John Crowley is one of the world's most respected fantasy and science fiction writers; indeed, is now regarded as one of America's greatest writers, someone whose work is not limited by genre boundaries. His best-known novel is *Little, Big*. His most recent novel is *The Translator*.

When, in *SF Commentary* 77 I republished John Sladek's 1980 article about **Thomas M. Disch**'s science fiction novels, Tom thanked me, and pointed out that John Crowley had written the following major article about his later 'gothic' (or 'dark fantasy') novels. Thanks, Tom, for arranging contact with John Crowley, who consented to the republication of this article; and thanks, **Matthew Davis**, for help in finding the *Yale Review* version.

In 1999 appeared Disch's latest novel, *The Sub: A Study in Witchcraft* (Knopf; 285 pp.; US$24.00/$A43.95), to be reviewed at length in a later issue of *SFC*.

John Crowley

The gothic of Thomas M. Disch

[This article first appeared in the *Yale Review*, vol. 83, no. 2, April 1995.]

The list of Thomas M. Disch's published works just inside his latest novel is printed in small type, and even so threatens to run onto a second page: twelve novels, five collections of short fiction, several books of poetry, a classic children's story (*The Brave Little Toaster*) and its sequel, plays, including an adaptation of *Ben Hur*, opera libretti and a piece of interactive software called *Amnesia*. Coming last in the list of plays is *The Cardinal Detoxes*, a one-act play in blank verse, which got its author and producing company in trouble with the archdiocese of New York — the landlord, as it happened, of the theatre where the play was running. The archdiocese's efforts to evict the company no doubt brought Disch visions of the *Index librorum prohibitorum* and a thrilling whiff of the auto-da-fé.

The Archbishop of New York appears on the dedication page of the British edition of Disch's new novel, along with Father Bruce Ritter, Father James Porter, the Servants of the Paraclete in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, and His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, 'without whose ministry and conjoint power of example this novel could not have been written'. The novel is titled ***The Priest: A Gothic Romance***.

The most famous of all Gothic romances was called *The Monk* (1796), and enjoyed vast success in England and America in part because the Catholic Church, its fabled power, occult processes, dramatic accoutrements, big architecture and supposed implacable zeal were so vivid and shudder-starting to white-church Protestants and rationalists. Matthew Gregory Lewis, who came to be called 'Monk' Lewis for his most celebrated book, altered the milder Gothic-novel tradition of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, adding actual supernatural events to their imaginary ones, and loads of desperate compulsive sex, including an affair between a priest and a novice (a girl in disguise, but the point is taken).

The Priest comes at the end of the Lewis tradition; it is set in contemporary Minneapolis, amid declining congregations, multiplying sex scandals and anti-abortion demonstrations, but it offers most of the thrills of its great predecessor, along with the tang of contemporary relevance and a species of dreadful hilarity that the church and its doings can often inspire in its lost or banished children.

Disch also once wrote, under the imposing pseudonym of 'Leonie Hargreave', a Gothic of the other sort, the kind where all the fearful possibilities resolve themselves as mere human extravagance and wickedness; it was called *Clara Reeve*, its heroine named after another of the ancestral Gothic novelists. His opera libretti include adaptations of *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Frankenstein*. So the Gothic is a familiar metier, but there is hardly a narrative form Disch has not tried, and stretched, and reshaped. His early novels were science fiction, a form to which many questing and restless talents were drawn in the 1960s; the most unlikely books could in those years be published as science fiction and sell copies, and set a young writer out (perhaps over optimistically) on a career. (*Ice*, a heroin-induced rhapsody by the English recluse Anna Kavan, appeared in the United States in those years as an SF paperback.) The name 'science fiction' is actually a masking term for a whole range of fictions that can share certain superficial resemblances but that actually belong to different genres — Gothics, philosophical romances, utopian speculations, boys' adventure (pirate or cowboy), modern dread, postmodern whimsy. A couple of Disch's SF novels (*The Puppies of Terra*, *Camp Concentration)* are describable as philosophical romances, but the most characteristic of them — *334*, *On Wings of Song* — are unlike any others in the field. Most writing about the future is purposeful: it intends some sort of warning or promise or encouragement or discouragement — some sort of moral. These futures of Disch's have moral intensity but no single moral direction. They are permeated with a kind of melancholy reflection, possessing the randomness, the knowable and yet unsummable multiplicity, and the poignancy that we associate with the past, and writing about the past. These futures bring in hard things and new species of oppression; but they bring in new possibilities, too, which souls rise to or fail to rise to. They are like life, which is the one thing most SF is not like.

Ambition in genre writing is often a perilous thing. The undiscriminating taste of genre readers (actually a highly discriminating taste, but a taste that discriminates only its kind of book from all others, aesthetic quality aside) and the invisibility of genre writing to all other readers are only aspects of the problem. Central is the question of whether the forms and constraints of any of the modern genres — horror, say, or SF, romance, sword-and-sorcery, or the

Western — are worth struggling with, worth the effort of transforming. What readership will witness your labours or be able to understand what you have done?

Beginning with ***The Businessman*** (1984), Thomas M. Disch has been creating a series of novels that are at once comprehensible within a genre and have aesthetic and perhaps other ambitions well beyond the usual scope of such books. *The Businessman* is subtitled *A Tale of Terror*; *The M.D.* (1991), second in the series, is subtitled *A Horror Story*, and the latest, *The Priest*, as noted, is *A Gothic Romance*. None of these subtitles is exactly accurate, but the writer is playing fair with his most likely readers: these are not pastiches, parodies or postmodern japes. *The Priest* and *The M.D.* are published by the very literary house of Alfred A. Knopf, but *The M.D.* bears a blurb from Stephen King. The delicacy of Disch's literary problem, to say nothing of his complex career choice, are often present to the reader's mind: to this reader's, at any rate.

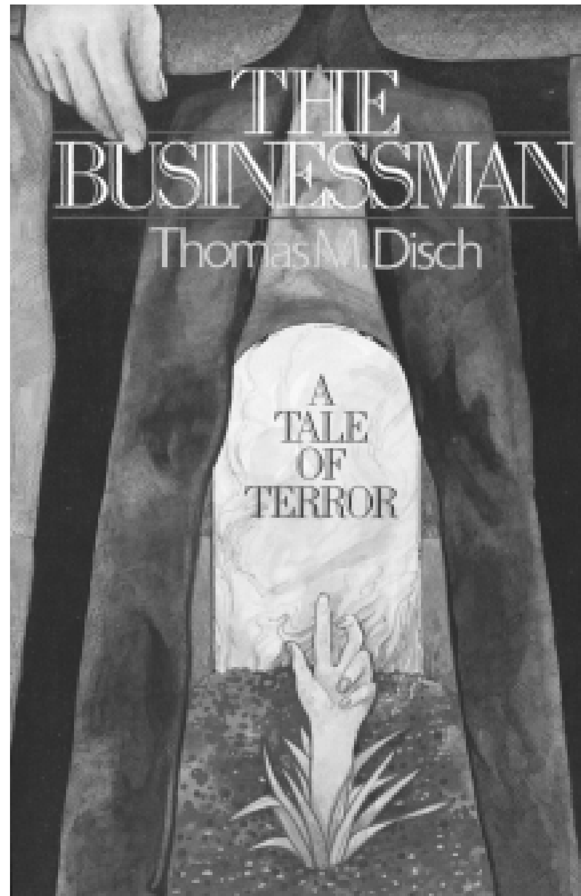
All three books are set in Minneapolis in approximately the present day (*The M.D.* reaches a few years into the future). A few characters play parts in more than one book, and there are places in the city important in all three, but they are unconnected in plot. More importantly, within each a different kind of spiritual or supernatural realm envelops the city, not mutually exclusive but particular to each book, a part of its individual *geist* as are the characters and the flavour of the language.

The Businessman is a ghost story. The central characters are mostly dead, and learning to live with it. Alive almost to the end is the marvellously named Bob Glandier, businessman and self-indulgent moral wreck, who has murdered his wife Giselle in a rage after discovering her in a Las Vegas motel room (Las Vegas is the distant capital city of Disch's world here), where she has fled from him. Her afterlife will consist for a time in the unpleasant job of haunting him, a thing she has no real say about. At first, in the grave, she knows nothing at all:

> Her body was here in the coffin *with* her, and in some way she was still linked to its disintegrating proteins, but it wasn't through her body's senses that she knew these things. There was only this suspended sphere of self-awareness beyond which she could discern certain dim essentials of the earth immuring her — a dense, moist, intricate mass pierced with constellations of forward-inching hungers, nodules of intensity against a milky radiance of calm bacterial transformation.
>
> *The worms crawl in* — she remembered the rhyme from childhood. *The worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle on your snout.*

Giselle, her dead mother Joy-Ann, and the spirits of Adah Isaacs Menken and the poet John Berryman (who committed suicide by jumping from a well-known bridge in Minneapolis, and whose ghost still resides unreleased beneath it, looking horribly shattered and bloody but in no pain except for needing a drink) combine not very purposefully but in the end effectively to fix Bob Glandier's wagon, and thus permit Giselle to move up a stage in the afterlife, which is a complex place but full of interest, its interaction with our lives on earth reasonable and explicable, though not predictable, even from the other side.

