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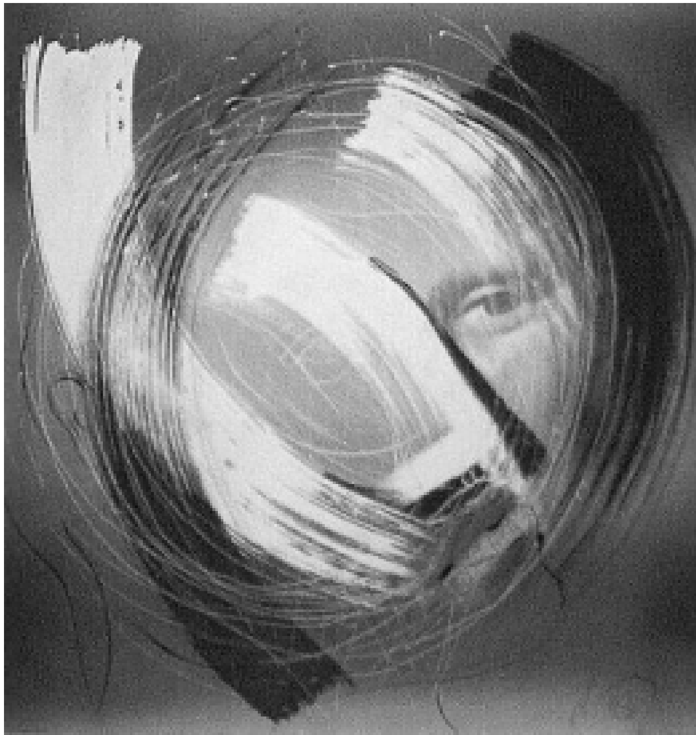
Roslyn Kopel Gross

How best can we live?

Discussed:
THE FRESCO
by Sheri Tepper (Gollancz, 2000, 406pp.)
THE TELLING
by Ursula K. le Guin (Gollancz, 2001, 264pp.)



Painting: Guy Browning.

Having heard much about the strong ideological/pedagogical nature of Sheri Tepper's writing, and having been somewhat disappointed in one of Tepper's novels, *Beauty*, I thought there was a reasonable chance I would dislike her latest novel, *The Fresco*. However, not only did I find *The Fresco* to be thought-provoking and exciting intellectually, but I thoroughly enjoyed reading it.

Essentially, ***The Fresco*** is both an alien contact story and a commentary on our life and times. In fact, one of its interesting features is that it is set virtually in the present time, or, more accurately, slightly in our past, as two of its characters appear to be President Clinton and his wife Hilary, although they are never mentioned by name.

When two aliens of the Pistach race arrive on earth they promptly choose an ordinary woman, Benita Alvarez-Shipton, as their liaison with the American government. The aliens, Chiddy and Vess, have the unenviable task of readying Earth to join their galactic federation; in order to do so, Earth needs to become 'neighbourly'. As part of this process, the two aliens, in hilariously simple ways, are able to solve such insurmountable problems as environmental degradation, the oppression of women in Afghanistan (the novel was written before the events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath in Afghanistan), the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and our drug and alcohol problems. Of course, they have resources and powers unavailable to us, but Tepper has a way of making clear solutions feel possible, almost obvious.

As in much anthropological/sociological science fiction, description of the alien culture is employed in order to make observations about our own. Tepper describes Pistach society, with the evident intention of being provocative and highlighting the obtuseness of human society. Chiddy explains, 'One should not want to be anything but what one is, because it creates unhappiness. If one cannot dance, one should not be a dancer . . . One should not be sexual if one cannot enjoy both the process and the product, and if there is no place for the product, one should stop being sexual.' In Pistach society, each individual is born 'undifferentiated' until he or she is selected, by suitability, into one of several occupations, which essentially constitute castes. Even 'receptors' (mothers) and 'inceptors' (fathers) are actually selected for this role, and are further altered physically and emotionally in order to be suited at this task. This is contrasted with the undifferentiated nature of humans socially and sexually, and the 'breeding madness' of some of Earth's men, which causes needless social and personal harm. Obviously, Tepper is not suggesting we follow the Pistach example in dealing with sexuality and procreation, but she nevertheless makes some trenchant observations about the harm our approach to sexuality wreaks in human societies. This is critique of a powerful, passionate order.

Although, in describing how the Pistach choose to handle Earth's problems, Tepper is not suggesting actual solutions or policies (the problems are solved using techniques not available to humans, anyway), she is certainly not afraid of pointing out how misguided and useless our

present policies are. Nor is Tepper reluctant to take sides in some other controversial issues in this novel. She is scathing, for instance, about the rigid anti-abortion position, and this is the basis of a very amusing subplot in the novel, in which a group of anti-woman, male 'right-to-lifers' get their comeuppance. Her strong opinions may annoy some readers, but the sharp and funny social commentary she employs to illustrate them are witty and clever.

In a subplot that turns out to be an essential part of the story, the Pistach philosophy is threatened, back on the home world, by political forces attempting to meddle with the Fresco, a giant wall painting depicting the origins of their moral code — their equivalent of religious scripture. If this happens, not only will the fabric of their society be destroyed, but the Pistach will not be able to help Earth, leaving it open for predatory aliens, whose arrival on Earth at the same time as the Pistach forms another subplot . . .

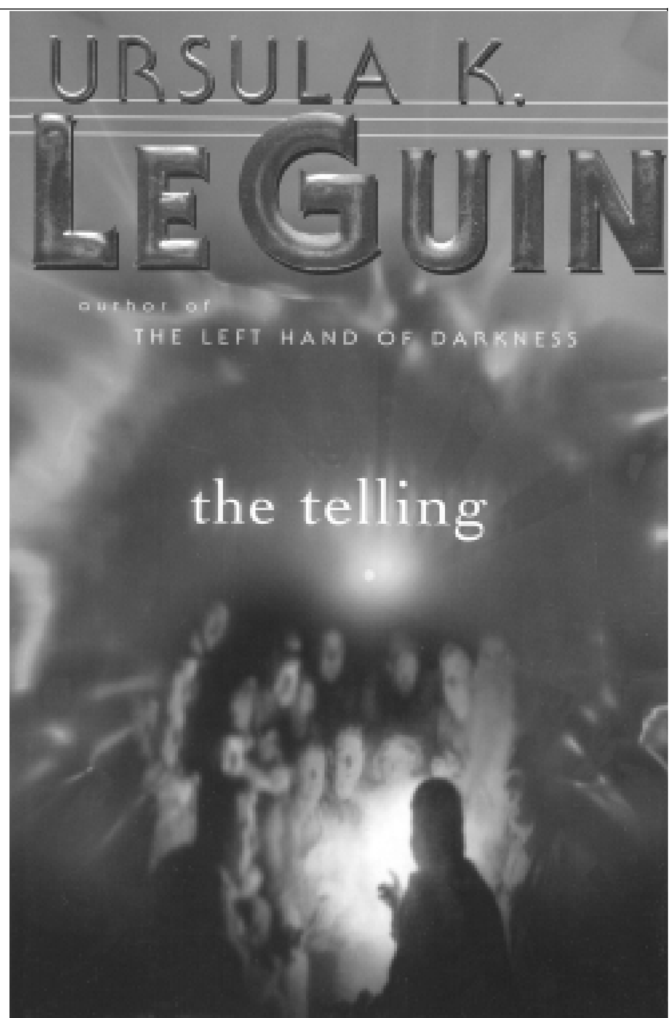
The resolution of this problem leads to some interesting questions. Is something true only because people believe it to be so? Does it matter if belief has been brought about through duplicity? Through this theme, Tepper makes some astute observations about the role of belief in shaping societies and the world views with which they are imbued. Such questions, which run throughout the novel, seem to me to be deeper and more fundamental than Tepper's views on abortion, drugs, homelessness or any other issue.

As in many novels that contain strong sociopolitical opinions, there are some elements that can only be described as stereotypical and clichéd. Benita herself, for instance, is very much the downtrodden woman who comes to realise how strong, intelligent and capable she really is, while her hapless husband Bert is a totally stupid and woefully prejudiced man with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. The fact that Bert refers to Benita as 'moocow' is an example of how painfully caricatured this character is at times.

Fortunately, such clumsy handling is the exception rather than the rule in *The Fresco*, and is balanced by the book's sense of humour and its deft touches, such as the wonderfully apt and ironic ways in which the Pistach do manage to change Earth's society. For example, their methods of dealing with the treatment of women in Afghanistan (again, obviously pre-11 September) is hilarious and ingenious, and one I cannot describe without revealing too much.

I tend to dislike pedagogical and didactic novels on principle, and, it seems to me, that in practice they often end up being highly unreadable as well. Having found *The Fresco* not only intelligent and funny, but highly entertaining and enjoyable, I will now leave it up to readers to decide whether this is a pedagogical novel that actually works, or not really a pedagogical work at all.

Perhaps the Le Guin novel to which *The Fresco* could best be compared is *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). It, too, employs an alien culture in order to examine and comment on human culture, and human sexuality in particular, although, while sexuality and its social expression is pivotal in le Guin's novel, the sexual structure of the Pistach, as part of their whole social division, is only a very small feature in Tepper's book. However, there is also an important difference of purpose: while *The Fresco* posits a society that chooses to structure sexuality in a particular way, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is something of a thought experiment: what would sexuality be like for hermaphrodites? What kind of society and culture would result from that? This difference in approach is evident also when comparing *The Fresco* with *The Telling*, although the latter is hardly interested in sexuality at all, and is a less detailed book than *The Left Hand of Darkness*.



I have read few books by Tepper, but Ursula K. Le Guin is a writer whose work with which I am much more familiar. Having read some lukewarm reviews that found *The Telling* somewhat dry and 'didactic', I was almost surprised to find a thoroughly absorbing and moving novel, showing Le Guin's trademark qualities of clarity of prose, complexity of vision and sheer ability to tell a story.

