute: How long is this story?

Q: A longish short story. But the really bizarre part — this is the Poppy Brite part — is that when the lights go out and about 99% of the human race is doomed to die — that's seen as okay — the other secretary's erotic passion bursts out. The spy reveals himself to be male. That she could be a lesbian is not thinkable. Before she dies, she wants one last romantic embrace, which she gets, whereupon she ecstatically rips out his jugular with her teeth and wallows in his blood. This is a Gernsback story. I don't think anybody read it carefully at the time or understood it, but it is all about the transformative power of mass transportation.

Clute: No. I doubt that story was really well understood at the time. I am hearing it in retrospect clearly as a transportation story, but within the context of 1928 it is also very much a rather imaginative dystopian story, because a lot of the imagery seems to dramatise how you become robotic in a dystopia, with one power source, one voice telling you what to do, et cetera, et cetera, and rigid role divisions. So it looks to me, in listening to it, what you're saying, is that David Keller — who was a bad writer most of the time, but actually a very interesting writer — did some really interesting things there. But it would not have at that time been read as a transportation story — all the transportation things would be seen as exemplifications of totalitarian dystopianism, in a pulp way. He might have meant both, but he would not have been read as having much to do with transportation.

Q: Why do you think science fiction does such a bad job of understanding its own subject matter, or understanding the future? It can't be because the writers are lazy. Some of them are, but many are not.

Clute: No, as I said, I think it's because a lot of them are deniers. I think that over the last fifty years a lot of professional science fiction has been written by people who knew better in terms of the simplicities of outcome, in terms of the ability for technological fixes to work, in terms of the understanding of the forms of SF as actually useful and clever ways of not only entertaining folk — which is not a lie to do — but of telling the truth. I think a lot of them knew and know better. That doesn't cover the whole of the genre though history, because a lot of people believe what they say, and a lot of people don't write that kind of stuff anyway. As regards earlier decades, it's simplistic just to say we were all demented in 1940, but it's not simplistic to say that some sf writers, for historical or accidental reasons, in the States, got hitched to the engineering wheel. The central creator in so many ways of American science fiction, as you know very well —

Q: John Campbell?

Clute: I would say Robert Heinlein.

Q: John Campbell created Robert Heinlein.

Clute: It doesn't look that way. Have you read the bio? [Clute refers to *Robert Heinlein, In Dialogue with His Century, Vol 1, The Learning Curve* by William H. Patterson, Jr. — D.S.]

Q: No. Not yet.

Clute: Read the bio. I found it very elucidating. We always knew that Robert Heinlein was actually older than Campbell, and hugely more experienced in the world than Campbell by 1939, but there's more. In his fervent effort, over five years, to become a naval officer despite his health, he did become a qualified engineer. A few years later he got involved in a lot of very, very hands-on, very, very, as it were non-Asperger street-stumping for Upton Sinclair's Social Credit movement. He was married twice in the 1930s. By the end of his first adult decade, he became a very experienced and highly proficient man of the Californian world, and it is this figure, as we can now see from that utopia he wrote at the end of 1938, which was his first real piece of fiction, who gives birth to everything else. 'For Us, the Living' permeates his Future History. 'For Us, the Living' is an engineer's utopia, a utopia in the traditional lines, in which the visitor-protagonist is brought into the future because he makes a few stupid mistakes back now — Heinlein was really good about male sexual possessiveness and jealousy — and gets whipped around a bit for that; but basically what he does is begin to fix things. They've already been fixed pretty well, but he's an engineer and there's nothing that can't be fixed. Heinlein was hugely influential at the end of the '30s and in the '40s. If you read the bio you get the sense that this man was actually (or in terms of experience) older than everybody else in the field except L. Sprague de Camp, and L. Sprague de Camp had already been ringed by some kind of ... you know ... wood-destroying thing. He was a stick even then. And Heinlein seemed to know everybody. Everybody else was influenced very deeply. It was a very small field. Did you listen to the Katherine MacLean

interview this morning?

Q: Alas, no.

Clute: She was talking about the sensation they had in the mid '40s, when she would have been 20 or 21, very young and very mentally active — she's still mentally very active — that the whole of the science fiction cohort of active writers would sit around sometimes — I guess it was in New York, so it wasn't obviously all of them — and talk all night the ideas that were going to change the world. This kind of small kind of cohort was not only a good way of brainstorming, but actually very influenceable. And of course Campbell was very much involved in the kind of story that had successful outcomes, that domesticated, that made visibly possible, all sorts of transformations in the world. So therefore science fiction in the States was predisposed to think along certain kinds of lines. With all the exceptions, and the people like William Tenn and Sheckley and Dick a few years later, that particular kind of serious/non-serious, predictive/prophetic writing was set off on the wrong track from the get-go.

Q: Was it that these writers were deniers, or that they were not allowed to tell the truth for marketing reasons? That is, if they told the truth, no one would buy their stories.

Clute: One needs to be kinder than that. That was an inflammatory thing to say.

Q: I mean that they were not allowed to be honest with their material, for marketing reasons.

Clute: I don't know, and I don't know whether they're deniers as we've come to know the term, but I do think that a lot of people over the last 50 years were persuaded to write stories they knew better than to believe in. Maybe they wanted to believe. It is like this gambler's refusal to give up on some scheme, even though the house always wins. SF gambled against the house in those years of its pomp, gambling that planning could fix things, at certain kinds of utopian thinking actually worked well enough to

be followed, even though it kept on not working in reality (even though the cars did not dwindle away), and even though you had to ignore the world transforming under your feet like snakes and becoming more and more irreducibly complex to the perception. These stories — *Analog* still publishes them — these stories are still happening. There are still writers who do them. But they are shadow people. They are at the end of a particular era.

Q: In the tone of what you're saying, you're describing science fiction in the past tense, as if its glory years are over.

Clute: It has been addressed to me before that I have called SF dead. I don't think the real literature of the fantastic that is premised on arguable worlds is dead. I think SF as a genre has been, as it were, colonised, overgrown, made irrelevant, made smaller, bigger, and become so complex and diffuse as a series of texts, not as a series of release-points, that in the twenty-first century, I have felt, while doing *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, that basically there are two encyclopedias. There is the one I am focusing on very hard right now to finish off, which is the intention to anatomise and deeply to honour the American SF, in particular, of the twentieth century and to maintain and to rehabilitate where necessary not only the entries on the authors, but also the theme entries that attempt to map that twentieth century enterprise. The second *Encyclopedia of SF* is the encyclopedia that attempts to create a series of models of theme entries and author entries and entry structures in general that will serve as a series of lattice-works over the complexities of the badlands that we inhabit now. Though the new pattern of entries will meld imperceptibly, I hope, into the old, it is the new that will try to give openings into the kind of SF someone like China Mieville or Elizabeth Hand writes. For you cannot really retrofit them comfortably into the twentieth century. Not that SF was ever exactly fixed.

Do you know the five-finger exploding palm device in *Kill Bill*?

Q: No.

Clute: You don't know the five-finger exploding palm device in *Kill Bill*? Ah. It's this ultimate move in martial arts. You go ... like that [makes a motion] ... in a particular way and your assailant does not know what has happened, but after five full steps, he or she drops dead. I think science fiction as a coherent enterprise suffered that particular move in 1957 with *Sputnik*.

Q: It doesn't know it's dead yet?

Clute: It is hard to define what a step is in the genre, but maybe the five steps have already been walked through and that particular thing is dead, and maybe we have another step to go, but basically the dragging of the space race, the dragging of the engineering dream of linear expansion back into the real world and dirtying it up with laundry, with all sorts of debris and real-life politics well, meant that that was the point where the blow had been struck. That was when it was killed.

Q: What does a young science fiction writer today — someone who is about twenty and just starting out — have to face? Do they try to reanimate a corpse?

Clute: If they are trying to write YA novels based on Heinlein, they are trying to revive corpses, yes. They may be great young adult novels, and Heinlein had elements of greatness as a writer, but I think there is something zombie about Heinlein YA *Redivivus*, sure. But if you are a young writer and you are actually trying to write a serious story, you should just think of yourself as going out into the world and trying real hard to recognise something, and if we recognise something really well, some tiny evanescent flash of now we can make work as a meme, we'll be writing SF, as we understand it now, which no longer focuses on the particular half-century of pomp we love and mourn and bury.

Q: Thanks, John.

— **Darrell Schweitzer and John Clute, Nov. 2011, May 2012**

Science fiction's people: Part 3: Jay Kay Klein

Mike Glyer

Jay Kay Klein (1931–2012)

When Jay Kay Klein died in 2012, **Mike Glyer** wrote this short obituary in *File 770*.

Jay Kay Klein, who spent his final days in hospice care with terminal oesophageal cancer, died 13 May 2012, reports John Hertz. Jay Kay was 80 years old.

Jay Kay and his camera documented decades of fanhistory. His four photo-filled Worldcon Memory Books (1960, 1962, 1963, 1966), are nostalgic monuments to an era most of us missed.

He was Fan Guest of Honour at Discon II, the 1974 Worldcon. He received the Big Heart Award in 1990, and in 2011 he was enshrined in the First Fandom Hall of Fame. Pros appreciated his work, too — he was awarded a SFWA Presidential Plaque for Extraordinary Photographs.

Jay Kay entered fandom in 1945, at a Philadelphia SF Society

meeting. Within two years he also joined the Queens Science Fiction League Chapter in Astoria, Long Island, and the Eastern Science Fiction Assn. (ESFA) in Newark. Much later he was part of two failed Syracuse Worldcon bids in the 1960s.

From 1977 to 2005 he wrote and supplied photos for the 'Biolog' feature in *Analogue*.

As time went by, Jay Kay showed considerable sensitivity to ways in which he felt overlooked. Sometimes he passed it off with humour. When MagiCon (1992) insisted fans show photo IDs to register, Jay Kay claimed to have satisfied the requirement with an old photo from his portfolio showing himself on a con panel beside Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. But another time I found it easy to agree that it seemed unappreciative when staffers at a

Worldcon tried to discourage him from roaming in front of the stage to take photos during major events. After all, he had made

himself legendary taking photos in situations like that.

Pamela Sargent has been publishing serious science fiction since 1970. Her many books include novels such as *Cloned Lives* and *Earthseed*, pioneering anthologies such as *Women of Wonder*, *More Women of Wonder* (whose later editions were *Women of Wonder: The Classic Years* and *Women of Wonder: The Contemporary Years*), and *Firebrands*; and collections of her own stories, such as *Starshadows*. Some of her major books are currently being reissued.

Pamela Sargent

Journeys with Jay Kay:

On the road with science fiction's photographer

There were earlier and later journeys of ours with Jay Kay Klein, but the road trips I remember most clearly are the ones George Zebrowski and I took with him in the 1980s and early 1990s. For several years, there were two conventions we all travelled to together fairly regularly: Contradiction in Niagara Falls, New York, and I-Con, held on the campus of the State University of New York's Stony Brook University on Long Island, meaning we covered much of New York state with Jay Kay. At the time, George and I were living in Binghamton, New York, near the Pennsylvania border, a city with one big disadvantage, namely its distance from just about every other city in the state. Going on the road with

Jay Kay for a non-driver like me meant avoiding hours of tedious bus travel, as Binghamton had lost all its train service years earlier and getting anywhere from the airport meant at least one or two stops before reaching any destination. Binghamton wasn't an easy city to escape.

Contradiction and I-Con usually covered some or all of our expenses, meaning Jay Kay was reimbursed for gas and (presumably) the conventions could save on travel costs for three guests. Our journeys, not surprisingly, were filled with discussions and sometimes heated debates. In addition to jokes and various kinds



Jay Kay Klein at Bucconeer (1998).

of humour, one of Jay Kay's favourites being bilingual puns (in English and French), we regularly held an hours-long SF con panel on wheels, and occasionally got so distracted by our conversation that we would miss our exit on the New York State Thruway or a necessary turn on a city street. Both George and Jay Kay could be aggressive and vociferous arguers who disagreed on any

number of subjects, but remained good friends nonetheless. My subject of choice during these road trips was often history, as I was researching my Genghis Khan historical novel *Ruler of the Sky* at the time, and Jay Kay, a history buff, enjoyed hearing what I'd learned about the Mongols while speeding along the Thruway or creeping along in the bumper-to-bumper traffic on the Long Island Expressway.

One argument Jay Kay and I had repeatedly on a subject about which we had to 'agree to disagree', as the cliché goes, was about American citizenship. Jay Kay was of the opinion that it should be more like French citizenship, in which your origins don't matter but you give up your own culture entirely for that of the French. I countered that this would undermine one of the strengths of American culture, the way in which it's been enriched by contributions from many cultures; there is, I contended, no one 'right' way to be an American and shouldn't be.

Jay Kay also had strong views on the subjects of religion and extended life. He was convinced that organised religion, which he considered a waste of time and human intellect, had its origins in a scam knowingly concocted by prehistoric shamans. (I agreed with him on the atheism but not the deliberate scam; human beings are capable of sincere belief in even the most preposterous of ideas.) He was mystified by multimillionaires and billionaires who would sink their money into ventures he considered trivial or far less important than researching the possibility of extending human life with the eventual goal of preventing death. If there was nothing after death, meaning you couldn't take it with you, why not spend your money on trying not to die at all?

Jay Kay's taste in science fiction tended toward the more traditional forms. For him, the genre was an escape, and he preferred hard science stories, tales of super-technology, and well-plotted space operas to the more literarily ambitious kinds of sf. He was a part of science fiction from way back, a background he put to good use in his 'Biolog' series in *Analog*, which featured a photo

and short biography of an author in each issue; there would have been a lot less of a pictorial record of the field without him. He had grown up in Philadelphia, then as now home to a large number of sf writers and fans, and had known such luminaries as Isaac Asimov, L. Sprague de Camp, Lester del Rey, Frederik Pohl, Arthur C. Clarke, Poul Anderson, and many others when they were just beginning as writers. George first met him in 1963 at the World Science Fiction Convention in Washington, DC and saw a man he described as 'this heavysset guy with a camera around his neck wearing a khaki shirt and shorts and looking like an Israeli tank commander'. Jay Kay, as far as I know, never went anywhere without a camera and a ton of photographic equipment.

He told us that part of taking a good photo was looking for what was really going on in the picture before taking it. When I got nervous or shy about having him shoot me (I have never liked having my photo taken), he'd say, 'The way you look in my photos, that's the way you look.' Not much anyone can do about that, but he also assured me that any photo I didn't like at the time it was shot would look a lot better to me after some years had passed. He was right about that; the passage of time is as great a tool for improving your opinion of photos of yourself as it is for helping you see what's wrong with a story you wrote ages ago.

Although he shot some photos in colour and had experimented with a stereo camera to produce three-dimensional images (I remember viewing with delight through a viewer 3-D photos he had taken in Florida during the early 1960s), his favourite medium was black and white film. I still retain in my mind the image of a photo he took at I-Con in 1990: Robert Bloch and E. Gary Gygax in front of a fireplace at the inn where the convention's guests were housed, with both of these legendary figures about to shake hands. I recall that he also caught another historic grouping that included Bloch, Gygax, and Gahan Wilson. One of Jay Kay's justifiable beefs was discovering that somebody had used one of his photos on a dust jacket without permission; another was any publication without permission of a drawing or piece of art that

was mainly a line-by-line reproduction of a photo. Too many people, he used to complain, just used what they wanted to without permission when all they had to do was just ask.

A couple of our trips home from I-Con were more memorable than we would have preferred. In 1992, Jay Kay managed to ferry us home while we were in the last throes of food poisoning and having to make frequent stops along the way, a true test of friendship. In the spring of 1994, after another I-Con, his car began making ominous clunking sounds while we were still on the Cross Bronx Expressway. Jay Kay nursed his old Buick along, sputtering through New York City and across the Tappan Zee Bridge to Nyack, New York, where the car finally died in a gas station next to a hostelry that resembled the Bates Motel. After several phone calls and the arrival of a tow truck, it was clear we wouldn't be going anywhere until the next day at the earliest. We checked into a couple of rooms at the threadbare motel; George went to sleep while Jay Kay and I headed to the restaurant next door for dinner. Jay Kay, in spite of being a friend of ours for decades, had always kept his personal life resolutely private. I had known he suffered from bouts of depression, but this late-night dinner was the first time he told me the story of his father's suicide while Jay Kay was still in his teens. He remained angry with his father even after all those years, mostly because he had shown so little consideration for the people in the apartments around him: turning on a gas stove had been his exit of choice. 'If somebody had lit a match', Jay Kay muttered, 'or there'd been an electrical problem, the whole building could have gone up.'

Throughout the 1990s and after we had moved to Albany, New York, George got after Jay Kay about a few things. One was ensuring that his photos were archived at an institution, a wish fulfilled by their now having a home in the Eaton Collection at the University of California at Riverside. Another was an intriguing piece of short science fiction Jay Kay had begun but never finished; whenever George nagged him about that, Jay Kay often replied, 'I am unfortunately a person of great indolence.' A third was urging



Jay Kay Klein in action. (Photo: David Dyer-Bennett.)

him to get a computer and go online, but Jay Kay resisted this plea and stuck to his typewriter and an old-fashioned telephone for communication. Whether this kept him less informed than he might otherwise have been or saved him from being overwhelmed by a lot of increasingly bad news on world affairs, I can't say, but

he seemed less interested in current events in recent years, and who can blame him? He often derided the doings of his fellow human beings as 'monkey island', and didn't have a terribly high regard for us as a species.

Those he did care about were individual friends, people whose intelligence he respected, writers, scientists, and fellow science fiction fans. In 1992, we accompanied him to the memorial service for his old friend (and ours) Isaac Asimov, held at the Society for Ethical Culture's building in Manhattan. This was a more sombre road trip than usual, with most of our talk being stories of Isaac, although the service itself, with remembrances by friends and colleagues that had everyone laughing even as they mourned and music performed by the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players, was anything but sombre.

It's customary at memorial services to speak about a life well lived, and Jay Kay was able to travel widely, meet many interesting and celebrated people (one of his guiding principles, he told me, was making friends with people of all ages so that he wouldn't be without friends in old age), and assemble what amounts to a photographic history of science fiction. But I strongly doubt that Jay Kay would have appreciated such sentiments, expressed as if he were still around to hear them. His wish would have been to remain among us, even with all our human foibles that could so annoy him, taking more photos, perhaps even with a digital camera.

— **Pamela Sargent, 2012**

The real science fiction: Introduction

George Zebrowski is the award winning author of *Brute Orbits* and *Macrolife*, *Stranger Suns*, and other novels, more than a hundred stories, and the editor of many anthologies, most recently *Sentinels In Honor of Arthur C. Clarke*, edited with Gregory Benford (Hadley Rille Books). About *Macrolife*, Brian Aldiss wrote: "No higher praise could be offered than to say that *Macrolife* is almost Stapledonian in its approach to the subject of man in the galaxy. The bullish mood engendered by the success of *Star Wars* perhaps told against more thoughtful work." (*Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, Atheneum, New York, 1986).

George Zebrowski

Raising the net:

The C. P. Snow Lecture, Ithaca College, 6 April 1995

When I was a junior in high school, I read two books that helped change my life. One was C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures*, and the other was Aldous Huxley's *Science and Literature*. The Snow book reminded me of things I already knew: that there were people who knew art, music, and literature, but who seemed blind to, even contemptuous of, science. And yet there were also people I had met who knew art, music, and literature, and who also saw

the beauties of science and mathematics, to whom history was a wonderful country of not only what was but what might have been; and to whom possible futures were only a continuation of history and human possibilities.

The existence of these people made Snow's division of the two cultures seem a bit of an exaggeration, although today one might

say that there are many subcultures that know not and care not for science, especially for science as a self-correcting, undogmatic method of adjusting one's knowledge of the universe so that observation and theory match up as much as possible through the experience of experiment. These subcultures consist of the popular wastelands of astrology, uncritical religion, secular self-help cults, UFO crazies, and people who are willing to believe anything you can't disprove. And there are still scientists, often chemists or physicists, who look upon history and anthropology as 'soft' opinion-laden disciplines lacking in precision, and who have spent so much time learning to be physicists and chemists that they did not have time for the human realms of feeling to be found in novels, opera, or string quartets, or even jazz and rock music, much less critical philosophy. The human realms come upon these people late in life sometimes, and hit them hard. The best of them respond; the worst retreat into a militant Philistinism, decrying all art and philosophy as a fraud.

So Snow was never quite wrong in *The Two Cultures*; he was incomplete. The cultures that know not science are many; the scientists who know not culture are mostly second-raters. Arthur C. Clarke once said that only a second-rate scientist made fun of science fiction; first-rate ones never do.

You may have guessed by now that the people I was referring to a moment ago, the ones who knew art, science, music, philosophy, history, who were both in love with technology and fearful of its misuse by humanity, were the science fiction writers I grew up reading. There were no walls between the cultures for them, no walls around time; these people would have of everything as they wished.

Of course much of what they wrote, as is most of everything, was not very good — the same failures of quality you find in all fiction; but the best of their writings were unlike anything one could find in the last century. What Huxley's *Science and Literature* reminded me of, in the midst of my omnivorous early reading of science

fiction, was that there could be, there had been, a certain kind of science fiction that more than any other deserved the name.

Huxley himself had written a prime example of it himself: *Brave New World*, first published in 1932, and still a durable, thoughtful read today. I had read H. G. Wells and Olaf Stapledon, two ambitious science fiction writers by any cultural criterion. Stapledon's *Last and First Men* is probably the single great holy book of science fiction's first century, though too little read; and Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* have never been surpassed, though certainly equalled.

But the problem for me now was that too much of the science fiction I was reading in the popular market was unambitious, betraying its critical possibilities in favour of entertainment alone, forgetting what it could be: a literature combining the insight of the sciences, not only in content but in method, with artful expression and narrative. It was Snow and Huxley who kept me looking for this 'real science fiction', both as an ideal and in the works that waited to be found.

It won't come as a surprise to any of you that there are not very many such works, that the mass market of publishing, driven by profit, has made such works even harder to bring into existence; but they do appear — at least a dozen every year — and their quality stands apart from motives of moneymaking.

This talk is my most recent attempt to understand what it is I think I'm doing as a writer of science fiction, and to tell you, and myself, what this 'real science fiction' is, where it comes from, and suggest where it might be going.

Recent discussions about science fiction have included physicist-author Gregory Benford's now well-known prescription that science fiction should be written 'with the net up'. For the moment I'll say that it means a respect for the science when writing science fiction and that when this is lacking, it's as if one played tennis

with the net down.

How hard is it to go about 'raising the net?' There is very little cutting-edge science in the vast bulk of published science fiction, and even less of the critical, doubting, open-ended philosophy that makes science, as the natural philosophy of our times, possible, even in well-written, artistically sound works. On top of this, there is just no cut-and-dried prescription one can give for 'raising the net' when it comes to the actual writing. It is much easier and quicker to do variations on previously digested scientific ideas that can be fitted into genre adventure patterns within the contractual time allowed for writing a novel. A professional, full-time writer, however devoted to innovation, cannot always escape the constraints of commerce. He must earn money simply to be able to keep doing what he loves best. Originality takes time to develop, and to use that originality in a notable work of science fiction takes both artistic effort and research, which is why so many new science fiction ideas first turn up as details and throwaways in stories by writers who want to show how current they are, and may turn up being treated in more depth only in later works. This kind of throwaway use of human-computer interfaces, virtual reality worlds, or nanotechnology reminds me of the old school exercise — use the vocabulary word 'reprehensible' in a sentence, and the student says, 'My teacher told me to use "reprehensible" in a sentence.'

The human experience of doing science, a sense of its historical failures and successes, should be central to science fiction. This is not to claim that science fiction should be written by and for scientists, but that the facts and observations of all the sciences, as well as the ethical example of honest scientific research, should influence our view of existence and our place in it. At the very least an author should not ignore what we do know about ourselves and the universe. This means that the universe depicted in science fiction should reflect 'reality to the best of our knowledge', incomplete as that will always be, and we should not violate 'what is known to be known', unless that violation of the known

is itself the subject of the story.

To 'raise the net' honestly requires that one have not only a background in the history of science, its methods, lore, glittering ideas, and knowing at least the general direction in which the cutting edge is cutting, but also that one must understand and apply this background to storytelling, characterisation, and personal style with ambitious thoroughness — and it should come out differently with every story or novel.

Needless to say, the result might still fail as a piece of fiction, as we can see by the work of various writers who know their science but are not outstanding writers of fiction. It is in fact something of a fashion among many of these writers to look down on literary graces, and, as one well-known critic has pointed out, these writers 'hold ... aloof from many human (and humanists') concerns'.

'Raising the net' is not enough; one must then play and win the game not only as a thinker but as a creator of literature. This is the major reason why there is so little 'hard science fiction', and why so much of it is not very well written — it's hard to do at all, and even harder to succeed on all fronts.

One way of explaining what 'raising the net' means is to say that successful science fiction worthy of its name is made out of first-rate ideas with first-rate literary execution. It follows that much brilliant work can be done with second- and third-rate materials, but I am convinced that it can never measure up to the first standard, even though many such works are held in high esteem.

Before discussing what first-rate materials are, I'll mention the ideals I started with as a writer. I have been described as a 'hard science fiction writer with literary intent' — which makes me sound like a difficult person about to commit some sort of crime. What I mean by 'literary' is that I try to pay attention to the writerly

virtues of style, characterisation, lucid storytelling, and narrative energy, as much as I do to what makes a work science fiction — its scientific facts, speculative ideas, and philosophical considerations. There's nothing wrong with that; I wouldn't think much of any 'hard science fiction' writer who left all that out. James Blish, a favourite writer of mine, once said that science fiction should be hard and thoroughgoing on all fronts — in its ideas and its literary virtues. This seems to me beyond argument as a prescription, and this is the ideal I started out with as a writer.

The method of what one should do as a science fiction writer can be clearly stated, but not easily practised. One writes fiction that deals with the human impact of possible future changes in science and technology, based on the best available candidates for knowledge we have about the nature of the universe and our place in it, which includes every science from physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, and the social sciences, in all their hyphenated gradations. This definition — that science fiction is fiction dealing with the human impact of possible future changes in science and technology — is the best definition of science fiction I've ever seen; it was put forward by Isaac Asimov, and should be considered definitive because of the incisive way it deals with both the intellectual and literary needs of science fiction. Even if you remove 'science and technology' from it, you still have 'the human impact of possible future changes'. You could remove 'future', since many science fiction works are set in the present or past, but you can still substitute 'imaginary but plausible' here without violating the spirit of science fiction. The 'human impact' makes it fiction; the 'plausible imaginary changes', examined in a scientific spirit of inquiry, makes it science fiction. How well the 'literary' and 'science fictional' conceits turn out depends on the ambition and skill of the writer.

Now, what are first-rate ideas? My answer to this question can't help revealing a worldview and a commitment to certain values, whose justification is that they are the best we can do for now. They include a commitment to the self-correcting, error-driven

method of the sciences; a provisional, open-ended conception of truth; and recognition of the mystery of a possibly infinite, and therefore transcendent, universe while avoiding both idolatry and credulity. A science fiction based on these considerations, and on the specific content of our developing sciences, has the advantage of striking into the genuine unknown from the actual frontiers of both our thinking and feeling experience.

These frontiers, rather than mythic traditions, are the sources of novel, first-rate ideas and story materials, to which must be applied ambitious literary skills, to make possible first-rate science fiction. I say possible because realising the work is of course the most difficult part of the task. First-rate writing and characterisation can dress up derivative ideas considerably. That's why lesser ideas can look so good in a first-rate realisation; which is to say that there are writers who do raise the net, but don't play the game; others do both, but not very well; and many play the game admirably, but lose. I believe that this account of what it means to 'raise the net, play the game, and win' is the most important set of statements that can be made about the ideals of genuine science fiction. They are there to be discovered by anyone who cares to think honestly about the problems.

First-rate materials can be described as follows:

- 1 Naturally striking ideas
- 2 Subtle ideas of intrinsic interest, capable of profound (even impressive) development, in intellectual and human dramatic terms.