The Businessman resembles other ghost stories less than it does those rare and deeply gratifying Hollywood fantasies, films like *Here Comes Mr Jordan* or *It's a Wonderful Life*, where



the writers have worked out in detail wholly original but wonderfully supple and consistent spiritual worlds and their earthly consequences. In Disch's book, the glamour and repletion provided in the movies by the presence of star actors and the glow of masterly cinematography are supplied by the narrator's voice — a voice of marvellous grave gaiety, offering pleasures generously but modestly, making no judgments it has not already led the reader into making, and awarding to the characters joys and punishments that are equally gratifying to hear about. Only lengthy quotation could show how, sentence to sentence, this is accomplished; best to read the whole. The reader is reminded, strangely, of Disch's fellow Minnesotan Sinclair Lewis, and of *Babbitt* in particular: the joyful care with which Lewis describes the contents of George Babbitt's bathroom cabinet or the choosing of his suit; how while seeming to be engaged in excoriating provincial errors of taste and moral inadequacy he communicates such relish, such love even, for the details of the places and lives he displays, that the reader feels his smile and is warmed by it. It is a very odd tone to be taking in a horror novel, and the success of it adds to the exhilaration.

The M.D., next in the series, is a different matter — not only darker in colouration but different in how the supernatural interacts with life on earth. Billy Michaels, growing up in Minneapolis and attending Our Lady of Mercy School, has a vision of Santa Claus, and has a vivid if ambiguous conversation with him. Sister Symphorosa, his teacher, has told him that Santa is like a pagan god and doesn't exist; she is right in the first claim, wrong in the second. Santa — who has chosen to appear to Billy Michaels in exactly the arbitrary way that gods were once said to visit people — is in fact a manifestation of the god Mercury, patron of medicine,

and of liars. He has a gift for Billy and an exaction to make in return. The gift is a sort of caduceus, with which Billy will be able to both make certain people sick and make others well; the exaction is a lifelong bondage to the god. Billy will find that his caduceus retains its power to heal if it is periodically recharged by being used to do harm; he cannot imagine, at ten, all that this will mean — how much harm he will find himself capable of — and the working out of this awful destiny, as in a Greek tragedy (or a Senecan one), will issue at length in madness, degradation and parricide.

There is a difficulty here, and it has to do with the fantastic in fiction in it widest application. In realistic novels — the sort that makes up not only most of what fills the front of the bookstores but most crime, spy and mystery writing as well — the mythemes out of older literature are deployed as metaphor, to add a layer of meaning to the events and dilemmas of the story. Hints of damnation, magic and the selling of the soul for power are used in this way in Mann's *Dr Faustus*. In other genres, though (I almost wrote 'lesser genres'), the supernatural or magical dimension is simply there, posited, a problem and a possibility for the characters. Billy Michaels is visited by a god; in exchange for the power the god has in his favour to bestow, Billy gives him what all gods want: worship and commitment. Taking place as they do in a realistic, even hyper-realistic setting, in a novel that is in every other way in the familiar vein of common realism, these things may seem problematic; they are radically unproblematic. They do not *stand for* the corruptions of power or the temptations of imperial science or the end not justifying the means; they are what they are. We are in a fairy tale; Billy's wishes will come true, and we will see what a boy like this, in this world of ours, will do with them.

This genre effect permeates the book, shifting conversations, events and crises continuously away from what the same things would mean in a book of a different kind. Here is Billy talking to his beloved anoretic stepsister:

> 'So, have you ever *prayed* to be cured?'
>
> 'Prayer isn't like that, William,' she protested. 'It's not like going to the Santa at Dayton's and giving him a list of what you want for Christmas. It's a conversation, like we're having, only it's God we're talking with.'
>
> 'If you needed something from me that I could give you, you'd ask me for it, wouldn't you? . . .'

God, in Disch's world, may be unable to answer prayers; but her brother can, and will.

The M.D. is a fairy tale, but it is also a long, circumstantial, realistic novel. Minneapolis, a Catholic childhood and Billy's shifting family relations are gravely and fully drawn. Billy Michaels has an obdurate opacity even though we are allowed to understand him by most of the usual novelistic means; his absorption in his power, how he learns to understand and use it, seems to drain away his ordinariness without in any way enlarging him: it leaves, in the end, nothing behind, an awful vacuity. And perhaps such power would do just that.

This would be a fine novel even with a different sort of engine in it; the magical, or demonic — which grows in power and dreadfulness as the book reaches into the future — continually unbalances and challenges the reader, always forcing further attention, an exaction not every reader will be comfortable with. But the tension is wonderfully maintained, and it is not always easy to see how this is done; the narrative voice forgoes the obvious delight in people and things everywhere felt in *The Businessman*, and gives less guidance, though it is often equally fine in its effects. Billy's mother playing Frisbee with her son in a rare moment of easy connection with the doomed boy:

> It was wonderful all the different flight paths you could make it trace. She had no idea what twist of wrist or flick of the fingers made it follow one trajectory instead of another. It was all done unconsciously but with a strange precision. You'd almost think the plastic disk had a volition and intelligence of its own, as though it were some species of bird that had been fined down to this bare anatomical minimum, a living discus skimming the lowest branches of the maple, whirling toward the patio and then veering away, settling down on the mown grass with a whoosh of deceleration like a waterfowl coming to rest on a lake.

Eventually the book must cease to vary its forward rush with such moments; there is much bloody work to be done, and we know it, for we are, after all, reading a horror novel, and like pornographic novels, horror novels must make their particular effects keep coming slightly faster, each a little more replete than the last. Which makes the cool poignancy of this momentary aerial suspension the more gratifying. This is a profoundly original book, whose originality is all the more confounding to expectations in a genre where originality is rare.

The Priest is, again, a different kettle of fish. The reader may suppose — Disch gives some reason to think it — that *The M.D.* is an indictment of the corruptions of power; I think this is a minor aspect. But *The Priest* is an outright philippic on the subject, with immediate reference to the daily papers. Here is another new use of the horror genre, which is again likely to be unsettling to fans and nonconsumers alike.

The earthly world of *The Priest* can be triangulated on three churches: there is Our Lady of Mercy downtown, newer and sleeker St Bernardine's in the upscale suburb of Willowville, and the huge completed but unused shrine, Speer-like and granitic, of Blessed Konrad of Paderborn, built up north on the shores of Leech Lake near Etoile du Nord Seminary. (I assumed that Disch must be making up these names; a look at a map shows me they are quite real.) Blessed Konrad, star of a medieval antisemitic martyr legend, has had approval of his cult withdrawn by Rome in the wake of protests; but the shrine, overseen by fanatic Gerhardt Ober and his sister Hedwig, is being used for other purposes.

Pastor of St Bernardine's, late of OLM, is Father Pat Bryce, not a paedophile (as he learns) but an ephebophile, who has often begun the seduction of his lads while in the darkness of the confessional:

> There was nothing that so transfixed him as hearing the voice of a boy who had never come to confession to him before haltingly explaining that he had been guilty of sins of the flesh. What sins *exactly*, he would have to know, how many times, and where, and what acts had the boy *imagined* as he masturbated? . . . For Father Bryce the moment of release was the moment he could feel a boy's will yielding to his. It was not necessarily a carnal moment, though carnality might well be the end result.
>
> It was, however, always a *priestly* moment, for a priest is a bender and shaper of wills.

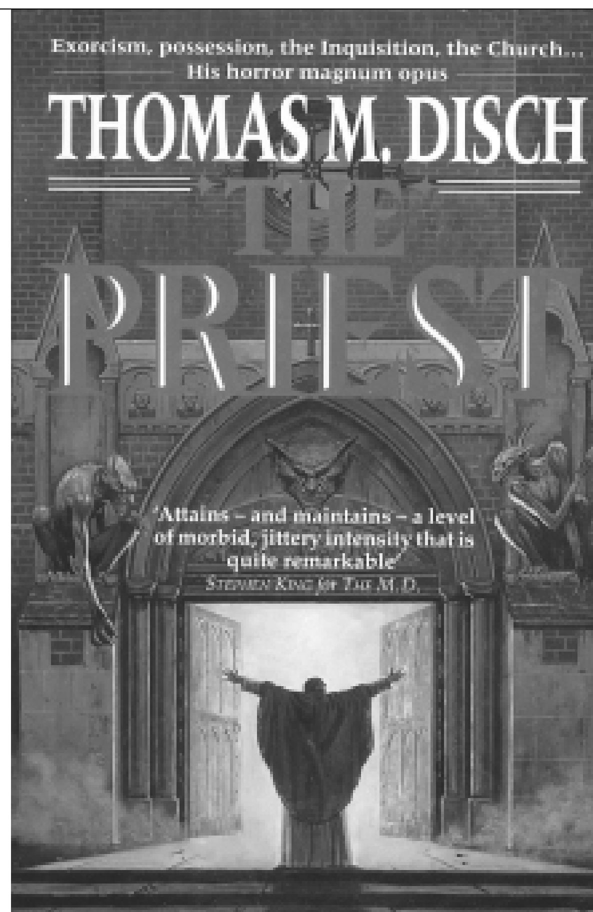
Father Pat, who is to be himself bent and shaped, is at St Bernardine's because of his tastes. When a boy lover in psychological trouble spills the beans, the scandal is hushed up; Father Pat is sent to a clinic in Arizona (where, like ordinary hoods and criminals, he learns lots of new tricks from fellow inmates) and then given a new assignment by the hierarchy, which he is in no position to refuse: from his new post at St. Bernardine's he is to be operator of a new and radical, as yet wholly secret, passing move in the Church's anti-abortion campaign. Parents of pregnant teenagers are to be convinced to sign their daughters to the church authorities, who by force if necessary will sequester them in the basements of the derelict shrine of Blessed Konrad of Paderborn (built to be nuclear bomb proof), cared for by the Obers until their children are born. The church will thus be able to communicate to its shock troops in the abortion wars that real action is being taken. Father Pat's distaste for this scheme is great but is as nothing compared to the debt he owes the church:

> The legal and medical costs that had been incurred in securing the Petroskys' silence exceeded $200,000, which the diocese had had to bear itself, since it was no longer possible, after the debacle of the Gaute case in Louisiana, to obtain liability insurance that would pay for legal claims brought against paedophile priests. ('As well try to get flood insurance in Bangladesh,' the bishop had quipped.)