Like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, ***The Telling*** is set in the universe of Le Guin's Hainish civilisation, in which it is the task of the Ekumen to visit worlds and study the culture of its sentient beings. In this novel, Earth has experienced two revolutions: a fundamentalist one, in which only one religion and one way is recognised, and all others are persecuted; and, later, a revolution of liberation from this system. The viewpoint character, Sutty, has grown up on Earth during the totalitarian religious revolution, and experienced the second revolution of liberation as well. She was trained as an Ekumen Observer and sent to the planet Aka. Sutty's own personality, her earnest search for truth in the complex situation in which she has been placed, and her own deep personal losses not only make her an intriguing character in her own right but make her central to the unfolding of the story. On Aka, a totalitarian revolution both similar and different from the one Sutty had experienced on Earth has occurred: the native philosophy/religion/way of life has been outlawed in favour of a

state-sponsored 'scientific' regime. A rich, multilayered culture has been replaced by a dictated, sterile one. When Sutty is asked to investigate an area of the planet where the old way of life is still maintained, the government, surprisingly, allows her journey to go ahead.

As in many of Le Guin's novels, including *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the protagonist's journey turns out to be not merely physical, but profoundly psychological and spiritual as well. Through Sutty's eyes — her personal history, her feelings, her intellect — we are gradually shown this philosophy/way of life, which, in many ways, is reminiscent of some other Taoist-like cultures that Le Guin has created, such as that of the Kesh in *Always Coming Home*, though it is not examined in the same detail here. There is the emphasis on balance, on wholeness, on common sense, an idealism rooted in a deep practicality that we often see in Le Guin's created cultures. The term of address, 'yoz', for instance, a word the new regime has attempted to root out, meaning 'fellow person', reveals much about this world-view.

Aka's traditional Taoist-like culture, all but wiped out by its Maoist-like revolution in which books were burned, language rooted out and changed, and culture stunted, is summed up by Sutty as 'the telling' — naming, giving account, or telling stories forms the basis of its whole way of thinking and living. And of course, it is Sutty's own personal story that helps her to grasp these truths, and try to comprehend why such a drastic cultural turnaround has occurred on Aka.

Unlike some reviewers, I feel that the telling of Le Guin's story is economically and masterfully blended with both Sutty's own story and her gradual discovery of 'the telling' itself. As in so much of le Guin's work, the big story cannot be understood without understanding the little story, the experience of each individual. This proves to be true of both Sutty's and the reader's deepening understanding of 'the telling'. Le Guin might have written a much longer work examining the culture and its interaction with Sutty along the lines of *The Left Hand of Darkness*; for myself, the restraint and economy of le Guin's own telling in this novel makes it all the more moving.

Sutty's own personal story illustrates this economy. The deep, inconsolable pain Sutty has experienced at the loss of her lover is neither overdramatised nor ameliorated: it is simply part of Sutty's inner experience, part of her personality that enables her to comprehend on a profound level the truths of 'the telling', leading to Sutty finally being able to tell her own story and become part of the great flow of 'the telling' herself. 'Her throat ached, but it always did. It always did.' The spareness of such sentences carries powerful emotion, and the acceptance of pain as simply part of life implicit in the sentence is reflected in the culture of 'the telling' itself.

Interestingly, there is some similarity between Le Guin's Ekumen, whose reprentatives are pledged to gather information about native cultures, and Tepper's Pistach philosophy, which is summarised thus:

> 'Where you see an unfruitful tree, make it bear.
> 'Do as little as possible.
> 'Do it as painlessly as possible.
> 'Be responsible for having done it.'

However, while the Pistach are determined to intervene in cultures that are not 'neighbourly' according to what they see as wise and sensible principles, Ekumen Observers endeavour not to interfere in alien cultures, but simply to observe and record. While the Pistach are very active and specific about effecting change on Earth from the beginning, Sutty is able to be the catalyst for bringing about a more balanced attitude on Aka. Ultimately, Le Guin is interested in something more indefinable than implementing ideas or ideals. Indeed, both Tepper and Le Guin have written novels about ideas, and novels that are ideological, in very different ways. Both are concerned with the ideology of culture, with the large moral questions of how best to live, but the titles of the two novels suggests one of the important differences between them. In effect, Le Guin's novel is about 'telling' itself, the vital importance of each individual's story in making up the culture's larger story. On one level, then, it is a 'meta' work, examining the nature of story telling itself. Tepper's novel satirises our own social and cultural mores, and suggests more effective ones, by contrasting them with other possibilities. Its title, *The Fresco*, also refers to a 'telling' of a sort — in this case, a religious story that has informed a whole culture — but Tepper's tale is much less concerned with the individual's role in this process, and is also much more linear in nature, less personal and contemplative, and more specific in suggesting what is wrong with our society and how it can be fixed.

Le Guin has Sutty realise: 'she had learned how to listen. To listen, hear . . . To carry the words away and listen to them.' This quote illustrates the difference, for me, in the styles of these two novels. *The Telling* is about this task of listening and telling, a profoundly personal human task that must take place within the individual as well as in a culture. *The Telling* is self-exploratory and introspective, and offers no easy solutions. It is Taoist in feel, recommending the need for balance between the individual and society, between action and inaction, interference and non-interference. *The Fresco* is bright and glittering, certain of its own opinions, not so much introspective as ingenious and fervent. The *Telling* is more a work *about* ideology than *containing* ideology; it is an examination of belief and dogma and freedom, in depth, with compassion and intricacy. Both novels, one gently and with awareness of complexity and the other with more stridency, but bucketfuls of humour, suggest that that there are wiser ways to live than those of present day Western society. *The Telling* has in subtlety and wisdom what *The Fresco* has in sheer ideas, opinions and inventiveness. I highly recommend them both.

— Roslyn Kopel Gross, June 2002

Rick Kennett was born in 1956, and has lived in Melbourne all his life. His work has been published in magazines and anthologies both in Australia and overseas. In 2001, Jacobyte Books brought out *13*, his collection of ghost stories. He shares his home with a manic whippet, and includes naval history and visiting cemeteries (necrotourism) as interests.

Rick Kennett

Finding Carnacki the Ghost-finder

Discussed:
NO. 472 CHEYNE WALK:
CARNACKI: THE UNTOLD STORIES
by A. F. Kidd and Rick Kennett
(2002; Ash-Tree Press 1-55310-037-9; 236 pp.; hb)

Thinking back, I couldn't remember either the story title or its author.

In fact I had only the vaguest memory of having read it in one of those scaled-down-for-juniors Alfred Hitchcock anthologies borrowed from the school library, circa 1969, and had only the scratchiest recollection of what the story had been about. What I did remember — vividly — was the illustration: a man's face pressed against a window, peering in at a stone floor bulging up in two enormous lips.

This exact same first contact with an unremembered author's forgotten story in a vaguely recalled book had already happened a few years earlier on the other side of the world. But it would be more than twenty years before I learned of it.

Move along a couple of years. I'm sitting my final English exams. The paper said to write about your hobby. So I wrote a little essay about ghost hunting. Not that I'd done any, but even at that tender age I'd been reading up on the subject, immersed in the books of British spook chaser Elliot O'Donnell, who I first encountered with *Screaming Skulls* in a ship's library in the middle of the Pacific. So I waxed knowledgeable about dusting floors for footprints and trip wires and thermometers and recording devices and cameras and it occurred to me then that I was not only drawing upon O'Donnell, but also dredging up things read in that long-ago story with the face at the window and the lips in the floor. Obviously it had had something to do with ghost hunting. But I still didn't remember its title or author. (I have sometimes wondered what the examiners made of my essay. At any rate, I passed my English exams.)

Move along to January 1975. I'm on my first ever holiday alone, flying off to Canberra to visit the War Memorial. Canberra is an oddity among the world's cities, purpose built as a national capital rather than developing from early settlements. Parked out in the middle of New South Wales and embedded within its own Australian Capital Territory, Canberra is like a country town with gigantism. And me. I'm a total innocent abroad with no idea of the city's excellent bus system. Despite the heat of that Canberra summer I walk everywhere, equipped with fly repellent and map. I walk down broad avenues and broader main roads, I walk across half the city from my motel to the War Memorial, and around and around in circles because that's the way the city is. Then one morning, hot like all the others, I walk out of the motel and just strike out in a direction I'd not previously taken. Half an hour wandering suburban streets brings me to a small shopping centre. For no particular reason I stroll into a newsagent, where my eye is caught by the lurid red cover of a Panther paperback. The illustration is totally weird: a wiry-haired child sporting the thin legs and swollen belly of a starvation victim, is jogging through a red-lit landscape of cracked earth and stunted trees. Trotting behind him, connected by a length of chain, is a pig. The title reads *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* and the author is William Hope Hodgson.