The first kind (naturally striking ideas) often appear as details in lesser works (because that is the easiest way to use naturally striking notions for the first time); or as excuses to have traditional action-adventures set in worlds reached by space travel, time travel, entering alternate realities, or some combination of these ideas. In recent times both space colonies and virtual reality have been used as passing details of greater interest than the trivial

works in which they appear. Examples of the second kind (subtle ideas of intrinsic interest) where the merits of ideas and issues are explored, include *A Case of Conscience* by James Blish, Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John* or Michael Bishop's *No Enemy But Time*. The fundamental difference between these two kinds of works is that the first is like the movie star who must only be himself and doesn't have to act, in films that are not about anything important or meaningful beyond themselves, and that may even fail as simple entertainment, while the second is like the actor who disappears into the role, becoming different with each part he plays, involving the viewer in the subtleties of the character he portrays.

Advice to an aspiring science fiction writer would stress that first-rate materials will not come to her out of nowhere, or from familiarity with the vast body of past science fiction; but they may emerge out of one's familiarity with current science, from the thinking that is being done about scientific facts and theories by scientists and philosophers. This requires that the writer constantly absorb large amounts of material that are not derived from past science fiction. It may even require original thinking and research in a science or technology, an understanding of how science is done, how technologies have developed, and especially an appreciation of the ideal of good science: namely, honesty before facts and experiments — and the realisation of constraint, that one can't just think what one pleases.

The science fiction writer can't escape the examples of past writers, but he must always know when an idea is not obviously derived from earlier work. There will always be the temptation to do an old idea better, and this is not an ignoble impulse, but one's skill still might be better lavished on original conceptions, or at the very least on a radical rethinking of existing ideas. The sad fact is that many of science fiction's best conceptions have barely been stated, let alone developed, in their full human possibilities. The writer must be open to leaps, guesses, and intuitions, but there must also be a rich ground from which to draw. Discipline

and chaos must work together to open the wall between workaday contrivance and inspired, well-formed conceptions; but to have any chance of opening this wall, the writer must know that there is a wall, and how to routinely position himself before it with the hope that erosion, earthquakes, or even his own scratchings will breach it.

There is an immediate appreciation that occurs with first-rate conceptions and realisations. The reader feels that the work is well-proportioned, miraculously right, even beautiful. Two examples of such works that come to mind are Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, and what is one of the finest science fiction short stories of the sixties, Damon Knight's 'Masks'. *Timescape* depicts the overwhelming personal, communal, and global effects of a communication across time, in a novel that continues to be admired both in and outside science fiction, especially for its human depiction of scientists at work. 'Masks', which presents the steps to the complete dehumanisation of a man as his brain and nervous system are reembodyed in a total prosthetic, draws everything humanly essential out of a careful, realistic examination of the process, in a story that speaks whole novels of implication. Above all, these two works have the well-formed cogency that belongs to great paintings, great designs, to mathematical and physical theories, and great poetry. Benford's recent story 'Matter's End' also elicits this kind of aesthetic appreciation, which convinces us that physicists stand at the border of a country where we just might get to the heart of things.

Of course, the ideal of first-rate materials and first-rate execution may have little to do with what is thought to be popular with readers, or what publishers try to push on book buyers. It is an ideal that still, barely, leads the field rather than follows the vagaries of taste, because its ingenuities eventually filter down into lesser works. Every form of science fiction, on television, in films, and in countless stories and novels, lives on what was once first rate, and is then degraded. Readers who see the genuine article are often delighted. Proof of this is the success of Gregory

Benford's work, or the dazzling novels of Greg Bear, who carries out with a vengeance the program I've outlined by doing his homework, by being open to the dynamics of both popular and high culture, and achieving this with awesome writerly skills to boot. Michael Bishop is the best writer of anthropologically derived science fiction since Chad Oliver pioneered this direction in the 1950s. And Ian Watson shows a remarkable capacity for digesting cutting-edge scientific ideas and expressing them in a seemingly endless stream of high quality novels and stories. The novels and stories of Nancy Kress and Pamela Sargent show a remarkable effort at understanding the social and political effects of science and technology. Paul Di Filippo, Howard Waldrop, Michael Swanwick, and James Morrow have brought immense skills to science fictional materials, and show every sign of staying on the cutting edge. These writers, and others, represent what should be the mainstream of science fiction — dare I say it, the one true science fiction?

But in fact it's not any one thing. 'Raising the net, playing the game, and winning' can be adhered to in an infinity of ways, because every set of first-rate materials can be assimilated and expressed differently by each of these writers. It's the spirit of inquiry, into character and ideas, that is at the heart of genuine science fiction. Benford has described all fiction as a gauzy realm at best; it is the degree to which aspects of the real world, as well as we can know it without succumbing to wish fulfilment, shine through and are interpreted through the individuality of the writer, that makes for the nourishment we get from great fiction. Any good story or novel has one feature in common with science, and this is doubly true of good science fiction — it is an effort at some kind of explanation, a way of knowing in the end why and how the characters, events, and the worlds depicted got to be the way they are.

If we had a genuine, fully successful science fiction that dealt with the human impact of science and technology, that truly interpreted developments and put forward moral, intellectual and historical

visions of possible futures, this science fiction might even become the mainstream of literature, more clearly the literature of our century and the next (as J. G. Ballard already claims it is), in which the centrality of our technical and scientific culture would not be a genre excuse for action- adventures that turn out to be fantasy by default.

A genuine, non-trivial science fiction would include the problems of human life and its historical predicament. It would have something to say beyond ingenuity and cleverness of idea and story. 'No one ever admired an empty-headed writer for his style,' Kurt Vonnegut once said, but in the science fiction world, and in much of the literary world, this is in fact what happens much too often.

One writer recently stated that he invents imaginary backgrounds and characters and then tells lies about them. Well, you can do that; but the ideals of honest writing require that you tell the truth about your characters and backgrounds; that is, you don't have them walk down streets that don't exist in your story, or behave against their own inclinations. In other words, you don't manipulate your characters or force dramatic resolutions by leaving out obligatory steps; you try, as well as you can, to follow the given tendency of character and events. Many writers just don't have the patience to let their story grow and develop in its own way, and they miss all that might have been good and real about it.

One may well ask at this point what all this does to our assessment of certain kinds of science fiction. Are many stories simply not very good? In past decades, science fiction has been criticised by such noted science fiction writers as James Blish, Damon Knight, and Alfred Bester, and in recent years by Stanislaw Lem and Gregory Benford, and some of the criticism they have made leads to the conclusion that a lot of intelligence, craft, and artistry have been lavished on second- and third-rate materials. And I can well understand, having done some less than original work myself, that those writers who have written such stories will not readily accept

such a judgment about their efforts decades into their careers. Reputations resist being diminished or destroyed, especially during the lifetimes of their owners.

To apply the criterion of first-rate materials/first-rate execution to specific works of science fiction would raise quite a storm, and would lead to much disagreement over whether this standard is being correctly applied, and that is to be expected; but the criterion's intrinsic legitimacy is self-evident. Its rigorous application might be rejected by people who 'read for pleasure', who don't care about the distinction between science fiction and fantasy, or whether ideas and their realisation are first-rate or not. Readers with debased tastes can enjoy just about anything except subtlety and thought. But even though some demanding readers can sometimes enjoy stories that are no more than light entertainment, their vagaries and the occasional lapses of taste among those who know better (even Gustav Mahler was sometimes seen ducking in to see a Viennese operetta), should not be accepted as any kind of standard, as some who defend popular culture often try to argue. Either one grows and develops as a reader or one does not. To grow and learn means that one must leave many things behind.

When you apply any standards at all to fiction, beyond the mere thrill of vicarious enjoyment, there will be works that fall short. By the standards I've suggested here, some very well-written books fall short; some very well-liked books fail. Does there come a day when one must turn away from works that sparked so much feeling in one's youth? Are the demands of carefully and deliberately arrived at standards to be preferred over unconscious, emotional responses? Whatever one wilfully prefers, the demands of reason and careful observation remain, even if ignored by readers who simply kick over the game board and refuse to play, following intuition instead of reason. But when they try to argue for their way, they should realise that they can't just think what they please, but should become responsible for their own assumptions and all the irrational and unpleasant conclusions that can be

teased from them. Clever irrationalists try to argue for irrationalism itself, but they can't have it both ways. Unexamined taste is the final recourse of the aesthetically lazy, a bad habit that can easily be challenged by a consideration of observable merits.

And this brings us to an issue that is never discussed: the dimly glimpsed truth that liking a book cannot, by itself, decide its overall quality. I'll hurry past the issue with a few assertions:

- 'Enjoyable is not the same as Good.'
- 'Enjoyable can be Good.'
- 'Good can be boring and still be Good.'
- 'Boring may sometimes mean a work is Bad.'
- 'Serious work can be entertaining.'
- 'There are many values in fiction beyond entertainment. It can provoke interest and curiosity, elicit understanding and sympathy, make us feel and think, confront ourselves, and involve us in ways that intellectual discussion can't — and do all this without being entertaining. In fact, it can be downright disturbing and frightening.'

What this all comes down to is a choice between having casual, vague standards — this means having unconscious ones — or accepting demanding standards that may hurt our feelings, even make us unhappy, since we may end up with harsh evaluations of things we once loved. Many people seem to have an active fear of unforeseen conclusions, preferring to justify preconceived ones. This strikes at the very heart of science, which must be an exploration into the unknown.

Rushing past this bog of problems (those of you who wish to sink into it deeper may do so in my introductions to the first four volumes of my original anthology series *Synergy*, from HBJ/Harvest books), I want to try to tease a few more conclusions from the approach I've outlined.

There's one important implication concerning how hard science fiction will eventually date. The actual first landing on the moon, for example, bore little resemblance to the moon landings in most science fiction of the 1950s. Does that mean those earlier stories are now dated? I would argue that if the net is properly raised, the game honestly played and won, then the very notion of 'dated science fiction' is unworthy. Science fiction writers and readers, more than anyone, should see beyond styles and times to the core of a successful work. *When the Sleeper Wakes*, *The War of the Worlds*, and *The Time Machine* are both dated and timeless, having passed into the realms of alternate history. Each is delightfully 'wrong' and 'right', challenging us to see whether what is wrong now was wrong when the work was written. Genuinely dated works were usually hopelessly wrong even when they were being written, and their authors failed to show that they even cared about being wrong.

When John W. Campbell, the noted editor of the magazine *Astounding*, died, one writer said that we no longer had anyone to get mad at us for failing to write genuine science fiction. (Campbell had been one of the first editors to demand realistic stories, rather than pulp adventures.) In the seventies and eighties the Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem did get mad at Western science fiction, and raised a storm of protest, even though Lem's criticism was Campbellian — calling for a hard science fiction rooted in science, with uncompromising, honest speculative intellect applied to human possibilities, expressed with an artistry of mind and feeling. Most of what Lem had to say has since taken root in the minds of some of our best writers, though they may have discovered these same ideals for themselves.

'And should the future be full of dangers', Lem wrote more than twenty years ago, 'those dangers cannot be reduced to the known patterns of the past. They have a unique quality, as a variety of factors of a new type. That is the most important thing for a writer of science fiction. But science fiction has meanwhile built itself into a jail and imprisoned itself within those walls, because its writers

have not seemed to understand that the salvation of the creative imagination cannot be found in mythical, existential, or surrealistic writings — as a new statement about the conditions of existence. By cutting itself off from the stream of scientific facts and hypotheses, science fiction itself has helped to erect the walls of the literary ghetto where it now lives out its piteous life.'

This harsh but constructive statement suggests how novelty of ideas is to be generated in stories, and where it is to be found; but most importantly, Lem points out that novelty, to be acceptable, must not be gratuitous novelty.

There are two types of novelty:

- 1 Genuine possibilities
- 2 Novel ideas for their own sake.

Campbell's *Astounding* (the magazine that was later transformed into *Analog*), achieved the initial freshness of 'genuine possibilities', most notably in the work of Robert A. Heinlein, as well as that of 'strangeness', in the work of A. E. Van Vogt. From a purely intellectual viewpoint, *Astounding* of the forties caught more than a glimpse of the world of the fifties and sixties, mostly from a technological viewpoint. But the achievement was more futuristic and essayistic than literary. In Heinlein, Asimov, and Clarke, the literary achievement was more than adequate, sometimes outstanding; the stories played with 'full net', recognising the constraints of science and the real world. The magnitude of this achievement, that there came into being a combination of Wellsian foresight and a degree of literary ambition, is still misunderstood — by pure literary types who can't see the spirit of inquiry, and also by many technophiles who can't see what the fuss in literature is all about (it's about the human response).

Analog today, where ideas are still welcome, rarely gets them in any human or intellectual depth, and even less frequently with any graceful writing. There are few editors in the large publishing

houses who understand 'science fiction with the net up'. It survives only if it sells, or if they can put a selling handle on authors who have scientific credentials and minimal literary skills. Most of what is published as science fiction is fantasy by default (which also makes it bad fantasy), with a sprinkling of secondhand science. Yet I believe that a genuine science fiction, authentically packaged and supported, would seem so genuine and different to new readers that it might very well become the mainstay of imaginative literature. It is this promise that continues to intrigue and keeps science fiction alive.

Why doesn't it happen? For one thing, it's not supported, and secondly, it's hard to do. You have to set out to be a certain kind of writer and person. One writer, who listened to some of what I've said here, replied with the comment, 'You don't have to do all that just to write science fiction!' I was properly horrified — but he was right from a practical point of view. You can get away with so much less. Not many writers would seek to educate themselves to the degree I've described here just to write science fiction. Yet this and more is required to create ambitious science fiction. The way waits for new writers; everything remains to be done.

By the late 1970s, it seemed that science fiction's growth into a mature literature mirroring humankind's love-hate relationship with science and technology was unstoppable. The decade had seen the publication of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Joe Haldeman's *The Forever War* and Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, among others. But no one had counted on the rediscovery of primitive mythic space opera science fiction by the movies, when *Star Wars* became a hit, or the rise of editors who knew no history and were concerned mostly with sales, entertainment, and keeping their jobs. The departure of the great writer-editors (who had nurtured science fiction by editing it and its sister, fantasy, from within, not from the outside) produced a vacuum and threw the field of imaginative fiction as a whole into decline. By 'decline' I mean that serious work was swamped by the vast ocean of work published each year. I would be happy if serious works made even

10 per cent of the total; but they are probably less than 1 per cent, and even so they are camouflaged by demeaning covers and have to make their way to readers almost by accident.

Imagine what we would have with the net raised in every aspect of a work, and the work successful on all counts. A vision of science fiction written with the net up might be described as a fiction informed by state-of-the-art thinking about the kind of universe we live in, but also drawing on the subtleties of the fictional modelling of life, dealing with important themes, proposing daring new ideas while confronting the ways in which science and technology are changing our views of ourselves, clothed in the language of poetry and the pointed explanatory narratives of storytellers. Writing with the net up also means that science fiction should be disturbing and provocative, raising basic issues of experience and moving us to think about them, questioning the identities given us by history, religious traditions, and mythical-familial origins.

For example, genuine science fiction has sometimes educated power — not simply by speaking truth to power in the manner of social critics, but by presenting power with creative avenues into futurity, by cultivating the habit of foresight and a sense of alternatives, to look beyond the self-interest of power and wealth to humane values based on sympathy, compassion, and knowledge. One of the most critical potentials of science fiction lies in probing the nature of human social systems with the tools of our sciences, in asking how societies got to be as they are. 'Just who do we think we are, and where do we think we're going?' are the kinds of questions that good science fiction has often asked, and should continue to ask. Who will wield the powerful means emerging from our science and technology? Will the concerns of justice and moral admonition continue to be regarded as no-thing more than a means to weaken the wealthy and powerful? Does a social system ever change from one that is driven largely by power and wealth to one of reason and moral decision? Attempts have been made through theocracies, but non-religious efforts also

seem to have persistent difficulties in establishing law and ethics in purely secular terms.

I know full well that a 'hard science fiction' that asks basic questions is a dangerous virus for human computers; but it is one that can encourage us to grow and change only when it doesn't pull its punches, when it looks to the human meaning of changes in science and technology, for better or ill, beyond the delights of new toys and novel situations. Yes, science fiction can be significant enough to rouse the censors. It should provoke us to anger, to thought, even to honourable action. It should make us feel the textures if not the literal reality of possible futurities, as well as to see the shadow we are casting forward into time, and to realise that unless we begin to shape for the better what is to come, by using every cultural means available, this century, which spent its first half getting ready for a great war and the second half trying to recover from it, will also go guilty into the dark.

But rather than end bitterly pessimistic, I'd rather conclude with John W. Campbell's famous statement that 'fiction is only dreams written out'. And 'science fiction consists of the hopes and dreams and fears (for some dreams are nightmares) of a technically based society', enabling us to practise thinking about futures, an area where no actual practice is possible. And science fiction, at its worst entertainment levels, always carries an undercurrent of

uneasy thought, whispering to us that 'things might be different; things might be better, things might be worse'. There is enough time and energy in the universe for us to do just about anything we can imagine, if we survive. What might we do in two hundred million years? Remember, we have barely twenty thousand years of recorded history, and we call the dinosaurs a failed species — but they lived two hundred million years. They were a success! And they didn't even write stories about their future. Although, if they had evolved into intelligent life in our place, I wonder what kind of science fiction they would have written!

It is exactly this kind of perspective, won from the sciences, and often expressed in the best science fiction, that may help us to understand and attain the proliferating, hopefully self-fulfilling, and creative foresights that are coming at us at an increasingly faster rate. Many possible futures are casting their shadows into the past — our present — competing for our allegiance. And I think it fortunate that we have an aspiring literature that is able and willing to deal with possibility both solemnly and playfully — because all of human creative effort is probably unequal to dealing with the reshaping of ourselves that started with civilisation, and we need all the baby steps we can take to make our humanity a success.

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The real science fiction: Part 1

Bruce Gillespie

Killers circling the stage:

Why Joanna Russ's fiction still puzzles me

When at the beginning of 1998 I volunteered to talk about the work of Joanna Russ at the November meeting of the **Nova Mob**, Melbourne's monthly science fiction discussion group, I did not know that for the rest of the year I would be in the middle of an intensive period of paying work. I also thought that after 11 months of reading and thinking I would have something useful, something all-inclusive, to say about her work. By November, I still found myself very puzzled.

And when Joanna Russ died on 29 April 2011, I realised I still had not returned to her work, although I had reread quite a bit of her reviews and criticism. I reread my article, and decided that I agreed with myself after all. I sent the article to **Rich Coad** for his splendid fanzine *Sense of Wonder Stories*, but Rich found his publishing schedule has been interrupted by real life. (Just as I have.) Nice Mr Coad has allowed me to reclaim my article, which appears here for the first time. This very inadequate tribute to Joanna Russ's fiction should be read in conjunction with many other tributes that have appeared elsewhere, particularly in a recent issue of **Chunga!**, edited by Randy Byers, Carl Juarez, and Andy Hooper.

Who was Joanna Russ? Throughout her career in science fiction, Russ has answered to a number of labels. These include academic, critic, literary writer, feminist, and in later years, lesbian separa-

tist. She is also known as a major writer of fiction. She is most famous for a novel, *The Female Man*, often reprinted, and for inventing Alyx, who has become the model for the warrior women



Joanna Russ in the 1970s. (Photo by Ileen Weber.)

of many other authors' fantasy and SF novels during the seventies and eighties. People also mention her 1972 essay, 'The Wearing Out of Genre Materials', which continues to be the best general essay on the science fiction genre. She has been placed by her admirers on a number of different pedestals, which I have tried to ignore. I wanted to remove Joanna Russ the worshipped object from the pedestals, take the labels off her works, and try to reach the heart of her fiction. I was too ambitious; I've failed because

the task is too large. Here is just one of many possible approaches to her work.

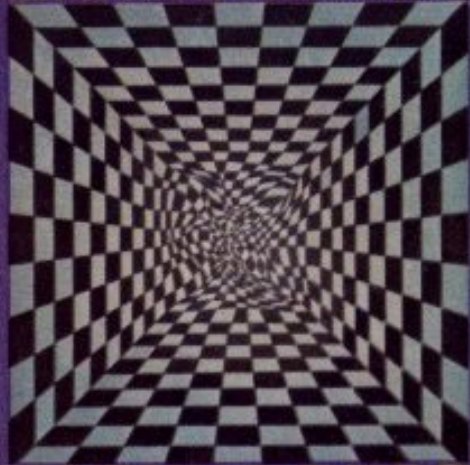
Born in 1937, Joanna Russ graduated from Cornell University in 1957 and from the Yale Drama School in 1960. She has been a teacher of English at Cornell University and at the Binghamton campus of the New York State University, she taught briefly in Colorado, and for some years she was Professor of English at the University of Washington in Seattle. I don't know a lot more. I know that she was a good friend of several members of Seattle fandom when she was living there, and that she suffered from severe back problems for many years before she died in 2011. Since her move to what I am told is a lesbian separatist colony in Arizona, she stopped writing fiction, but I read somewhere that the dry climate improved her back problems. To judge from information contained in one short story, it seems that her father died when she was very young, and that she was raised by her mother, to whom several of her stories are addressed or dedicated.

How did I become first aware of Joanna Russ? I'm not sure. She just seemed to be part of the SF landscape from the mid 1960s onwards, and her fiction was often linked in people's minds with that of Samuel Delany. Suddenly she seemed to be someone whose books I should collect, although I had read little of her work, so I began collecting everything. Russ wrote a book review column for *F&SF* for some years in the early 1970s, alternating with Tom Disch. Between them, they made the *F&SF* book review column a work of wonder and delight. What I liked about Russ's reviews was her book-reviewing-as-a-blood-sport style.

Joanna Russ became well known for a number of public fights with other authors. I have a tape of the verbal battle she had at Torcon 1973 with Michael Coney. Unfortunately I missed the event itself, and now I dare not play the tape for fear it will disintegrate as it passes through the tape heads. I can't remember what the fight was about. Later in the 1970s she had a paper run-in with Philip

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AN ACE SCIENCE FICTION SPECIAL



JOANNA RUSS PICNIC ON PARADISE

"Style and originality and power
...splendid." — THEODORE STURGEON



Dick about abortion. Dick wrote a story that appeared to deplore the abortion of any foetus that might possibly become a human; Russ, defending women's right to control of their own bodies, jumped all over Dick.

The general impression I had of Joanna Russ was of a cloud of ferocity and no-bullshit anger about everything she did. She went straight to the point in arguments; she avoided theoretical waffling as much as possible. Her work has been always invigorating to read.

The first time I noticed a particular work of hers was when George Turner reviewed *Picnic on Paradise*, first published in Terry Carr's Ace Special series. George wrote his review in 1968, and I published it in January 1969 in the first issue of *SF Commentary*. I quote extensively from George's review because he finds so much more in the book than I found:

Miss Russ is a Cornell BA ... ; she is a produced playwright and something of a poetess. The playwright shows, to advantage, in the strict construction of the novel, the teacher shows in the accurate handling of language, and the poetess shows, more subtly, in her relation of language to form and in flashes of intense association wherein meanings sputter like sparks from simple words and exchanges.

The plot is a dependable old-timer. A tough girl from the past is summoned to guide a party of far-future people (ingrainedly soft and, because of their cultural background, mostly psychopathic in Alyx's appreciation) in a march from danger to safety through hostile territory. Her problem is less the hostile ground than the helpless people. The dangers are not overtly great as hostile environments go, and her failures are mainly due to the inability of her charges to come to grips with the realities they have been civilised away from. They do not all survive.

On this base she has constructed an allegory of different types of reality (or different visions of reality) pitted against each other. Those who compromise or accept fresh vision win out; the others

do not. If this sounds like the bones of a Campbell editorial, don't be put off, because Miss Russ is a deeper psychologist and logician than Campbell. She never digs deeply into her characters or theme, but presents the thesis intelligibly and does not force her incidents to hammer a point. The incidents are normal and expectable and the reactions believable; her handling of them is neither ordinary nor expectable. Nor is her heroine one of those irritatingly superior beings who know all the answers against all probability; she meets her various Waterloos where her understanding fails her.

If there is a nit to be picked, it is the author's choice of a lass from ancient Tyre as heroine. SF writers have a disastrous love of this person-from-the-past bit, and none of them has ever handled it with any sense of the past to give it life ... Miss Russ has no discernible sense of the 'feel' of an ancient civilisation and her Alyx might as well have been a healthy outdoors Amazon of our own day, but I found it easy to forget this and accept her as a competent person with a contemporary viewpoint.

It is in the writing, often subtle and rarely ordinary, that the charm lies. The book can be recommended on two levels; as a good, salty adventure or — for those with literary training and insight — as an unspectacular but sound piece of good writing.

While all this is true, in his review George treats rather kindly some distracting peculiarities of *Picnic in Paradise*.

For instance, Russ never really explains why the group of tourists are stranded in one spot on Paradise, and why, when war breaks out on the planet, they must reach another spot on the same planet in order to head home to Earth. The journey itself seems arbitrary. Why is there no spaceport or whatever at the spot where we first find them?

Also, at the beginning of the novel Russ assumes we know a fair bit about Alyx's background, but that background, sketchy as it is, can only be found in some of the other stories that were eventually collected in *The Adventures of Alyx*. In other words, in

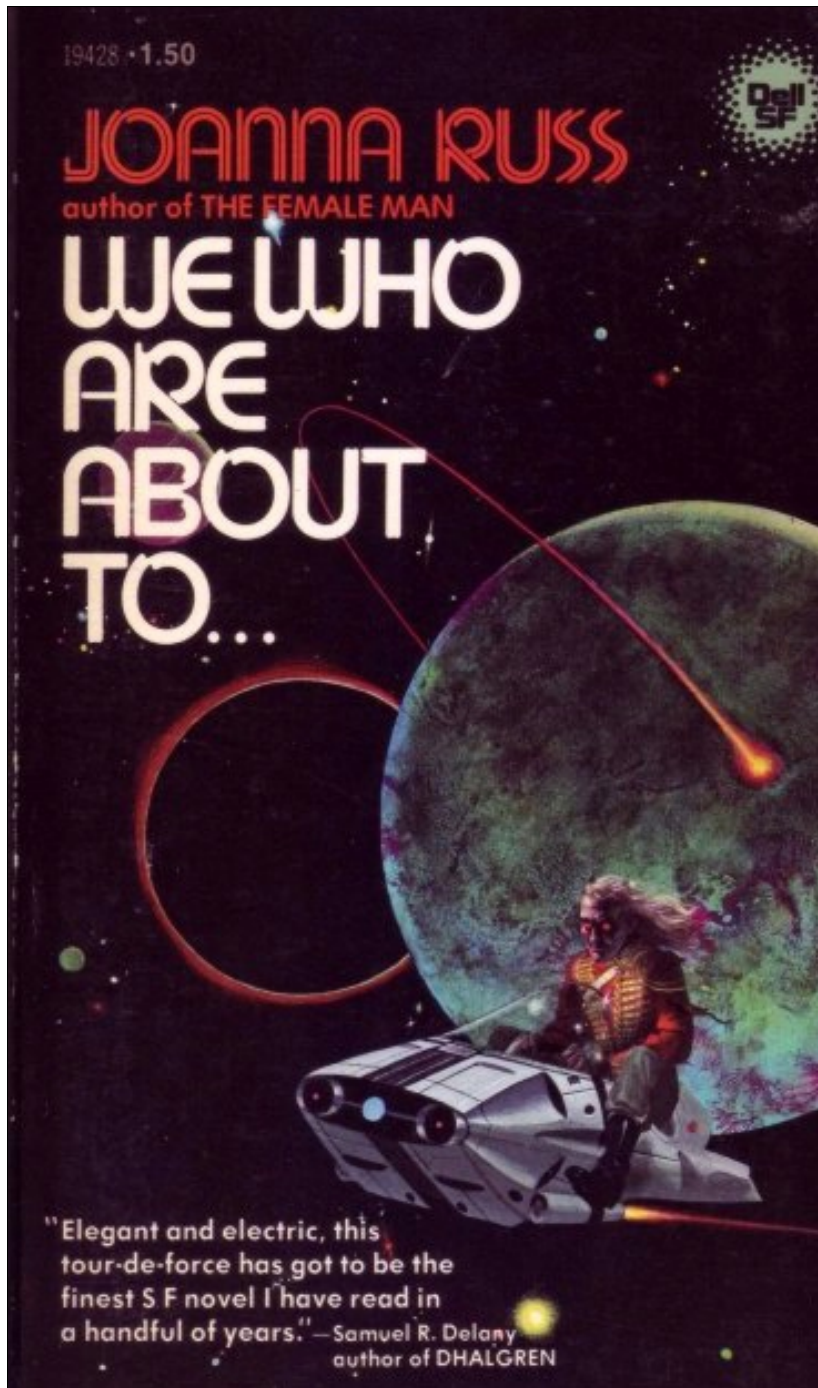
this novel and in her others, Russ is that most annoying of storytellers: the one who never quite tells us the vital nuts-and-bolts facts that would give us a firm hold on the basic story.