The real-life Father Gaute, still serving his twenty-year sentence, is welcomed into the text, which is obviously designed to accommodate him, as it does the figures of Disch's dedication. Without such reminders of the actual scandals, evasions and legal difficulties into which the real church has been sunk in these several years, the reader might take Disch's tale to be an extravagance, an anti-Catholic diatribe in which the most unlikely mendacity, cynicism and vice are attributed to too many church figures to be believable.

His fervent opposition — not to say loathing — is, however, clear, and operates on many levels, from skilled fun-poking and hypocrisy-deflating to a horrid delight in retribution that he makes it hard for the reader not to share. Disch, as represented by these fictions, seems not really to believe in conscience; he believes in good and evil natures, the evil being more common, though the self-promptings of good natures have a real power for those who feel them. His wicked characters feel only the dangers of exposure; they attribute their cruelties and indulgences to a supposed frailty they can do nothing about, and rarely resist their impulses; they feel shame vividly but not guilt. This seems the most non-Christian thing about these books centrally concerned with Catholicism (as all three are, *The Priest* only the most obsessively).

Far worse things are in store for Father Pat than running Birth-Right, his tough-love maternity hospital. For there is a fourth church involved in his fate (his crucifixion, not quite metaphoric); a church existing in a different space-time than the other three. To reach it, we must return to the book's beginning; but the book's beginning is a brilliantly and masterfully managed series of deepening revelations and downward turns that chapter by short chapter lowers us (laughing helplessly) into Disch's frightful world, and I will not analyse it — this must be one of few books where the reader's pleasure will be seriously spoiled by a description of the beginning rather than the end.



Suffice it that, as in the other two novels, the hopes and errors and needs of the characters encounter and are entangled in a spiritual realm whose existence they largely do not suspect, and misunderstand when they glimpse it. Father Pat finds himself translated — 'transmentated', as he will come to find the process is called — into medieval France, where he is a Cathar-hunting cleric, Silvanus de Roquefort, Bishop of Rodez and Montpellier-le-Vieux. Changing places with the bishop leaves him his own personality, even his own body, though afflicted with thirteenth-century pains and premature aging, and an ability to understand Languedoc French, but no other of the bishop's memories. As in the well-known actor's dream, Father Pat has to fake it, keeping up as best he can and trying to satisfy a ferocious Dominican inquisitor just arrived from Rome, who suspects the bishop of being soft on Catharism, and who looks, to Father Pat's eye, just like Gerhardt Ober.

It's hard for Silvanus, too, though more interesting. He's found himself in Father Pat's world — more exactly, the underworld Father Pat has come to be involved in through those opening gambits — and naturally thinks he's died and gone to hell, a hell where desires are both punished and indulged. Silvanus on the loose in modern Minneapolis, getting messages from the demon TRINITRON and appearing as Father Pat to all, will deal roughly with more than one character, as what damnee would not?

The process of transmentation, and the precise node of this process that links Minneapolis and the now-ruined church of Montpellier-le-Vieux, is explained in the writings of A. D. Boscage, science fiction writer and cult leader, a mix of Philip K. Dick, L. Ron Hubbard and famed UFO abductee Whitley Streiber (with whom Disch has had public set-tos). Boscage claims to have been a character back in Silvanus's world, and his experiences there form part of his

UFO abduction theories: that a giant net of intelligences, alien or supernatural (the 'Alphanes'), surround our world and manipulate us for reasons of their own.

Father Pat — who is, as it happens, being blackmailed by Boscage's cult for reasons of *its* own, though without knowing why or how they are connected to Silvanus and the past — holds a priest's low opinion of such stuff:

> Boscage's book, *Prolegomenon to Receptivist Science*, was a virtual anthology of New Age absurdities and an obvious hoax by a rather unsophisticated hoaxer. To argue against it was as hopeless a task as bailing water out of a ruptured boat.
>
> The problem was that he was a passenger in the boat and the boat was in deep water.

The more interesting problem, which Father Pat will never be allowed to solve, is that Boscage's system reflects the play of supernatural power far more closely, in the universe of this book, than does Father Pat's theology. It is a common thing, in thrillers descending from the 'Monk' Lewis tradition, to use the church and its theurgies as special effects; *The Exorcist* may have been un-Catholic to its core, but within its world demonic possession followed the church's rules, and could be defeated by the church's means. Not here. In this book, the priests haven't a clue; the entire supernatural structure of their church is fake, their sacraments are inefficacious, and the whole rigmarole is only a means to power and pleasure for the hierophants. Most of them know it, too, or act as though it were indisputable, whatever they say out loud.

And meanwhile all around them are more things, in heaven and on earth, than are dreamt of in their theology. Transubstantiation doesn't work, but transmentation does. At the same time there is a constant reversibility to the frights and spooks of this tale; sometimes ordinary realities turn out to mask otherworldly depths, but at other times similar supernatural events turn out to be illusory, and mask only ordinary realities. The undecidability is a constant, without any irritable striving after fact and certainty. Unlike the elaborate and smooth-running stage machinery of the supernatural in *The Businessman*, the spiritual world of *The Priest* resembles the continuous astonishing improvisation of certain classic B movies, where new material is always superseding and partially cancelling out the unfolding complications of earlier premises, a process that picks up speed until the end becomes unimaginable.

The end of *The Priest* leaves the ground littered with the usual quota of corpses (including one kept for some time in a freezer, a theme, if that is the word, that also appears memorably in *The M.D.*, combined in that instance with a microwave.) Death in horror novels tends to visit a broad sampling of the characters, both good and bad; the nosy get it but so do innocent bystanders, and the guilty. This even-handedness of horror fiction I think impresses the young male readership of such novels as a delightful cynicism, as — in the current devalued use of the word — *ironic*. There must, though, be a core of good people who survive to the end and even profit, or the book would not be a romance. Readers of *The Businessman* will be sorry that the delightful Bing Anker, Giselle's brother and the victor of that book, is removed somewhat abruptly here, though his friend and sometime lover Father Mabbely survives, a rare decent and sympathetic cleric.

Disch brings his tale to a climax at the shrine of Blessed Konrad, which is for Father Mabbely the last straw; his occupation's gone:

> There ahead of them stood one of the Seven Wonders of the Totalitarian World . . . The Shrine was a perfect combination of cathedral and bunker, with a lead-gray dome of cast concrete that seemed to be sinking into the earth rather than soaring from it. Every detail was expressive of the whole, though detail, as such, had not been the architect's *forte*. It was One Big Idea, and that idea was Authority. Authority that had no use for the landscape around it, or for the people who might enter it, but only for its own swollen and ill-conceived *terribilità* . . . What a bliss it would be no longer to be implicated in what that building represented! To be a priest no more and a human being again!

The body count at the Shrine is added to the numbers already accumulated, some of them dispensed, it must be admitted, rather swiftly; Blessed Konrad's guard dogs maul one sickly pregnant escapee from Birth-Right to death almost unnoticed by the reader, or the writer. For Thomas M. Disch as for Father Mabbely it may have been a relief to cease being a priest, and become again a human being — the cruel opposition he has constructed here. Indeed, it is possible that this ambitious and extravagantly gifted writer is getting tired of the constraints of the horror genre. If that is so he has wrung from it more than could have been imagined, and it is to be hoped that the whole trilogy will reach, besides the usual consumers of this genre, those readers who will be able to grasp what an unlikely, what a large achievement it is.

'The issue always and at bottom is spiritual.' Thus Dwight D. Eisenhower, in the epigraph Disch has chosen for *The Businessman*. At the end of *The Priest*, the good characters, those who have avoided being slain, gather and talk, and an attempt is made to explain the events of the plot in mundane terms of multiple personality disorder and the hypnotic effect of Boscage's fantasies. But this scene (this is, of course, a common trick of the genre) is followed by another final scene, which calls into doubt all such simplifications of damnation. A similar endgame is worked to terrible effect in *The M.D.* In the world of these books, in this spiritual Minneapolis, we can hope not that we can avoid otherworldly threats and terrors, fates we may or may not deserve, but only that around us and beyond them lies the heaven pictured in *The Businessman*, whose hardworking spirits watch over us, and where our wounds will at last be dressed: if, that is, we are both good and lucky.