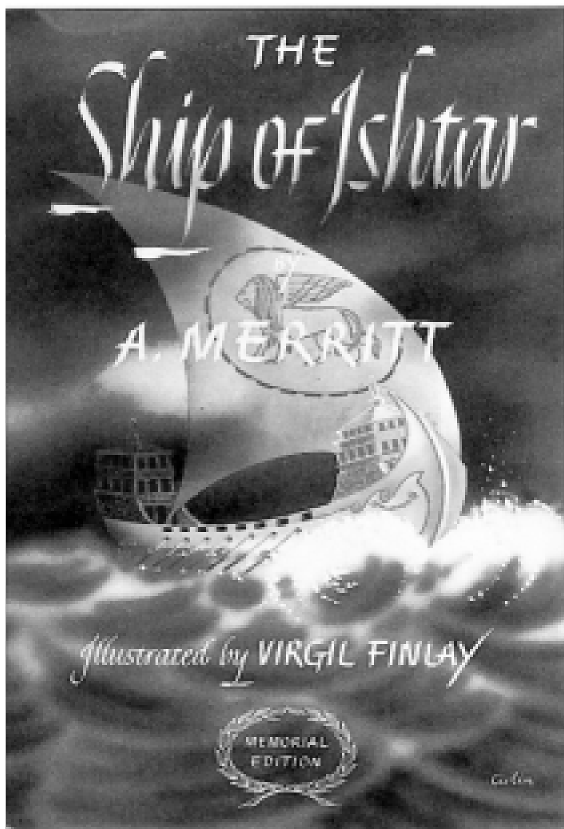
If the cover alone isn't enough to make me shell out the required $1.20, the clincher's the blurb quoting H. P. Lovecraft: 'The work of William Hope Hodgson is of vast

Dick Jenssen retired more than ten years ago as Head of Meteorology at the University of Melbourne. Since then he has spent much time reacquainting himself with Melbourne fandom, developing his computer graphics skills, developing programs such as DJFractals, and playing Scrabble against his computer (often winning). At ConVergence in June 2002 he won the award named after him, the Ditmar Award (for Best Fan Artist). The following article appeared first in Michael Waite's *Trial and Air*.

Dick Jenssen

The approach to Abraham Merritt:

A personal journey on 'The Ship of Ishtar'



The cover of the original hardback edition scanned by Michael Waite.

The argument

The approach to Merritt and *The Ship of Ishtar* is best managed, in my opinion, by finding a way through a garden of forking paths — the labyrinth reflecting the contours of my mind — paths which may be variously labelled, even if they conflate.

Quality/enjoyment

I enjoy reading lists, but am not quite so fond of generating my own, if only because the elements therein will shift, disappear or mutate with my well-being on any one day. Nevertheless, I sometimes like to organise those books which have given me great pleasure into two groups — those whose worth resides in their quality, and those of pure enjoyment. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but I know that some novels whose joy is acute would not be regarded, even by me, as gems of prose. I make this distinction primarily because if I consider a novel to be canonical then it must be possible to justify that judgement by rigorous, logical and well-argued critical means. On the other hand, the pleasure given me by a novel that I know is not 'of quality', must be quite, quite personal and so apart from logical criticism — though not, perhaps, entirely. Any discussion, therefore, of the merits of Merritt will inevitably be largely eisegetical and will reflect what is often pityingly referred to as my personal taste.

To digress, in an attempt to clarify my position on the difference between (justifiable) quality and (personal) liking, if I were, at this moment, asked to list the 'best', and the 'most enjoyable', five novels I have read, that list would be:

Best

Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*
Jane Austen: *Emma*
Ford Madox Ford: *The Good Soldier*

Enjoyable

Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Abraham Merritt: *The Ship of Ishtar*
Henry Kuttner: *Fury*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Henryk Sienkiewicz: *Quo Vadis*

All the novels in the first list are, of course, 'enjoyable', but not all in the other list are 'of quality'. What is interesting is that as far as quality is concerned, Proust is head and shoulders and half-torso above any other novel I have read, but Merritt and Kuttner are only a half-head below him in enjoyment.

Milieu

I am sure that my fondness, perhaps I should say my unreasoning love, of *The Ship of Ishtar* stems from the fact that it was the first real adult pulp fantasy I ever read, and read at the highly impressionable age of sixteen. One has many loves in one's life, but first love never dies and remains to colour all subsequent amours, even if a later passion is seen as the one true love.

I read *The Ship of Ishtar* roughly every two years or so, and

each time it enshrouds me in wonder and charm — a wonder and charm which likely reside only partially in the novel itself, and which are almost certainly extraneous to it and which are engendered by the remembered emotions the book releases, as inadvertently as the taste of a petite madelaine dipped in tisane renewed the past for Proust. At sixteen I was beginning to question the world, to want to know more, to find beauty for myself and not only where teachers and adults claimed it resided. And the prose, the images, the characters, the themes, and above all the *romance* of Merritt's novel all fuelled my burgeoning desires. I cannot, even now — and probably never shall — escape that time of transformation.

The prose

It may seem inappropriate, even ludicrous, to claim that Merritt's prose, his style, is worthy of attention, but I find the following, from *The Metal Monster*, to be immensely effective in its evocation of the mystery, the *natural* mystery, of the world around us.

> In this great crucible of life we call the world — in the vaster one we call the universe — the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic, the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder.

Then there is this early passage from *The Ship of Ishtar*:

> And now Kenton became aware of a fragrance stealing about him; a fragrance vague and caressing, wistful and wandering — like entwined souls of flowers that had lost their way. Sweet was that fragrance and alluring; wholly strange and within it something that changed the rhythm of his life to its own alien pulse. He leaned over the block — the scented swirls drew round him, clinging like little hands; scented spirals of fragrance that supplicated, that pleaded — softly, passionately.
>
> Pleaded — for release!
>
> A wave of impatience swept him; he drew himself up. The fragrance was nothing but perfumes mixed with the substance of the block and now sending forth their breath through the heated room. What nonsense was this that he was dreaming? He struck the block sharply with closed hand.
>
> The block answered the blow!
>
> It murmured. The murmuring grew louder. Louder still, with muffled bell tones like muted carillons of jade deep within. They grew stronger, more vibrant. The murmuring ceased; now there were only the high, sweet chimings. Clearer and ever more clear they sounded, drawing closer, ringing up and on through endless tunnels of time.
>
> There was a sharp crackling. It splintered the chimings; shattered and stilled them. The block split. Pulsed from the break a radiance as of rosy pearls, and throbbing in its wake came wave after wave of the fragrance. But no longer questing, no longer wistful nor supplicating.
>
> Jubilant now! Triumphant!

Now to many — even to myself when I attempt a divorcement from the remembrance of my first reading of *The Ship*, and to adopt a more rational attitude — these passages, particularly the latter, are paradigms of the purple prose of the pulps. And yet I wonder. Not purple, nor even violet, but far, far into the largely unseen realms of the remote ultra-violet is this writing, coruscating through endless passages of words and then returning, joyfully, to astonish us. I have always felt that one of the true tests of a unique style is how well it may resist being parodied. As Max Beerbohm wrote, in one of his Jamesian skits, 'We had come whole, so to speak, hog into the heart of the matter'. The heart, in Merritt's case, though, is that I have never come across a successful parody of his *Ishtar* style. A cynic might say that this is because the style is already a self-parody, but I prefer to believe in the uniqueness, and so the legitimacy, of the writing.

The images

I do not know why, but I have always had a fondness for the names of some jewels and semi-precious stones: cinnabar, chrysoprase, malachite, lapis-lazuli — especially lapis-lazuli. (One of my prized possessions is a pair of lapis-lazuli cuff links given me by a good friend who knew of my passion for the stone. Strangely enough, though, it is the *name*, the *word* itself, which I cherish more than the tangible object.) So when Merritt describes the Ship, very early in the novel, as 'a jeweled craft of enchantment . . . made for elfin princesses to sail ensorcelled seas . . . turquoise . . . milky crystal . . . ivory . . . jet . . . ebon . . . peacock iridescence . . . opal . . . gold . . . azure . . .' I was totally lost, ensorcelled, in its enchantment. The Ship, though, as described, falls into two disparate sections — the ebony of Klaneth, and the ivory of Sharane — a trite, but to my mind (already bemused by the jewelled visions conjured by the prose), enormously effective metaphor for the struggle that Kenton will initiate, and resolve, between Good and Evil.

There are also the descriptions of the seaports and cities that the Ship will encounter, the regal chamber at Emakhtila, the tower of Bel, and the final resolution in the Hall of the Gods.

Perhaps the evocative strength of these images resides more in my mind and imagination than on the pages of the novel, but their potential must be in the words, otherwise their entelechy, even if largely of my own doing, would not be so powerful. Which raises the question, posed often by Borges, of how involved is the *reader* in the writing of a novel, how much does the *reader* contribute, how different is the novel for different *readers*?

The characters

The protagonists are largely split into two ciphers — the evil of Klaneth, the priest of Nergal, and the good of Sharane, priestess of Ishtar. The dwarf Gigi, and the Viking Sigurd, represent the 'good' qualities of friendship, loyalty, bravery and trust, though Gigi has a disturbing underside. Kenton, however, can move from ebony deck to ivory deck on the Ship, and the implication is that he embodies both good and evil — an implication strengthened when the priest of Bel is revealed to be an avatar of Kenton himself, but with the frailities, the timidity, the vague cowardice largely absent from Kenton's personality.

The most memorable character is the King of Emakhtila, again a yin-yang symbol concatenating the good and evil aspects of humanity.

> The lord of Emakhtila, king of the two deaths, sat legs crooked on a high divan. He was very like Old King Cole

of the nursery rhyme, even to that monarch's rubicund jollity, his apple round, pippin red cheeks. Merriment shone in his somewhat watery blue eyes. He wore one loose robe of scarlet. His long, white beard, stained here and there with drops of red and purple and yellow wine, wagged roguishly.

Should the king be pleased with anyone, he grants them the *Right-Hand Death* — a dwarf, hideous to look at, whose form and visage fills the viewer with the knowledge that life is pain and evil, and that death is good and surcease of pain, a knowledge inducing such revulsion for life that to throw oneself in an instant upon the poniard which the dwarf holds, and so to die, is joy indeed. For those who displease the King, he grants them the *Left-Hand Death* — a beautiful maiden holding a razor-sharp rake. To gaze on her, the victim knows that life is good and to be held at all costs, so that when she lovingly caresses their body with her implement and the flesh flays, they still, in their agony, clutch existence. For those who incur his mild wrath, dozens of archers in niches engirdling the throne-room will dispense swift death.

The King appears jovial and affectionate, yet spews death with abandon. His ambiguous character is given more substance when Kenton, under threat of being given to Klaneth and death, finishes a verse which the drunken King is quoting.