Not that the literary model for *Picnic on Paradise* is the story or the novel. The model for most of her work, successfully in the short stories and much less successfully in the novels, is the interpersonal drama. She puts a small number of characters on stage, and watches them battle it out within a small physical or emotional space. In *Picnic on Paradise*, the stage of the novel is a large, hostile area of the planet Paradise, although the psychological space between the characters remains stiflingly close.

Even so, *Picnic on Paradise* does not conform to the model of the traditional American stage drama. Russ's aim is not to reveal the truth of the past of the lives of her characters, but to put them onto a fighting stage from which few of them will escape alive. As George Turner notes so acutely, there is a constant element of Campbellian Social Darwinism in Russ's work: may the best woman be left standing at the end, since it almost certainly won't be a man, and most of the women characters will be dead as well. And the best woman remaining will be the one who is best at physical fighting skills. I've read very few writers, male or female, who relish a physical knockdown fight in the way that Russ does. Physical power is what Joanna Russ is interested in, not to mention the odd slaughter.

In ***We Who Are About To ...*** Russ virtually rewrites *Picnic on Paradise*, with most of its peculiarities accentuated and elaborated. The title is based on Suetonius's line from 120 AD, 'Hail, Emperor, we who are about to die salute thee'.

Something goes terribly wrong with an interstellar spaceship carrying a group of passengers who are remarkably like the softies and psychos we met in *Picnic on Paradise*. Fortunately, the disintegration of the ship takes place near a planet on which humans can breathe. Unfortunately, the planet supports no plants



or animals on which humans can feed. The group of humans managed to take with them a fair bit of equipment into their rescue craft before they headed towards the planet. They find that have everything they need to set up a new human society except for sustainable food sources. Their provisions can only last a few months. They are all doomed. How best will they face the situation?

Russ's storyteller, who is very like Alyx, is determined to end her days alone, with grace and dignity. Most of the other people in the party, despite the fact that they know they cannot live long, merely try to set up the worst aspects of Earth's paternalistic society. Everybody is willing to fit into his or her role except the storyteller. The others see her independent attitude as intolerable, and attack her in various ways. She steals the little one-person flyer, and heads across the planet, which is all the more beautiful and potent for its being inimicable to humans. She finds a cave, sets up camp, and believes she is safe. However, the rest of the group find a way to track her across country, and attack her cave. She proves very good at killing her attackers. She returns to the original camp, kills the two women who are still living there, then returns to her cave to put her thoughts in order during her final days.

The relationship between these people seems to me as odd as the geography of the planet is beautiful. I can't quite see why the others are totally determined to make the main character fit into their new little society. I can't see why she is utterly determined to kill them rather than merely find a way to escape their clutches. In other words, as a background to some vivid writing we still find the great American fallacy: that the only way to solve problems is with violence, not with subtlety or persuasion.

In each of *And Chaos Died* and *The Two of Them* I found it extremely difficult to work out the basic situation in which the characters find themselves. Also I find the solutions to the problems raised both unnecessarily violent and oddly exhilarating. The strength of the novels is the angularity and sharpness of the

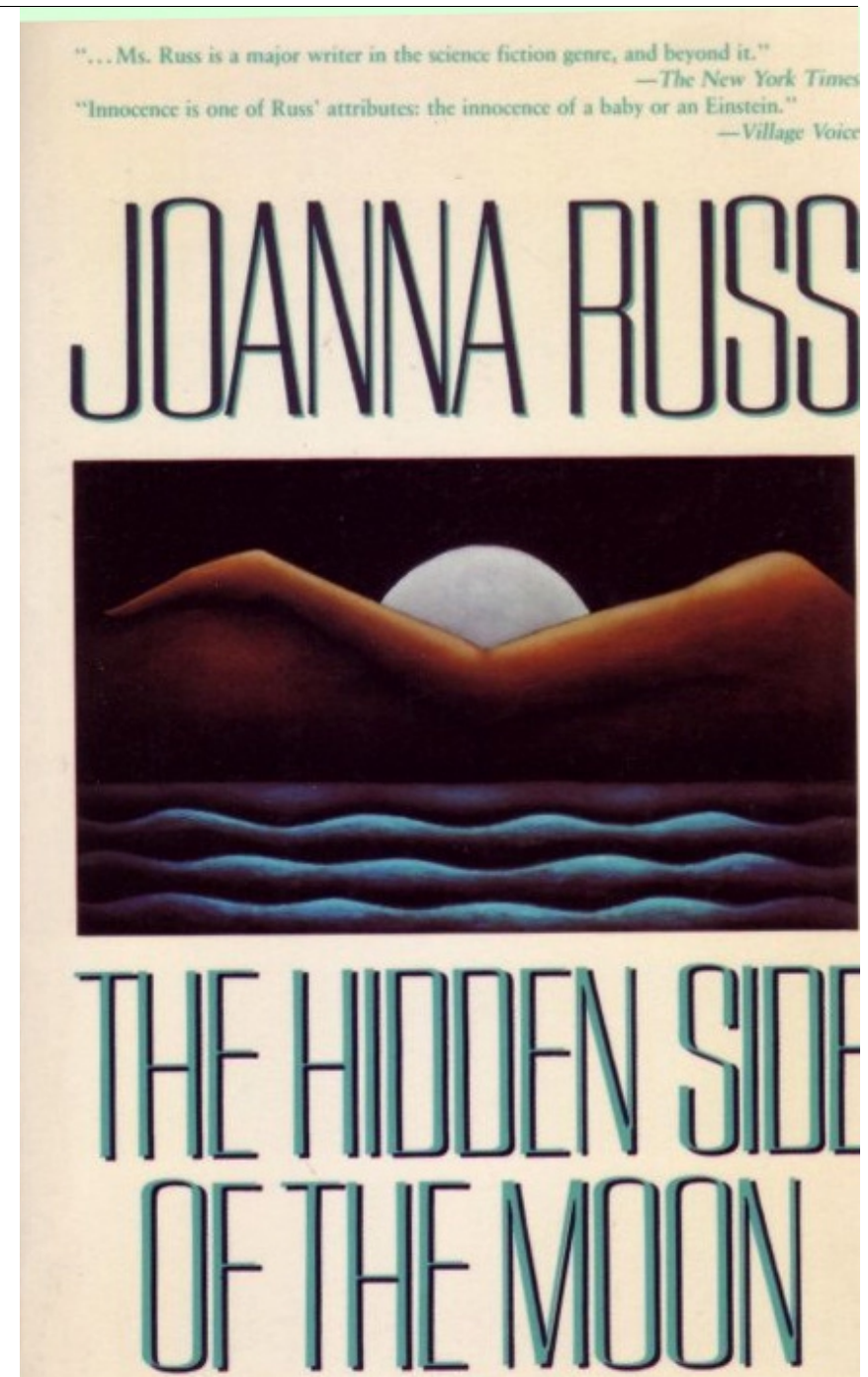
writing. There is no waffle here, no generalities. Character is expressed in action, as George Turner once prescribed for all fiction. The action is vivid. Its peculiar character is the feeling of claustrophobia it gives the reader. It feels as if the characters are circling each other on a bare Shakespearean stage, waiting to sink the dagger into each other. In Russ's world, to encounter another human being, even an outwardly non-dangerous human being, is to risk slaughter.

If Russ had written only novels, I would have little more to say about her work, except for *The Female Man*, to which I will return. But she has also been a prolific short story writer since the late 1950s, and the difference between the novels and the short stories is startling.

I really began to take notice of Joanna Russ's work in 1970, about two years after I read *Picnic on Paradise*. I had read some of the early short 'Alyx' stories, but didn't like them, and still don't, now that I've re-read them. But in 1970 I read in the first issue of Samuel Delany's original fiction anthology *Quark* a story by Russ called '**The View from this Window**' (reprinted in the anthology *The Hidden Side of the Moon*, 1987). I quote my own review at the time:

Joanna Russ's 'The View from this Window' must be the best *non-SF* story ever published in an SF collection. True, on second reading, I notice that Russ hints that her storyteller is really an Alien Living Among Us. In the story's first paragraph she writes, 'I materialised in a laboratory rented from the Harvard Special Researches Project, and had to be taught the words for bed, table, chair.' Later in the story Russ even hints that both the lady and the young man she picks up spring from the same alien species ('We both belong to that race of neat people who grow up early and stay young for a long long time.') Or perhaps short story writers can no longer shelter anywhere but under the SF banner.

The story begins 'with the advent of cold weather' when 'this University shrinks into itself'. Like a flurry of snowflakes, details of the main character's life and attitude flutter past as we read the



story's first few pages. The storyteller certainly sees herself as an 'alien', a cheeky swimmer against the tide of formless, conventional University life:

A few hardy atoms like myself still darting past the bunches of people peering doubtfully from the windows of the warmest buildings . . . This is the joy that only an amphibian can know: waving to windows of faculty offices in the cold, dark-blue evening as I quit work . . .

Her colleagues wave from windows; she looks through windows, from the outside. She stands apart from her colleagues, and sums up their characters with further snippets of sentences:

There at the glass wall was Bill Beam, so I joined him: a thin, eager, effusive fellow, already a little bald at thirty, hates student actors, an increasingly bad director.

When Bill Beam tries to flirt with her, she tries to brush him off. An interesting person, but just another alien to her.

She always seeks the most luxuriant sights, sounds and feelings:

There is an L-shaped box of glass and steel built over a waterfall; it lights up like an aerodrome at night, and you can even sit in a glassed-in patio and watch the waterfall go by at the level of your knees, but there is no other place so close to the night: a vast hall of black mirrors.

The storyteller shows a similar attitude towards human relationships. She takes advantage of her position in the University to waste luxuriant quantities of time: 'There is always something new: new books at the store, new records, plays, concerts, readings, films, special groups, and when anything comes, everybody goes.' A catalogue of enjoyments; again, both tempting and alien. But she views people as if she looks at water sliding down the other side of a pane of glass:

It was a mole-coloured, bundled-up, utilitarian crowd, on the whole, with a few pink cashmere sweaters and one girl — only

one — in an avant-garde black vinyl dress that crackled violently as she moved, with a sound like pistol shots. Most students dress down.

Russ's telling phrase is, 'Most students dress down.' The students occupy their places, and she occupies hers.

Russ's story shows how the window of her story-teller's viewpoint is broken, but at no time does she give away to sentimentality. Bill Beam introduces a boy, one of his drama students, to the storyteller:

The boy took off his perfectly round-lensed steel-rimmed spectacles, the spectacles of a revolutionary idealist who carries radishes in his pocket when visiting rich friends at dinner, and showed us his naked face.

In vain, the storyteller tries to shut out the boy as just someone else to be laughed at. However, his awkwardness and idealism strike her as unexpected. At first she takes no notice of him, but his intensity attracts her:

He told me two things on the way home: his age and the name of his play. He also said quite candidly, 'Mr Beam is a failure, isn't he?' and then he told me his name, but I didn't remember it: Alan Something.

'Alan Something' makes himself into a mystery, which the storyteller tries to unfathom. A view through a window makes everything look flat and manageable, such as the University staff and students. The story tells how she tries to step through the window. The boy shares an odd harmony with her; he seems like another alien. Russ writes the diary of a love affair, told from the viewpoint of a complex, hedonistic, supremely self-confident woman. The last few pages contain one of the best-written love scenes I've read.

That's the end of the review that I wrote in 1971. Not having experienced a love affair of any kind at that time, I could hardly write more about the details of the truly extraordinary intimacy

that Russ brings to this account of a seduction. The story ends as she leaves in the morning. The young man is asleep. She does not say goodbye. She won't be coming back. But at least the tone of intimacy has been here, as it almost never is in the novels.

What is the secret of Joanna Russ? Why do her story-tellers find it so difficult to make contact with other human beings? In conventional SF terms, most of her storytellers are representatives of the Trans-Temp patrol. Throughout her stories, mainly those in *Extra (Ordinary People)* and *The Adventures of Alyx*, we find almost nothing about this organisation except that, in Alyx's case, it picks her up from Earth's far past and keeps dumping her in eras that are in our future, but which are in the past of the Patrol itself. Sometimes, as in the story '**Souls**', a Trans-Temp operative spends her entire adult life as a Mother Superior in a Dark Ages convent before she is rescued by the Patrol, but we never find out whether representatives of the Patrol are merely observers, or are required to carry out good works of some kind.

In the novel ***The Two of Them***, for instance, the main character becomes a rebel on the run because she kidnaps a girl from one of the environments she visits, a very strict Muslim society, although she believes that the girl would have suffered greatly if she had stayed in the society. And yet during the novel one can never work out what relationship the storyteller and her male Trans-Temp partner are supposed to have to the environment they visit while they are there. At best, we can say that the various Trans-Temp characters we meet are observers who are always in danger of disturbing the environment in which they find themselves.

In the case of '**The Second Inquisition**', the story that set me off into this exploration of Russ's work, the operative seeks refuge by staying in a past world.

For some kind of answer to the conundrum, I must return to the

short stories, to a story that appears in her SF anthology, *The Hidden Side of the Moon*. The story is not science fiction, but a ghost story. It is '**The Dirty Little Girl**'.

It begins promisingly enough:

Dear —

Do you like cats? I never asked you. There are all sorts of cats: elegant, sinuous cats, clunky, heavy-breathing cats, skinny, desperate cats, meatloaf-shaped cats, waddling, dumb cats, big slob cats who step heavily and groan whenever they try to fit themselves (and they never do fit) under something or in between something or past something. I'm allergic to all of them. You'd think they'd know it.

As the storyteller wanders the neighbourhood, cats try to take over her life, 'crying *dependency! dependency!* and showing their elegantly needly little teeth'. They have confidence in her, but she fends them off.

Cats are not the problem, though, merely symptoms of a fractured interface with ordinary life. 'And the children!' exclaims the storyteller. 'I don't dislike children. Yes I do. No I don't, but I feel horribly awkward with them.' What do they see, she says 'in a tall, shuffling, professional, intellectual woman at forty?' What indeed? But this is the most startling line of self-revelation Joanna Russ gives us in all her fiction.

The story begins when 'the dirtiest eight-year-old I've ever seen' approaches the storyteller in a supermarket. She cannot be got rid of. This dirty little girl with the low, gravelly voice takes over the life of the storyteller, who has much difficulty with back pain. The girl can lift groceries. When eventually she gets past the front door, she is lost in wonder at the storyteller's astronomical and micro photographs on the wall. She admires the house, although it is rather modest. The storyteller manages to clean her up and brush her hair a bit. The little girl runs off, leaving no address, but

returns days later. Eventually she is given a bath. 'Afterwards she flashed nude about the house, hanging out of windows, embellishing her strange, raucous shouts with violent jerkings and boundings-about that I think were meant for dancing.' She will never say where she lives.

Abruptly the story somersaults. 'Was this the moment I decided I was dealing with a ghost? No, long before. Little by little, I suppose. Her clothes were a dead giveaway, for one thing: always the same and the kind no child had worn since the end of the Second World War ... But she was such a *nice* little ghost. And so solid! Ghosts don't run up your grocery bills, do they?'

As soon as the storyteller realises this, the dirty little girl disappears. She reappears many months later, very wet at the door after a late-summer storm. The little ghost cannot be placated: 'You want to clean me up because you don't like me! You like me clean because you don't like me dirty! You hate me so when you won't give me what I need! You won't give me what I need and I'm dying! I'm dying! I'm dying!' The storyteller realises that all her cleaning up was to keep the girl at bay. She cuddles her for the first time. She is fully bathed for the first time, as part of a relationship. The girl asks to stay forever, but in the morning she is gone forever.

Is this the end of the story? Hardly. The storyteller then tells us that her father died when she was two, and that she has always had an uncomfortable relationship with her mother. She is always angry with her mother. However, some time after the final disappearance of the dirty little girl, mother and daughter meet at a restaurant. 'There was nothing to be angry about, this time.' At their meeting, her mother starts to tell her of an incident when the storyteller was five. The mother seemed to disappear from her life for a long time. She never told her daughter that she was being treated for cancer. 'What would you feel about a mother who disappeared like that? ... I wish I could go on to describe a scene of intense and affectionate reconciliation between my

mother and myself, but that did not happen — quite.'

The end of the story features two descriptions of images caught in mirrors. In the restaurant where the story teller meets her mother:

if you sit at a corner table in Kent and Hallby's and see your face where the mirrored walls come together ... you can see yourself (for the only time in your life) as you look to other people. An ordinary mirror reverses the right and left sides of your face but this odd arrangement re-reflects them so they're back in place. People are shocked when they see themselves; I had planned to warn her.

This piece of quiet description seems to me the finest prose in any of Russ's work, because it represents everything she has been aiming for, often without realising it, in all the earlier work. The storyteller merely wants to show her mother this startling image of how she looks to her daughter, but the author is seeking something larger, represented in the story by the dirty little ghost who has already given a true reflection of herself to the story teller.

In the last few paragraphs, the storyteller keeps seeing the dirty little girl at her side when she looks in shop windows. But 'what about the bags under her eyes, the deep, downward lines about her mouth, the strange color of her short-cut hair (it's grey)? What about her astonishing air of being so much older, so much more intellectual, so much more professional, so much more — well, competent — than any Little Dirty Girl could possibly be? Well, faces change when forty-odd years fall into the developing fluid.'

Is this too neat an ending? Yes, told like this. No, when experienced while reading the story. The enormous power of the ghostly girl, the storyteller meeting herself of forty years before, bursts right through the fabric of the story. She's there, in the room, as you would expect in the work of a master dramatist.

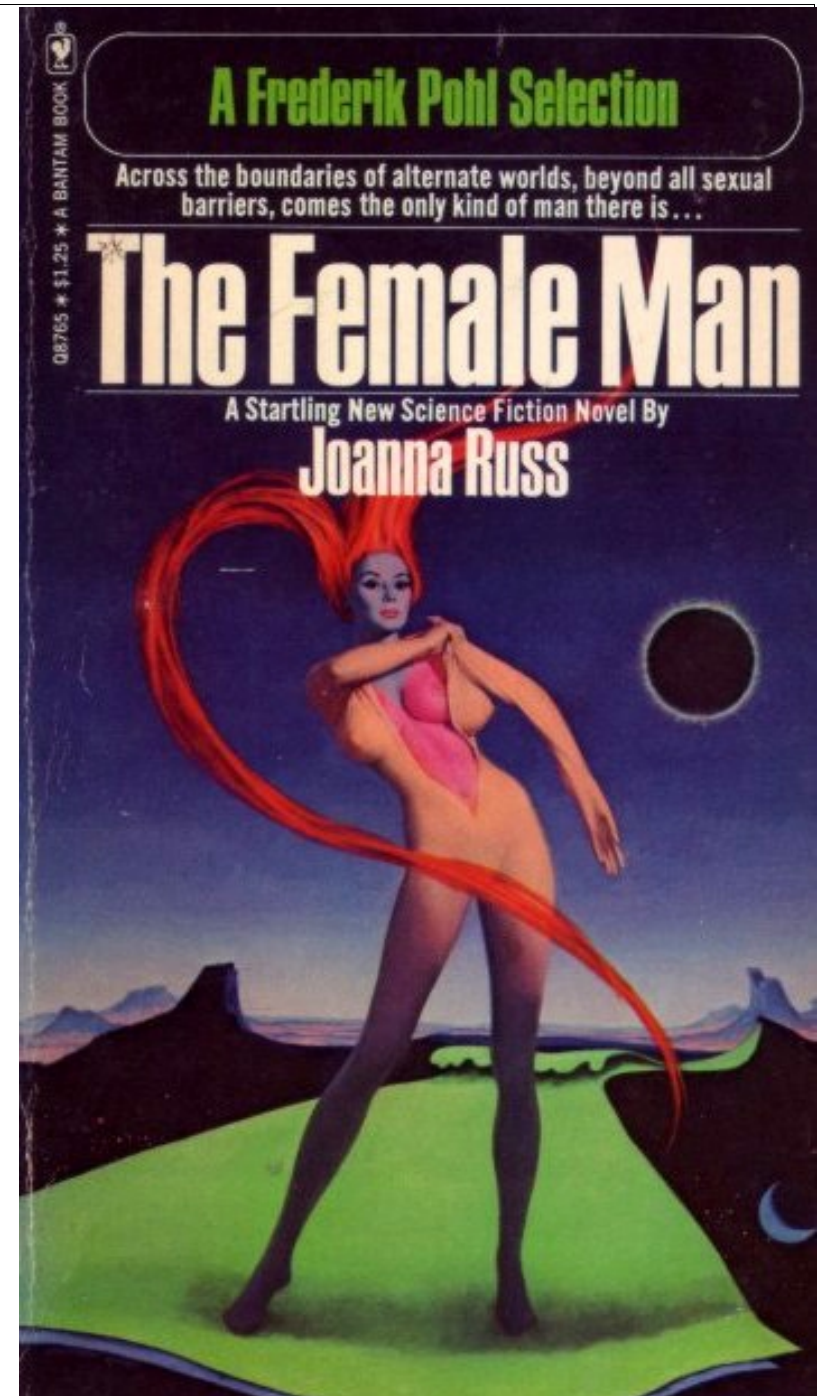
Most importantly, she's not there in most of the novels, and in

many of the short stories. Alyx and the other warrior women are parts of the earlier Russ consciousness, which keeps doing battle with itself. But on the dramatic stage of her mind, the warriors can only find inadequate enemies, who die all too easily.

Before 'The Dirty Little Girl', the nearest Russ came to finding adequate images of herself was by dividing herself into four in ***The Female Man***. The result is richly comic, and I don't have time here to talk much about it. One of the main characters lives on a far-future feminist Utopia called Whileaway. I would have liked Russ to have concentrated on Whileaway, as Le Guin did on Anarres in *The Dispossessed*. The other Joannas live in versions of our contemporary world. It's never quite clear by what mechanism the four characters flit between each other's worlds, but Russ gains some very nice effects as any three characters watch the other one trying to live life in an inadequate world. Much of argument in the book is feminist, but the mode of argument, dramatic confrontations, reflections in a fractured mirror, is purely personal and is the real reason why the novel stays popular.

Somewhere in the eighties, Russ achieved some of her own personal aims and settled some scores with herself in her fiction, for she now seems to have stopped writing novels and short stories. Her latest book is a huge bible of feminism, *What Are We Fighting For?* It's something of a relief to find that Joanna Russ is still out there fighting, but I wish she would return to writing short stories, her greatest talent.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 3 November 1998/3 November 2011**



Joanna Russ's 'The Wearing Out of Genre Materials'

(Reprinted from *Steam Engine Time* 12, March 2010.)

Joanna Russ wields a sharp scalpel, and loves to use it. After you've read her essay collection *The Country You Have Never Seen*, you might wonder how anybody can keep reading science fiction at all. Yet, like the *ASFR* critics whose reviews most resemble hers, you feel that she kicks hard because she believes the best works in the field can kick back. In reading Russ, you find many funny and pithy sentences about the art and craft of fiction writing.

Russ's book is essential reading for its general essays, especially 'The Wearing Out of Genre Materials', the most brilliant essay about science fiction I've read:

When writers work in the same genre, i.e. use the same big scenes or 'gimmicks' or 'elements' or 'ideas' or 'worlds' ..., they are using the same fantasy. Once used in art, once brought to light, as it were, the effect of the fantasy begins to wane, and the scene embodying it begins to wear out. The question immediately arises: Which wears out? Does the underlying wish wear out or does the literary construct lose its power of embodying the wish...?

What really happens is that the wish persists but the artistic construct loses its connection with the wish — Auden has said that readers go from bad to good literature looking for the same thing. That is, in one person's lifetime the desire for a certain kind of fantasy persists, but the person is driven to a higher and higher quality of literary work. The bad work wears out.

Russ's theory is that genre materials wear out in three stages: 'Innocence, Plausibility, and Decadence'. She traces this through several SF motifs, such as the Revolt of the Robots. Her three examples, from a Damon Knight collection, are: 'Moxon's Master' by Ambrose Bierce (1893), a story from the stage of Innocence, 'Reason' by Isaac Asimov (1941), from the stage of Plausibility, and 'But Who Can Replace a Man' by Brian Aldiss (1958), from the stage of Decadence.

Innocence is the simple and naïve stage in the evolution of a genre construct ... a brief glimpse of the marvel, rather like pulling a rabbit out of the hat. ... Once the idea stops enrapturing you, the next step is to make it plausible... What we think of now as typically science-fictional questions are being asked: ... At what level would technology have to be to make such a machine possible? ... What would such machines be like? The question that's being asked in this second stage is 'What, if really?' ... [what is] realistic in the sense of making concessions to sense, actuality and logic.

Russ then explains how science fiction went to the stage of Decadence. I don't have time to outline anything like her complete argument. Here are a few highlights:

Stories may become petrified into collections of rituals, with all freshness and conviction gone ... Stories may become part of a stylized convention ... What once were the big scenes or frissons of the whole story may be shrunk, elided, compressed or added to, that is, until only the original wish/scene is left as a metaphoric element among other metaphoric elements.

Russ's example is Brian Aldiss's 'But Who Can Replace a Man?', which was written before the New Wave era, but could well have been published by Mike Moorcock in *New Worlds*. As Russ says:

The story is not about robots rebelling, or why robots rebel, or what robots are; it uses these common science fiction elements for another purpose: showing us what we are. ... [It] shows us a science-fictional element on the verge of death — i.e. on the way to continued existence only as a metaphor ...

The three stages of Innocence, Plausibility, and Decadence may present a paradigm of the history of every aesthetic element in art ... And I wonder if metaphor is not the ultimate destination of every narrative element ...

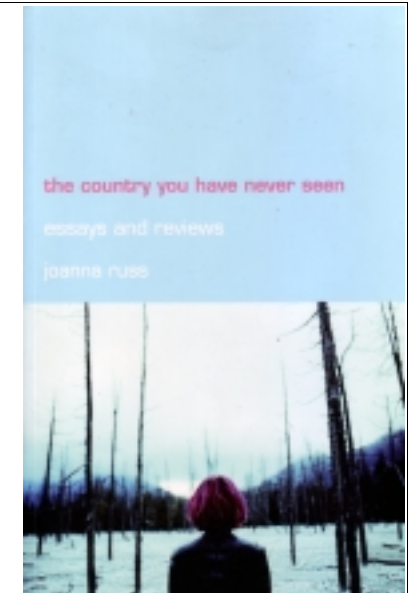
Joanna Russ's article goes on for several more pages, riffing on the ways in which it can be applied to any art, not just science fiction. As far as I know the essay appeared only in a magazine called *College English* in 1971, then in the BSFA's fanzine *Vector* in 1972, and appeared nowhere else until Joanna Russ's recent collection. Yet it makes sense of many aspects of the treasure search, showing clearly why the search for new treasure is probably in vain, but has to be undertaken anyway. Her theory applies to most popular fields. In film, the Innocent stage was the early years of the silent era before 1928, when most of the plots and techniques still used were invented. The Golden Age of film, as in any genre, was the equivalent of Russ's Realistic era. From the late 1930s to early 1950s film was at its most self-confident and brash. In 1946, as many people went to the cinema each week in Britain as they did each year by the 1970s. In pop music the innocent era was a very short period from 1954 to 1957, the rock and roll era whose happy self-confidence the musicians of many later eras tried to revive.

In short, each new genre starts at its top, then gradually deteriorates.

Since this has happened in science fiction, it's little wonder that the main tone of the writers I've been discussing is resignation or disappointment. They can barely remember why they became enthusiastic about science fiction. All that sense of excitement has gone. They know why they do what they do, for they see themselves as highly skilled metaphorical artists, a product of what Russ would call the Decadent era of science fiction. Their work is entirely personal, yet they are trying to write for people who don't care about the personal. As Disch says, the audience for science fiction is always young, but most of its writers are now middle-aged or old. Today's young writers don't write science fiction; they tend to write in other genres, such as horror or epic fantasy.