— John Crowley 1995

John Romeril has written for the theatre for three and half decades, first at La Mama, then the Pram Factory in Melbourne. He continues to work freelance, still concentrating on the theatre, but with some film and tv credits to his name. Recent gongs include receipt of the NSW Premier's Play Prize (see photo: NSW Premier Bob Carr (l), John Romeril (r)) — and the Gold Awgie 2001 for *One Night The Moon*, a musical drama for tv devised with Rachel Perkins, Mairead Hannan, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody.

John Romeril

The maker alive in the made

Discussed:
TRANSCENSION
by Damien Broderick
(2002; Tor Books 0-765-30369-8; 348 pp; US$25.95/A$49.95)

I want to pin a 'must-read genius at work' tail to Broderick and suggest an Austral comet is streaking across our southern sky. A bias comes with the hyperbole.

I shared a house with Broderick in the late sixties. Literary gonna-bes, we collaborated on a story or three (for *Man* magazine, if anyone remembers it). I've followed his career since, and borrowed his brains from time to time on projects of my own. He's a mate. And this is a mate's review.

The bond extends beyond friendship, into cultural kinship. His latest novel triggered in me a warm fuzzy rush of nationalist-cum-civic sentiment. That won't (it's an American hardback) happen to the citizens of New York, Austin and Anchorage. They'll reach the end flap expecting a puff on the author, a biog., past achievements listed, etc., and finding only that 'Damien Broderick lives in Coburg, Victoria, Australia', they'll have a so experience. For me, a boy from Moorabbin, there's no so about it. A reminder that an out-there talent like Broderick's lives here, in the flatlands of my home-town . . . weird how nearness to a national living treasure can make a nation feel worth living in.

Fact is I contend Broderick's stature as a public intellectual in our midst (and on the world stage) will grow. With it the reputation of a novel like *Transcension*. The latter claim I cling to despite the author's Afterword, where he labels it 'a frolic of a book'. I see some merit to his disclaimer. There's some clunky satire and adolescent humour, but a frolic, as in a trifle? That's a 'you know not what else you do' type statement.

From where I view the gallops, the stable Broderick's from, his bloodlines, betoken excellent form. It's probably been said (he may baulk at me saying it now), but his polymath forebears are hugely reliable steeds (Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, and before them H. G. Wells). They wore/wear, ask any farrier, big shoes that take some filling, but if modesty ever allows Cinderella Broderick to say 'mine tink it they fit' I'll find that merely just.

My bottom line? I'm mixing metaphors, but at least the sporting angle's intact: for years now, and with a vengeance through the nineties into the noughties, a mix of high calibre science fiction and science fact has streamed from Broderick like brain sweat from an athlete of the intellect — a Freeman of the fac-fic world.

Not essential background reading to have a go at *Transcension*, but grist to it; if you haven't sighted *The Spike* and *The Last Mortal Generation*, seek out these brave, thorough gems of factually fuelled science writing. Classics of Australian futurology, were the three tomes a boxed set they'd nail for you how across today's big ideas Broderick is, and what a gift he has for rendering them in ways Moorabbinites can digest.

So what's *Transcension* about, Alfie? Aleph, as it happens. This someone, or sum-thing, this he/she/it, this 'se' in the Broderick-speak of *White Abacus* (1996), intros the tale, and I'll quote it in full:

I sit on a hill.
I {re-entrant selfaware identity operator}
sit on {instantaneous location slice on search trajectory}

a {existential pointer in exfoliating context sheaf} hill {local optimum in restricted search space}.

Call me Aleph.

I am a machine mentality. This in nowise distinguishes me from yourselves. My personhood, my self, is a process running as programs reflexively modulated in a net of nanocomputers in solar space. Most of my dispersed body remains for the moment on, in, above Earth. I am just like you humans, then.

I know the bite of the wind on a winter day, the silver light of the Moon, the warmth of the Sun, the laughter of children. I have loved Earth because it has been the root and home of my parental stock. Do you see? Do you understand? Do you feel?'

Tricky? What's a 're-entrant selfaware identity operator', for instance? I suggest a second read, aloud maybe. To yourself, or others. There's a voice there, yeah? And the writing's beguiling enough to go with the flow, isn't it?

Later, when bringing the book home, Broderick loops back to this 'opener'. Second time round in an expanded form, i's dotted t's crossed, the chilling/challenging majesty of it is awesome. It's better for being more thoroughly teased out, but the clues (Broderick's good at clue management) were all there in the beginning. The Aleph has 'a machine mentality' but also 'personhood', a 'self'. And has loved Earth, 'the root and home of my parental stock'.

Climax comes in this novel when a form of artificial intelligence approaches both godhead and the escape velocity required to transcend Earth. The engineering feat (exquisitely described) is the sculpting of the solar system. Broderick's feat is to put us inside a sensibility capable of that Promethean act. The rave (captions for a cataclysm) is my vote for far-out monologue of the year.

Indeed I long to be there in a rehearsal room at NIDA or the VCA, or any drama school in the country, when some enterprising would-be student uses this chunk of utterance for his or her audition piece. What play's this, the auditors will ask, where's this coming from? Out of Coburg's the answer — and the parenthood of AI is the hugely problematic issue addressed. Can we invent artificial forms of intelligence and not embed in them our own humanity? Is the carpenter's hand, and spirit, not present in the worked timbers of a chair? The maker alive in the made?

Broderick puts flesh on this concept, pumps blood through its veins, lards it (against our scorn — our fear?) with sentiment, with truth, with character. At the net, the baseline, and mid-court, he keeps hitting rhetorical (and oratorical) winners. A prime (because primal) example occuring some pages earlier is a truly moving recognition scene:

Late afternoon. A glorious day. A Bali-esque beach, though not a beggar in sight. The hero of the piece (certainly the character whose angst imbues the novel with its philosophical reach) wakes in a deckchair. Abdel-Malek, Magistrate in Metro. He's served a cool refreshing drink by a waiter who (didn't you die) shouldn't really be here. And Alice, wife of the Magistrate, who should be here but isn't, where's she? Their love — it seems to have spanned centuries, born when they were research partners in Silicon Valley — how long ago was that . . . ?

Alice does appear. I have something to show you, someone you need to meet. She guides her husband towards the water's edge. Out there bobbing in the deep is someone or something. And they swim towards a small pale figure.

'He's just, she's only a child of . . .' Abdel-Malek, as he swims, can't decide age or even gender. At one with sea sand sky, the Aleph floats in a young and humanoid form. 'Hello Father.' The patient deep brown eyes, the slow sweet smile. Click. The penny is dropping. Way way ago, as Century 21 hit its straps, Abdel-Malek's brain scan had been the seed of origin, the human core, the template. This is indeed his child.

To so gently orchestrate this arresting encounter is a class act. You don't buy the ideas in this novel, because Broderick joins the plot dots, and fills the areas with gaud. You do so because he seduces you with the brush strokes, lovingly paints the detail in. A rich resonant muscular prose is the musical underscore to a succession of action-driven, cinematically conceived scenes. It's an epic journey, especially across time, but not a cast of thousands, a mere five or six major characters steer the boat, each individual trajectory surefootedly mapped. How, not just what, they think feel say know, constantly laid bare, peeled back, revealed.

The overall effect seems that of a symphony, when really it's the work of several soloists performing a dance of (growing) consciousness, now this, now that, core figure's signature tune coming to the fore. In a way, that's the story. A handful of folk inhabiting remnant enclaves on a seemingly exhausted Earth that even the Aleph will soon enough forsake.

Here, though, I've raced ahead when I was, back on page one, a still-to-be-seduced reader. The grab of the Aleph I quote is printed there in bold, and this handsomely produced Tor book boasts a considerable amount of bold, of both the authorial and typographical kind. Swatches in a range of typefaces blossom; passages in italics crop up. Should, like me, you find a dip in the font box as enticing as a trip to a bad restaurant, be patient. Gutenberg overkill isn't on the menu.

Yes Broderick, á la Laurence Sterne of *Tristram Shandy* fame, proves (see his back list) as fond as ever of calligraphic hi-jinks. Because I come from the why-use-long-words school of writing and reading, and viewing those who 'play with the book as book' as onanists, *Transcension*, for a time, had me reaching for my gun. The surprise was how quickly I reholstered the weapon.

Point is, the 'print aids' Broderick employs do help. With the voicing. With the time shifts. They signpost whose sensibility is coming our way. They answer the who when where questions any reader asks. Given how slippery the subject and story are, *Transcension* is a deceptively complex novel — the triumph is it simply isn't a difficult one.

Big ticks go to the writing (sweet, deft, true, in craft terms); to the characters (whose consciousness and lack of it is winningly vulnerable); and even the layout, once you get how it hangs, stops seeming cute (or worse) and proves highly efficient. I don't know who should carry most can for the trade skills and discipline on show. The editor (David G. Hartwell) gets a credit, and the praises of two collaborators (Rory Barnes and Barbara Lamar) are also sung. Whatever the division of labour, TLC abounds (talented loving care), and if it isn't all Broderick's fault, it's sure coming from someone.