> 'What!' the king cried. 'You know Maldronah! You —'
> Old King Cole again, he shook with laughter.
> 'Go on!' he ordered. Kenton felt the bulk of Klaneth beside him tremble with wrath, impatience. And Kenton laughed, too — meeting the twinkling eyes with eyes as merry; and as the King of the Two Deaths beat time with cup and flagon he finished Maldronah's verse with its curious jigging lilt entangled in slow measure of marche funerale:
>
> Yet it pleases to play with the snare,
> To skirt the pit, and the peril dare,
> And lightly the gains to spend;
> There's a door that has opened, he said,
> A space where ye may tread — But the things ye have seen and the things ye have done,
> What are these things when the race is run
> And ye pause at the farthest door?
> As though they never had been, he said — Utterly passed as the pulse of the dead!
> Then tread on lightly with nothing to mourn!
> Shall he who has nothing fear for the score?
> Ah — better be dead than alive, he said — But best is ne'er to be born!

Themes

The King and his poem lies at the centre of a *major concern* of the novel — the antagonism between Life and Death, Good and Evil, Beauty and Ugliness — in short, between the antinomies of existence.

But they also highlight a minor, almost invisible motif — the importance of the seemingly trivial. Poetry is not regarded by many as serving any utilitarian purpose whatsoever. Even the beauty of a poem is unappreciated by the majority of humans, and those who can perceive it, like as not, would find it difficult to give an example of its usefulness. But Merritt does. Knowing the imagined poet, Maldronah, and his poetry, saves Kenton's life, frees him from Klaneth, befriends him to the King, and, ultimately, allows him to defeat Klaneth and find happiness with Sharane.

This theme, that what may seem to be nugatory often has a significance overlooked by the majority, surfaces again when one realises that Kenton is, in our world, an archaeologist, a researcher into forgotten languages, vanished worlds, lost empires and peoples, an almost supreme paradigm of the dabbler in uselessness and irrelevancy. And yet it is this exemplar of the seemingly superficial who brings peace and resolution to an entire world — admittedly a fantastical world divorced from ours, but a world, a universe, nonetheless.

But the poem holds a very personal charm for me in its last line. At sixteen I read not only Merritt, but Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Camus says that the only true philosophical problem is the question of suicide. And there — in a *pulp* novel, in a line of *poetry* — is the expression of the same thought: 'better be dead than alive'. The next words, however, sent a shiver up my spine: 'But best is ne'er to be born!' Here non-existence was preferable to being. If one never was, then the pain of existence, the struggle to understand, to cope, to fit in, also would never be. But the paradox inherent in those words — and this is what caused the frisson of dubiety — is that only one who existed could utter them. For some reason I find myself attracted to paradoxes like this.

There are other themes — the fairly stock ones of a bonding against disasters, struggle against the oppressors, the belief in rectitude, the quest to rescue beauty . . . — but, stock though they may be, they are invested by Merritt with a magic of their own. The death of Zubran, for example, who sacrifices himself so that his friends may escape the tower of Bel:

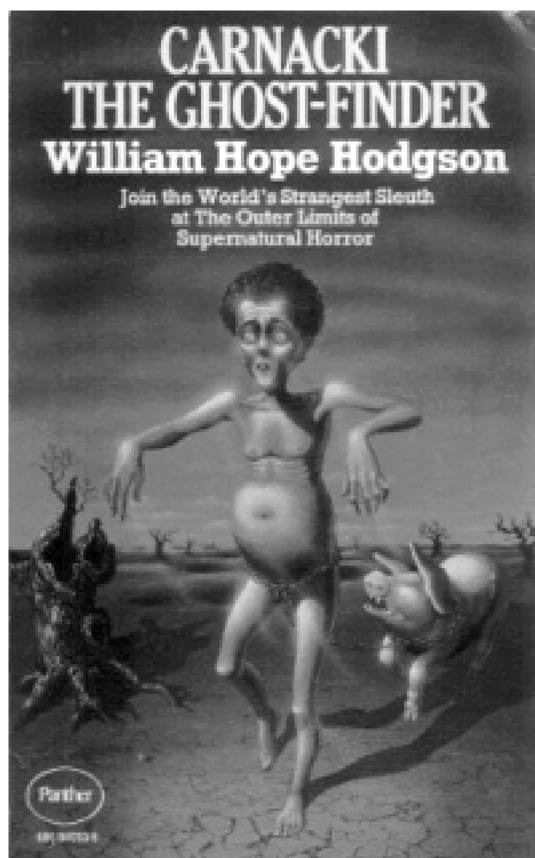
> 'A clean death!' smiled the Persian. 'At the last — like all men — I go back to the — gods of my fathers! A clean death! O Fire Immortal — take me!'
> As though in answer to that prayer a high and fragrant flame shot up beside him. It shot up, hovered, then bent over the Persian. The tip of the flame broadened. It became a cup of fire filled with a wine of flames!
> And into that flaming cup the Persian dipped his face; drank of its wine of fire; breathed in its fire as though it had been incense!
> His head fell back, unmarred; the dead face smiling. His head dropped upon the soft breast of the dancer.
> The flames made a canopy over them; they licked them with their little, clean, red tongues; ate them with their clean, crimson teeth!

Romance

And finally there is the *romance* of the novel. I am an unashamed romantic, I need romance, I crave it.

The Ship of Ishtar may be over the top, it may be ludicrous to some, perhaps to many, but the journey of Kenton, his love for Sharane, their defiance of the Gods, and their ultimate triumph, make Merritt's novel a perennial favourite of mine. And my most often read book. But my delight in each new reading must inevitably remain personal, for I know that this novel is not 'of quality', but only of 'pleasure' — and pleasure is idiosyncratic, a concomitant of each unique personality, and apart from logic. And as far as my choices are concerned, for those who know me are and are so fond of telling me, they are apparently divorced from any reality whatsoever.

— Dick Jenssen, September 2002



power in its suggestion of lurking worlds and beings behind the ordinary surface of life', at which point I actually look about the shop, wondering what was lurking beneath the surface of this particular bit of ordinary life.

> William Hope Hodgson [I read on the flyleaf of the book] was born in 1877 in Essex, England. He ran away to sea at age thirteen and spent eight years in the Merchant Marine before settling down to a writing career. He produced several outstanding works of weird fantasy, and is perhaps best remembered for two novels, *The House on the Borderland* and *The Night Land*. He joined the Royal Artillery at the outbreak of the First World War and was killed in action in 1918.

Over the next couple of days I dip into the book, going from one promising title to another: 'The Thing Invisible', 'The Gateway of the Monster', 'The House Among the Laurels', 'The Haunted *Jarvee*', 'The Whistling Room', 'The Horse of the Invisible', 'The Find', 'The Searcher of the End House'. I read the longest story, the novelette 'The Hog', while waiting in Canberra Airport for the plane back to Melbourne, occasionally looking up as RAAF Hercules transports take off for Darwin, devastated the month before by Cyclone Tracey.

Hodgson tells his nine stories within a framing device. The narrator Dodgson and three others, having received 'curt and quaintly worded' cards of invitation from Carnacki, gather at their friend's home at 472 Cheyne Walk in the London suburb of Chelsea. There, after a 'sensible little dinner' that is covered in the first page, if not the first paragraph (Hodgson worked in the Edwardian equivalent of the pulps and knew how to move a story along), they pull up their chairs to the fire, cigars and port are handed round, and Carnacki, puffing on his pipe, tells them about his latest ghost hunt. The classic 'club story' form.

Carnacki the Ghost-Finder is a hybrid of the detective story, the horror tale and the scientific romance. Until then, most ghost-hunter stories had been a mixture of the first two (and sometime scorned by both genres because of it), but now Hodgson was throwing in technology as well. Carnacki turns up to his investigations armed literally with a box of tricks. Although these include the accoutrements of traditional magic and the obligatory book of arcane knowledge — in this case *The Sigsand Manuscript* — there is also the Electric Pentacle, a defence of glass vacuum tubes that glow a pale blue when connected to a battery, thus keeping all but the biggest and hairiest bogles at bay during a vigil in a haunted room. Likewise there's an apparatus that throws out 'repellent vibrations', a modified gramophone that records dreams on graph paper, barriers of concentric rings of glass tubing that glow with a mixture of defensive colours, and something with a passing semblance to a CD WalkMan. (In 1910?)

The novelette 'The Hog', with its Lovecraftian (actually pre-Lovecraftian) theme of the Outside reaching into our world, I had to read more than once to get a hold of what was happening. Others, such as 'The Haunted *Jarvee*' and 'The Searcher of the End House', read like a series of special effects with no real answers at the end, a breed of story that can leave the reader either infuriated or agreeably tantalised. Most disappointing (for me at least) were the stories that had no supernatural aspect, but turned out to be human trickery — a form of story whose only reason for existing appears to be to jump up at the end and shout: 'Tricked ya!' Others had sham hauntings running parallel to the real thing. This can be pure cliché in clumsy hands, but Hodgson pulls it off well. A particularly good example is in the final pages of 'The Horse of the Invisible', where the unmasked trickster and his captors realise that what's coming *clungk clunk* down the dark passage towards them has no human hand behind it.

And then there was 'The Whistling Room' — a story of a uniquely haunted Irish castle, a story that proved to be that long forgotten school-library-Alfred-Hitchcock-anthology story — with its face at the window and huge lips erupting from the floor.

At about the same time, this same recognition of this same story in the same book was being enacted on the other side of the world. But it would be 15 years before I learned of it.

Over the years I sought out other work by William Hope Hodgson. During another hot summer I sat down in front of an electric fan switched to 'high' and read *The House on the Borderland*. Later I read Hodgson's sea-going novels *The Boats of the Glen Carrig* and *The Ghost Pirates* — the latter so intensely written that I could feel the swaying deck beneath me. I never attempted his massive apocalyptic novel *The Night Land* because of its pseudo-eighteenth-century narrative voice. Many who have braved this awkward writing style (while shaking their heads and muttering 'Why? Why? Why?') nevertheless declare Hodgson's genius at the book's concepts and inventions. I'll just take their word for it.