The books I've been discussing don't fully take into account this paradox in science fiction. They still get worried about science fiction itself, instead of getting to grips with individual works and authors. No wonder they don't write the kind of reviews I was looking for when I began reading for this essay. To do so you have to assume that your fellow writer is first and foremost a self-conscious artist, representing a unique viewpoint, and treat the work as such, not as a work designed to maintain the clunky genre machinery of science fiction. But if you look at a work of SF in a truly critical way, can you be bothered about the fact that it is science fiction, since the assumptions of the field, so forensically exposed by Disch, Priest, and Russ, remain those of bright twelve-year-olds?

— **Bruce Gillespie, March 2010**



The real science fiction: Part 2

George Zebrowski

Arthur C. Clarke

Most critical discussions of Arthur C. Clarke's writings rarely look beyond his stories and novels; but to understand his fiction, one must examine how Clarke has thought about future possibilities, because this reveals the nature of the provocative realities that shape his fiction. His approach to looking ahead is the basis of his vision of human history and its promise.

Clarke fulfils the ambitions of science fiction, in that his achievement is both intellectual and artistic. Clarke's work meets Isaac Asimov's definition of science fiction as a literature that deals with the human impact of changes in science and technology, in which the 'changes' makes the work science fiction and the 'human impact' makes it literature. The importance of this definition is that it allows SF its one compelling feature: that it is not just a story, but something that might happen — if not literally, then in its major features. Without this element of genuine possibility SF becomes fantasy. Einstein's profound prescription for the work of science — that hypotheses and theories are at first free creations

of the imagination, which must rejoin reality through the experience of an experiment (an organised form of experience by which theories are confirmed, denied, or left pending) — applies equally well to science fiction: the central premise affecting the characters must be at least possible, or not easily discredited, at least, or the story loses the means by which it suspends our disbelief. This is perhaps the most difficult feature of genuine science fiction to explain to the casual reader, who may not understand the resourcefulness, creativity, and imagination required to comprehend the cutting edges of the sciences, and then to use these materials in the realm of fiction.

Clarke's grasp of human scientific and technical creativity is best expressed in ***Profiles of the Future***, an often revised collection of his essays. In these pieces Clarke does not express a naive, even uncritical, faith in science and technology; rather, he sets out what is possible, whether humankind accomplishes any of it or not. The most important chapters in *Profiles* are the first two:

'Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Nerve' and 'Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination'. Few people today, both in future studies and among science fiction writers, fully understand how important these two chapters are in humanity's efforts to think about possible futures. One must look back to *Daedalus* (1923) by J. B. S. Haldane and J. D. Bernal's *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1929) to find essays of comparable importance (the first had a new edition in 1995, the second in 1970); both books continue to be the subjects of continuing interest.

Clarke's essays are marked by playfulness, but their light touch conceals the weight of their subject matter. Revolutionary statements come and go in the space of a sentence, suggesting tomes of more detailed explanation. Such is the case with Clarke's Laws, without which one cannot understand Clarke's fiction, or what genuine science fiction attempts to do.

These laws, despite their wit, present an undogmatic, creative way of thinking about possible futures. They are a profound working tool, and the very heart of one of the great scientific and literary careers of the twentieth century. The laws limit their province, include qualifications and exceptions based on how 'looking ahead' has disgraced itself in the past, and chart the limits of foresight, using ignorance itself as a map. They demonstrate why future innovations are not to be deduced in some mechanical fashion, but are drawn from a reservoir of ideas that, if they do not violate fundamental laws, will always be possible even if human beings fail at making them into practical realities.

Law One: 'When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.' Here Clarke decries conservative inertia, which tends to see innovation as extravagance. Failures of nerve and imagination prevent seeing how familiar obstacles may be overcome, even though the record of the past shows that many seemingly wild predictions have been fulfilled, as long as they did not violate basic physical laws. There

is a psychological brake on technological applications — even when the science is mature — that must be overcome in every generation. The most startling aspect of this condition is that a technical innovation is sometimes most denied just as it is about to happen. Nuclear fission and space travel are two examples of last-minute denials.

Law Two: 'The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible.' This process will not overcome basic limits, but even these should be retested by every generation of researchers, if only to avoid creeping timidity and dogmatism. Science is not made up of absolute truths, but of candidates for truth that continue to resist disproof, but are never proven absolutely. There may be 'basic impossibilities' that only seem so until we step outside their province. These may turn out to be merely technical impracticalities that yielded to new technology. Positive proof of scientific claims requires an infinity of experiments — a feat that cannot be performed — any one of which might fail sooner or later; but even one negative experiment is all it takes to cast a fatal doubt. It must be possible to at least imagine the conditions under which a hypothesis or theory might be disproven, even if that will never happen. Only a vulnerable theory, for which a test can be imagined and carried out, has any chance of being true — that is, in resisting disproof; the other kind is true by definition, which is no proof at all.

Law Two may be viewed as an application of Karl Popper's famous Falsifiability Criterion for identifying whether a claim is a scientific one. Only theories that *may* turn out to be wrong are legitimate candidates for scientific truth — or it's not a horse race; the truth is prejudged, and all facts can be made to support the conclusion — and nothing can count against it. This is what we mean by a dogma, or in logic, a tautology. Dogmas are computer viruses for the human mind. They end all doubt and inquiry by excluding all evidence to the contrary. A dogmatic state is a psychological extreme, a denial of our finitude, which yearns for final answers that will be final and invulnerable to disproof; and coiled within

dogmas is an even more insidious virus: a reinforced dogmatism, which has written within it a rule against being doubted. All discussion ends. The important point here is that we live in a creative universe of vulnerable rather than absolute truths, and that genuine science fiction should reflect the fact. Put simply, it is a distinction between open and closed minds.

Law Three: 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.' Here Clarke sounds the central fact of science and science fiction — that science is *the* discoverable magic of our universe, the only magic that works, for which we yearn in all our myths. Scientific knowledge will not give us omniscience and omnipotence, but it has provided applications that would have been magic to our ancestors. We can have a large measure of wish fulfilment, if we turn away from idolatry before the mysteries of existence and support the development of science and technology.

Up to now our science has been surprising in its penetration, adolescent in its applications, but suggestive of what a mature science-technology alliance might be able to do. Arthur C. Clarke has not only looked ahead, but has also examined what attempts to look ahead involve in the way of logical and practical problems. His projections in technical papers and in essays have sought to stimulate research and to educate the intelligent reader. In this he is the heir to the efforts of H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, J. D. Bernal, and J. B. S. Haldane. His contemporaries in this effort have been Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, Loren Eiseley, and Jacob Bronowski, to name a few of the best.

The human impact of scientific-technological possibilities Clarke shows us in his science fiction. The playful aspect of his three laws is superficial; their subtlety and far-reaching implications could easily fill whole volumes of discussion and examples. The thinking behind them takes for granted that we live in a quantum, Gödelian universe of relatively open possibilities that is more like a great evolving thought than a clockwork Newtonian machine, a universe

in which recognising and shaping possibilities must replace guesswork and naïve prophesying of the religious and mythical kind. 'The real future is not logically foreseeable,' Clarke concludes. 'We need logic, but we also need faith and imagination which can sometimes defy logic itself.'

Clarke's views about the universe and human possibilities are not merely present in his science fiction; they shape his fiction by selecting its dramatic possibilities. His science fiction is imbued with authenticity, lacking the arbitrariness that is too often a feature of lesser SF.

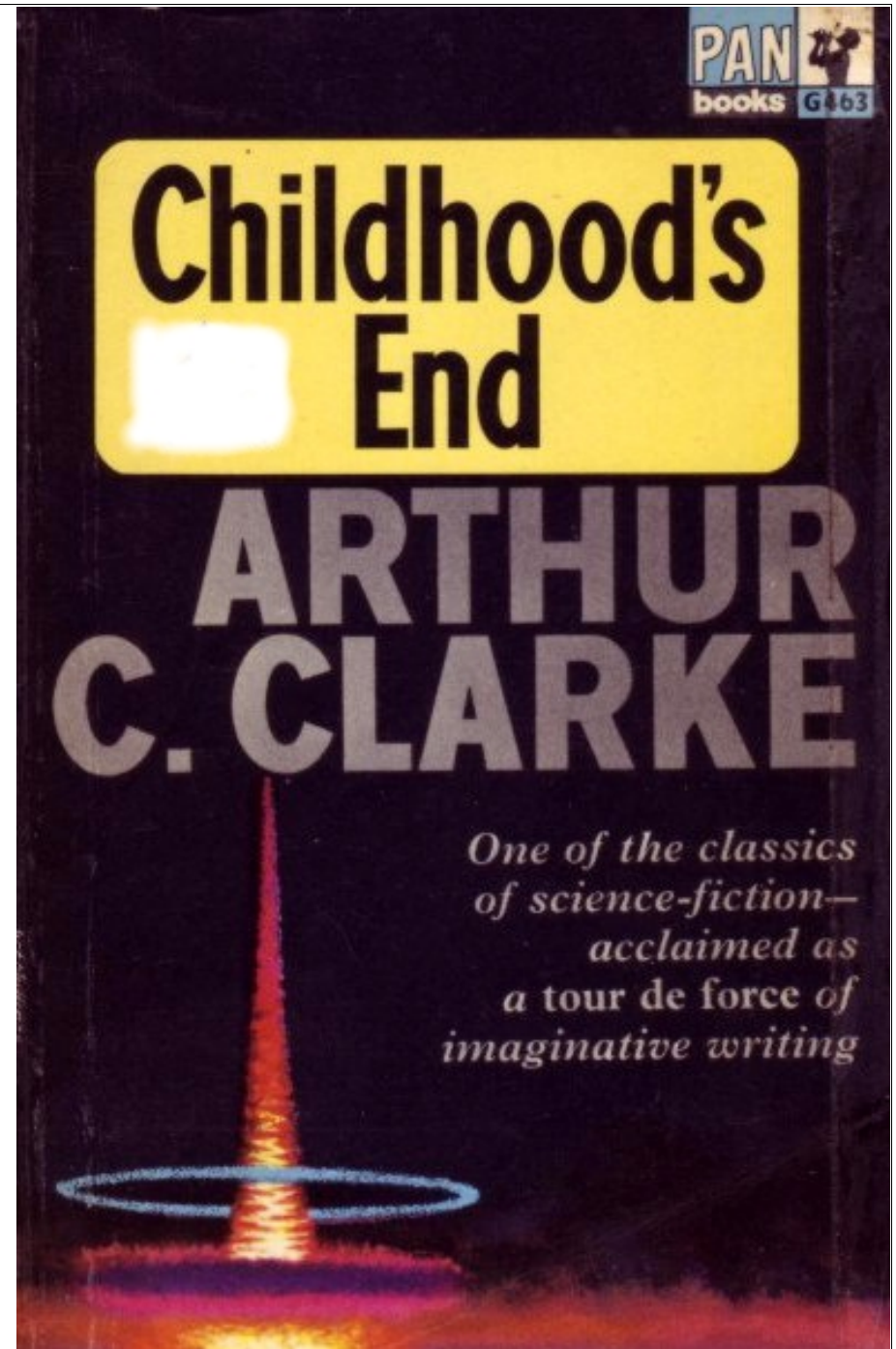
Childhood's End (1953), Clarke's first major success in the novel form, both within science fiction circles and in the general literary world, paced both Robert A. Heinlein and Ray Bradbury, who were being reviewed outside the SF genre in the early Fifties. Like them, Clarke had spent the forties writing outstanding stories for the SF magazines, and published his great short novel of the far future, *Against the Fall of Night*, in *Startling Stories*, November 1948. In 1945 he proposed the geosynchronous communications satellite, for which he would later receive credit as the 'father of the communications satellite' and a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. In 1951 he published *The Exploration of Space*, which became a Book-of-the-Month Club Selection, and which remains to this day, revised as *The Promise of Space*, one of the most important books about the meaning of space travel.

Childhood's End, together with the short story 'The Sentinel', presented ideas about human-alien contact that later became central to Clarke's novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* and the Stanley Kubrick film of the same name that was released in 1968, making Clarke the most famous science fiction writer since Jules Verne and H. G. Wells. It has been said that if humanity survives its own destructive impulses and maintains any of its ties to its historical character, and survives contact with interstellar cultures, then the

'Odyssey' novels, along with Kubrick's film, may become the prescient Homeric epic of humanity's childhood longing for kinship with the other evolving intelligent life in the universe.

The central concept of *Childhood's End* is its provocative, pre-emptive view of human destiny, in which humanity is drawn from its chrysalis of human history and absorbed into an alien purpose — for better or worse, we cannot say. On the face of it, this does not seem to be the kind of story often associated with the 'father of the communications satellite'. To many readers Clarke's stories are largely about technical progress and its effect on humanity, the purest kind of science fiction; some would say the only genuine science fiction. But *Childhood's End* is not only about alien contact, but also features paranormal powers, sociological commentary, and a vision of the ultimate fate of our species. Its scope is wider than Clarke's 'realistic' novels of this period, which include *Prelude to Space*, *Islands In the Sky*, *The Sands of Mars*, *Earthlight*, or the later stories about space exploration, of which the best may be 'Transit of Earth' and 'A Meeting With Medusa'. *Childhood's End* is in the tradition of Olaf Stapledon's visionary philosophical novels, with more than a touch of H. G. Wells and John W. Campbell, Jr., each of whose influence Clarke has acknowledged.

And yet this dual impulse of a realist who is also a visionary was always a feature of Clarke's work: *Prelude to Space* and *Against the Fall of Night* juxtapose Clarke's enduring attention to immediate possibilities (the first Lunar expedition) with ultimate concerns (human immortality and stagnation in the far future). A closer look at Clarke's fiction reveals that these concerns are not as far apart as they seem. The 'realistic' books argue for the transforming effect that science, technology, and space exploration may have on human culture; from there we are ready to enter the realms of deep future history — and ultimate changes. Clarke does not shirk the questions: What does it all mean? What will it all come to? The emergence of science and technology into human history signals the beginning of the end of our youth. Too much has been made of the facile distinction between Clarke the realist



*One of the classics
of science-fiction—
acclaimed as
a tour de force of
imaginative writing*

and Clarke the so-called mystic. That he is a poet of space travel, that he expresses his yearning for the stars and for a meeting with advanced intelligent life, is natural, given the realities of our expanding knowledge.

But in his continuum of earlier and later works, Clarke also sounds warnings that all may not be progress, that human reason, ingenuity, and heroism may be pitted against humbling forces. In the 'Odyssey' novels, humanity may be redeemed by contact with the patron race or races that have already guided our history; but in *Childhood's End* the contact is at first humiliating, then politically constructive (it brings world peace at the cost of cultural stagnation), and finally terrifying — even a horror story — as much a rebuke to our vanity and ignorance as was H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* to the smugness of the British Empire.

Childhood's End seems to carry within it a great trauma, as if it were based on some expulsion from paradise in the author's life. Perhaps the story echoes a disillusionment with humanity after World War II. Clarke offers an intriguing hint about the novel's origins in his preface to a 1989 edition. He recalls a beautiful summer evening in 1941, when he saw a fleet of silver barrage-balloons anchored over London to protect it from German bombers: 'As their stubby torpedo shapes caught the last rays of the sun, it did indeed seem that a fleet of spaceships was poised above the city. For a long moment we dreamed of the far future, and banished all thoughts of the present peril which that aerial fence had been erected to guard against. In that instant, perhaps, *Childhood's End* was conceived.' Although it would be easy to conclude that Clarke later wrote a what-if scenario for the sake of a story, it clearly got away from him and became much more. The great trauma of the novel is shared to one degree or another by all readers who are expelled from their youth into the complexities of adulthood.

The quiet, scientifically motivated heroism of characters in Clarke's more obviously realistic novels is represented in *Child-*

hood's End by Karellen, one of the great, most convincing aliens in all science fiction. In him we find a strange, rational affection for humankind, a knowing admiration for beings who still have a further development awaiting them, and a regretful sense of loss about the tragic dead end of his own kind, the Overlords. Struggling with the fact of humankind's open, unfinished state, Karellen is a Cartesian and humanity Gödelian — the one laboriously mechanical, the other creative, incomplete, and seething with inner power, even as traditional human aspirations become irrelevant and are left behind.

Karellen envies this humanity that does not know itself, and which is so desired by the Overmind, because he knows himself completely — and there is nothing else left for him to become, no surprises remaining. His race is the tool of the Overmind, a growing interstellar entity that is adding to itself, burgeoning with power and discovery, and that now seeks to merge humanity into its aggregate.

We learn that the Overlords have been trying to discover more about the Overmind, but cannot join with it because they lack the inner richness of a creative species. We see this in the logical way that they steer Earth's various societies into peace — and cultural sterility. Karellen is an unrepentant Satan, doing the bidding of an evolving god whose goodness or evil cannot be ascertained. He comes like a pied piper to lead humanity away from itself, to a fate he cannot share, but which intrigues him. The reader shares with him a great curiosity about the life of the Overmind, which has already assimilated the minds of several solar systems, but does not wish to absorb Karellen's race; however powerful its constructive intellects, they represent an uncreative, elegant dead end.

We come to believe that despite his speculative interest in the Overmind, Karellen's people will never have the will or the creative ingenuity to revolt against the growing Overmind. Karellen's governance of Earth, benign and rationally restrained, produces

a golden, humane age free of war, politics, crime, and disease; but culturally and scientifically human civilisation is at an end — and most people do not care.

How valid a speculation about the result of our first contact with an alien culture is this? How seriously can we take it? No one can say, because we have no past models for such an event; and the historical collisions between human cultures, horrifying as they have been, may not carry any lessons outside our human history; but Karellen may very well be right to this extent:

'In this galaxy of ours,' murmured Karellen, 'there are eighty seven thousand million suns. Even that figure gives only a faint idea of the immensity of space. In challenging it, you would be like ants attempting to label and classify all the grains of sand in all the deserts of the world.

'Your race, in its present state of evolution, cannot face that stupendous challenge. One of my duties has been to protect you from the powers and forces that lie among the stars — forces beyond anything that you can ever imagine.'

But in his benign stabilisation of human culture, Karellen has cut short all future development, preparing humanity for use by the Overmind. Somehow, in the cauldron of evolution, humanity developed abilities that the Overmind wants to add to itself. We carry a prize it covets.

This powerful and emotionally disturbing novel faces us with the abolition of all human history. 'The stars are not for man,' Karellen asserts, and we rebel, caught in the act of an extraordinary suspension of disbelief. The novel has about it a Somerset Maugham-like poetic clarity and a richness of suggestive ideas that resonate around each paragraph, often around each sentence, as with musical overtones. No simple outline of the story, wrote Groff Conklin in his 1954 *Galaxy* magazine review, can 'even remotely suggest the richness, the variety, the maturity and emotional darkness of this book ... a continuous excitement, a

continuous kaleidoscope of the unexpected.'

What has endured about *Childhood's End* is its striking anxiety, mourning, and pity. A childhood's end seems to hang over the waning twentieth century by way of a 'genetic and biomechanical tinkering that will splinter the human species forever,' writes Dennis Overbye. And in his book on cosmology, *Voyage to the Great Attractor*, Alan Dressler concludes 'that we are most likely near the end of what we have known as humanity. Nature's gifts to us have led to the secret keys of evolution, and we are not likely, I think, to long refrain from unlocking this box of treasures and troubles.'

Much of Clarke's work sings of a farewell to childhood, both individual and that of humanity. He tells us that the universe we know is still young, and that we will move on to adulthood's powers and complexities. *Childhood's End* was his youthful, anxious unfolding of a theme that may take on new, specific meanings in the ages to come.

A different childhood's end is depicted in the unfinished '**Odyssey**' novels sequence, one that may well be much closer to Clarke's belief's and hopes. These novels are Clarke's second great success in terms of popularity, influence, and sales. They constitute a rethinking of the theme of *Childhood's End*. Instead of the Overmind's mysterious motives for absorbing the human race, we have an advanced patron race that 'saw how often the first faint sparks of intelligence flickered and died in the cosmic night. And because in all the galaxy, they had found nothing more precious than Mind, they encouraged its dawning everywhere. They became farmers in the fields of stars; they sowed, and sometimes they reaped. And sometimes, dispassionately, they had to weed.'

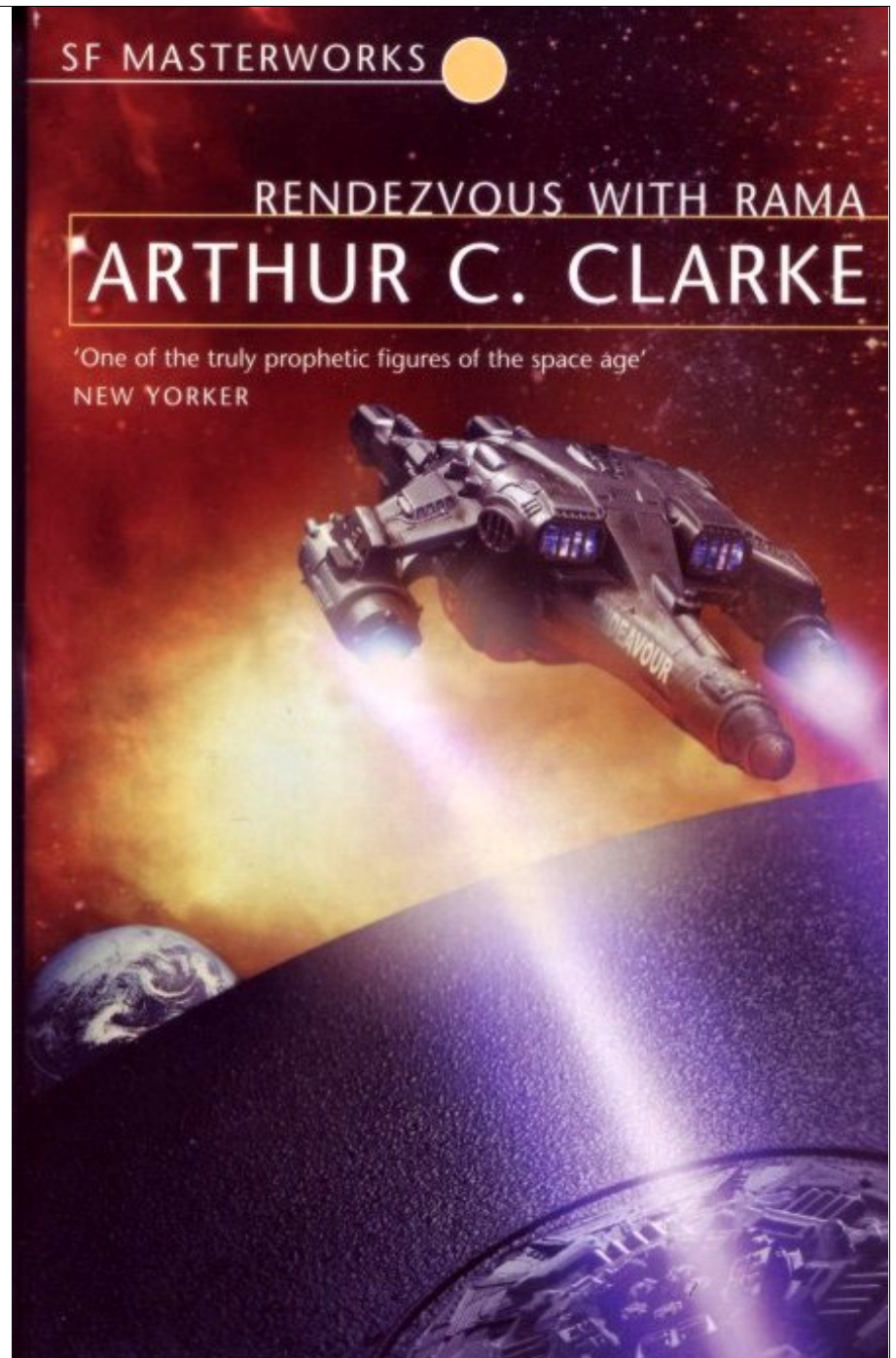
The inner story of both the film and the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* is that human evolution is a nurturing program under-

taken by a high alien civilisation. The first black monolith stimulates mental development among our prehuman ancestors; the second sends an alarm signal to the monolith circling Jupiter to announce that the species has developed space travel; the signal's direction lures a human expedition to the giant planet, where Bowman is taken as a sample for investigation by the aliens, who transform him into the Starchild and return him to the vicinity of Earth to further develop our world's intelligent life.

The failure of HAL in the first film/novel is later explained, and HAL is rehabilitated. We also learn the nature of the monoliths and what kind of technology they represent: self-replicating cybernetic machines for macro-engineering projects; communications devices; a stimulus/tool for bio-engineering; stargates; and perhaps much more. The nature of the monolith technology became obvious to Clarke as he wrote *2010: Odyssey Two* and *2061: Odyssey Three*, following, of course, from the implications of the previously described functions of the monoliths. This brilliant piece of inventive retrofitting in these novels has never been commented upon. Clarke wrought better than he knew, in describing an advanced technology that obeys his Third Law, leaving himself conceptual room to deduce what his original inspiration about the monoliths meant; and in its lack of overt explanation, Kubrick's film, by evoking a visceral response to the wonders of the universe, is also true to the spirit of Clarke's work.

It is possible that the 'Odyssey' novels have been critically underrated. On conceptual grounds they offer ideas that may later prove prophetic, even profound; and on literary grounds, a single, one-volume edition of the three novels, with the still possible concluding fourth work, may change critical opinion about the importance of these novels.

Clarke's greatest critical success may well be 1973's ***Rendezvous with Rama***, which took the Nebula, Hugo, and John W. Campbell



Awards for best novel — the triple crown of SF awards — as well as the British Science Fiction Association Award, the Locus Award, and the Jupiter Award. It is the only novel to have ever been so honoured. He had won the Nebula the previous year for his novella, 'A Meeting With Medusa', a story set on Jupiter, the first award for his fiction since 'The Star' received the 1955 Hugo in the short story.

An artificial alien worldlet, 50 kilometres long, swings through our solar system and is boarded by an exploratory team. This was about all that many casual reviewers wanted to tell readers when *Rendezvous with Rama* was published; but the novel is about much more, asking the reader to observe and to think about what is being shown. *Rama*, the alien vessel, is a mind-quickenng challenge to the novel's characters, to a future human civilisation, and to Clarke's readers. Eric S. Rabkin described the novel as combining 'the absolutely fascinating exploration of an extra-solar vessel come into our system with profound philosophic questioning of the significance of humanity, of biological life, and of intelligence'. This deft, hypnotic drama invites one to observe and understand the details of its major setting, inside the alien artifact, graphically presented with an authentic sense of place by the writer who has been described as 'our solar system's first regionalist'. He does just as well within *Rama's* alien setting, and the result is a spectacular, inspired, and subtle observation of an imaginary artifact that convinces us of its reality. Just as subtle, and sometimes critically satiric, are the human reactions to this visitor from the stars.

Clarke worked out what *Rama* (the human name given to the visiting ark) is and how it would behave. Only the alien Ramans know more than Clarke, by definition, since the author has carefully created a genuine unknown (carefully considered in accordance with his Third Law), which is never threatened with exposure by easy explanations; discoveries are carefully stalked.

Clarke's meticulous homework for what a vehicle of this advanced

kind might be like enables him to derive all the events of the story without the arbitrary imaginings that are the mark of failed SF. Only certain things can happen inside *Rama*, and not others. There is no cheating on what has been assumed. The reader is free to think ahead and discover some of the solutions to the problems faced by the characters.

Also depicted is the solar-system-wide civilisation's bureaucratic response to *Rama's* arrival, through the *Rama* Committee of narrow, hilariously portrayed specialists. We are given the religious response, through the lone Cosmo Christer aboard the *Endeavour*, who becomes convinced that *Rama* is another Noah's Ark come to save the elect; Commander Norton's sensitive and diplomatic encounter with the beliefs of this crew member is an incisive bit of characterisation. The colonists of Mercury respond by deciding to destroy *Rama* before it takes up a power position around the sun. The human drama is played out as a conflict between our better and worse selves, as impulses toward exploration race against the xenophobic urge to destroy *Rama*. We see a sedate human civilisation shaken up by the confrontation with the grandly indifferent *Rama*; and when the visitor's purpose becomes clear, human civilisation and Commander Norton respond in ways appropriate to their characters. At 55 years of age, Norton feels that the last of his youth is invested in exploring *Rama*, and that he may regret his lost opportunities. Clarke was the same age when this novel was published, and perhaps he thought it might be his last, but he said the same about 1979's *The Fountains of Paradise* nearly a decade later.