Still on typography, still back at the beginning, while the page one 'opener' is in bold, it's eek, page two, welcome to italics-land. Here Broderick wants to be sure we're across 'the argument', limning in the big ideas that lend sinew and backbone, not to mention relevance, to this tale: 'First let us postulate that the computer scientists succeed in devel-

oping intelligent machines that can do all things better than human beings can . . . the human race might easily permit itself to drift into a position of such dependence on the machines that it would have no practical choice but to accept all of the machines' decisions.'

I compress it here, but this is a sliver of Kaczynski's 'Unabomber Manifesto', the neo-Luddite position. The italics continue, as Broderick adds a slab from *Wired*, April 2000. I reduce what he filches to a question so you'll get the drift: 'Can we doubt that knowledge has become a weapon we wield against ourselves?'

The pinch is from Bill Joy's article, 'Why The Future Doesn't Need Us'; what price joy if it doesn't become Broderick's meta-theme? Part of the intelligentsia as early warning system, interpreting the future for the present, he takes his place among a brood of latter-day Hamlets insisting 'to be or not to be' is the question. Given the slew of spectres haunting our era, it's hard to disagree.

Are the germs gonna get us? AIDS, that grim reaper, marches hand in glove with the more mundane malaria and tuberculosis, nowhere down for the count. Landmines to September 11 — military mania remains rampant. Are aggression, savagery, revenge hardwired into the genome? Global warming, desertification, salination; when did eco-catastrophe become a jingle on every street singer's lips? Ar yes, from Blomberg to the dailies, the obscene spectacle of a world that can overproduce but underdistribute. And how wedded are we to developments in biotechnology, nanotechnology, the quantum leaps in computing power that stock-feed artificial intelligence? Is that marriage for better or worse? AI goes hyper intelligent, and then . . . ?

Taking a dive into the future may be humanity's oldest party trick; something we've always done, are always doing. Did it ever rate a higher degree of difficulty? A sense of the species at the crossroads, cusping it at the portals of a strange new world, galvanises Broderick's pen. He looks forward, he looks back (the futurist ambience of the Metro's malls, the down-home hand-spun Amish world of The Valley). In a different font, one of the three scene-setting gambits on page two, he lifts a couplet from Andrew Marvell (1621–1678) and, with 'apologies', doctors it thus:

> But at my back I always hear
> Time's winged chariot changing gear

This ability to not just metaphysically but viscerally depict time's cog slips, the shift of paradigms; that's Broderick's great act. Cryonics, cellular repair, the life everlasting albeit in cyberspace holographically extended — we lean forward, bend back, pass through time into the interstellar depths, the breath of a new physics, a rewritten everything upon us.

A frolic? I don't think so, when the Afterword that tells us this also betrays deeper aims, not to say arcane sources:

> The revised physics I play with are a science fictional version of the late Allen Rothwarf's model proposed in 'An Aether Model of the Universe' . . . not meant literally except as a hint that everything important in physics we might not yet know.

Broderick (kindly) steers us to a learned journal (*Physics Essays* 11, 444-446, 1998), see the Drexel University Web site: http://cbis.ece.drexel.edu/ECE/fac_staff_pages/rothwa rf_ etc. bradbury/MatrioshkaBrains/PlntDssmbly.html is how a second cite/site ends. And the topic being dilated on? 'As for disassembling the solar system, how feasible is that? Freeman Dyson showed as long ago as 1960 that just using available solar energy, Jupiter could be dismantled in 800 years. More recent updated analysis by Robert J. Bradbury shows that this is too cautious. Whole worlds could be vapourised and the escaping gases captured and sorted, but that's messy. Solar flux could be turned into electricity to power tiny self-replicating nanogadgets to chew up a planet or moon, sequester the materials conveniently . . .' — and so on, the gist being, capture some of the Sun's output, chart the gravitational binding energies of the planets and other relevant parameters, voilà: 'Mercury, closest to the Sun, can be pulled apart in five hours, Mars in 12 hours, the Moon in a mere 19 minutes'. A consolation, perhaps, Jupiter will still require 560 years.

This is the barely thinkable stuff on which Broderick hangs his dreams. Apocalypse possible, the disassembly of the solar system is the denouement of *Transcension*, related in a dramatically sprung way, unfolding in majestic technicolour, an IMAX-style grandeur to each slo-mo minute, seen through the eyes of several people (and one thing) who we've grown very fond of.

There's a bigness to the authorial sensibility here that you simply don't get in big airport novels, and 'frolicsome' isn't the blurb I'd slap on it. Sure, pleasures are myriad. This novel teems with wit, has satiric bite, a core set of beautifully observed characters, not least a Romeo and Juliet whose young love is imaged with an endearing degree of hormonally charged ardour. Above all, there's a narrative architecture to die for, and pulsing deep within it the torque of the plot, the churn of an engine that will bring you (it did me) home on a wet sail in an elated awestruck state.

Engine *and* sail? Paradox, or just a bit of piggy-backing? Old and new technology mixed and matched? That's kind of this book: the out-there frontiers of Science (new technology) hyper-linked to capital L (old technology) Literature.

Anyway, there I was, at the end-flap — 'Damien Broderick lives in Coburg, Victoria, Australia' — with memories of primary school flooding my lobes, recalling the way kids inscribed their pencil cases, listing their name and the school, their house number, the street suburb and city they lived in, adding stuff like 'the Southern Hemisphere, planet Earth, the Solar System, the Universe'. Does a Piaget-like turning point infect us? We don't necessarily leave the neighbourhood, but learn to see beyond it? Some kids turn looking out into a habit. They grow up astronomers and do the night shift at Parkes or Mt Stromlo. Others produce, like Broderick, a dread SF-inflected reggae, the wail reaching Coburg to New York.

— John Romeril, August 2002

Russell Blackford is Melbourne-based writer and critic. With Van Ikin and Sean McMullen, he is co-author of *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999). Since then he has contributed many articles, on a wide range of subjects, to such magazines as *Quadrant*, *Nova Express* and the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. He and his wife Jenny Blackford edited *Foundation* 78, the special Aussiecon III edition, and he is at present writing a commissioned trilogy of novels.

Russell Blackford

Posthuman futures

Discussed:
TRANSCENSION
by Damien Broderick
(2002; Tor Books 0-765-30369-8; 348 pp; US$25.95/A$49.95 hardback)

SCHILD'S LADDER
by Greg Egan
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07123-0; 249 pp; £10.99/$A35.00 trade paperback)

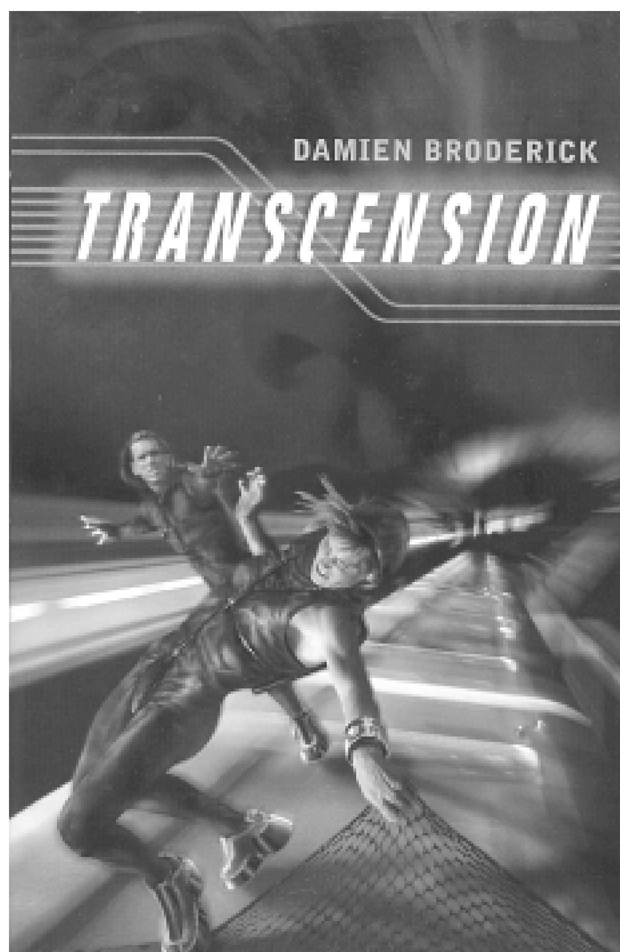
[First published in *Australian Book Review*, September 2002.]

Over the past 12 years, Australian science fiction has undergone an extraordinary renaissance. Before 1990, only a small number of writers, notably Damien Broderick, George Turner, and A. Bertram Chandler, had achieved regular success in the major overseas markets of the US and UK. Local publication of SF was largely restricted to the offerings of small presses, such as Norstrilia Press and Cory & Collins, with sporadic support from mainstream and genre magazines.

During the 1990s Broderick went from strength to strength, becoming a leading international critic and theorist of the genre, as well as a respected novelist. Greg Egan, who had published some short stories and one small-press novel during the 1980s, had a meteoric rise to prominence, winning international awards and building a huge reputation as a novelist of ideas. He is now established as one of the foremost writers of 'hard', strongly science-based SF. Many other Australian writers have made their mark overseas, while mass market publishers in Australia now produce work by a wide range of SF authors, covering most of the field's variety.