Back in the good old days, it was easier to make a living as a short story writer than as a novelist. It was the heyday of the fiction magazine, each of them hungry for material. Hodgson — amazingly prolific during the 14 years of his writing career — was a regular contributor to the publications of the day: horror, science fiction, straight adventure,

romance and even westerns. Yet, apart from the Carnacki stories, which have been seldom out of print since 1972, there has been only one mass market paperback collection of Hodgson's short fiction: *Masters of Terror: Volume 1: William Hope Hodgson,* Corgi, 1977. (It was just as well Hodgson appeared in volume one, as the publicised *Masters of Terror Volume 2: Joseph Sherridan Le Fanu* never eventuated.) Hodgson's short fiction survives today only in horror anthologies and in limited edition collections from specialty presses such as Donald M. Grant and Arkham House.

One Hodgson book I searched for in vain was a second volume of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder*. I didn't find it because it didn't exist. I'd been tricked into believing there were further stories because of a habit prevalent among detective story writers of the Victorian and Edwardian period: in the middle of a story they would make reference to some other case, the details of which they would subsequently tell you nothing. Some find this annoying (Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories is perhaps the most famous offender), though it does lend a certain veracity or false history to a series of connected stories. So it is with Carnacki: 'It is most extraordinary and different from anything that I have had to do with, though the Buzzing Case was very queer too'; 'Do you remember what I told you about that "Silent Garden" business? Well this room had just the same *malevolent* silence'; 'I gave him some particulars about the Black Veil case, when young Aster died. You remember, he said it was a piece of silly superstition and stayed outside. Poor devil!' We hear nothing more of these cases, nor of the others mentioned in passing: the Noving Fur, the Steeple Monster, the Nodding Door, the Grey Dog, the Dark Light, the Yellow Finger Experiment and 'that case of Harford's where the hand of the child kept materialising within the pentacle and patting the floor: a hideous business'.

It left me hungry.

So one day in 1990, with utter presumption, I started writing a Carnacki story of my own with the title 'The Silent Garden'. It was my first attempt at pastiche, but I'd read and re-read most of the Carnacki stories, and had a liking for Edwardian and Victorian ghost stories to begin with, so I felt sure I could get away with this impersonation. Yet the project was accompanied by a twinge of audaciousness. Here I was picking up an idea discarded by a famous writer of the golden long ago, and daring to borrow his characters and writing style. Who'd a thunk?

Who? The answer was on the other side of the planet, and pure blind chance — a six billion to one shot — was about to lead me straight to it.

There was a time when I thought the answer was August Derleth.

The first edition of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* was published by Eveleigh Nash in 1913. It contained six stories — all that had so far appeared in magazine form. The full nine-story edition did not appear until 1947, when it was reprinted by Mycroft & Morant, the sister imprint of Arkham House, in the United States. Of the new additions, 'The Haunted *Jarvee*', had been submitted by Hodgson's widow, Bessie, to *The Premier Magazine* and appeared in 1929, 11 years after her husband had been annihilated by a German shell while manning a forward observation post near Ypres, Belgium. The other two were 'The Find' and 'The Hog', neither previously published. The sudden appearance of these two, 29 years after their author's death, at times aroused suspicions that they were not genuine Hodgson at all but pastiche perpetrated by August Derleth. Derleth was not only the owner of Arkham House and Mycroft & Morant, but also a well-known writer of weird fiction himself, who often worked in the field of literary pastiche: Lovecraft, Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) and, once, even Sherridan Le Fanu. The perfect suspect.

However, the truth lay in mundane commercial reasons. Though both stories are indeed genuine Hodgson, neither had ever sold despite aggressive marketing by Bessie Hodgson of all her husband's works between the time of his death in 1918 and her own in 1943. There's no mystery as to why this was. 'The Find' is a weak piece involving an ordinary fraud, the story line having strong echoes of Poe's 'The Purloined Letter': that is, hide the sought-after object in plain sight. As such, it jars badly with the other stories of supernatural detection. 'The Hog', though, had a different problem. This is a powerful novelette of intruding cosmic entities — similar to and anticipating by many years the Cthulhu Mythos tales of H. P. Lovecraft. However, at more than 13,000 words, it would've been too big for what most magazines of the time considered the proper length for short fiction.

So I had not been beaten to the punch by August Derleth. But I would soon find I was not alone in my curious notion to fill in the gaps in the Carnacki canon.

In November 1990, I sent my pastiche 'The Silent Garden' to *Dark Dreams,* a small press magazine in the U.K specialising in supernatural fiction. It accepted it a month later. In fact, on the day its acceptance arrived I had started a second Carnacki pastiche, based on a line from 'The House Among the Laurels': 'He had heard of me in connection with the Steeple Monster case.' This was a fateful choice, as it turned out. Because what was about to happen would never have done so had I picked on some other untold case to make a story.

Steeple . . . a church . . . a bell-tower . . . a monster in a bell-tower . . . church bells effecting the monster . . . 'Whoa, wait a minute,' I thought. It'd suddenly hit me that this story line was straying too close to one I'd recently read, 'Immortal, Invisible' by A. F. Kidd (a well-known writer in the British supernatural small press), where a church bell was used to exorcise a spirit. 'Hmmm, don't want to look like I'm plagiarising . . . and come to think of it, what do I really know about bell-towers anyway? A. F. Kidd writes about 'em, is in fact a bell-ringer herself, according to her magazine bios. A collaboration would solve both problems.' So I wrote to her, outlining my difficulties. 'Would you like to help me write this?'

Somewhere behind me, unheard, the shade of William Hope Hodgson chuckled.

A. F. Kidd proved to be the pen name of Chico Kidd. I discovered this when her reply came with the first post of 1991: 'Dear Rick, This has got to be the longest the proverbial long arm of coincidence has ever reached (between Australia and England?). I had my battered copy of "Carnacki" down from the shelf not two days ago to look for a chapter heading quote for the book I'm working on, and it reminded me that *I have some pastiches somewhere*' (my italics). Circumstances had dictated that I write to the only other person on this planet to have written Carnacki pastiche. I should have such luck in lotteries!

When the initial shock had worn off, we set about our project, and after six months of to-ing and fro-ing in the international mails, 'The Steeple Monster' was born. During this correspondence, I found that Chico had like-

wise first discovered Hodgson and his ghost-finding creation in 'The Whistling Room', likewise read in an Alfred Hitchcock anthology borrowed from a library. The 'battered copy of Carnacki' she'd mentioned in her letter was the same Panther edition as mine, bought at about the same time that I'd wandered innocently and unsuspectingly into that Canberra newsagency in January 1975. Chico's stories had been written some years before mine, but without any thoughts of publication, and so left to gather dust in a drawer.

'The Steeple Monster' was sent to the then new Australian SF/F zine *Aurealis*, where it was published in the seventh issue.

Meanwhile back in England, plans were going ahead to publish all our Carnacki stories in booklet form via the Ghost Story Society in Liverpool, of which Chico and I were members, and to which *Dark Dreams* had relinquished its claim to 'The Silent Garden'. 'The Steeple Monster' was accepted as a reprint, and Chico's 'The Darkness' (The Black Veil) and 'Matherson's Inheritance' (The Noving Fur) were brought out of their drawer and dusted off. The resulting 32-page booklet, *472 Cheyne Walk — Carnacki: The Untold Stories*, appeared in 1992, was distributed free to members of the Ghost Story Society and sold to anyone else for about one pound fifty. The small print run quickly disappeared. (Since then I have only seen one copy for sale. Found in England via the ABE web site in late 2001, it was going for around 20 pounds. Within two weeks it had gone.)

Over the years, Chico and I went our separate literary ways while our copies of *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* and *472 Cheyne Walk* sat quietly on our shelves. During this time Chico published two more Carnacki stories in the British small press: 'The Witch's Room' (1994) and 'The Case of the Grey Dog' (1995), both of them resurrected manuscripts from the long ago, found too late to go into the booklet. Chico then suggested I try writing a story set in Australia during Carnacki's early days as a sailor. It has been noted that Hodgson based a great deal of the Carnacki character on himself. In 'The Haunted *Jarvée*', for instance, he demonstrates a familiarity with ships and the sea: Hodgson had spent eight years — from 1891 until 1899 — in the Merchant Marine and had visited Australia at least once. Unfortunately I couldn't get the story to work, and it soon bogged down. It was eventually finished in collaboration with Bryce Stevens as the stand-alone gaslight Gothic 'Rookwood', which, like 'The Steeple Monster' collaboration before it, also found a home at *Aurealis*.

Despite this setback, the idea of writing more Carnacki stories wouldn't go away. In addition, the Ghost Story Society, which had moved from England to Canada in the mid nineties, had sprouted a book publishing arm: Ash-Tree Press. Here were distinct possibilities. By coincidence — a word that had been our constant companion throughout our work together — Chico and I got the same idea at the same time: write more stories, put 'em in a book.

Ash Tree was contacted. They indicated interest in the project.

Thus encouraged, we began another collaboration, based on almost the last line of the last Carnacki story Hodgson ever wrote: 'Some evening I want to tell you about the tremendous mystery of the Psychic Doorways.' After a page or two, I left Chico to finish 'The Psychic Doorway' under her own name, while I had another crack at Young Carnacki in the Colonies, ending up with a story called 'The Roaring Paddocks'. Having now worked up momentum, Chico penned 'The Sigsand Codex', detailing Carnacki's initial discovery of his oft-quoted book of arcane knowledge; and I sent him out to sea in the service of the Royal Navy to encounter 'The Gnarly Ship', an omen of the coming war, which would engulf the original author of these tales. Finally, in a break with format, Chico allowed one of the visitors to Cheyne Walk to take the floor in 'Arkright's Tale', while I, seizing one of Chico's stand-alone ghost stories by the plot line and inserting Carnacki as the protagonist, reinvented it as the novella 'The Keeper of the Minter Light'.