There is a moment on the last page of *Rendezvous with Rama*, presented almost as a casual gift from the departing alien visitor, when Dr Perera wakes up as his unconscious pushes toward a breathtaking insight into *Rama's* nature. Here is the very method of Clarke's novel, which has throughout invited us to observe and think about what we are being shown with such vivid lucidity. This is art working through the poetry of scientific investigation, as we strive to fill the vast space of our ignorance with an equal amount

of discovery. Here is a rendezvous with epic drama unlike any in all science fiction, whose beauties enable us to share such lovely details as the stairway as high as the Himalayas; the spring-like warming of *Rama's* inner atmosphere as the vessel approaches the sun; the dark, cool interior being pierced by a searchlight as the explorers move across the central plain; the moment when *Rama's* lights go on, revealing three linear suns in a vast interior; the tidal wave that sweeps around the equatorial sea; the passage of the human-powered glider along the central axis toward the vast play of electrical energies among the spikes of *Rama's* south pole; *Rama's* awesome intake of fiery matter from the sun; and the artful way in which the mysterious but detailed wonders interlock, gripping our curiosity and satisfying it while opening up larger questions, then leading us on to the edge of the unknown, where we realize that despite human foibles our species can get at the truth, that *Rama* is not magic, but operates according to natural laws harnessed by an advanced alien race. *Rama's* entrance into human history is not only a call to adventure, but an antidote to stagnation, a plea for open-mindedness as a way to regain the joy of childlike curiosity.

Perhaps the novel's finest moment is when Commander Norton, who throughout has shown great restraint in the use of force, decides to use lasers to cut into what may be a kind of storage facility inside *Rama*. He does 'not want to behave like a technological barbarian', and hopes that the Ramans will 'forgive him' and 'understand that it was all in the cause of science'. Here we see Clarke's sort of character in action, as the rationalist shows that he values the difference between a little force and unnecessary force. Throughout the epic exploration of *Rama*, Norton behaves as a sensible, unspectacular leader who strives to solve problems with the least of amount of disruption and harm, much as Karellaen does in *Childhood's End*. Norton tries not to be overwhelmed by *Rama*, to keep his head, but before the encounter is over he is glad to have been led beyond his careful ways into the unknown, toward the seemingly impossible — and we are reminded of Clarke's Law Two, the very essence of creative action.

All of Clarke's characterisations, in all his works, are of this subtle, essential kind. The people in *Rendezvous with Rama*, even though they are necessarily dwarfed by the alien visitor, are the kinds of human beings that interest their author and properly belong in his disciplined visions — highly trained, questing, cooperative human beings with a sense of humour that hints at their control of deeper longings and failings.

A strong example of characterisation from Clarke's later work may be found in ***The Fountains of Paradise***, where, as in *Imperial Earth*, the central character progresses from himself to his hopes for humanity. At one time Clarke thought that *The Fountains of Paradise* might be his best novel, and one can clearly see why he might have thought so. The novel has an ambitious structure, a variety of characters, and presents a striking idea — a space elevator on a cable into orbit — with considerable originality. Clarke's attentive mind walks us through all the relevant aspects of the Tower. We peer into moments of wonder, both in the distant past and the much nearer future, through which we arrive at an understanding of how this project is rooted in human history, in human imagination and yearning — the deepest of all realities. We learn what it would mean to build this kind of structure, and what kind of world, politically and socially, might find the will to do so. And as with all of Clarke's fiction, the novel is a window into carefully imagined possible experience. It is perhaps the very clarity of Clarke's windows that has led some critics to gaze through them obliviously, failing to notice the grace and lucidity with which understanding has been stimulated.

But for those whose gaze can be focused by Clarke's Apollonian temperament, the effect is one of a deeply felt sense of human aspiration. In *The Fountains of Paradise* the central image of the Tower sings of humanity's ascent. The penultimate moment, the very heart of the novel, when the life of an individual hangs within the dream that he has made real, is both true and moving.

The Fountains of Paradise

ARTHUR C CLARKE



In reading this novel, as with *Glide Path* and *The Sands of Mars*, one cannot help being reminded of Clarke's own life. A prophet of space travel, inventor of the communications satellite at the end of a terrifying war (certainly a humanitarian note to signal peace, if there ever was one), award-winning educator and science writer, the co-creator of that cultural icon, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, this bestselling author of graceful science fiction became what he wrote about — a man whose dreams became realities because they were put through the test of science and technology. Futurist Clarke's laws of forecasting not only summarise how we failed at it in the past, but set out the *limits* of looking ahead. This approach has contributed to shifting our thinking away from literal prediction of a single, straight-line future to the more fruitful idea of possible futures — and especially to the Wellsian idea that our future is, to an important degree, ours to make, if not to foresee. Like Wells, Clarke has helped to change the world we live in.

'My favourite book is undoubtedly *The Songs of Distant Earth*,' Clarke has said on more than one occasion since 1986. The reasons for this are not hard to guess, even though it is, along with *Imperial Earth*, one of his relatively neglected works. A starship fleeing the ruined solar system encounters a utopian colony world. The ship stops for repairs long enough for a few personal encounters to play out, some harrowing history to be passed on and digested, and the future considered. This gentle, sometimes sombre work is probably the most Maugham-like of all Clarke's novels; it requires an attentive reader to let the entire predicament of humanity sink in and the implications of new futures to open up. We are shown — with great pictorial beauty and sure narrative — one of the most plausible scenarios for interstellar exploration and colonisation — that of the Pacific Island hopping settlers — as well as the difficulties — physical, moral, and personal — of relativistic travel. The overall effect is psychologically convincing and emotionally moving, especially in the subtle details of the personal fates of the characters, as they are

affected by the arrival of the starship. Clarke manages a few startling denouements born of relativistic dislocations. The story steps into the minds of its readers, then into the hearts of its characters, in that order.

In judging Clarke's writings fairly one must start with the fact that he is a one-of-a-kind original. Heir to *both* the traditions of Wells and Stapledon, but also to those of Verne and Campbell, Clarke combines, in Eric Rabkin's words, 'the enthusiasm of the one camp with the breadth of vision of the other' in his correct use of science and technology and a concern for philosophical and social dilemmas. Where most critical discussions of Clarke are lacking is in the failure to describe the *experience* of reading his work. The author's work persuades readers more effectively than is possible in a critical discussion. The failure of criticism on this point is what must be described as 'a loss of the phenomenon' in the analysis, a loss of all the effects before analysis that simply fails to convey the aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional reality of the objects under discussion.

Clarke's work produces readers who either fall under the spell of his discursive poetry, or who are respectful but relatively unmoved. To acquire a taste for his work (both his fiction and nonfiction produce kindred effects) may also be a lesson in how to read science fiction — not primarily as a way of learning about life and character, which is what all of serious classic and contemporary literature is about — but as a criticism of human life and history, as seen from the perspective of the growing technical and scientific culture that has been with us since the Renaissance, as an effort to see what can be made of life through innovation born of knowledge. Even the least of Clarke's works can be of intense interest to readers who have learned to 'see' the very human implications of what Clarke has understood. And what he has understood is of the utmost importance to the future of humanity.

Reading Clarke faces the reader with the problem of how to think about science fiction. The purely literary writer or reader often

does not respect the thinker; while the thinking writer or reader often fails to respect the difficulties of grace, wit and style — the 'writerly virtues'. Clarke respects both. His thought does not disappear in favor of style; it is one and the same, and the ease with which he communicates can fool critics who read according to certain literary models and then find fault when a work does not live by the model; change models and flaws fade away. Those unwilling to think along with the author grow impatient and see a stiffness of prose; those who do not understand the kinds of characters Clarke knows best fail to see the characterisation; those whose databases are impoverished fail to make connections that would only deepen their sense of poetry and vision; those who need to have things repeated deplore his concision of style; and those who think episodic structures a flaw simply fail to find interest in the episodes, and miss how they are related. One is reminded of the blind men groping the elephant and failing to describe the animal. Like all great writers of science fiction, Clarke's work is alive with the needs of traditional literature while searching for ground where purely literary concerns are not the only values. 'One of the greatest values of SF', Clarke writes in *Astounding Days: A Science Fictional Autobiography*, 'is the way it challenges long-held beliefs, and makes the reader appreciate, after he has stopped foaming at the mouth, that the external world need not always conform to his hopes and expectations. It forces one to think — which is why so many people dislike it.'

Clive Sinclair, writing in the *New Scientist*, summarised one aspect of Clarke's life as follows: 'The plot is improbable: a brilliant scientist, in his 20s, lives on a teeming planet which numbers its people, who are mostly horribly poor and feuding with each other, in billions rather than millions. He invents a means of linking these billions, which requires a technology barely dreamt of. Yet we are expected to believe that, within two or three decades ... the beings of this planet ... find the billions of dollars necessary to realise his invention, but that our scientist hero retreats to a remote idyll, there to live by the pen, linked to a grateful world by his own invention.'

Unlike Jules Verne's fictional Captain Nemo, Clarke has always tended to be apolitical and tolerant of human failures, waiting out human history while explaining and applauding fundamental developments as they unfold alongside deplorable ones. The imagination he found in science fiction liberated him from ordinary ways of looking at the humanity and the universe; his concise, often humorous imagination was only strengthened by his scientific training. The Apollonian clarity of his writings is central to his character, which desires the success of human aspiration. The effortless grace of his writings belies their profound content, but

for those who have 'caught the Clarke wave', this humane, rational man is one of our troubled century's treasures.

Happily, he has had three periods of great success, and unlike the Ramans is determined not to do things in threes. Now in his sixth decade as a writer, he is a happily creative Karellen, pointing the way with hope for a humanity whose childhood he will not outlive, but a humanity that may take his work with it into futurity.

— **George Zebrowski, 2008**

The real science fiction: Part 3

John Litchen

Re-visiting *Childhood's End*

John Litchen has been contributing regularly to my other fanzine, **brg** (recently renamed *Treasure*), for some years. His autobiographical 'My Life and Science Fiction', as a serial, is a highlight of most issues. John was a prominent member of Melbourne fandom for many years. He was the director of the *Anti-fan* film that did much to win Australia the bid for the 1975 World Convention. Since he and his family retired to Robina in Queensland, he has followed up his many interests, including Aikido. His most recent book

is *Aikido: Beyond Questions Often Asked*. He has also published recently a novel and several books of memoirs, as well as a series of articles about his favourite Golden Age SF novels. This is the first of them.

Childhood's End was first published in 1954, and I would have bought my copy that same year or certainly by the early part of 1955. I was 15 years old then, and remember devouring that book with incredible enthusiasm. (It cost me 13/3 i.e. 13 shillings and 3 pence in 1955. The idea of changing into \$ and cents had not occurred to anyone at that stage and the cost was only slightly dearer than the listed price for the book in England. It was 10s 6d, or 10/6 over there, not much of a mark-up.)

The thing I remembered for years about the book was that humans had reached an evolutionary peak when the invaders arrived, and for some reason I misremembered how the aliens looked. I thought the reason they hid themselves from humans was because they looked like giant spiders, and they knew of our fear of spiders and what that would do to us if we saw them. Why did I think that and remember that so incorrectly for the last 56 years?

Having just read it again after 56 years, the only reason I can advance for my mistake must be an image from the very end of *Childhood's End*. When the changed human children are ascending as a collective entity the last man on earth, Jan, sees a structure in the sky that resembles a giant spider web. And the last thing he sees as the web begins to fade is the light shining up from inside the earth as it becomes transparent and insubstantial enough to allow the earth's core to explode.

That must have impressed me sufficiently to stick in my mind and override what is actually in the story. Clarke was for years renowned as a writer who predicts the future with an amazing degree of accuracy. Right at its beginning he predicted a space race, with both the Russians and the Americans competing secretly to build a spaceship to launch the first humans into space. And this was before the Russians actually launched the first

satellites, *Sputnik I* and *Sputnik II*, at the end of 1957! But the cold war was beginning when Clarke wrote his novel, and the Russian submarine spying on the Americans' island-based space ship suggests it was in full swing. It was those satellites that started the Americans on a path that led them to compete, and then surpass, the Russians to land a man on the moon. The Russians were winning at the start, only to be overtaken by the Americans, at which point the Russians changed their strategy. Like the tortoise who competed with the hare, they allowed the flamboyant Americans to have all the glory they needed until they abandoned the moon, and finally abandoned the shuttles, leaving the stodgy plodding Russian tortoise to win the race and take control of nearby space.

Finally, in 2011, the Russians won the space race. And unless the Chinese and the Europeans or the Japanese can do something soon the Russians will be in control. They will set the prices for launching and decide who will go aloft to the International Space Station. In my view this is a sad situation if not a great tragedy which started when the Americans decided that reaching the moon was enough. There was no need to consolidate and build the moon base that every reader of SF was hoping for, no need to use the moon as a stepping stone to Mars and the asteroids. They had proved to everyone how technologically superior they were, and they could turn their endeavours to near-space and orbital stations. With the invention of the space shuttle they looked like having it all again with the ability to go up and come back flying the shuttle like a glider to land so it can be reused. They convinced us all that very soon space would be available to everyone, and that we could all take holidays in magnificent orbiting hotels. They told us the cost of launching would come down exponentially from just over a billion to a mere few millions — but this was a government-run and funded organisation, and such cost

efficiencies are not possible. So the shuttle has been abandoned. Until private enterprise can return to the space race, the rumbling Russian juggernaut controls nearby space.

How disappointing for old-time SF fans. We will all be dead before anyone ever gets to Mars, and perhaps close to that when the Americans return to the moon. Somehow, and sadly, I doubt that this is ever going to happen. We had our chance and we blew it.

In Clarke's book, just as the two rival spaceships are ready and only days away from being launched, the Overlords arrive in their huge ships, rather like those giant flying saucers that arrive at the start of *V* (both TV series), and hover over every major city in the world. Clarke doesn't really describe them. He only hints at their enormity and their power. They remain hovering silently, suggesting that some kind of anti-gravity keeps them there. The two protagonists building their puny spaceships look up and see these giant ships darkening the sky and realise that their race was over, lost before it had begun. For six days the ships hover 50 miles up without doing anything. Then every radio and television frequency is interrupted by a broadcast in perfect English from the leader of the fleet, Karellen, Supervisor for Earth. There were demonstrations, fights, attempts to attack the hovering ships, all of which came to nothing. Eventually the human race realises it is in thrall to a superior intellect with power they cannot oppose. Finally, after five years a tiny ship comes down and a representative of Earth is taken up to the hovering flagship to be told what was going to happen.

To a 15-year-old much of this was incredible. Now I realise the style of writing is quite pedestrian, with Clarke often *telling* the story rather than *showing* it happening. It gives it a documentary feel for many sections, which to me now seems rather boring.

The Overlords do not show themselves for 50 years, no doubt waiting until the next generation is accustomed to seeing their ships hovering so they will not be surprised by the revelation. Part

1 finishes with Karellen allowing his only human contact a brief glimpse after their final visit, but no description is given. We must read on to find out what the aliens are really like.

And what a surprise to me it was to discover they appeared very much as we imagined the devil to look like — very big and black, with leathery wings, with horns and a barbed tail; and with faces and eyes that are impenetrable. There is nothing spiderlike about them at all. When the first Overlord descends to the ground in his smaller craft

an orifice opened in the side of the ship and a wide glittering gangway extruded itself and drove purposefully towards the ground. It seemed a solid sheet of metal with hand-rails along either side. There were no steps: it was sleek and smooth as a toboggan slide, and, one would have thought, equally impossible to ascend or descend in any ordinary manner.

On reading this again, my first impression is of the ship that lands in Washington in the film *The Day the Earth stood still*. Had Clarke seen that film? It was released in Australia about the same time his book was being published. Perhaps it had been released earlier in the US. Or had the producers read his book and seen a great way to depict something superior and quite alien: a gangway that extrudes, that is made of the same material as the ship, and that when it retracts it leaves no sign of any opening at all?

Clarke suggests that the horror humans feel when they see the Overlords is a racial memory from the distant past when the Overlords had previously encountered humans, but later refines this as a memory from the future of their final contacts with the Earth. He suggests that time is neither past nor future and those memories and experiences can reverberate throughout time. He uses Einstein's theories of time dilation to explain the 80-year journey of Jan, who manages to stow away on board an Overlord ship returning to the home planet, a journey that takes only a few months either way at speeds approaching that of light itself, but 40 years passes each way. Jan returns less than a year older, but

all the human adults from his time have died off and only the children are left. They are no longer children, but are beginning to become something else altogether. This is something not permitted for the Overlords to achieve. They monitor and study what is happening to the children so they can understand the process. They too have their limitations, and only do the bidding of a higher power. Clarke implies that these mysterious entities have done this many times before, with the Overlords assisting them, and that the universe is vaster and more incomprehensible than we can imagine.

This book offers many predictions, some of which are spot on, such as people spending at least three hours a day watching television, whose many channels offer nothing but 'passive and mindless entertainment' that requires no thought to understand. His explanations of time dilation are also accurate. In other cases he is not. For example, Clarke has everyone flitting about in air-cars, a common idea in many stories from the fifties. Can you imagine today's traffic snarls, bad driving, hoons, and all translated into the three-dimensional spaces above a city? His air cars do not use anti-gravity, but some other kind of propulsion that is not explained.

When Jan stows away on the Overlords' ship he takes with him a 4 mm camera and kilometres of film. In the fifties I owned an 8 mm camera. They were new at the time, because until then the only small movie cameras available had been 16 mm cameras, which barely matched the quality of standard 35 mm movie cameras of the day. I can see now why Clarke would have thought in future it may have been possible to reduce the size of cameras further, but this would not have worked unless there had been a corresponding increase in the sharpness and clarity of film stock. And of course in 1953 Clarke had no concept of video recording or personal video cameras. Today you can buy a mini HD video camera that shoots hours of absolutely sharp high definition images and stores them on a flash card as small as a fingernail.

He does mention giant computers that occupy whole buildings, but he would not have imagined today's computers. Even the average desktop computer has more power than those used to fly the now redundant space shuttles.

But Clarke did come up with the concept of orbiting geostationary satellites for radio transmissions long before the Russians put *Sputnik* in orbit. A geostationary orbit is still often referred to as a Clarke Orbit.

Still, Clarke was fairly good at picking the future. The image of the Overlords' ship departing the solar system for its home star is reminiscent of the descriptions he gave in his much later book — his best book for me — *Songs of Distant Earth*.

Much was made of *Childhood's End* in the early fifties because it was different from other SF published at the time. Even today, I read it with nostalgia. Although much of it is slow and documentary in style it does have moments of brilliance that maintain its status as a classic story.

I feel now that Clarke didn't do justice to the ending. It is very short for what is a massively important event: the destruction of the earth. I would have liked much more detail and description about the planet and the system where the Overlords live, their ships and their technology, but perhaps Clarke did the best he could.

Childhood's End is, however, a book I will always remember with great fondness, for it was a part of my own growth and development as a person. It opened my mind to thinking and appreciating that the world and the universe are vast and wonderful places.

— John Litchen, July 2011

The real science fiction: Part 4

George Zebrowski

A sense of something in him: C. M. Kornbluth

Discussed:

C. M. Kornbluth:

The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary

by Mark Rich

(McFarland & Co., Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina and London, 2010, trade paperback, \$39.95)

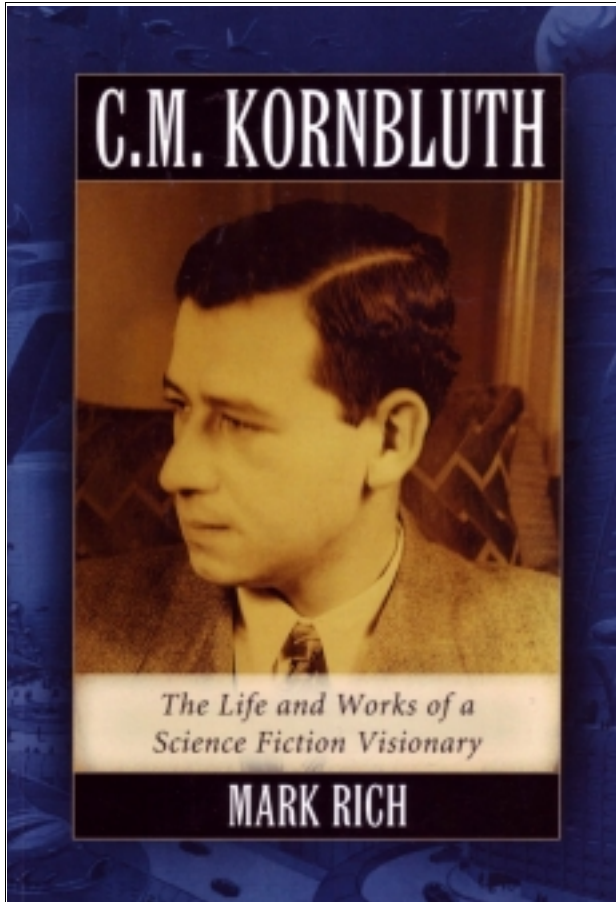
Cyril M. Kornbluth, born in New York City in 1923, was educated at City College and the University of Chicago; received a Bronze Star for infantry service as an army machine gunner in Belgium, France, and Germany during World War II, married Mary G. Byers in 1944 (reportedly the 'M' in his byline), with whom he had two sons; worked for Trans-Radio Press in Chicago from 1949 to 1951; and became a freelance writer from 1951 until his sudden death in 1958, from hypertension and lifelong heart problems, worsened

by his wartime exertions. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge, as did his colleague, Philip Klass (writer William Tenn); both saw the results of Nazi atrocities.

He received a Hugo Award in 1973.

Mark Rich writes:

Important to realize, in understanding Kornbluth, is that while he was unusual, exceptional, and a solo brilliance, he was also in many ways representative of his chosen field ... because of the experiences he went through, which were the defining ones for his generation; because of the wrongs he suffered; because of the difficulties he labored beneath; because of the frustrations, meager rewards and constant pressures to which he was subjected — all of which were aspects of his life that were



thoroughly of his times.

Growing up in the American economic depression, surviving the world war and the world's anti-Semitic prejudices, and the usual disgraces of becoming a writer and making a living at it, unchanged since the times of Herman Melville, did not deter Kornbluth. He was fortunate to write science fiction in a time of increasingly found literary maturity among its writers, and a growing respect for science fiction fuelled by technological developments (ironically brought by the atomic bomb and military rocketry). He

also managed contributions to the *noir* crime novel of the 1950s and wrote for television's early science fiction programs.

He collaborated with Judith Merrill on two well-reviewed novels, *Gunner Cade* (1952) and *Outpost Mars* (1952). Of his four collaborative novels with Frederik Pohl, *The Space Merchants* (1953), satirising advertising and consumerism, brought the greatest attention. His solo novels, *Takeoff* (1952), *The Syndic* (1953), and *Not This August* (1955), were admired by readers and the respected reviewers Algis Budrys and Damon Knight, among others. *Takeoff* was runner-up for the International Fantasy

Award.

But Kornbluth's finest work may have been in the shorter forms. 'The Words of Guru' (1941), the precocious work of a teenager, was the first to be published under his own name. 'The Marching Morons' (1951), perhaps his best-known story and voted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame by his fellow writers, looks to our dumbed-down world of today, later anticipated so fiercely by Philip K. Dick. 'The Little Black Bag' (1950), a much reprinted classic and a second Hall of Fame inductee, was adapted for television. His elegant style shows us that he simply did not know how to write badly, in the words of a colleague. Mark Rich writes:

An impassioned curiosity takes hold of readers when they encounter Kornbluth's work. The stories brightly entertain with rapier wit; they bewitch with stylistic and structural sophistication; they disarm with their lack of pretense; they charm with their backstreet cadences and their Everyman and Everywoman voices. They talk readers into accepting, however briefly, subversive and sometimes outrageous ideas; for they convince eye, ear, and mind of their veracity. Each sentence of every story conveys the sense of having been penned under the pressing need to bear witness. The sense of intense vision, even of urgent vision, remains undiminished by the passage of time.

Several reference works in recent decades have offered lists of science fiction's 'hundred best novels', onward from 1818's *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley; others list books from the last 50 years or so, proclaiming novels that have gone through a critical shakeout and sifting. But the curious result of this process is that for every such roll call of canonical titles a parallel list might be drawn, title for title, with perhaps a dozen titles being eligible from every decade of the twentieth century, with every entry having a reasonable case for inclusion, embarrassing judgments and contrariness to the point of critical collapse and absurdity.

Further complicating the problem is the fact that some authors did their best in the shorter forms, yet are judged by their novels;

even more of a problem is the possibility that the short form authors' works may be superior to the novelist's in content, execution, and significance. This last quality is of great importance, given the censorious tendency of commercial publishing with its demands for entertainment, in what is a highly critical form of writing, in which everything is up for examination, past, present and future, yet is so often reduced to adventure fiction and catering entertainment, as much by commercial demands as by the self-censorship of authors who need to eat. Much of the difficulty of defending science fiction may be suggested by asking whether it is possible to complain about the trivialisation of science fiction, more an attitude than a genre, and be understood. The question hovers between the hopeful and the rhetorical.

Mark Rich's biography of C. M. Kornbluth calls our attention to a major writer who has been somewhat neglected by science fiction readers, and nearly invisible to the traditional literary culture, although Kornbluth is not alone in this. This 'magisterial biography', in Robert Silverberg's words, benefits from a new dawning, in which science fiction has permeated general culture, from its most commercial and popular forms to the heights of artfulness and poetic sensibility. Kornbluth is one such rediscovery, perhaps only a step behind Philip K. Dick, cut short by an early death but still shining.

Some of SF's reach and grasp, so often disguised by commerce (inevitable in a capitalist post-feudalism of corporate masters, vassals and slaves in all but name) has always produced confusion among literary critics and academics, and derision; but the disrespect has long been fading, as demonstrated by this biography and recent ones about Judith Merril, Robert Heinlein, and James Tiptree. The literati's views have been scattered and shown to be incoherent, and the denials voiced by the great ones like Alfred Kazin are rarely defended. They came and went without noticing science fiction hoisting itself through its numerous practitioners, throughout the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, into artfulness and serious content well beyond that of contemporary fiction. 'Rooted as they

are in the facts of contemporary life,' wrote Aldous Huxley, 'the phantasies of even a second-rate writer of modern science fiction are incomparably richer, bolder and stranger than the Utopian or Millennial imaginings of the Past' (*Science and Literature*, 1963). Even the field's writerly shortcomings have never been worse than the failings of all fiction. A circle-the-wagons defensiveness that was once productive (as it was in the development of jazz and rock) has been set aside by the many gifted writers who never went west with the original settlers. The entrance of Philip K. Dick and H. P. Lovecraft into the Library of America volumes confirms decades of rise and final triumph, with more to come, as hindsight lifts the blinders from past detractors.

Two notices for Mark Rich's biography point to how much more can be said about Kornbluth. Robert Silverberg ('Rereading Kornbluth,' *Asimov's SF Magazine*, December 2010) wrote:

The Rich book, 439 large, densely packed pages, is the product of fifteen years' research. It follows this short-lived genius from his birth in 1923 through his adolescence as a science fiction fan, his eerily precocious ventures into writing, his boyhood friendships with such later great figures of the science fiction world as Frederik Pohl, James Blish, Damon Knight, Isaac Asimov, and Donald A. Wollheim, his arduous military service in Europe during World War II, and his glorious though troubled post-war career as a first-rate science fiction writer, on to his miserably early death, on a railway station in a suburb of New York, after he had overexerted a heart that most probably had been damaged by the stress of his military life. It's a fascinating, chilling story, full of marvelous gossip about the science fiction world of the forties and fifties, some of it new and startling even to me, though I was part of that scene myself during the last four years of Cyril's life (and was one of the many sources interviewed for the book).

Notes covering the vast sourcing of this book fill the oversized pages 383-439. Frederik Pohl's material is drawn from his own papers and letters at the Special Collections Research Center of the Syracuse University Library.