The new books by Broderick and Egan, *Transcension* and *Schild's Ladder*, are at the genre's cutting edge. Both writer attempt to imagine worlds that have undergone truly radical change, as a result of which humanity itself has been superseded or deeply altered. Such posthuman scenarios are now debated intensely within the genre, as its practitioners reflect upon the contemporary technological trajectory. Once the possibilities for powerful new technologies, such as nanotechnology and artificial intelligence ('AI'), become clearer, the debate will increasingly spill over into the intellectual mainstream, a process that is already beginning. Today's themes in serious sf are tomorrow's mainstream social and political issues, as shown by the recent controversies over reproductive technology.

In Broderick's *Transcension*, the Earth has fallen under the benevolent control of a powerful AI known as 'the Aleph', and it becomes clear that human beings, as we know them, are now found only in relatively small enclaves that the Aleph has willingly set aside. Here live societies that, to greatly varying extents, have relinquished the future's rapidly advancing technology. Broderick shows us how the Aleph came to be, and depicts a sequence of astonishing events as the AI chafes at its remaining limitations, seeking



to move to an even higher level of freedom and power.

Egan's *Schild's Ladder* explores the themes of love, identity and the pursuit of knowledge. It is set twenty millennia from now, when the galaxy has been extensively colonised by our descendants, whose minds run on quantum level computational devices called 'Qusps' ('quantum singleton processors'). In this strange, distant future, people can live in a disembodied, virtual form or move between different bodies as necessary. Love remains, and sex can be arranged, but the biological division of the sexes has been engineered out, leaving gender distinctions as no more than a linguistic fossil.

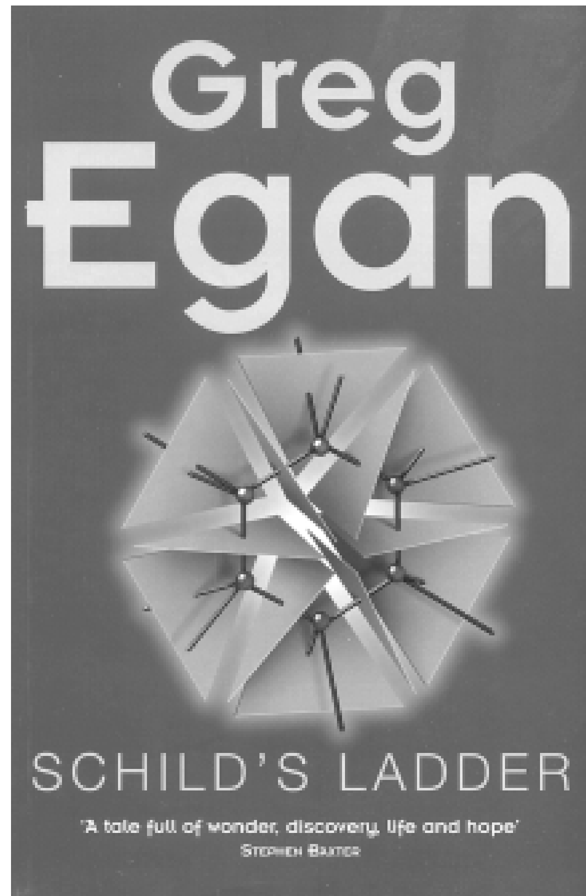
Then an experiment in fundamental physics goes wrong, creating a region of 'novo-vacuum' in outer space. Here, different physical laws operate, and nothing living can survive. The novo-vacuum immediately begins expanding outwards at half the speed of light, engulfing star systems and planets, which have to be evacuated before its edge can reach them. This unprecedented disaster triggers two main political responses. The 'Preservationists' want to save the existing colonised worlds, which means stopping the expansion of the novo-vacuum, or preferably destroying it, whereas the 'Yielders' want to preserve and study it, or even adapt to it. They see the novo- vacuum as a new universe, flowering within the old, offering a much-needed stimulus to their stagnating interstellar civilisation. As studies of the phenomenon continue, it becomes apparent that the novo-vacuum is not so empty, after all — it has developed its own rich structure, including a form of life.

Both novelists are confronted by the same artistic problems: how to make such radical visions of the future transparent to their readers; how to involve us with their characters. If beings such as Broderick's Aleph and Egan's distant descendants of current humans are advanced so far beyond us, how can we understand them and care about them? Broderick's main tactic is to keep us, as far as possible, within the consciousness of a group of human characters, who are given turns to narrate the story. Of these, the most important is Amanda Kolby-McAllister, a bored 'pender' (i.e., she is going through a kind of biomedically extended adolescence) whose idea of fun is train surfing on supersonic maglev freighters, using high-tech safety gear. Amanda speaks and writes in a kind of futuristic teen slang that crushes out many words:

> Feet touched curved metal, shoes gripped. Hangar still dim, empty. Stood there few beautiful seconds. Solid bulk freighter beneath feet didn't vibrate, hum. Right now quiet as tomb — but could feel supersonic power of thing.

While this is off-putting at first, it is easy to get used to, and Amanda is a very engaging character, as are the other narrators, whose contrasting personalities provide much of the book's pleasure. Amanda and her friend Vikram become involved with a community that has renounced machine technology as the work of the devil — though even here there are some twists. The interactions between characters from very different societies are amusing and gentle, though tragedy strikes at one point.

Broderick makes important use of another character, Mohammed Kasim Abdel-Malek, who has survived from approximately our own time. In one thread of the book, we follow what happens to him after he is murdered by a juvenile street gang, preserved cryonically through the Aleph's rise, then returned to Amanda's society. In this narrative thread, we are introduced to the back story, while we follow events in the book's present through the adventures of Amanda and the people she meets.



Schild's Ladder is far more daunting, requiring considerable concentration and effort from the reader to penetrate its extensive tracts of scientific discourse. Yet it is also notable for its mastery of technique, for Egan has a refined ability to clarify everything, so that the only remaining difficulties are those arising from the subject matter itself. The style and structure of the book are simplified to the maximum, and the prose contains no unwanted distractions. Egan enables us to understand events through the eyes of truly strange characters, and to feel their passions.

For a mainstream audience, these are not the most accessible books by either writer. In particular, Egan's *Teranesia* (1999) is a far better place to begin for anyone who is not already familiar with his work. At the same time, *Transcension* and *Schild's Ladder* are quite remote in tone and intention from media 'sci-fi', the sort of action/adventure SF that dominates on television and in the cinema. Instead, they are carefully worked out thought experiments, as rich and moving in their way as high quality novels from the literary mainstream. They may not extend the audience of either writer, but they should receive much attention from the international sf readership, and they confirm the current richness of the sf field in Australia.

— Russell Blackford, September 2002

Elaine Cochrane says she should wear a badge 'Spouse of BNF' at conventions, because she has to put up with the *SF Commentary* editor as a husband. She is, of course, a fan in her own right, having been a member of the Melbourne University SF Association during the 1970s, and later a participant at many conventions and fannish gatherings. She has delivered to Nova Mob meetings several papers, one of which, 'If You Do Not Love Words' (on the works of R. A. Lafferty), appeared in *Steam Engine Time* 1. Elaine is a freelance book editor specialising in science and mathematics.

Elaine Cochrane

Egan's new universe

Discussed:
SCHILD'S LADDER
by Greg Egan
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07123-0; 248 pp plus 2 pages of Greg Egan's notes on sources for the maths/physics; £10.99/$A35.00 trade paperback)

As cosmologists attempt to describe the universe in mathematical terms — of which general relativity, quantum mechanics, the Big Bang model and inflation are just part — the search for the underlying pattern poses a different question. These mathematical descriptions are very good at describing the universe as it is, but are they the only descriptions possible? Is our type of universe the only possibility?

Greg Egan is fascinated and excited by cosmological theory, and he wants to share that excitement. In *Schild's Ladder*, he proposes a future physics, based on geometry, that has dotted almost all the '*i*'s and crossed almost all the '*t*'s of current cosmology. In that world, a physicist brings into existence a universe that is described by a different geometry, of which our own is just a simpler special case. The universe or 'novo-vacuum' described by the new geometry is expected to have only a fleeting existence, but instead it grows and threatens the existence of our own. Egan's far-future cosmologists are excited and frustrated by the challenge of understanding this new and strange space–time. They are also faced with the decision of what, if anything, can or should be done to stop its expansion, and if it can, or should be, destroyed. It is Egan's triumph that we share their wonder and frustration.

One reason for his success is that his science is rigorous. As Cass, the physicist who triggers the events, points out, general relativity and quantum mechanics are so successful at describing our space–time that they can't be far wrong, and Egan is careful not to transgress either. Thus the novo-vacuum expands at half light-speed, making observation possible. He is also careful to exploit many of the peculiarities of both, including relativistic time dilation and superposition of quantum states, to achieve some of the more mind-stretching action.

Another reason is his characters. Almost all are AIs, but they are AIs with human ancestry, with curiosity, a moral sense, values and doubts, and a diversity of cultures. Many inhabit bodies; many do not. Those who do inhabit bodies do so in a variety of forms, and for a variety of reasons. All have the potential to transmit themselves as packages of information, to inhabit a new body at the receiving end, or suitable computer hardware—and to leave their old selves behind as backups. Thus Cass, again: 'When the means existed to transform yourself, instantly and effortlessly, into anything at all, the only way to maintain an identity was to draw your own boundaries. But once you lost the urge to keep asking whether or not you'd drawn them in the right place, you might as well have been born *Homo sapiens*, with no real choices at all (p. 6).'