William Hope Hodgson

And so there we were, slumped over our respective keyboards, vaguely aware that coincidence, striking once again, had arranged for our contributions to this 99,000-word collection to be almost exactly equal.

In May 2002, Ash-Tree sent us the final drafts for corrections. At the end of June, *472 Cheyne Walk — Carnacki: the Untold Stories* appeared as a 242-page hardback in a print run of 500 copies.

Such are the consequences of walking into a Canberra newsagency in 1975 and finding a Panther paperback. Such are the consequences of blindly writing to the only other person in the world working along similar lines. Such are the workings of synchronicity and coincidence.

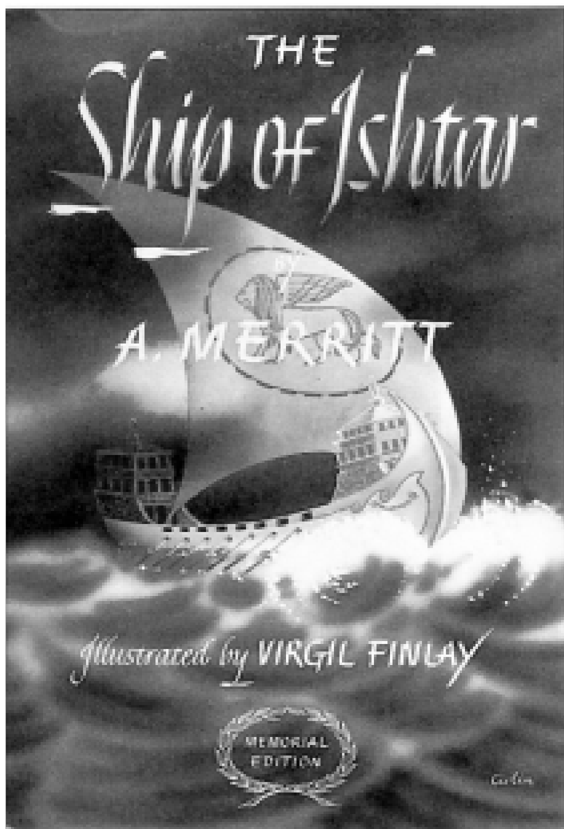
— Rick Kennett, June 2002

Dick Jenssen retired more than ten years ago as Head of Meteorology at the University of Melbourne. Since then he has spent much time reacquainting himself with Melbourne fandom, developing his computer graphics skills, developing programs such as DJFractals, and playing Scrabble against his computer (often winning). At ConVergence in June 2002 he won the award named after him, the Ditmar Award (for Best Fan Artist). The following article appeared first in Michael Waite's *Trial and Air*.

Dick Jenssen

The approach to Abraham Merritt:

A personal journey on 'The Ship of Ishtar'



The cover of the original hardback edition scanned by Michael Waite.

The argument

The approach to Merritt and *The Ship of Ishtar* is best managed, in my opinion, by finding a way through a garden of forking paths — the labyrinth reflecting the contours of my mind — paths which may be variously labelled, even if they conflate.

Quality/enjoyment

I enjoy reading lists, but am not quite so fond of generating my own, if only because the elements therein will shift, disappear or mutate with my well-being on any one day. Nevertheless, I sometimes like to organise those books which have given me great pleasure into two groups — those whose worth resides in their quality, and those of pure enjoyment. These are not, of course, mutually exclusive, but I know that some novels whose joy is acute would not be regarded, even by me, as gems of prose. I make this distinction primarily because if I consider a novel to be canonical then it must be possible to justify that judgement by rigorous, logical and well-argued critical means. On the other hand, the pleasure given me by a novel that I know is not 'of quality', must be quite, quite personal and so apart from logical criticism — though not, perhaps, entirely. Any discussion, therefore, of the merits of Merritt will inevitably be largely eisegetical and will reflect what is often pityingly referred to as my personal taste.

To digress, in an attempt to clarify my position on the difference between (justifiable) quality and (personal) liking, if I were, at this moment, asked to list the 'best', and the 'most enjoyable', five novels I have read, that list would be:

Best

Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Gustave Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*
Jane Austen: *Emma*
Ford Madox Ford: *The Good Soldier*

Enjoyable

Marcel Proust: *In Search of Lost Time*
Abraham Merritt: *The Ship of Ishtar*
Henry Kuttner: *Fury*
Herman Melville: *Moby-Dick*
Henryk Sienkiewicz: *Quo Vadis*

All the novels in the first list are, of course, 'enjoyable', but not all in the other list are 'of quality'. What is interesting is that as far as quality is concerned, Proust is head and shoulders and half-torso above any other novel I have read, but Merritt and Kuttner are only a half-head below him in enjoyment.

Milieu

I am sure that my fondness, perhaps I should say my unreasoning love, of *The Ship of Ishtar* stems from the fact that it was the first real adult pulp fantasy I ever read, and read at the highly impressionable age of sixteen. One has many loves in one's life, but first love never dies and remains to colour all subsequent amours, even if a later passion is seen as the one true love.

I read *The Ship of Ishtar* roughly every two years or so, and

each time it enshrouds me in wonder and charm — a wonder and charm which likely reside only partially in the novel itself, and which are almost certainly extraneous to it and which are engendered by the remembered emotions the book releases, as inadvertently as the taste of a petite madelaine dipped in tisane renewed the past for Proust. At sixteen I was beginning to question the world, to want to know more, to find beauty for myself and not only where teachers and adults claimed it resided. And the prose, the images, the characters, the themes, and above all the *romance* of Merritt's novel all fuelled my burgeoning desires. I cannot, even now — and probably never shall — escape that time of transformation.

The prose

It may seem inappropriate, even ludicrous, to claim that Merritt's prose, his style, is worthy of attention, but I find the following, from *The Metal Monster*, to be immensely effective in its evocation of the mystery, the *natural* mystery, of the world around us.

> In this great crucible of life we call the world — in the vaster one we call the universe — the mysteries lie close packed, uncountable as grains of sand on ocean's shores. They thread gigantic, the star-flung spaces; they creep, atomic, beneath the microscope's peering eye. They walk beside us, unseen and unheard, calling out to us, asking why we are deaf to their crying, blind to their wonder.

Then there is this early passage from *The Ship of Ishtar*:

> And now Kenton became aware of a fragrance stealing about him; a fragrance vague and caressing, wistful and wandering — like entwined souls of flowers that had lost their way. Sweet was that fragrance and alluring; wholly strange and within it something that changed the rhythm of his life to its own alien pulse. He leaned over the block — the scented swirls drew round him, clinging like little hands; scented spirals of fragrance that supplicated, that pleaded — softly, passionately.
>
> Pleaded — for release!
>
> A wave of impatience swept him; he drew himself up. The fragrance was nothing but perfumes mixed with the substance of the block and now sending forth their breath through the heated room. What nonsense was this that he was dreaming? He struck the block sharply with closed hand.
>
> The block answered the blow!
>
> It murmured. The murmuring grew louder. Louder still, with muffled bell tones like muted carillons of jade deep within. They grew stronger, more vibrant. The murmuring ceased; now there were only the high, sweet chimings. Clearer and ever more clear they sounded, drawing closer, ringing up and on through endless tunnels of time.
>
> There was a sharp crackling. It splintered the chimings; shattered and stilled them. The block split. Pulsed from the break a radiance as of rosy pearls, and throbbing in its wake came wave after wave of the fragrance. But no longer questing, no longer wistful nor supplicating.
>
> Jubilant now! Triumphant!

Now to many — even to myself when I attempt a divorcement from the remembrance of my first reading of *The Ship*, and to adopt a more rational attitude — these passages, particularly the latter, are paradigms of the purple prose of the pulps. And yet I wonder. Not purple, nor even violet, but far, far into the largely unseen realms of the remote ultra-violet is this writing, coruscating through endless passages of words and then returning, joyfully, to astonish us. I have always felt that one of the true tests of a unique style is how well it may resist being parodied. As Max Beerbohm wrote, in one of his Jamesian skits, 'We had come whole, so to speak, hog into the heart of the matter'. The heart, in Merritt's case, though, is that I have never come across a successful parody of his *Ishtar* style. A cynic might say that this is because the style is already a self-parody, but I prefer to believe in the uniqueness, and so the legitimacy, of the writing.

The images

I do not know why, but I have always had a fondness for the names of some jewels and semi-precious stones: cinnabar, chrysoprase, malachite, lapis-lazuli — especially lapis-lazuli. (One of my prized possessions is a pair of lapis-lazuli cuff links given me by a good friend who knew of my passion for the stone. Strangely enough, though, it is the *name*, the *word* itself, which I cherish more than the tangible object.) So when Merritt describes the Ship, very early in the novel, as 'a jeweled craft of enchantment . . . made for elfin princesses to sail ensorcelled seas . . . turquoise . . . milky crystal . . . ivory . . . jet . . . ebon . . . peacock iridescence . . . opal . . . gold . . . azure . . .' I was totally lost, ensorcelled, in its enchantment. The Ship, though, as described, falls into two disparate sections — the ebony of Klaneth, and the ivory of Sharane — a trite, but to my mind (already bemused by the jewelled visions conjured by the prose), enormously effective metaphor for the struggle that Kenton will initiate, and resolve, between Good and Evil.

There are also the descriptions of the seaports and cities that the Ship will encounter, the regal chamber at Emakhtila, the tower of Bel, and the final resolution in the Hall of the Gods.