James Sallis's review of July/August 2010 in *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, an especially insightful look at Rich's biography, points to the central importance of Kornbluth's work:

I've long been curious about C. M. Kornbluth, who seems to have been from all the evidence one of the brightest of the early generation, revered by fellow writers and by editors, his loss at an early age lamented. Yet I knew almost nothing about him, had little but the stories and novels themselves and the sense of something in him, some engine or edge to his life, thought and work, that set him apart.

Mark Rich's biography shows us what that 'something in him' turned out to be, as a man and science fiction writer. I say 'science fiction writer' because writer though he was, being a science fiction writer put him on the shores of this most critical of human literatures, planetary, historical and a-historical in its reach, whose loyalties live with civilisation and with mind, and not even necessarily with the human species. The war sharpened Kornbluth's critical intellect and darkened much of his outlook on the future, which for a science fiction writer must always be a swing between utopian and dystopian hopes, as the evidence justifying hope or despair in your times permits.

As the biography wends its way through the exigencies of a writer's life, with all its drops, tugs, and soarings, and Rich's insightful readings of Kornbluth's short fiction and novels, especially the nearly forgotten but extraordinary pseudonymous contemporary novels, we arrive at the heart of Kornbluth's work, as he found his way with a growing deliberation to the 'moral stance' so well presented in the four page final chapter of this book. As Kornbluth reached this outlook, his peers thinned out before a crafted style and a thinking outlook which can only be compared to an Aldous Huxley, a George Orwell, an H. G. Wells, or a Jonathan Swift.

Nearly three decades after his death, NESFA Press published *His Share of Glory: The Complete Short Science Fiction of C. M. Kornbluth* in 1997, and it remains in print. His collaborative novels

with Frederik Pohl come and go from print repeatedly, but Kornbluth's solo novels have been nearly forgotten, as have his pseudonymous contemporary novels, which are worthy of attention. Mark Rich offers an extensive bibliography of commentary on Kornbluth's life and work, and lists all his novels and stories under all their titles and bylines, complete with sources for readers to search out and explore.

As a teenager I lay in a hospital, and received a package of books from the Science Fiction Book Club. One of them was *A Mile Beyond the Moon*, still a distinguished collection and a collector's item today. I knew soon after that Kornbluth was not like the others, and that one day I might want to write about his work. Mark Rich has done the job for all of us, in what may well be a chapter out of Barry Malzberg's keenly envisioned and hoped for 'True and Terrible History of Science Fiction', which no one will ever write.

Those of us who write science fiction with high ambitions, not for money, but for the challenge of the imaginative attitude we love and respect, must look to the example of Kornbluth, and too few others, for the critical stance inherent in science fiction.

As I finished the last chapter of this biography, I glimpsed the centrality of Kornbluth's concerns and the centrality of science fiction's 'moral stance' — a concern for the future. Mark Rich shows us how Kornbluth, along with his colleague Phil Klass, accomplished the interplay of their life experiences with their art.

And then this biography shot me through the heart with its final chapter.

'The good of it,' in Klass's words, came to the civilians of Germany; they did not fight, but they benefited. 'And when they told me that they were not Nazis, they had nothing to do with it,' soldier Klass wrote, 'I told them, "Yes, but you had the good of it, you had the food that was stolen from all over Europe.'" All over Europe there were kids with spindly shanks and long, bony faces. You got to

Germany, you saw plump kids for the first time.'

'The good of it' came to Phil Klass when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; he, like Kornbluth, would not fight in the Pacific, but both came home with saddened eyes and looked to the future in their works.

For me, 'the good of it' came when my parents, kidnapped from Poland and enslaved by Germany in their teen years, met and married after the allied liberation, and brought me to the United States, where we benefited from being young and white in a country built on invasion, slavery, and Indian genocide.

The moral stance admits and accepts the responsibility of benefit from the misery and deaths of other human beings, of refusing to lie to yourself by saying, 'before my time', 'I never owned slaves', and 'I killed no Indians', of refusing to make a new compact with past crimes by ignoring its ills; and even more important, refusing to say, 'I'll be dead by the time the worst happens' or 'let people worry about things a hundred years for now'. This last refusal marks the true science fiction writer's concern with the future.

We are all guilty on this world — except that some admit it and take the moral stance; you either achieve it or live blind and pass it on blindly. Well, yes, that's most of us, isn't it? Yes, there are degrees of knowing, degrees of what is possible for an individual to know. Kornbluth and Klass went to war and opened their eyes. Mark Twain travelled the world to pay his bills and saw that there were intelligent people all over, of all colours.

To know, truly, deeply: that is the moral stance, and the first great step to change; it is the most positive weapon we may ever have a chance to use, and the most difficult to wield. This was the 'sense of something in him' that lived in Kornbluth.

And how far commerce distances science fiction from what it should be, demanding gratuitous, pointless extravagance rather

Mark Rich's biography reminded me of how many members of the Futurian Society, 1938–1945 (the club to which Kornbluth belonged), and their associates, later became influential novelists, editors, anthologists, editors, and publishers, and helped me in one way or another. Donald Wollheim and Frederik Pohl published my first novel; James Blish, Judith Merril, and Isaac Asimov contributed to my amateur magazine; Asimov praised my 1979 novel *Macrolife*, and encouraged my science writing; Damon Knight and Frederik Pohl rejected early stories with insightful comments; Virginia Kidd, my first agent, edited and retyped an early story which would have been much worse otherwise; Algis Budrys, my distant Eastern European kindred soul, always seemed wary of praising me, and then did.

And Cyril M. Kornbluth, never met, but whose stories and novels did to me all that I needed, and whom Asimov believed to be the most brilliant writer of the group. We never stand fully alone.

than provoking thought and encouraging creative change. In the last chapter of this rich and meticulous biography, Phil Klass (William Tenn) mentions the few writers who have avoided the trivialization of science fiction by taking up the moral stance. Too many still do not, because its implications are severe, demanding of us that we remain loyal to literature's 'sharp teeth and capacious stomach', in Gore Vidal's words. Achieving the critical moral stance arms the writer against the entertainer's sin of triviality. Why so much triviality? The cliched answer, admitted with bowed head, labelled a cliché to distract from its truth, is money. But artfulness has always disturbed and spoken truth to power, always resisted, speaking across time. And those of us who will not turn away from trivialities must at least admit that we were herded to write this way and take our lumps.

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The real science fiction: Part 5

Patrick McGuire

A glimpse of recent Russian fantasy

Discussed:

A. Belyanin (Andrey Olegovich Belyanin), *Moya zhena – ved'ma (My Wife Is a Witch)*
(Moscow: MediaKniga, 2002 (audiobook, 14 hours 40 minutes on 2 MP3 disks) (print edition appeared in 1999))

Sergey Gnedin, a contemporary minor poet living in St Petersburg, follows in the footsteps of earlier heroes of humorous fantasies by discovering, soon after the wedding, that his wife is a witch. In this particular case, his bride Natasha: (1) only recently came into her powers and does not yet fully understand them; (2) can travel into a magical alternate plane of reality; and (3) as a related part of her inheritance from her witch grandmother has become a shapeshifter who frequently, and sometimes involuntarily, turns into a wolf. In the back story of the novel, witches almost never take husbands, but such rare spouses gain, by the marriage, formidable magical powers of their own. Sergey can work magical

spells by means of poetry, although the results are not completely predictable. Fortunately, Sergey has read the fantasies of L. Sprague de Camp and Christopher Stasheff, so he quickly assimilates the general idea. Sergey discovers that he also now has a personal small angel and small devil who, just as in cartoons, ride on his shoulders or otherwise hang out near him, and try to influence his conduct. Their status is a bit unclear: no one else can see them, and they explain that they are merely aspects of Sergey's own subconscious. However, they observe their respective reporting chains into the administrations of Heaven and Hell, and each has knowledge and powers that Sergey lacks and would have no apparent means of obtaining.

Through the work of various nasty entities, aided by mistakes that Sergey makes out of ignorance, Natasha is soon ensorcelled and dimensionally displaced. It turns out that there are many planes of reality, not just ours and the one that Natasha has been able to travel to, and Sergey must chase her down through various

realms, most notably the world of the Norse gods (where the teenage goddess Freya develops a crush on the very-married Sergey and where Ragnarok is just around the corner unless Sergey can reset the clock) and a world resembling tsarist Russia, complete with a coarse and ignorant rural gentry, but with additions, including intelligent rat-human crossbreeds, talking bears, werewolves and a seductive female vampire.

A fairly important secondary character is the centuries-old wizard Sir Thomas Malory, author of *Le Mort d'Arthur*. I am unaware of any real-world tradition that Malory was indeed a wizard, but given the legends attached to other literary figures such as Virgil and Thomas the Rhymer, the attribution did not seem jarring in context.

I am fairly selective about the fantasy I read even in English, and I know little about the post-Soviet Russian field; with minor exceptions it became possible to publish most subgenres of fantasy in Russia only after the disappearance of Communist rule and its censorship. I picked this book up mostly because at the time I was looking for Russian audiobooks for language practice and a New York dealer was offering this one at a discount. After I had finished the novel I turned to the Internet to learn more about the author before writing this article. I found out that Belyanin is in fact a very popular and (by genre standards) a reasonably successful author in Russia. Besides having a long string of fantasy publications, Belyanin is also a serious published poet, a talent reflected in the high quality of the poetry woven into *Witch*. (Not, to be sure, that I am much of a judge of poetry even in English, let alone in a foreign language.)

I found this to be a perfectly competent light fantasy coming up to the standards prevalent in the English-speaking world. The main characters are well drawn and likeable, the novel contains genuine humor, the plot ends are mostly tied up, and amidst the humour Belyanin presents some serious reflections on the value of poetry, the nature of love between husband and wife, and the

relative values of romantic love and the love for God or for abstract goodness. I might well read more Belyanin if it came my way, and any lack of warmth in that evaluation simply reflects my overall lack of particular enthusiasm for fantasy as a genre.

I did consider one plot element rather weak: Freya is rescued from disappearing as a 'forgotten' goddess by the action of Sergey and Natasha in naming their daughter after her. But if a goddess only has to be remembered, not worshipped, Freya was in no danger of being forgotten in our world in any event. In English, the day of the week Friday is really named after another goddess, Frigg, but Freya often gets mistaken credit precisely because she is so well known. Per the etymology in my German dictionary, the German counterpart, Freitag, really is named after Freya. For that matter, probably one could even find actual Freya-worshippers among contemporary neopagans. But perhaps all this Freya-consciousness is more obvious in countries speaking Germanic languages than it would be in Russia (where the word for Friday just derives from 'fifth day').

At the close of the novel, considerable mystery still surrounds Sergey and Natasha's daughter. The author doubtless intentionally held resolution of this mystery over for a future book. If this element actually did make it into the one published sequel (see below), that part of the plot is not reflected in its *Russian Wikipedia* article (as it existed on 31 August 2009) — then again, the article is admittedly brief.

According to the *Russian Wikipedia*, there is one sequel, *Sestrenka iz preispodney* (*The Kid Sister from Hell*, 2001), in which Natasha's teenage sister, who has a fixation on Sailor Moon, magically takes on the appearance and personality of the anime heroine and sets off to right wrongs. This does not sound like an especially promising beginning, but given the competence displayed in *Witch*, Belyanin may have been able to pull it off.

The *Witch* audio book is padded out to full length with two short

stories by Andey Yantsev, both science fiction rather than fantasy. By contrast with the quality of Belyanin's work, both Yantsev efforts are lame surprise-ending pieces that are only partly

redeemed by the stylistic competence of the narration. I doubt that equivalent English-language work would have been commercially publishable.

The real science fiction: Part 6

Taral Wayne

The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders (Phyllis Gotlieb)

The Tsaddik of the Seven Wonders is a charming fantasy written some fifteen years ago by Isidore Haiblum, and, according to the writer, a *tsaddik* is a wonder-worker. Not a magician, who works tricks and illusions. Nor a magical being whose powers are supernatural. Rather, a mortal who, through wisdom, brings wonderful things into being. **Phyllis Gotlieb**, long Canada's best-known science fiction writer, is a Tsaddik in her own right.

Her first wonder was a book published as a Fawcett Gold Medal edition in 1964, with cheap graphics and atmospheric painting by Richard Powers. The title is ***Sunburst***, 'a science fiction classic of tomorrow, by Phyllis Gotlieb'. It was her first novel. Phyllis called

it her autobiographical first novel, and it is self-evident that she put many of her deepest fears and hopes, and much of her own experience into *Sunburst*.

Sunburst is a story told in the sombre tone of John Wyndham of a child growing up in a small town under martial law. Although set in the future, Sorrel Park is backward, poor, suffering from unemployment and stagnation. Once it had been like other towns. A nearby reactor accident brought the Army, and the Army stayed when children of the injured residents were discovered to have deadly gifts. The children had telepathy, telekinesis, every power to make men and matter do what they wanted. But, they were

flawed godlings who had the characters of juvenile delinquents. Selfish, violent, irresponsible, unstable godlings, they nearly wrecked Sorrel Park before they were imprisoned behind a psychic barrier called 'The Dump'.

Shandy Johnson, thirteen, isn't a 'Dumpling'. She believes herself to be a normal, if streetwise, kid without parents. She's brought up by an ethnic working family who, perhaps, don't have a lot of love to give after their own children. As a loner, Shandy had learned to avoid notice. She doesn't find it at all strange that she can lose anyone she wants to, and is never seen when she doesn't want to be — until the 'Peeper', a spy from 'The Dump', begins to follow Shandy around town.

Shandy isn't merely an understudy for the author, but there is nevertheless a lot of Phyllis Gotlieb in her. The image of special children, gifted but maladjusted to society, occurs again in *O, Master Caliban*, written in 1976. Here we have 'Dahlgren's World', an experimental station for research into genetics. The director is Dahlgren himself, an egotistical and unfeeling man who experiments with his own germ plasm to produce his only son by the wife who deserted him. Sven is malformed, however. He has four arms, he is hairless, and (unlike his father) Sven is sensitive. The robots and automatons that run Dahlgren's World rebelled, imprisoned their master and cast out his son. Years passed. Sven grew to be a man. Then, suddenly, a stolen spacecraft dropped out of the sky with a troupe of special children with special talents and special problems.

Among the excellent short stories in *Son of the Morning*, we find other situations like this. 'Gingerbread Boy' is about artificial humans, who have adult minds but the bodies of children. Peace between them and natural human beings, their 'parents', is ruptured by a growing misunderstanding. In 'Blue Apes', children of an isolated colony are capable, intelligent, and fatalistic. They know full well that they grow up to be stupid and incurious, like their fathers and mothers. They know that some day they'll be

looked after in turn by their own children, without any awareness of their dependence. From the opposite point of view, there is 'A Grain of Manhood'. This is a story of a woman who is stranded on an apparently deserted planet. Discovering an invisible Faerie-like realm, she conceives a child before she's rescued by her own kind. In 'Sunday's Child', a woman gives virgin birth to a nightmarish alien. Throughout Phyllis' writing, parenthood and childhood are painful and wonderful alike.

The Human-Quality is something that is also painful and wonderful. Phyllis has never written herself out on this subject. What exactly makes a Human Being? Is it flesh and blood? Sometimes the answer is yes, but more often no. In *O, Master Caliban*, the other robots build a duplicate of Dahlgren, who learned to imitate a Human Being only by becoming one in spirit (if not body). There are no Rabbis to minister to the last Jew in the universe, so a robot becomes a Jew in 'Tauf Alpha'.

Must a human being have human form? No. Unequivocally no. Aliens and non-humans of all shapes populate Phyllis's books, and they are often Human to a fault. They suffer loneliness, as does Spinel-Alpha in *Emperor, Swords, Pentacles*. They fall in love, as do Khreng and Pranda — sentient panther-like beings — in *Judgment of Dragons*. They grieve, as Esther, the motherly gibbon grieves for Igal the goat, in *O, Master Caliban*. The seal-like Cnidori are converted to the Judaic faith in 'Tauf Aleph'. Even God — if Kriku of the Qumedni is the same God of the burning bush as found in the Old Testament — behaves in a human way.

The issue is brought into even sharper focus when Phyllis writes about *Homo sapiens*. Almost all of her human characters are paranormal in some way. With some it's a small thing, such as the sixth finger than Kinnear had removed before he became a GalFed agent. Othertimes it's a more obvious sign, such as Sven's extra set of arms. Colonists to other worlds accept abnormal forms as a condition of their settlement, undergoing physical adaptations. Ardagh's folks settled a world where heavier gravity

required short, stocky build, so Ardagh's body has fewer vertebrae than normal human anatomy. The feelings she has that she's ugly are the basis of a social maladjustment that leads her to meeting Sven, a genuine mutant, in *O, Master Caliban*. The children in 'Blue Apes', preordained to become subhuman as they age, are also victims of voluntary genetic manipulation. There are, again, the artificial people of 'Gingerbread Boy', who can never grow up, but are all but adult. In all these cases, and others, not being normal isn't the real liability. The victims are no less human for being dwarves, or for being short-lived or unable to grow. The liability is always in their own mind, or in the minds of others — those who refuse to see that the paranormals are as fully human as themselves.

One special kind of paranormality has an obviously benevolent character. Espers appear in most if not all of Phyllis Gotlieb's works set in the GalFed background. In her later novels, *A Judgment of Dragons*, *Emperors, Swords, Pentacles*, and *Kingdom of the Cats*, telepathy is an indispensable tool. The Ungruwarkh, otherwise called Starcats, are great red feline forms, intelligent and telepathic. They make up most of the principal characters in the first of the three novels. Khreng and Pranda dominate the other two. But they cannot vocalise. They communicate by telepathy alone. Some Humans and members of other races, such as the Xirifri, are also Espers. Communicating mind-to-mind is the *lingua franca* of the galaxy. In a GalFed teeming with diverse life-forms and unintelligible modes of speech, telepathy transcends the fleshy envelopes that otherwise separate like-minds. How much this reminds one of the problems of communication that are the essence of every writer's craft!

And by her own admission, it is thematically dead centre in all of Phyllis Gotlieb's work.

- *Sunburst*: 1964, Fawcett Gold Medal

- *O, Master Caliban*: 1976, Harper & Row
- *A Judgment of Dragons*: 1980, Ace
- *Emperors, Swords, Pentacles*: 1983, Ace
- *A Son of the Morning*: 1983, Ace, collection
- *Kingdom of the Cats*: 1985, Ace

I said Phyllis Gotlieb was a *tsaddik* of seven wonders, though, didn't I? There are two ways to count to seven in my arithmetic. Before Phyllis became Canada's best SF writer, she was by all accounts one of the country's top poets. Phyllis publisher her collected poetry, ***The Works***, via The Calliope Press in 1978. Many of her poems are science fictional, and all are written in a comprehensible narrative style that I believe most readers can appreciate. Two of them, 'ms and mr frankenstein', and 'was/man', reappeared in Phyllis's SF collection, *Son of the Morning*. All of the poems in *The Works* were reprinted from earlier volumes now out of print — *Within the Zodiac*, *Ordinary*, *Moving*, and *Doctor Umlaut's Earthly Kingdom* — but poems that appear nowhere else are also printed for the first time in the larger collection.

The other way to count to seven wonders is to include Phyllis's next work, unfinished as of this writing. ***Heart of Red Iron*** is a sequel to *O, Master Caliban*. In this novel, Phyllis returns Sven and Ardagh to Dahlgren's World, 13 years later. *Heart of Red Iron* will introduce many new characters, and the most substantial of them might well be Dahlgren's World itself, which Phyllis hinted might be very much alive in its own fashion. Humanity redefined even further? That's one possibility. Another is that Phyllis might develop her ideas in still unexpected ways in her future novels. A *tsaddik* moves in mysterious ways, her wonders to perform.

Since the publication of *Heart of Red Iron* by St Martin's Press in 1989, three years after this article was written, Phyllis has also had published:

- *Blue Apes*: 1995, Tesseract Books, a collection of short stories
- *Flesh and Gold*: 1998, Tor, begins a new trilogy
- *Violent Stars*: 1999, Tor
- *Mindworld*: 2002, Tor
- *Birthstones*: 2007, Robert J. Sawyer Books.

Two points from my original version of this article were left out before publication at Phyllis's request. The first concerns her belief that childbearing is a miracle both wonderful and painful. I have little doubt that Phyllis's own experience as mother of a troubled

daughter are the source of this persistent theme in her work. Second, Phyllis likely had personal reasons to account for her interest in problems of communication. She was not a fluent speaker herself.

Truly, this overview of Phyllis's novels needs a second part. Unfortunately, I fear that I'd have nothing new to add, and I know I'm not up to the task.

— **Taral Wayne, December 2009**

The real science fiction: Part 7

Fred Lerner

Displaced in time: *The Time Traveler's Wife*

Fred Lerner has been a librarian and bibliographer for more than 40 years, and was one of the founders of the Science Fiction Research Association. His first book, *Modern Science Fiction and the American Literary Community* (Scarecrow Press, 1985), was a scholarly study of science fiction's changing reputation in America. He edited *A Silverlock Companion* (Niekas Publications, 1988), a chapbook exploring the writings of John Myers Myers. Much of its content appears in the NESFA Press edition of Myers's romance *Silverlock*

(2005), which he co-edited. *A Bookman's Fantasy* (NESFA Press, 1995) collects some of his essays on science fiction, librarianship, and other areas of interest. A new edition of his historical survey *The Story of Libraries: From the Invention of Writing to the Computer Age* was published by Continuum in December 2009.

First published in Fred Lerner's *Lofgeornost* No 99 (May 2010) for FAPA mailing 291. Fred Lerner can be found at 81 Worcester Avenue, White River Junction, Vermont 05001, USA.

What happens when a newcomer takes up an old science fiction notion and shapes it into a novel?

Often the result is a disaster. Back in 1957 Bob Bloch wrote of the flawed efforts of Herman Wouk to work the veins of speculation that the writers of the Golden Age had mined so skilfully. And today we have to put up with the condescension of Margaret Atwood, she of the talking squids in space, or the ignorance of Philip Roth, who seems to think that he invented the alternate history story.

But sometimes the result is a triumph. Such a book is ***The Time Traveler's Wife*** by Audrey Niffenegger.

When I picked up the novel I had no idea of what to expect, but I hoped that it would be good company on a transatlantic journey. When I opened the book one evening in a Copenhagen hotel room I was immediately won over. How could I not be, when in its opening scene a research librarian is accosted by an 'astoundingly beautiful amber-haired tall slim girl' who 'turns around and looks at me as though I am her personal Jesus'. Henry DeTamble has never seen Claire Abshire before, but she has known him since she was a little girl. And Henry, realising that 'a massive winning lottery ticket chunk of my future has somehow found me here in the present', seizes the opportunity that the vagaries of chronological displacement syndrome have put before him.

For the next five hundred pages, under Niffenegger's supervision, Claire and Henry reveal the critical episodes of their life stories, told as the events happen to them. Claire lives her life the

old-fashioned way, travelling into the future one day at a time; but Henry weaves in and out of Claire's life, and in and out of his own past, at the whim of whatever freak of nature has bestowed upon him the utterly uncontrollable ability to travel through time. Both tell their stories in present tense — who but the French have enough past tenses to confront time travel?

Henry and Claire's relationship made me envision a caduceus, the snake wrapped around a staff that is the traditional symbol of western physicians. Niffenegger's stroke of genius is to present Claire's life as the staff around which Henry's wanderings in time come to revolve. Thus the inherent unreality of their relationship is anchored in an ordinary human existence — or as ordinary an existence as a woman can have whose husband has an idiosyncratic relationship with chronology.

Robert Heinlein is justly renowned for his tales exploring the paradoxes of time travel. But 'By His Bootstraps' and 'All You Zombies—', for all their ingenuity, are short stories; and in Heinlein's lone novel of time travel, *The Door into Summer*, Daniel Boone Davis makes only one trip into the past. In *The Time Traveler's Wife* Niffenegger sustains her story through 540 pages, without once forcing her reader to suspend his suspension of disbelief.

It's not just that she makes a splendid and moving story out of a standard science-fictional device; she has an SF writer's eye for the consequences that flow from it. Her focus is on the personal, rather than the societal, effects of one man's ability to travel through time; but she is generous in her consideration of its

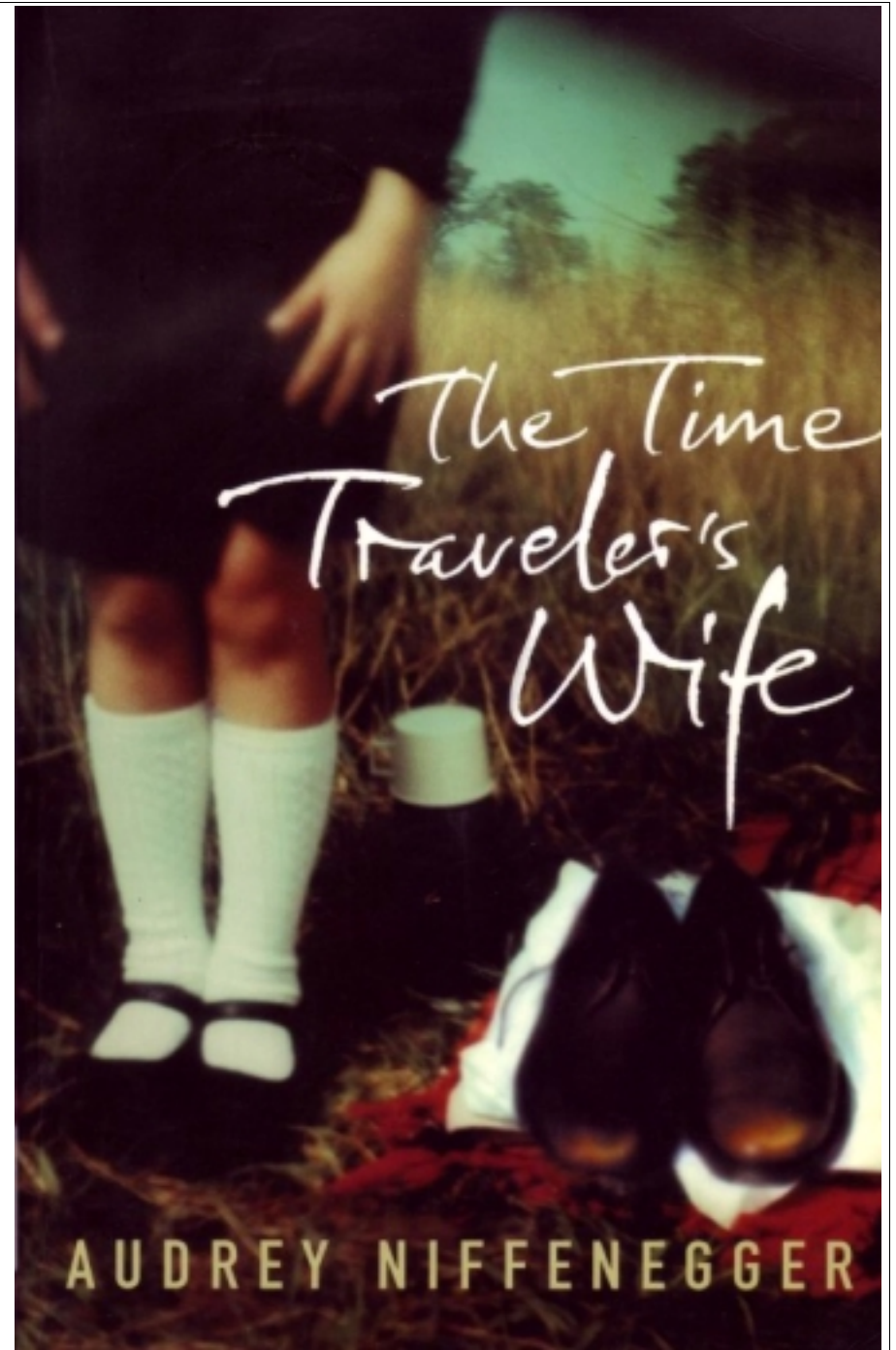
implications. A man who is liable to be whisked abruptly from one time-and-place to another soon learns ways of dealing with the consequences. If one's travels are unaccompanied by anything one might happen to be carrying or wearing at the time, the results can be comic or tragic, but will certainly be damned inconvenient. And if the one thing that the time traveller can bring with him is information, that has its consequences too. The possibilities that this affords are not the subject of *The Time Traveler's Wife*, but enough is said about them to convince the reader that Niffeneger had given careful thought to them.