A strong secondary theme of the novel concerns the different types of social structures and social interactions such forms of existence make possible. Egan's care, and a certain sly humour, give even his most bizarre inventions a plausibility and a sense of rightness.

The characters may be AIs, and thus potentially immortal, but they share a deep reverence for life, particularly biological — mortal — life. Much of the tension of the novel arises from their differing interpretations of what this means, and their attempts to reconcile this reverence with their desire to understand the new phenomenon of the novo- vacuum. Resolution does not depend only on heroics, although many of his characters do display courage. (It's all very well having a backup a few light-years away; that backup is not the current *you*, and it can know nothing of the circumstances since its creation that lead to its activation.) Those AIs studying the novo-vacuum do so rationally and intelligently. Their analysis is guided by logic, but their decisions and actions are also guided by their values and beliefs. It is this interplay that gives the novel so much of its strength.

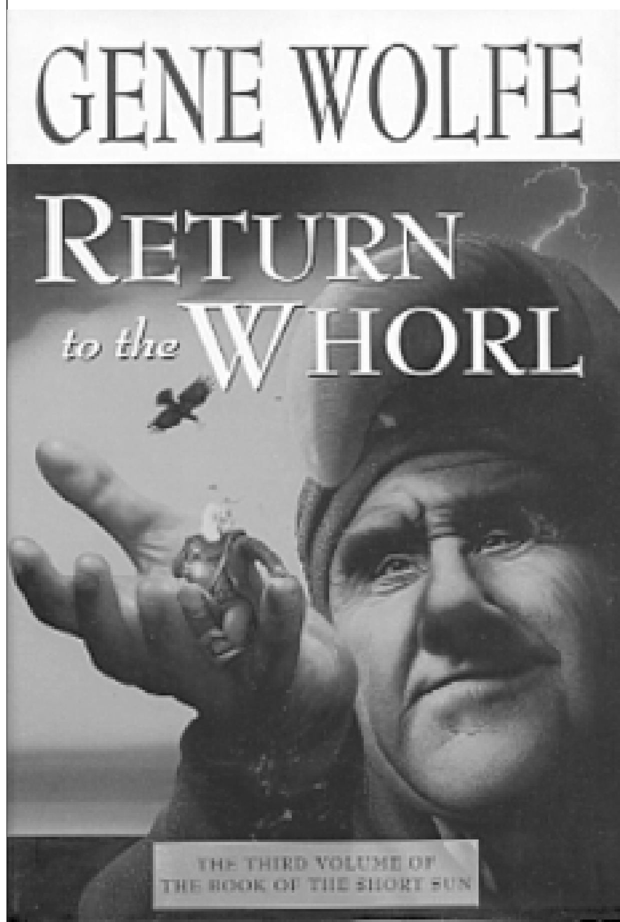
— Elaine Cochrane, June 2002

Jenny Blackford is a freelance writer and critic, and performs manuscript assessments of both fiction and non-fiction for Driftwood Manuscripts. In a previous life, she was an expert in computer communications. She lives in Albert Park, Victoria.

Jenny Blackford

Unreliable narrators

Discussed:
RETURN TO THE WHORL
by Gene Wolfe
(2002, first publication 2001; Tor 0-312-87364-6; 412 pp.; $US15.95/$A28.00 trade paperback)



Cover: thanks to Tor Books and Gordon Van Gelder.

Return to the Whorl is not a novel in its own right, and it would be little use for me to review it as if it were. It is the third and apparently final volume of *The Book of the Short Sun*, and therefore the culmination of three separate series of books. The three volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun* were preceded by the five volumes of *The Book of the New Sun* and the four volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun*. The 12 books effectively comprise a single, very long novel, or, perhaps, if we take the three series titles *The Book of* seriously, a long trilogy. They are all beautifully written, and rich and complex, almost to a fault.

To appreciate *Return to the Whorl* at all, it is very important to have read *The Book of the Long Sun*, plus the preceding two volumes of *The Book of the Short Sun*, that is, *On Blue's Waters* and *In Green's Jungles*. You are more likely to enjoy *Return to the Whorl* if you have read or, preferably, reread these six books very recently. You will be vastly better off if, before rereading those books, you also reread *The Book of the New Sun*, including the extra (fifth) book, *Urth of the New Sun*.

Return to the Whorl is not an easy read. Do not pick this one up in an idle moment. You need an idle day (or a month, if possible, for the homework) and a clear head. After I finished the rereading the three series, culminating in reading *Return to the Whorl* twice, much of the complex setup had gradually fallen into place in my head, but I was still baffled about many things. Did the inhumi, for example, really fly through hard vacuum between the planets Blue and Green? Could the secret of the inhumi really be as trivial as it seemed? What *did* Horn do to Chenille on Green? How does the astral travel stuff really work?

I did what one does these days: I searched the net. There is an online community of terrifyingly intelligent and literate people who discuss Wolfe with obsessive tenacity. The archives of the list are at www.urth.net/urth/achives, and are searchable. To my profound relief, the archives showed a general experience not wholly dissimilar from mine. On my questions above, for example, some thought one thing, some thought another, and others were violently undecided.

How can I summarise what has happened so far in this long and complex work? Wolfe's familiar preoccupations with self, spirit and personhood, with truth, lies and self-deception, with death, life and resurrection, permeate the books. Unreliable narrators tell us long tales, during which they encounter the dead and, often, also die themselves; identity is lost, merged or changed; shape-shifters imitate and prey on human beings; and the apparent writer within the stories (Wolfe, of course, is the 'real' writer) is often revealed as a mere mouthpiece for others.

The five novels of *The Book of the New Sun* are the story of journeyman torturer Severian on some very peculiar travels. He meets strange people (huge sea-dwelling alien women, a monstrous giant and his doctor, man-apes who live in a mine, time-travelling aliens sent to guide Urthlings), and has many long conversations — long conversations are a feature of all of these books — and rather more sexual encounters than one might have expected. After he is made

Autarch, he comes to understand that his life task is to try to bring the New Sun, that is, to bring a White Fountain to renew the dying Sun, which is being eaten up by a Black Pit. To get the White Fountain and bring the New Sun, he has to travel to the higher universe, Yesod, and plead with an entity closer to God ('the Increate') than the men of Urth. In doing so, Severian becomes the Conciliator of centuries earlier, whose sacred memory he once revered.

One huge advantage of rereading all these books in one fell swoop is that many of Wolfe's little puzzles become satisfyingly clear. What was murky when one read each of the books year by year as they came out is relatively simple when they are read all together. The answers to questions such as the identity of Severian's mother, father and grandparents are relatively easy. (The question of Severian's sister, however, remains murkier.)

Next comes *The Book of the Long Sun*. The eponymous Long Sun is the heating and illuminating structure in the centre of the *Whorl*, a generation starship made from a hollowed-out asteroid. Pas, the chief god of the *Whorl*, is an upload of the thoroughly unpleasant tyrant Typhon, who lived long before Severian's birth. Severian meets Typhon twice in *The Book of the New Sun*: Severian apparently brings the long-desiccated Typhon back to life during Severian's journey north in *The Sword of the Lictor*; and Severian as Conciliator, gone back in time in *Urth of the New Sun* to Typhon's own time, is persecuted by him, but escapes by a (quite literal) miracle. We do not encounter Severian again until *Return to the Whorl*.

The basis of the Long Sun books is that Typhon created the *Whorl*, around the time when Severian met him in Typhon's first lifetime. He loaded it with a Cargo of live human people ('bios'), preserved people ('sleepers' — few of whom appear to have entered the *Whorl* voluntarily), androids ('chems') and embryos (human and animal), plus seeds to stock the future colony. The personalities of Typhon and his family and friends were uploaded into Mainframe on the *Whorl*, where they gave themselves divine attributes and Greek-inspired names. Pas, for example, is Greek for 'All'. In the Long Sun series, the 'gods' communicate with the people of the *Whorl* through the Sacred Windows (big video monitors), and can possess people, by downloading part of their personalities into their worshippers through the Windows, or, indeed, any monitor. They are as bloodthirsty as Pas was when he was alive, wanting frequent blood sacrifice, preferably human.

By the time of the action of *The Book of the Long Sun*, the Cargo living and breeding in the *Whorl* have lost most of their memories of Urth. They are unaware of their Cargo status, and take the *Whorl* for granted as the world. The *Whorl* arrived long ago at a star system with two apparently suitable planets, Blue and Green, but none of the Cargo knows that there is an Outside, and the few Crew have little power. Pas wants the Cargo to leave the *Whorl* for Green or Blue, but his family has rebelled against him, and 'killed' him in Mainframe. Pas in these books seems less evil than Typhon was; this may be a result of his 'death'. Like so many Wolfe characters, Pas is resurrected, but some personality components may have been lost in the process.

The main character of the Long Sun books is Patera (that is, Father) Silk, a priest whose goodness and humility is as charming in its way as Severian's simple acceptance of life as a torturer. Silk is 'illuminated' by the Outsider — a god who exists outside the *Whorl*, not one of Pas's family and friends (yes, he seems to be the real God — atheists beware). Silk has long conversations with strange people as he battles criminals and the corrupt government of his native city-state Viron, in complicated subplots. Finally, he struggles with the rundown systems of the *Whorl*, trying to get the people of Viron safely transported to Green or Blue. One major problem is that the people of the *Whorl* have cannibalised the ship, including its landers, during the long journey, so few of the landers are operational.