Perhaps the evocative strength of these images resides more in my mind and imagination than on the pages of the novel, but their potential must be in the words, otherwise their entelechy, even if largely of my own doing, would not be so powerful. Which raises the question, posed often by Borges, of how involved is the *reader* in the writing of a novel, how much does the *reader* contribute, how different is the novel for different *readers*?

The characters

The protagonists are largely split into two ciphers — the evil of Klaneth, the priest of Nergal, and the good of Sharane, priestess of Ishtar. The dwarf Gigi, and the Viking Sigurd, represent the 'good' qualities of friendship, loyalty, bravery and trust, though Gigi has a disturbing underside. Kenton, however, can move from ebony deck to ivory deck on the Ship, and the implication is that he embodies both good and evil — an implication strengthened when the priest of Bel is revealed to be an avatar of Kenton himself, but with the frailities, the timidity, the vague cowardice largely absent from Kenton's personality.

The most memorable character is the King of Emakhtila, again a yin-yang symbol concatenating the good and evil aspects of humanity.

> The lord of Emakhtila, king of the two deaths, sat legs crooked on a high divan. He was very like Old King Cole

of the nursery rhyme, even to that monarch's rubicund jollity, his apple round, pippin red cheeks. Merriment shone in his somewhat watery blue eyes. He wore one loose robe of scarlet. His long, white beard, stained here and there with drops of red and purple and yellow wine, wagged roguishly.

Should the king be pleased with anyone, he grants them the *Right-Hand Death* — a dwarf, hideous to look at, whose form and visage fills the viewer with the knowledge that life is pain and evil, and that death is good and surcease of pain, a knowledge inducing such revulsion for life that to throw oneself in an instant upon the poniard which the dwarf holds, and so to die, is joy indeed. For those who displease the King, he grants them the *Left-Hand Death* — a beautiful maiden holding a razor-sharp rake. To gaze on her, the victim knows that life is good and to be held at all costs, so that when she lovingly caresses their body with her implement and the flesh flays, they still, in their agony, clutch existence. For those who incur his mild wrath, dozens of archers in niches engirdling the throne-room will dispense swift death.

The King appears jovial and affectionate, yet spews death with abandon. His ambiguous character is given more substance when Kenton, under threat of being given to Klaneth and death, finishes a verse which the drunken King is quoting.

> 'What!' the king cried. 'You know Maldronah! You —'
> Old King Cole again, he shook with laughter.
> 'Go on!' he ordered. Kenton felt the bulk of Klaneth beside him tremble with wrath, impatience. And Kenton laughed, too — meeting the twinkling eyes with eyes as merry; and as the King of the Two Deaths beat time with cup and flagon he finished Maldronah's verse with its curious jigging lilt entangled in slow measure of marche funerale:
>
> Yet it pleases to play with the snare,
> To skirt the pit, and the peril dare,
> And lightly the gains to spend;
> There's a door that has opened, he said,
> A space where ye may tread — But the things ye have seen and the things ye have done,
> What are these things when the race is run
> And ye pause at the farthest door?
> As though they never had been, he said — Utterly passed as the pulse of the dead!
> Then tread on lightly with nothing to mourn!
> Shall he who has nothing fear for the score?
> Ah — better be dead than alive, he said — But best is ne'er to be born!

Themes

The King and his poem lies at the centre of a *major concern* of the novel — the antagonism between Life and Death, Good and Evil, Beauty and Ugliness — in short, between the antinomies of existence.

But they also highlight a minor, almost invisible motif — the importance of the seemingly trivial. Poetry is not regarded by many as serving any utilitarian purpose whatsoever. Even the beauty of a poem is unappreciated by the majority of humans, and those who can perceive it, like as not, would find it difficult to give an example of its usefulness. But Merritt does. Knowing the imagined poet, Maldronah, and his poetry, saves Kenton's life, frees him from Klaneth, befriends him to the King, and, ultimately, allows him to defeat Klaneth and find happiness with Sharane.

This theme, that what may seem to be nugatory often has a significance overlooked by the majority, surfaces again when one realises that Kenton is, in our world, an archaeologist, a researcher into forgotten languages, vanished worlds, lost empires and peoples, an almost supreme paradigm of the dabbler in uselessness and irrelevancy. And yet it is this exemplar of the seemingly superficial who brings peace and resolution to an entire world — admittedly a fantastical world divorced from ours, but a world, a universe, nonetheless.

But the poem holds a very personal charm for me in its last line. At sixteen I read not only Merritt, but Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Camus says that the only true philosophical problem is the question of suicide. And there — in a *pulp* novel, in a line of *poetry* — is the expression of the same thought: 'better be dead than alive'. The next words, however, sent a shiver up my spine: 'But best is ne'er to be born!' Here non-existence was preferable to being. If one never was, then the pain of existence, the struggle to understand, to cope, to fit in, also would never be. But the paradox inherent in those words — and this is what caused the frisson of dubiety — is that only one who existed could utter them. For some reason I find myself attracted to paradoxes like this.

There are other themes — the fairly stock ones of a bonding against disasters, struggle against the oppressors, the belief in rectitude, the quest to rescue beauty . . . — but, stock though they may be, they are invested by Merritt with a magic of their own. The death of Zubran, for example, who sacrifices himself so that his friends may escape the tower of Bel:

> 'A clean death!' smiled the Persian. 'At the last — like all men — I go back to the — gods of my fathers! A clean death! O Fire Immortal — take me!'
> As though in answer to that prayer a high and fragrant flame shot up beside him. It shot up, hovered, then bent over the Persian. The tip of the flame broadened. It became a cup of fire filled with a wine of flames!
> And into that flaming cup the Persian dipped his face; drank of its wine of fire; breathed in its fire as though it had been incense!
> His head fell back, unmarred; the dead face smiling. His head dropped upon the soft breast of the dancer.
> The flames made a canopy over them; they licked them with their little, clean, red tongues; ate them with their clean, crimson teeth!

Romance

And finally there is the *romance* of the novel. I am an unashamed romantic, I need romance, I crave it.

The Ship of Ishtar may be over the top, it may be ludicrous to some, perhaps to many, but the journey of Kenton, his love for Sharane, their defiance of the Gods, and their ultimate triumph, make Merritt's novel a perennial favourite of mine. And my most often read book. But my delight in each new reading must inevitably remain personal, for I know that this novel is not 'of quality', but only of 'pleasure' — and pleasure is idiosyncratic, a concomitant of each unique personality, and apart from logic. And as far as my choices are concerned, for those who know me are and are so fond of telling me, they are apparently divorced from any reality whatsoever.

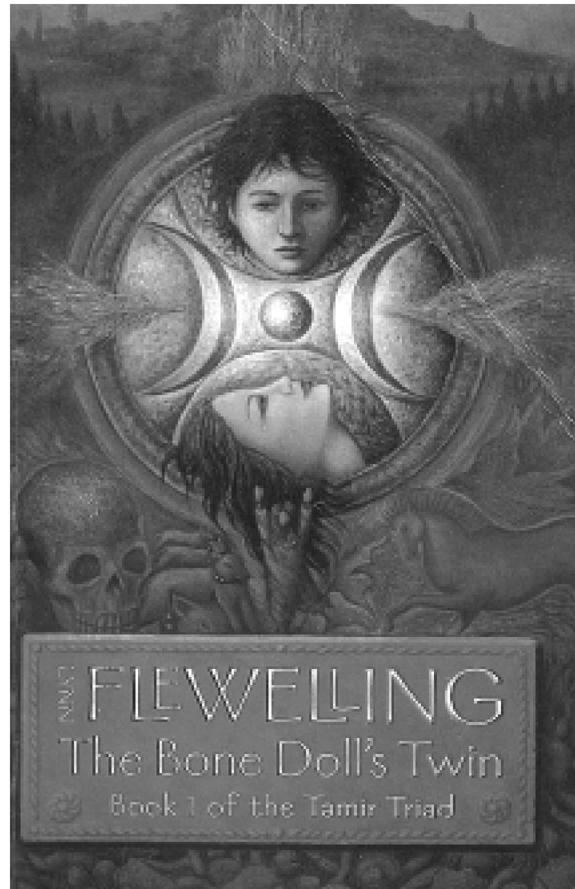
— Dick Jenssen, September 2002

Roslyn Kopel Gross

Generic or not?

Discussed:
THE BONE DOLL'S TWIN (Book 1 of the Tamir Triad)
by Lynn Flewelling (HarperCollins Voyager, 2001, 438 pp.)
RHAPSODY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Tor, 1999, 656 pp.)
PROPHECY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Gollancz, 2001, 465 pp.)
DESTINY
by Elizabeth Haydon (Gollancz, 2002, 558pp.)
THE MAGICIANS' GUILD (The Black Magician Trilogy: Book 1)
by Trudi Canavan (HarperCollins Voyager, 2001, 520 pp).

For some time now, I have been fond of saying that I don't like 'generic' fantasy. What I mean by 'generic' is fantasy that is usually set in a medieval-type world and is often epic in scale, covering many volumes (often the dreaded trilogy), and containing stock, often-used characters and ingredients, such as magicians or wizards, priests, demons, witches, singers, oracles, prophecies and the like. Often, as in Tolkien, the plot is based on a cosmic battle between good and evil. I tend to avoid endless series that seem to be no more than clones of Tolkien and other classical epic fantasies. However, it would be a huge mistake to lump all books that use some of the conventions of generic fantasy in the same basket. The books in this review all appear to be nothing but common-garden-variety generic fantasy, until one takes a closer look.



Had I not known of Lynn Flewelling and enjoyed her previous books, I might well have avoided ***The Bone Doll's Twin***, because it gives every outward sign of being a generic medieval-type fantasy. The first book in a trilogy, there is the ever-present map and a page outlining the seasons of its world, and a cursory glance through the book reveals the presence of kings and queens, dukes, priests and wizards.