What's important to me about *The Time Traveler's Wife* is not that it is the finest example I have ever seen of an outsider writing a really good science fiction novel. The important thing is that it is a beautiful piece of story-telling, a well-crafted account of two attractive people living and loving through an impossible situation with grace and spirit. It left me with the same feeling I had when I read Mark Helprin's *A Soldier of the Great War* or Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* or John Crowley's *Four Freedoms* — a feeling of having spent several hours in the company of imaginary people who enriched my life by their acquaintance. Audrey Niffeneger has just published *Her Fearful Symmetry*, which seems to be a ghost story aimed at the young adult readership. I mean to find a copy as soon as I come down from the high that reading *The Time Traveler's Wife* gave me.

Am I right to call *The Time Traveler's Wife* a science fiction novel?

As always, the answer to that question depends upon what one means by the term. I have often spoken of three approaches to defining science fiction, so let's see how well *The Time Traveler's Wife* fits under each of them.

If we're defining SF in terms of subject matter, then there's no question about it. A time travel novel is inherently science fiction if even a token attempt is made to suggest that some natural law governs the process. Diagnosing Henry's condition as Chronic



Displacement Syndrome and offering a genetic etiology for it certainly qualifies.

If we're defining SF in terms of its narrative strategy and use of language — I refer you to Suvin and Delany for the details — then *The Time Traveler's Wife* passes that test too. It's not just that the not-so-obvious implications of the *novum* play an important role in the story. The matter-of-fact presentation of a circumstance significantly different from what we know of the world and the principles that govern its operation places *The Time Traveler's Wife* solidly within the science fiction tradition.

It's the third approach to definition — the one I most favour — that raises the biggest question. To my mind the most meaningful definition of science fiction is 'that body of literature produced by SF writers'; that is, by writers who are knowingly working within the tradition that began with Shelley, Poe, Verne, Wells, and their contemporaries; matured in the pulp magazines; and continues to be 'in conversation with' earlier stories created within that tradition. Does *The Time Traveler's Wife* qualify as a science fiction novel under this definition? Is Audrey Niffenegger a science fiction writer?

There's nothing on her website to indicate any background in science fiction: so far as I can see the words don't even occur there. And I had never run across her name during my decades of reading science fiction and participating actively in the SF community. But that doesn't mean that she was ignorant of the term.

One of the chapters is titled 'Library Science Fiction'. In that chapter Henry first tries to explain his situation to outsiders: his boss at the Newberry Library, from whom he can no longer conceal his sudden appearances and disappearances, and a geneticist-physician, with whose help he hopes to find an explanation and perhaps a cure for them. And later, when 'there is only the truth, which is more outrageous than any of my lies', Henry's boss is incredulous. 'Listen, I do not appreciate you sitting in there telling me science fiction. If I wanted science fiction I would borrow some from Amelia.' (She is a co-worker who in the office betting on Henry's absences 'put her money on abduction by aliens'.)

Those are the only references to science fiction in the book, and they're precisely what one might expect from a writer who knows what science fiction is but doesn't consider it especially relevant to what she is doing. According to the account on her website, Audrey Niffenegger never thought of sending *The Time Traveler's Wife* to a science fiction publisher.

So if there's any validity to that third approach, Audrey Niffenegger is not a science fiction writer, and *The Time Traveler's Wife* is not really a science fiction story. It is instead something extremely unusual: a novel written by an outsider that addresses the concerns of science fiction. I hope that its success will inspire other writers to use the tools that science fiction writers have developed over the past two hundred years to explore all the implications of being human.

— Fred Lerner, 2010

The real science fiction: Part 8

George Zebrowski

Extreme science fiction: Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950)

Readers, whether they notice it or not, perform what they read in the theatres of their minds. Yet the model often accepted today is that of a writer who does it all by taking over the reader's mind. This right away absolves an unwilling readership from effort beyond an assumed comfort level of reading. Unwilling to exert itself when confronted by works above their comfort level, this readership blames the author, leaving itself also unable to tell good-but-difficult from simply bad works. One also finds this failure among writers, reviewers, and even ambitious critics.

Many writers accept this condition and cater to the readership by simplifying. But to find this kind of failure in the potentially most ambitious and critical of our world's literatures, one that claims to question everything, which takes as its themes our cosmic existence and our very natures as a work in progress, is the most

stultifying spectacle of my entire working life in science fiction.

I exaggerate; the failure has always been there, in various degrees, because money has made it so, as greed has diminished all human activities by standing in the way of merit, even paying wordsmiths to deny that money is a good servant and a bad master.

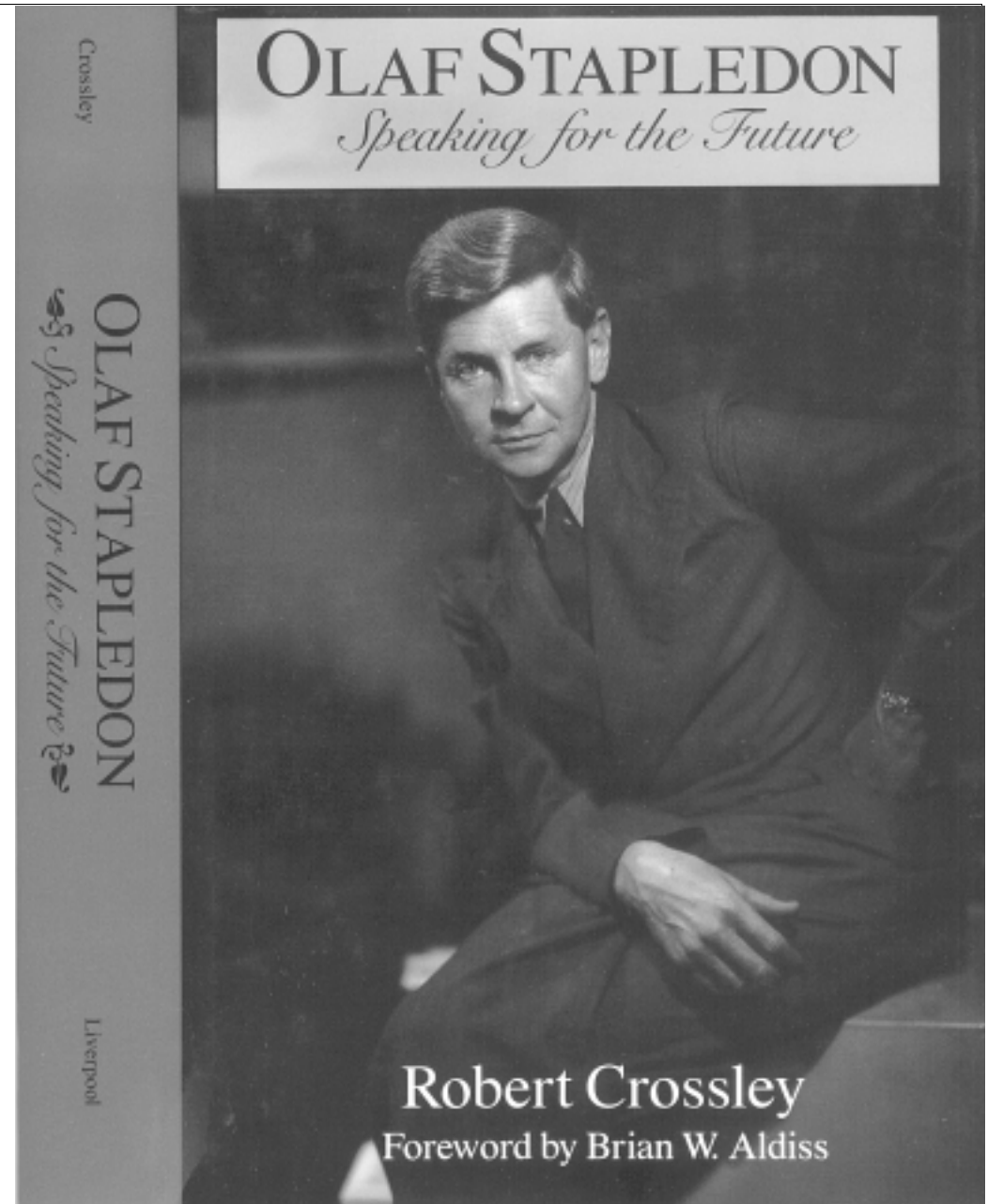
The case of **William Olaf Stapledon** (1886–1950) is perhaps the emblematic problem of the serious literary publication of science fiction.

Over the years of my writing life, several of the major houses attempting SF programs have asked me whether they should republish the works of Stapledon, the author of ***Last and First***

Men (1930) and **Star Maker** (1937), from which so many ideas and themes flowed into SF — into the works of E. E. Smith and Arthur C. Clarke, to name two extremes. Then these publishers would fail to reissue the works of Stapledon when they researched the small sales of his English and other editions, despite a chorus of endless critical acclaim from Jorge Luis Borges, C. S. Lewis, Stanislaw Lem, Robert Silverberg, Leslie Fiedler, Doris Lessing, Brian Aldiss, Arthur C. Clarke, and many others, directly and indirectly influenced by his works. One begins to feel after the passing of decades that commerce not only exercises economic censorship of what is published but also imprisons the past by building a backlist wall to keep new readers out, something like the way governments confine political prisoners against the outcries of civil rights organisers.

Stapledon has been reprinted by a number of smaller houses and university presses, but never in the way that he deserves, with a complete set of works. This is one of the shames of money, whose operatives routinely commits cultural crimes of which they are wilfully unaware or in denial. George Bernard Shaw (who wrote at least one play with Stapledonian and Wellsian echoes, *Back To Methuselah*, 1921, revised 1946), commented on money in the 'Preface On Bosses' to his 1936 play, *The Millionairess*: 'What is to be done with that section of the possessors of specific talents whose talent is for moneymaking? History and daily experience teach us that if the world devises some plan of ruling them, they will rule the world. Now it is not desirable that they should rule the world; for the secret of moneymaking is to care for nothing else and to work at nothing else; and as the world's welfare depends on operations by which no individual can make money, while its ruin by war and drink and disease and drugs and debauchery is enormously profitable to the moneymakers, the supremacy of the moneymaker is the destruction of the State. A society which depends on the incentive of private profit is doomed.'

For how long now wisdom has been in plain sight and we do not



practise it: 'two wrongs don't make a right'; 'the wrong means poison the end'; 'money is a good servant but a poor master'. Some moneymakers are stricken with a social conscience as they shudder over their graves, as we see in the hopes of non-profit foundations, but these rarely confront the crowd of private bosses they left behind, and fail to establish sustainable good. The union of business and government, once described as the very definition of fascism, is the tyranny of today. To paraphrase Stapledon's comments about society and the individual, authors must deserve their publishers, and publishers must deserve their authors; few do so on either side.

Yet good works are published, and disappear; the tyranny of money is not perfect but it soon corrects its lapses into quality. Knopf published Wells but not Stapledon, and only money differentiated between these two great ones.

But there is another side to Stapledon's problems: readers. P. S. Miller, the longtime reviewer for 'The Reference Library' in John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, later *Analog*, told an instructive story about his reading of Stapledon, still worth quoting in full:

One of the publishing events of 1953 was *To The End of Time*, the omnibus volume by Olaf Stapledon with which Funk & Wagnalls surprised the science fiction world (775 + xiv pp., \$5.00). It contains Stapledon's four greatest books: *Last and First Men* (1930), *Star Maker* (1937), *Odd John* (1935), *Sirius* (1944), and also *The Flames* (1947). Of these, *Last and First Men* and *Odd John* originally appeared in this country as well as in England, and FPCI brought out *The Flames* in 1949 in a volume, *Worlds of Wonder*, which included *Death Into Life* (1946) and *Old Man in New World* (1944) (The latter were republished by FPCI last year with Murray Leinster's unrelated 1931 *Murder Madness*, in a book called *Quadratic*, for \$3.50.)

FPCI (Fantasy Publishing Co., Inc) was a small house, founded and run by William L. Crawford, a self-taught printer and SF fan,

from the 1930s through 1972. The contrast between Funk & Wagnalls and FPCI could not have been more ironic, or even more noble.

Miller continues:

Although the book took some time to catch up with me here in Pittsburgh, you'd have heard about it months ago but for one thing: I found it unreadable. You're hearing about it now for another reason: I found out why.

Let me qualify what I've just said. To me Stapledon's story of the super intelligent mutant sheep dog, *Sirius*, is by far his most readable book as 'Sirius' is his most 'human' and believable character. *Odd John* comes next, though I know that many readers find John altogether too odd and unhuman for them to make any identification with him. He is by no means a 'hero' in the sense of the usual *Homo superior* of current science fiction.

The 'smaller' virtues of ***Odd John*** and ***Sirius*** exist in their criticism of humankind's pretensions about progress, which has failed so often, and now seems about to reach a crisis of planetary proportions. These are affecting Swiftian novels dealing with the nature of intelligence.

Miller continues:

Both of these books held my attention when I came to them about two-thirds of the way through *To the End of Time*, as well as they have ever done. But this omnibus which Basil Davenport has selected-edited begins with Stapledon's best-known and probably greatest book, *Last and First Men*, and follows it with the sequel (which I had never read) *Star Maker*. And here I stuck fast.

Now, I remembered *Last and First Men* as a work of breath-taking imaginative power which sweeps through the future of mankind for some two billion years. John Campbell has said of it: 'Olaf Stapledon's science fiction is beyond the ordinary meaning of science fiction — a most remarkable extension of man's history

and philosophy toward a visualization of the ultimate goals of life.' Yet I found myself unable to turn the pages.

Then I learned the reason: my own reading habits.

By necessity and (now) habit I do most of my reading in fits and snatches, with meals, on the trolley, late at night, with a few clear stretches on a weekend. I've long known that solid, serious books, fiction or non-fiction, can't be read in this way and my reading has suffered. It's a method that's fine for light, fast-moving fiction like detective stories or most science fiction — anthologies, of course, have their built-in breaks — but every now and then when I get well started on a new — or old — book of history, or archeology, or science, I find there's no way to read it except by ignoring all else, including the news- papers, until it's done.

One of the winter's assorted bugs caught up with me, I spent a couple of days at home, and after going through five mysteries in one very long Thursday I picked up Stapledon again. *And I couldn't put it down!*

You can't read Stapledon in little bits. But once you've let the pace of *Last and First Men* pick you up, you'll find it carrying you irresistibly on as a kind of remote spectator watching the rise and fall, birth and death of races. And in *Star Maker* that sweep of imagination encompasses the entire evolution of the universe, human and nonhuman, and introduces Stapledon's concept that life is a property of all energy-converting entities, from a flame in a Welsh hearth to the assemblage of galaxies which swim through space. (*The Flames* is a kind of vignette in the same grand pattern, but a very minor one.)

It is amazing that other writers of science fiction have not made more use of Olaf Stapledon's tremendous panorama, as an entire school developed Lovecraft's synthetic mythology. Many have struck on the same ideas and themes, but so far as I know nobody has ever tried to fit his stories into the pattern of Stapledon's future as Robert Heinlein, or Isaac Asimov, or Clifford Simak, have done with imaginary futures of their own.

I intrude at this point to say that a number of writers, myself among them, have since taken this route. Miller continues:

When I commented, some time ago, that James Blish's 'Surface Tension' was a variation on one of Stapledon's themes I meant only its concept of a human race deliberately engineered and bred to suit an utterly alien environment. 'Man Remakes Himself' is the title of Chapter XI of *Last and First Men* and the theme of all the rest of that book and most of *Star Maker*.

For those of you who have no idea of what these books are like, I'd better attempt a synopsis. *Last and First Men* was written in 1929: it is a history of mankind from the end of the first World War until the end of man, reported telepathically by one of the Last Men of two billion years hence. (The predictions for the period of our own lifetimes have been omitted in this edition).

This omission was Basil Davenport's decision for Funk & Wagnalls, believing in the midst of the Cold War that this material was dated; today, it reads like an alternative history in the full, available editions (remember, you can get almost any out-of-print book online). Miller continues:

An American world state develops, exhausts its resources and collapses. Plague wipes out great masses of the population, then here and there in remote places new, isolated variants on the human race begin to develop: 'During the first tenth of the first million years after the fall of the World State ... man remained in complete collapse. Not till the close of this span, which we will call the First Dark Age, did he struggle once more from savagery through barbarism into civilization. And then his renaissance was relatively brief. From its early beginnings to its end, it covered only fifteen thousand years; and in its final agony the planet was so seriously damaged that mind lay henceforth in deep slumber for ten millions of years. This was the Second Dark Age.' And this is the matter for *two chapters* in *Last and First Men*. As the incredible story unfolds, we are dealing with new species of men as strange as any recent science-fictioners have used to populate alien worlds: the furry little Third Men, the Great Brains, the android Fourth Men, the giant Fifth Men, the migration to Venus

and development of the winged Seventh Men, of the Ninth Men designed to live on Neptune and the evolution there of ten more human species, and the Eighteenth and last who tell the story.

Where *Last and First Men* followed the human race to its end, *Star Maker* follows its narrator on a mental wandering through all space and all time, among races human and nonhuman, to the knowledge that stars, planets, galaxies, galactic swarms — all have life and intelligence, and that creation follows creation and cosmos builds upon cosmos through an infinity of time, space and dimension.

In the very short *The Flames* one of these sentient sun-children, trapped in the solidifying earth and now freed by miners, reveals another facet of this vision of cosmic consciousness. A fourth book, not in this collection...is *Last Men in London*, in which a Last Man looks at our civilization with a two-billion year perspective. *Death Into Life* — in the FPCI *Worlds of Wonder* — goes over much the same ground from a still different point of view.

As Basil Davenport points out in his introduction to *To The End of Time*, the ideas in his major books are their characters, and races and aeons of time replace individuals and days. Only *Odd John* and *Sirius* have semiconventional plots, conversations, action. But no writer who has ever come into the science-fiction- fantasy field has ever shown so vast and encompassing an imagination. If you can match your pace to his, you're in for an experience.

If you cannot, then that condition opens up a problem that goes to the very heart of what science fiction, wedded to thought and knowledge, should be.

In 1969, reviewing *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* in the complete Dover edition, Miller added:

a must for any science fiction library. You may not even 'like' it, but you'll find *Last and First Men*, in particular, impossible to forget ... The ideas in it have only been scratched by other writers; *the entire body of later science fiction could have been written out of it and left much still to be used...never before was*

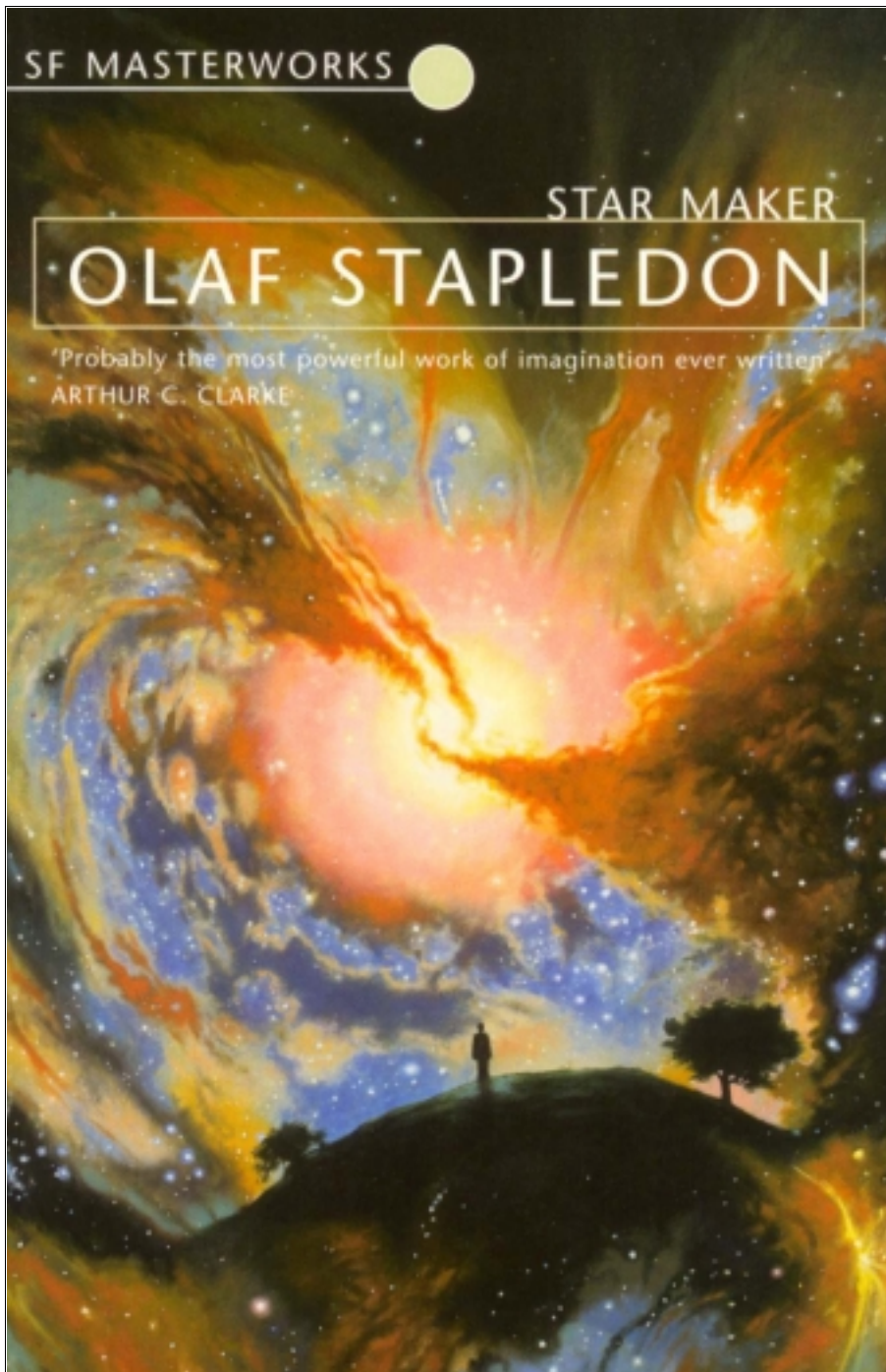
there anything like this book.

The above (italics mine) cannot be said of any other science fiction writer, then or since; not even Verne or Wells, who domesticated their ideas with more conventional ways. I also did so in my own *Macrolife*, in an attempt to deal with the usual but irrelevant charge made against *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*, that they have a story without characters. Not entirely true, since both books have narrators, who are specifically identified, and each has a voice and a point of view.

I read *Star Maker* first, in my teen years, because I had learned that *Last and First Men* was only a footnote in the larger work — so why should I start small? And then I felt that there wasn't much left to live for, when I had seen it all! Such is the mind of a disillusioned teenager who had been told by his parents, survivors of Europe's cruel war, not to be so curious because I would learn too much early on and have nothing left to appreciate or discover by the time I was thirty. But I had just looked into the Gorgon's face of Stapledon's *Star Maker*, a vision they could not even begin to grasp; it reduced their life experiences to a passing second, as do most scientific perspectives, which is why so many people shut out time and space from their minds.

But next, as his mind cleared, the boy wanted to become one of Stapledon's 'Forewards', the kind of reader that every SF reader should be, giving himself to foresight more than to hindsight, of which we have had too much, leading us into William Faulkner's sad refrain that the past is never past and persists as both present and future. If nothing else, Stapledon, and much of science fiction's best, calls us to throw off the dust of temporal provincialisms from our heels and become Wells's Time Traveller, at home in history and in creative possibility.

As I read Stapledon, as the writer I wanted to become, I asked what was left for me to do, given what he had done. The answer was, of course, everything, as it had been for him, he with the



knowledge of his day and what he could imagine from it, and I with the database I could accumulate, and with what I could imagine.

As I reread Stapledon today, I know that few readers seem equipped to read him, as they pursue job training rather than education. Narrower expectations run their minds — but expectations should not govern; exploration should. Readers with narrower expectations seek only to repeat their previous satisfactions, and freeze at certain levels. Readers of Stapledon should be 'forewards', as should SF readers in general.

What happened to make this so is not hard to see, once we look at the world's constraints, which if widened would put most of the accumulators of wealth who do not produce anything out of business, beginning with the fossil families of gas, oil, and coal. Education, health care, and legal services, if they were not for profit, would unleash the human creativity that lies waiting in our knowledge. The tragic vision, so clear in Stapledon, in which dozens of civilisations rise and fall, might yield an entirely different kind of growth, one free of Einstein's lament that his contribution to knowledge had only put matches into the hands of children — as decades of science fiction has so clearly registered. Even the most popular forms of science fiction, depicting conflicts and wars on massive scales, as in the works of A. E. Van Vogt, show barbarism in charge of the toys made by our knowledge. The serious element of change through knowledge seems impervious to the entertainments that wear the critical garb of SF for commercial gain, drowning more thoughtful work with wave after wave of redundant production.

In my 1979 novel *Macrolife* and its 1999 companion in the 'Macrolife Mosaic,' *Cave of Stars*, I began along the Stapledonian way. The Stapledonian comparisons were inevitable, the praise extravagant, along with a few vicious condemnations, the sales modest, the publishing support poor, justified by twisted self-fulfilling prophecies of failure. The 'bottom line' was always and still

is, for the shrinking percentage of serious SF, that it's just too bad; the unspoken conclusion is 'just give up and die and don't make us feel guilty about it'. One editor at a major house said to me that 'whether we publish your work or not has nothing to do with its merits'. She did not blush, mirrors did not shatter, the Earth did not shake at these words, and she might just as well have said, 'You've been published — now forget it. We took our chance with you. Nothing more can be done.'

Now, with the collapse of publishing as we knew it well along, we have let go of the accepted wisdom that an author's sales are his own responsibility and that poor sales mean poor quality; too much quality has come and gone to keep the lie afloat, even as 'craft morons' continue to produce highly polished, skilful junk, tailors who cut marvellous suits from burlap.

Olaf Stapledon's work, along with that of many of his children, sits as a continuing reproach to publishing as well as to the collaborationist writers' failure of ambition.

One major colleague of mine once told me how he was tempted to write a Stapledonian novel about far futures, with no concession to so-called fictional-dramatic 'norms'. Just the vision — straight out at the reader, wherever it might lead, thank you.

He never wrote it.

Another colleague lamented how general fiction is permitted all kinds of freedom in technique, but when even a small bit of innovation was imported into SF during the New Wave fracas of the 1960s, publishers and critics bemoaned the loss of narratives. Since then, a few of our oldest old-timers have absorbed minor portions of the possible palette of techniques (already quite old in general fiction) and been rewarded for it.

But in commercial SF (most of it), the one-step, two-step, turn-and-repeat of plain 'telling' still prevails, and 'writing' is still denied

in favour of the ancient dance of talking.

And still one more colleague has insisted, in embarrassing print, that money comes quickly to SF writers, if you are good, ignoring the many fine SF writers who never made money. Stephen Colbert, on his satirical television program *The Colbert Report*, says it often, so mockingly that many a fool takes it seriously: if you make money, you are a success and the matter is closed. Of course, this does not mean that if you make money you are bad; or that failing to earn money makes you a genius. The logic is not a two-way street.

As I look around since 1979, looking for Stapledon's way, I see that I do not have many companions. Both Gregory Benford and Brian W. Aldiss have compared *Macrolife* to Stapledon's cosmic novels, with considerable praise, and with the realisation that there's not much money that way. I should note *Galaxies Like Grains of Sand* and *Starswarm* (1964) by Brian W. Aldiss (1960), *Cities In Flight* (1969) and *The Seedling Stars* (1957) by James Blish, *City* (1952) by Clifford D. Simak, the works of Arthur C. Clarke, Gregory Benford, Doris Lessing, and Greg Egan, for their Stapledonian leanings. It is understandable that these all have the shape of what have been called 'chronicle novels', covering large spans of time, and that as Benford has said of *Macrolife*, they all 'talk to Stapledon.'

Stapledon's works represent the extremes of SF, both as fiction and as thought. But that seems wrongheaded: a racing car owner would not wish to drive at the speed limit, but would want to see what the vehicle could do, at least somewhere, sometime. And so with SF. What can it do? Can we be happy with pedestrian SF, both in thought and story? As readers, must we stop growing in our appreciations?