The Book of the Long Sun appears to be written by Silk himself. One of the minor characters in *The Book of the Long Sun* is Silk's pupil Horn, who is chastised at one point for his excellent imitations of Silk. Horn admits at the end of *The Book of the Long Sun* that he and his wife Nettle, rather than Silk, wrote the whole account. Horn appears to be the writer of *The Book of the Short Sun*, but appearances are often deceptive. At the beginning of the action of *The Book of the Short Sun*, in *On Blue's Waters*, Horn and Nettle are living on Green near New Viron, a settlement founded by the people of Viron. With their oldest son Sinew and their twins Hoof and Hide (the naming conventions of Viron are stern), the couple run a paper mill on a small island, the Lizard.

The frontier civilisation of Blue is becoming increasingly uncontrolled and violent — for example, slavery is arising. The problems on Blue are compounded by the inhumi, a race of shape-shifting alien blood-suckers native to Green. They are reminiscent of, but generally agreed to be different from, the shape-shifting alien blood-suckers of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Blood confers something close to identity: the inhumi drink human blood because they want to be human.

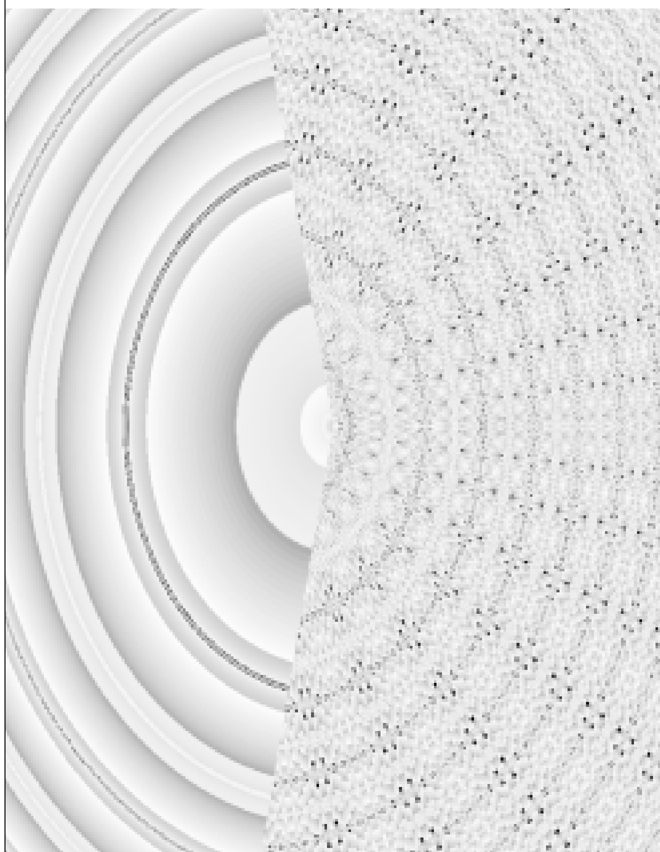
A delegation from New Viron asks Horn to go back to the *Whorl*, to find Silk and bring him to Blue, to restore order. However, apart from any difficulties in finding Silk and persuading him to travel to Blue, even the task of getting back up to the *Whorl* is difficult. Any landers sent from the Whorl automatically return to it, unless they are hopelessly damaged, but it is claimed that there is a lander in the mysterious town of Pajarocu, which is rumored to be on a continent far from new Viron.

In the first Short Sun book, *On Blue's Waters*, the narrator, who calls himself Horn, writes of Horn's strange adventures in his journey, mostly by sea, to Pajarocu. These adventures conspicuously include Horn's infatuation with a beautiful, one-armed siren, Seawrack, who joins him in his boat; his (probable) death in a concealed pit on an island on the way, and subsequent (probable) resurrection; and his developing relationship with the former inhabitants of Blue, the Vanished People or Neighbours, who have many arms and legs and are difficult to see. In Pajarocu, he boards a decrepit lander run by inhumi and men who turn out to be their slaves. It is obvious to Horn that the inhumi plan to take the lander not to the *Whorl*, but to their native Green, where slavery and death await the humans on board.

The narrator, who claims to be Horn, intersperses his first person account of Horn's travels from the Lizard to Pajarocu with the narrator's 'present' situation as Rajan of an Indian-like state at war with a Chinese-like state. It is clear that everyone around the narrator in 'present' time believes that he is Silk, not Horn, though he denies it persistently.

In Green's Jungles has rather less of the jungle than *In Blue's Waters* has of the sea. Back on Blue, the narrator in 'present' time is involved in a power struggle between small Italian-like states. The story of Horn's time on Green comes in small doses, mostly in reported conversation and reported story-telling. In this book, the narrator reports something like astral travel happening to him and those around him, in 'present' time. Their bodies remain where they are

Graphic: Elaine Cochrane, using DJFractals



on Blue, apparently asleep, but their spirits find themselves in other places (on Green, and even on Severian's Urth).

In part of the action reported in *In Green's Jungles* Horn certainly dies, killed in a battle with the inhumi on Green, and his 'spirit' is transferred by the Neighbours to a body whose 'spirit is dying'. It seems obvious to the reader that the body is Silk's, and that Silk's spirit is dying because his beloved Hyacinth is dead. The narrator does not wish to acknowledge this. The reader cannot, of course, be sure of *anything*, because this is Gene Wolfe.

At the beginning of *Return to the Whorl*, in the 'present' time the narrator is returning home to New Viron and Nettle, accompanied by Hide and the inhuma Jahlee whom he has 'adopted', and later by Hide's twin, Hoof, as well. The 'present' narrative is written in first person, as were the whole of the previous two books.

The account of past events in *Return to the Whorl* — mostly the narrator's travels in the *Whorl*, looking for Silk — is written in the third person, interspersed chapter by chapter with 'present' events. (The shift to third person for this narrative is significant; the explanation comes late in the book.) This narrative starts with the narrator's finding himself on the *Whorl*, bleeding, next to the corpse of a middle-aged woman. He travels to and through Viron, often literally as well as figuratively in the dark, dealing with the usual very strange people, who clearly believe him to be Silk.

The narrator maintains to them all, against all probability, that he is in fact Horn (and he does have Horn's memories, though Silk's memories also intrude). The narrator acknowledges that he looks different now; he is taller, his hair is white and he has a long white beard. However, he refuses to deal with the possibility that his body is Silk's, and that he has changed very considerably, in many ways, from Horn the paper-mill owner.

The astral travel in *Return to the Whorl* includes several visits to the young apprentice torturer Severian in the Matachin Tower. Severian as an earnest child is terribly appealing. The narrator is even introduced to Severian's dog Triskele. These are the closest thing to a romp in the book.

Horn, sadly, is not as likeable a character as either the peculiarly gentle torturer Severian, or the virtuous, guilt-ravaged Silk. He is much more of a rough diamond: he hates his son, Sinew, passionately, carefully misinterpreting (the doubtless surly) Sinew's affectionate acts; and he rapes the young siren Seawrack whom the Mother 'gives' him (though there are arguments as to how far the siren's song is to blame for this).

This description has merely scratched the surface of a hugely complex work. I have avoided, for example, any mention of possession by the gods in the *Short Sun* books, but the Whorl list mentioned above is full of speculation as to how far Silk was merged into Pas on the *Whorl*, and therefore how much of Pas is in the narrator.

As the series progresses, Wolfe is writing more and more through indirection. Conversations and stories increasingly make up the bulk of the books. In *Return to the Whorl*, the narrator teases the reader with promises to relate important events, which he never actually gets around to. The reader is forced, even more than in most Wolfe books, to piece together much of the actual story from hints. While this is interesting, it may be less pleasurable as a reading experience than more traditional narrative.

Do not expect a dazzling sense of satisfying closure at the end of *Return to the Whorl*, or even as much closure as there was at the end of the previous two series. The book may well leave the reader more puzzled than sated, and the ending came as at least an initial disappointment, not only to me, but to some on the Whorl list. Few loose ends were tied up, or conflicts resolved. Most people posting on the list report finding that thinking about the book and re-reading it helps; I certainly found the ending more satisfying on my second reading.

Religion alert: the religious symbolism and references which contribute some of the intense textural richness to the *New*, *Long* and *Short Sun* books become even thicker in *Return to the Whorl*. Less religious readers may have felt a little uncomfortable while reading *Urth of the New Sun*, as Severian became a full-blown Christ figure (though he is merely an *echo* of Christ, not an allegory). The narrator of *The Book of the New Sun*, like Silk in *The Book of the Long Sun*, feels the presence of the Outsider. The narrator, in *Return to the Whorl*, actually celebrates 'sacrifice' with bread and wine. On one of these occasions, he says 'This is my body' of the bread, and 'This is my blood' of the wine. Admittedly, the religious solemnity is a little undercut by his companion Olivine's interesting status as an incompletely built chem, and the fact that the literal body and blood that the narrator is referring to is Horn's body, then dead for a few days on Green, but all the same . . .

This is neither a short read nor an easy one. It is, however, profoundly interesting. Few readers could regret the experience.

— Jenny Blackford, June 2002