We think of Stapledon as an extreme because so much of SF has been so much less. Much less. Too much less to be explained by simple failure of effort. Too many authors have simply adapted to

what they have read, to what sells, to readers who imagine that many an author has invented everything in his work from scratch, when in truth SF has been a generational conversation among the best. The hacks simply copy, cut and paste, then polish; the best argue, expand, and find new ways, and avoid triviality.

Stapledon did not live in the genre village; he did much more — he lived in thought, in human history, in the sciences of his day, in the critical philosophies of his day. He did, in preparation and in execution what an SF writer should do; he ran the full race, and at dangerous speeds. Most SF crawls, driving its engines at the speed limit, timidly. And inbreeding has been killing our village.

Inevitably, my 'Macrolife' stories, the two existing novels and three novelettes, had to be compared to Stapledon, with both praise and with mockery; I asked for it. One reviewer, a fellow writer, suggested that if you'd like to read Newton's *Principia* before breakfast, then this was the book for you. Only George Turner, the noted Australian writer, specifically defended my right to my choice of form for *Macrolife*, even as commercially minded reviewers were nonplussed, and sought to re-define the novel to fit their conclusions.

Today, Stapledon is respected but still rarely read, even by his admirers, but that fact only reveals laziness. He should be read with effort that can only strengthen readers. SF without thought is not SF, and neither is SF that crawls.

Stapledon's other works deserve a few words.

Perhaps Stapledon felt overwhelmed by his visions, and so turned to his 'smaller' works, *Sirius* and *Odd John*, and sought to educate and enlighten in his works of philosophy, ***A Modern Theory of Ethics*** (1929), ***Waking World*** (1934), ***Philosophy and Living***, two volumes (1939), and ***Beyond The 'Isms'*** (1942), all still quite readable and provocative today.

Reading Stapledon's work today one is struck by the contrast with so much science fiction that is socially and politically trivial, amusement and distraction sold for money, written by people who are intelligent, concerned and not blind to what they are doing, for readers who have learned to like what is put before them because they have rarely seen much else. How this can happen seems a naïve question. It is argued that escapism is sometimes needed as therapy — but whatever happened to Isaac Asimov's claim that SF is an 'escape into reality, not from it,' into creative realities wherein we glimpse our chances to change all that we can change, our futures?

Stapledon's SF was never trivial, never commercially meant, never shameful before SF's potential as a 'planetary literature'.

Entertainment and play are necessary to our mental health; but not all the time, and in seemingly endless quantities, as we find in the media, and in most SF. Truth and reality are necessary for our sanity, even our survival, and this the trivialisation of SF does not serve. SF itself has foreseen its own problems, in its depictions of our move into virtual worlds of wish fulfilment and madness — warnings at which the playful producers of craft-moronic SF sneer. SF authors have also envisioned the horror of child-monsters, who in our world become brutal adults. What we need is a joyous, childlike but critically aware flexibility that is unafraid of creativity and change; SF's dystopian and constructive futures, warn while hoping.

What is the alternative to commercial publishing? Move with merit, with no fear of an author's track record/rap sheet or lack of it; ignore 'buzz'. The result would be no worse than trying to fix the horse race. Hold a lottery of all available book projects, in all fields. The counter-intuitive prediction is that we would see no change in sales — but there would be the usual surprises, because in reality merit is a stealth quality, and the whys of each editor or committee are mere rationalisations; imperfect tyrannies let quality slip through the cracks — so why not simply recognise it

outright? Where do the surprise successes come from? Strange, that the ideals of the founders of the great publishing houses, now sold off to corporations, should be so little applied, and when they are observed, with so much grudging. Too much good is left to stealth and accident.

Today, a large portion of the most ambitious SF is published by the smaller presses, which is where SF began in the 1940s and '50s; but as these grow again, a race to the bottom comes upon them in the name of survival. The lesson is not to get too large and to keep quality in sight; and the lesson for writers is to write well, and put it in the drawer, unpublished, if necessary; if you do that, you'll know how much it means to you. Is it the act of writing and thinking or publication? Easy to say both, which is why we have so many worthless books.

A recent major author recently reported the rejection of his new novel, about which the publisher said that years ago they would have published the work, but not *today*; quality was not the issue. The editor called upon a readership that the publisher had helped dumb down to justify a rejection. Follow but do not lead. The circularity of the argument is a disgrace to logic; the editor's job needs this disgrace of reason, and writers who will adapt to it.

Stapledon would not be published today. 'So individual is his voice', Brian Aldiss has written, 'that his writing has never been properly accepted in either the history of literature or of science

fiction. Yet his two major works, *Last and First Men*, and, more especially, *Star Maker*, are unrivalled for scope, beauty, and aspiration.'

The mountains of praise for Stapledon that today can be found online has always been there; he never lacked for it; but it is often self-congratulatory within the SF field, or places him entirely outside of it. Even more ironic is that today we have editors who have never heard of him and openly disclaim any interest in the history of the field; they know how to read in a vacuum.

Recommended: Robert Crossley's biography, ***Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future***, Syracuse University Press, 1994, with a complete bibliography of all works, also definitively refutes the charge of 'Marxist' that is supposed to diminish his work. Also recommended is ***An Olaf Stapledon Reader***, edited by Robert Crossley, Syracuse University Press, 1997, an elegant compilation for readers unwilling to venture into deeper waters. On the cover is Arthur C. Clarke's comment about *Last and First Men*, that 'No other book had a greater influence on my life'.

A recent example of literary justice may be found in the new edition of ***Star Maker*** (Wesleyan, 2004), a critical edition edited and introduced by Patrick A. McCarthy, with a Foreword by Freeman J. Dyson.

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The real science fiction: Part 9

John Litchen

Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*

Doubleday special edition with illustrations by Karel Thole and a biographical sketch of the author by William F Nolan.

Television mini-series (281 minutes duration) produced in 1979 and starring Rock Hudson, Gayle Hunnicutt, Bernie Casey, Roddy McDowell, Darren McGavin, Bernadette Peters, Maria Schell, Joyce Van Patten, and Fritz Weaver, Screenplay by Richard Matheson.

It has been more than 50 years since I first read *The Martian Chronicles* in its English published edition called *The Silver Locusts*, and having come across a recently released DVD of the 1979–80 mini-series (which I remember seeing on TV, and at the time was quite impressed), I thought it was time to have another look at this seminal book to see whether it still holds up as the enthralling read I fondly remember it to be. The DVD was only \$15, so I didn't hesitate to buy it.

When the series was made in 1979, Rock Hudson was a fading star, but his name still held some appeal and I suspect he was happy to have the work and be the lead. However his acting hadn't improved. It was still wooden and emotionless. The only decent film I remember him being in was *Seconds*, directed by John Frankenheimer, and that was so downbeat it didn't last long in the theatres before vanishing. From an acting point of view that was the best film he ever made. It was released in 1966, and I can't remember him in any other film after that until the TV series of *The Martian Chronicles*. Back then to appear in a TV series was a real comedown for film actors. They regarded TV disdainfully, and to all and sundry it indicated the end of a career — quite the opposite of the last decade or so, when many actors of TV series have crossed over into film and become massive stars. George Clooney springs to mind as a good example. Even the best and most famous actors are happy to even do TV commercials and don't mind appearing in TV shows as well as movies. A good TV series is often better than a movie, as it can tell a story in great

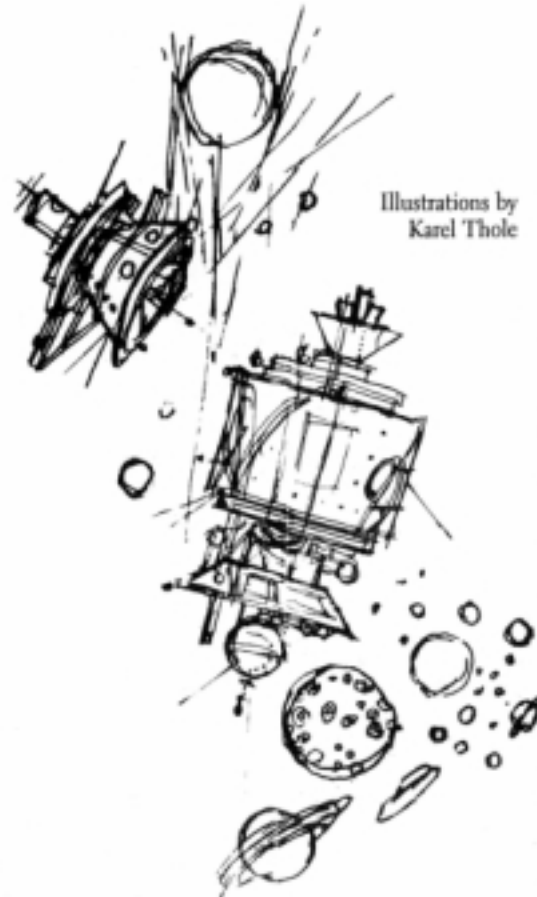


detail over an extended period and people will follow it and then buy the DVDs of the series so they can watch it again at their leisure.

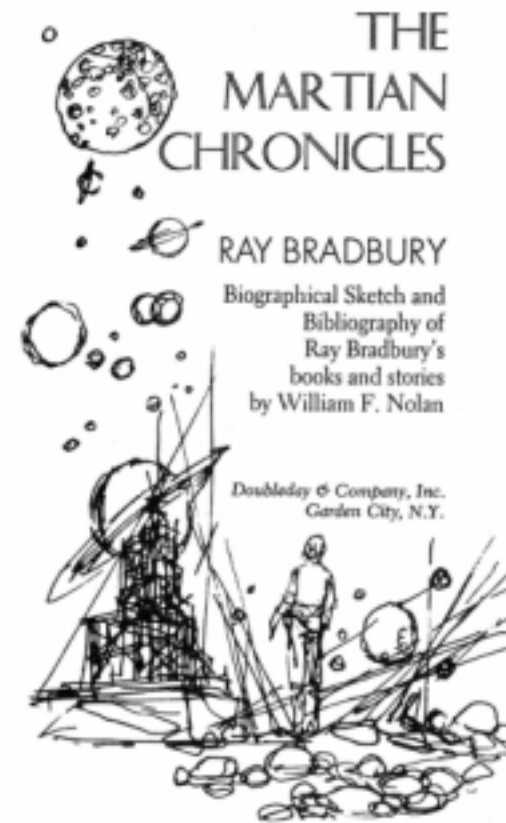
With Richard Matheson, whom we all know as the author of *I am Legend* (made into a movie three or four times, with actors such as Vincent Price, Charlton Heston, and Will Smith playing the lead in the various versions) writing the script one would assume the series was going to be brilliant. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Matheson also scripted *The Incredible Shrinking Man* as well as writing the novel. I don't know which came first, the film or the novel, or whether it was meant to be a film tie-in, as often happens these days, but I did buy the novel long after I had seen the film. I wanted to see how he explained the ending, but my recollection now is that it was as vague as the film, and probably equally as implausible.

I suppose that, by the standards of TV series shown in 1979 or 1980 in Australia, *The Martian Chronicles* was good. I hadn't remembered how cheap and tacky the animation of the space rockets appeared. The crude control centre I could accept, as such structures were often shown like that in old films and they did reflect a degree of reality. But the rockets were absolutely silly with puffs of smoke spluttering out of the engines, and jerky animation.

The book I have, published by Doubleday in 1973, is a special edition with illustrations by Karel Thole, a man I met at Aussicon in 1975. (He also did covers for early Brian Aldiss paperbacks as well as many European SF books and magazines.). This book doesn't have the story that I read years ago about the protagonist who sleeps at night in a Martian house. While he is sleeping, microscopic tendrils emerge from the bed and penetrate his body all over, slowly altering him so he becomes more like an extinct Martian. It was a creepy story that gave me bad dreams for a while. Bradbury must have written this well after the original publication of *The Martian Chronicles* in 1950, but did not add it



Illustrations by
Karel Thole



to this edition.

Bradbury's Mars has always been about the myth of going to Mars. His ideas of what Mars might be like could have been engendered by what he read as a boy by Edgar Rice Burroughs, who wrote a whole series of books set on Mars, and the older idea that Mars harboured a dying civilisation; that the lines seen on Mars's surface by astronomers were miles of canals built to bring water from the poles to the arid tropical areas. Even H. G. Wells thought Mars harboured an ancient civilisation, though his Martians were

much more malevolent than Bradbury's, who were wise, benign, sometimes even funny (see the second story, 'The Summer Night'), and certainly very human.

Bradbury wasn't concerned with the reality of Mars but with the myth of a lost civilisation that had endured aeons of a dying planet, as well as the myth of country America, remembered from his childhood. His recollections of small-town America were more a fantasy than a reality, but he projected that childlike fantasy into his present time (1940-50) and his vision of the near future. This

nonexistent past America projected into the near future gives the stories a sense of wonder tinged with nostalgia that permeates the book. This same feeling, that after more than half a century, keeps these stories alive, fresh, and enjoyable.

Bradbury was called the Poet of Science Fiction because he used imagery in a very poetic way. He was a master story-teller. The trappings of his backgrounds were barely sketched in, because he put all the emphasis on what the characters did and said. How they expressed their emotions and their feelings always took precedence over the setting. It is claimed his stories are like prose poems and many of them are studied in schools alongside other more famous American writers of literature. His language sings, and its quality is remembered long after the story has been read and put aside.

Bradbury postulates that his Martian cities are built along these ancient canals. His only attempt at science is to claim that the air is so thin it is hard for earth people to breathe and that it is not nourishing. He suggests it is like the air pressure at high altitudes of villages in the Andes, and that it will take time for humans to acclimatise. His descriptions of the Martian scenery are vague, and he focuses more on the problems the characters bring with them to Mars rather than what Mars could possibly be like.

Surely in 1950 people must have known that it was simply too cold to go unprotected on Mars, that the air was far too thin to breathe regardless of how much acclimatisation one cared to make, and that any outdoor activity would require protection as well as breathing gear? What Bradbury expresses, I think, is what people in the 1920s and 1930s would have believed Mars to be like, so his visions of the future, where just about anyone could build a rocket in the back yard, where rockets were as common as cars, and buses and trucks come in all sizes and where every town has at least one rocket ready to lift off for Mars, are retro-futuristic, and decidedly quaint. Can you imagine carrying enough lumber to rebuild exact replicas of small towns in country

USA in thousands of rockets filling the sky like silver locusts in waves of voyages from Earth to Mars? These 1920s American towns are replicate along the canals. He implies that all the food and luxury items are brought in by rocket. There is no hint of anything being grown on Mars. One story, though, tells of a Johnny Appleseed character wandering across Mars planting seeds for oaks, ashes, and elms, all familiar trees. This one seems outright fantasy compared to the other stories, as we see the trees sprouting into giants behind the character as he traverses the countryside.

When Bradbury wrote the Mars stories, the only rockets he may have seen would have been V2 rockets used in World War II against England, so his vague descriptions suggest scaled-up versions of these. How could these be made as common as the family car? How could the massive infrastructure be built to accomplish this impossible feat?

His characters bear no resemblance to astronauts or cosmonauts, or even to Air Force pilots or any other people who might be able to fly a plane. They are ordinary people who suddenly decide they want to go to Mars, so travelling there needs little more than hopping into a rocket and off to Mars.

He hints at a reason why people want to goto Mars, perhaps an atomic war looming on the horizon — a very real fear in the early 1950s at the beginning of the Cold War. When war finally breaks out on Earth, everyone on Mars ups and leaves, taking themselves and their rockets back to Earth, presumably to help fight this terrible atomic war. He suggests that thousands of rockets falling to earth will cover the migration of most of the humans on Mars. It is such a beautiful vision that any addition to it is superfluous. There are a few left stranded on Mars, people who for various reasons cannot take the rockets home. When the original ship's captain from the third story returns after travelling to Jupiter and Saturn, he finds Earth destroyed and only a few people left to survive alone on Mars. This is the last story, 'The Million Year

Picnic', in which he takes his wife and children to see the real Martians, themselves, reflected in the still waters of a canal.

Most of the stories hold up well because Bradbury is a great craftsman with words, a born storyteller. He can make a story out of virtually nothing. You will read it, thinking how poetic and beautiful it is. There is only one story, 'Way in the Middle of the Air', that jars, a story that is so racist and downbeat that I would have removed it from this volume and any future reissues. In the 1950s it may have been seen as a powerful social comment, an indictment against white supremacists. I don't remember this story being in *The Silver Locusts*, so maybe it was added later, or perhaps I found it so distasteful I erased it from my memory.

Fortunately it doesn't appear in the DVD series. Only some of the stories are represented: the first, 'YLLA', the third and fourth combined, 'The Third Expedition', and 'The Moon Be Still as Night'. The second story is used as a basis for another episode but is completely changed. Other stories that are used, individually or combined, are 'The Silent Towns', 'The Long Years', and 'The Million Year Picnic'.

In 'The Silent Towns', the phone rings in various buildings, and one lone earthman chases around to answer it. Missing the call, eventually he decides to call every number in the phone book. Finally he connects with the last woman on Mars. Desperately trying to find her, he is staggered when he encounters a vain self-centred creature who wants her every whim catered for, almost to the point of insanity. He jumps into his truck and leaves her there, preferring the solitude of the deserted mountains far away. In the book, instead of a beautiful woman he encounters a hugely overweight slob who stuffs herself endlessly with chocolates and

sweets. She is such a revolting creature he flees in despair in his gyrocopter. I suspect the presentation of a morbidly overweight woman would have put off television viewers, so she was changed into a person they could accept, a beautiful but vain woman. This story did not work as a TV episode.

But in 'The Long Years', Rock Hudson plays the man returning from an expedition to Jupiter, to find a lone man searching the skies and waiting to be rescued, who builds robot facsimiles of his wife and daughter to keep him company. This has the poignancy of the original story. Finally the astronaut returns to Earth to find his wife and children waiting for him. He takes them back to Mars and destroys the rocket so they have no choice but to live there. This is also translated effectively into the final episode of the TV series, 'The Million Year Picnic'.

Much could have been made of this series, but Rock Hudson's wooden acting and Darren McGavin's overly melodramatic exaggerations verge on the cartoonish, so the stories struggle to generate any interest. Roddy McDowell is also in this series, but I didn't recognise him. He must have been one of the Martians. With their golden skin, bald heads with no ears, and eyes that are yellow, at least they have a certain dignity.

The series may have looked good in the 1980s, but it fails today. Perhaps it is time to create a new translation of the book into TV terms. Bradbury's book is well known all over the world, staying in print in many languages, so there is a huge potential audience for a new series.

Surely an astute producer could redo these stories in a manner befitting their classic and iconic status.

The real science fiction: Part 10

John Litchen

J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*

This book is as relevant today as it was when it was first published by Victor Gollancz Ltd in 1963. Apart from one or two references to devices such as a radiogram used to play an LP record, there is nothing that would date this story to a particular time period.

The Drowned World is as perceptive a vision of the possible effects of intense global warming resulting in catastrophic climate change (for humans) as any that may be written today.

The main character, Kerans, was born 30 years after humans abandon the sinking cities and retreat to the poles, where the climate remains tolerable to humans. Because of this, he is indifferent to phenomenon of the sinking of civilisation, whereas some of the older people actually lived at one time in the partially submerged cities. Now in his forties, Kerans is part of an expedition to map the biological changes to species, their mutations, and the re-emergence of older, more primitive forms that are adapted to a world similar to Earth during the Carboniferous era. Others on

the expedition are attempting to recover useful materials from the sunken cities, which are now covered by tropical jungle and filled with wild creatures such as crocodiles, giant iguanas, huge spiders and insects, millions of mosquitoes, and bats. With temperatures in the middle of the day around 120 degrees Fahrenheit and rising, London is not a pleasant place. Gangs of looters and pirates rampage through lost cities searching for treasures, which is Ballard's comment on the rapacious greed humans continually exhibit.

He is not concerned with the science of how the world came to be like it is, dismissing it in a brief explanation of several paragraphs in Chapter 2:

a succession of gigantic geophysical upheavals which transformed the Earth's climate made their first impact some 60 or 70 years ago. A series of violent and prolonged solar flares caused by a sudden instability in the Sun had enlarged the Van Allen belts and



31-
Brian Lewis' cover for the original novella version of 'The Drowned World', *Science Fiction Adventures*, 1959.

diminished the Earth's hold on the upper layers of the ionosphere. As these vanished into space, depleting the Earth's barrier against the full impact of solar radiation, temperatures began to climb steadily. The atmosphere expanded as it heated to complete the cycle.

He goes on to explain: 'Mean temperatures rose several degrees each year.' The tropical areas become uninhabitable and people retreat to more temperate climate areas, which continue to heat up. 'Entire populations migrated north and south to the regions around the poles. With temperatures in tropical areas over 140 degrees Fahrenheit it was impossible to live there.' Of course the ice caps melt and the sea levels rise. Massive precipitation brings rivers of silt into sunken cities and allows jungles of tropical fernlike species to run rampant. Wildlife species quickly adapt to the physical changes, mutating and reverting back to earlier forms. 'Millions of acres of permafrost liquefied into giant rivers, silting cities, extending coastlines and locking up seas. Driving massive amounts of topsoil the giant rivers completely altered the shape and contours of continents.'

For the first 20 years or so people fortify cities, refusing to abandon them, but eventually they have to admit defeat and retreat to the poles. The spectre of severe overpopulation is solved by mammals becoming infertile, allowing the return of the reptiles. Only one in ten couples give birth. With natural attrition over 70 years since the changes began, human populations have dropped considerably.

Ballard, as always, is concerned with how his characters react to the world around them. The brief history of this world is there merely to establish a time and a reason for the world being the way it is.

As the story opens, members of the expedition of which Kerans is a part are having strange nightmares that involve a pulsing gigantic sun. Many refuse to sleep. The members of the expedition

is packing up, preparing to abandon their research. The doctor (Bodkin) is studying what he calls Neuronics, or the Psychology of Total Equivalents, to dismiss it as a metabiological fantasy. He explains:

However, I am convinced that as we move back through geophysical time so we re-enter the amniotic corridor and move back through spinal and archeopsychic time, recollecting in our unconscious minds the landscapes of each epoch, each with a distinct geological terrain, its own unique flora and fauna. If we let these buried phantoms master us as they reappear we'll be swept helplessly in the flood-tide like pieces of flotsam.

This is the key to the story, which follows Kerans' slow dissolution into something less than what he was, as he searches for answers to his nightmares and the ever-changing world he finds himself inhabiting. He is dragged helplessly through the floodtide of his racial memories of epochs long gone.

When the others leave he decides to stay, as does Dr Bodkin, who once lived in London and now searches that drowned city for his lost memories, and a young woman who has ensconced herself in a penthouse apartment in one of the taller buildings that rise above the swamps and lagoons and mudflats. She too suffers from nightmares and the devolutionary psychological effect these bring. She is as lost as the doctor and Kerans.

Kerans feels a compulsion to travel south into the more tropical regions in search of himself, or at least something of which he is not sure, but he is reluctant to start. An insane bunch of scavenger looters in search of treasure lost in the city set up base in the lagoon where Kerans and his two companions live their separate

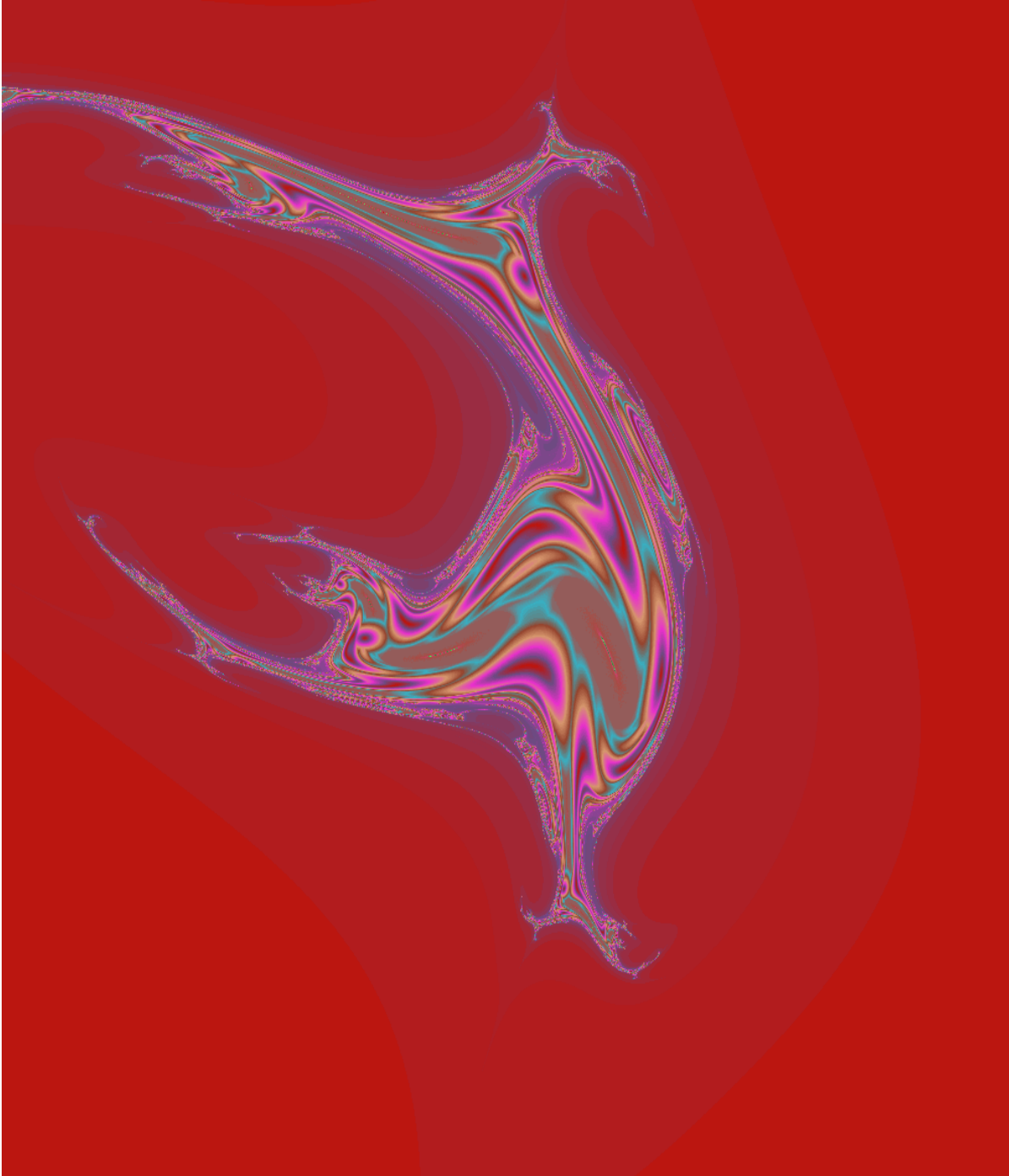
lives. The marauders take over the area, staging mad parties and shooting at all wildlife apart from a tame retinue of crocodiles. They block off the creek and drain the lagoon to reveal the streets around Trafalgar Square.

Bodkin and Kerans are convinced the lagoon must be reinstated, and Bodkin is killed as he attempts to blow up the barrage blocking the creek's inlet. After much insane activity, during which Kerans almost loses his life and is rescued by the return of the earlier expedition whose leader is equally as mad as the leader of the marauders, he finally manages to blow up the barricade and flood the lagoon, returning it to its state when he first arrived. This enrages the others and they try to kill him, but he evades them, fleeing into the ever encroaching jungle. He heads south, following the beating sun of his ancestral amniotic memory. This is where we leave him after 27 days, 'completely lost, following the lagoons southward through the increasing rain and heat, attacked by alligators and giant bats, a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun'.

This story is timeless, and deserves its status as a classic. Apart from the use of Fahrenheit and the mention of a radiogram there is nothing to tie it to the early 1960s, when it was first published. It could start happening tomorrow, if it hasn't already begun.

That this novel is still reprinted periodically, and that you can still read this novel today and feel that it is more relevant than many other recent books dealing with climate change, reminds you of how perceptive an author the late J. G. Ballard was.

— **John Litchen, February 2012**



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GRAHAM STONE
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CONTRIBUTORS:

**Ditmar ::
James Doig ::
Graeme Flanagan ::
John Foyster ::
Miranda Foyster ::
Peter Gerrand ::
Bruce Gillespie ::
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