Flewelling's previous books, a loose trilogy called the 'Nightrunner' series, consist of *Luck in the Shadows*, *Stalking Darkness* and *Traitor's Moon*. These books are far from your average generic fantasy. They are not a real trilogy at all, for a start, but three stand-alone books set in the same world with the same characters. Apart from containing a detailed and interesting world and wonderful characters, the series happens to feature a gay love story that seems to have appealed to readers who aren't gay. There are also very dark undertones to the book's magic that give an added depth to a series that would otherwise be light reading.

The Bone Doll's Twin is far from being the generic fantasy it appears to be. The dark feel of the earlier books has been enriched and taken much further here; it would be accurate to describe *The Bone Doll's Twin* as a dark fantasy. The characters are vivid people whose interests we immediately take to heart. In fact, this book is not really epic fantasy. To a large extent, it is an account of the inner life of its child protagonist, Tobin, and also the tale of Tobin's relationship with his father and with his friend, Ki. In the same world in which the 'Nightrunner' books take place, but centuries earlier, Skala has been ruled by queens, rather than kings, until a tyrant takes matters until his own hands. Then, to the rightful succession, twins are born, a girl and a boy. To say much more than this would be to give away far too much. The novel becomes an exploration of gender and identity, as well as a story about characters the reader comes to care about very much. The novel, only Book One in the trilogy, ends on a heart-wringing and emotion-filled cliffhanger.

The Bone Doll's Twin is written with maturity and confidence, and with elegance and insight. Yes, there is a witch

in it; but the witch is a fully developed character who, at some cost to herself, attempts to protect the lives of characters the reader cares about. There is a king, and an oracle, and a duke, and of course, magic, but in this book, these are very far from the stereotypes in some fantasy. Tobin's situation (about which he himself knows little until the very end) seems utterly unique, and it is this that sets the novel apart from generic fantasy: it stretches the bounds of imagination, rather than simply repeating the clichés of a genre. If generic fantasy uses stock characters and themes in a fairly predictable manner, *The Bone Doll's Twin* cannot be considered generic fantasy, even though it may appear so on the surface. Because the book's concern is centred within Tobin's soul, his inner life, the ubiquitous good-versus-evil theme is neither obvious nor trite. The darkness in the book comes not from some cosmic evil but from magic gone wrong as a result of human error and human pain, which we examine 'close up and personal'. Even if one considers the novel to be in the same basic tradition as generic fantasy, it far transcends the bounds of that subgenre. While it may not be quite in the same league (though in my opinion, Flewelling is rapidly getting close), it is reminiscent of Guy Gavriel Kay's 'Fionavar' books in its use of generic fantasy forms to do so much more and go so much deeper than standard generic fantasy does.

When Elizabeth Haydon's ***Rhapsody*** was published in 1999, it was marketed as the new masterpiece to hit fantasy shelves. Reading reviews and opinions from various mailing lists on the Internet, I noticed that people were heavily divided about *Rhapsody*; as that old cliché says, they either loved or hated it. On the one hand, some claimed that it was poorly written, the worst kind of rehashed fantasy with a silly plot and stock characters; on the other, and according to the blurb, that it is a 'landmark fantasy epic'.

On this scale of opinion, although I don't regard the series as a radical departure in the epic fantasy field, I veer more towards the second end of the scale. I think that this series shows that there is still room in the apparently tired epic fantasy field for a well-written, absorbing, intelligent book. While it may not be achieving something really different, as Guy Gavriel Kay did in the same field with his 'Fionavar' books, and, as I feel Flewelling is getting close to doing in *The Bone Doll's Twin*, *Rhapsody*, *Prophecy* and *Destiny* are a huge cut above most other books marketed as epic/saga fantasy.

In the first book, the three central characters, Rhapsody, Achmed and Grunthor, find themselves fleeing beneath the earth on an enormous tree root. In this way, they traverse not only half the earth, but many centuries as well. This part of the story has deeply mythological undertones; the gigantic root of the Tree on which they journey is reminiscent of the World Trees of various mythologies. During this journey, Rhapsody undergoes a transformation that may lead some readers to find her irritating and difficult to relate to as a character, but which is essential to the developing plot. In the second book, ***Prophecy***, the main characters must continue to discover what is really going on in their new home. It seems that one of the evil beings, known as the F'dor, whom the characters were fleeing in the old world, has found a way to pass into this world centuries later, and is disguised as a person the companions know. The story broadens to become both a love story and a tale of cosmic proportions, as the reader discovers that it is up to the three friends to save the world from the F'dor. In the final volume, ***Destiny***, far too many words are taken up in gratuitous subplots, but the story does come together in a satisfying way.

From the beginning, Haydon has employed an intriguing and original framing device, and it is this device that brings a sharp and original twist to the ending, a twist that is far more interesting than the otherwise rather predictable plot developments.

The trilogy is an odd mixture of the original and the hackneyed. On the one hand, the patchwork of races, nations and religions has a certain breadth of vision, and is certainly presented with precise thoroughness. On the other, Haydon presents what appears to be a derivative mishmash of patriarchal and nature religions; the Lirin races seem very much like elves, with a nature religion and culture; the religions of humans seems like a mixture of several Western faiths; the Bolg are monsters; and the F'dor are evil demons. There is the obligatory magical sword, called Daystar Clarion, and of course the whole story is based on the good-versus-evil model. Rhapsody and another character also become involved in a love relationship that becomes an important part of the book; readers who dislike romance may find this tiresome. Others may consider the romantic angle unusual and refreshing in the epic fantasy context; indeed, Haydon manages to keep the lovers apart in a particularly creative way, then bring them together satisfactorily by the end of the trilogy.

I feel similarly ambivalent about the characterisation. On the one hand, it may seem — and some critics have definitely taken this view — that the characters are nothing more than the stereotypes of generic fantasy. For instance, Rhapsody is a 'Namer' and 'Singer'. How many more Namers and Singers can the genre support, you might well wonder? But because the whole system of magic Rhapsody has been taught is dependent on music and on names, and because of the vivid way this is portrayed, as well as the strong characterisation of Rhapsody herself, she is actually far from being a stock character. (The importance of music in the trilogy is emphasied by the fact that each chapter has been given a musically related title.)

Rhapsody is a strong woman, without being yet another 'feisty' heroine. Not that I have anything against feisty women; the trouble is that they have become something of a cliché in fantasy literature. In fact, the definition of what constitutes 'feistiness' has itself been stereotyped. Rhapsody is determined and strongminded, but an idealist and a 'do-gooder', whom some readers may find insufferably perfect. Grunthor, as another example, appears to be the clichéd giant with a soft heart, and Achmed is the tough guy, an assassin, with a secret soft spot for Rhapsody. To some extent, these two evoke stock emotions; but what ultimately saves these characters from being nothing but stereotypes is the verve with which they are written. Both come alive as more than the clichéd characters they might be if written by a lesser writer. For instance, the trilogy is peppered by the many very funny songs Grunthor sings, which reflect both his fierceness and sense of humour.

There are some marked awkwardnesses in the writing of this trilogy. For example, sometimes Haydon has Rhapsody make inappropriately modern utterances, such as, 'I guess I'm not cut out for diplomacy or its facilitation'. This feels extraordinarily out of place in this book. On occasion the writing descends to banality, as in, 'I command you, slow your pace and egress carefully' and 'He focused his gaze on his glowing wife'. Some of the names of people and places are confusingly similar (as well as relentlessly Celtic): Gwylliam, Gwydion and Gwynwood, for instance, and

Anwyn and Anborn. There is little question in my mind that the trilogy is far too wordy, with too many unnecessary subplots and not a few 'info-dumps'. And, while their history, recounted at length, is intricate and fascinating, the F'dor, elemental forces of cosmic evil through the centuries, do present a stereotypical picture of an evil that must be defeated. In these respects, the trilogy is indeed predictably epic, generic fantasy.

However uncomplicated evil might appear to be, the same cannot be said of the 'good' characters or their decisions; and the verve and vigour of the writing, which overpowers the occasional triteness, also prevents an easy dismissal of the trilogy as 'just another generic fantasy'.

By a new Australian writer, Trudi Canavan, ***The Magicians' Guild*** is, like Flewelling's novel, the first in a projected trilogy. Although not seeming (so far) to be epic fantasy, this book has many outward features common to generic fantasy. It has a series of maps at the beginning of the book: not only a map of the land of Kyralia, but maps of the city of Imardin, and of the grounds of the Magicians' Guild of Kyralia, both central to the action that takes place. At the end of the book there is 'Lord Dannyl's guide to slum slang' and a Glossary, which defines various terms and vocabulary used in the book, including the names of plants and animals in this world. What sets these features apart from the usual generic fare is that the maps have been beautifully rendered and the other information thoroughly and charmingly presented. The slum guide, in particular, is a fascinating and unusual touch that I found beguiling.

The world depicted in the novel is not exotic, and thus far includes no non-human inhabitants. It is, however, a detailed and carefully thought-out world. Half of the novel takes place in the slums and secret tunnels of the city of Imardin, where the Thieves have their own gangs and laws, and in which a young slum girl, Sonea, is suddenly found to have the powers of an untrained Magician. Magical talent is almost exclusively in the hands of the upper class in this world. Believing the Magician's Guild would harm, or at the very least, never accept her, she tries to hide from them in the tunnels of the Thieves, with the help of her friend Ceri. I found this part of the book to be the less interesting, concerned as it is with the mechanics of escape and politics among the Thieves and Magicians respectively. However, the slang invented for the slums, and the vocabulary used for this world in general, do help to bring the first part of the book alive.

I did find the second part, in which Sonea finds herself in the school of the Magician's Guild, and in which the nature of magic and the individual personalities of some of the Magicians are explored, to be more intriguing. Magic is presented not as a vague talent; the school consists of several magical disciplines, each requiring specific skills and disciplines. Because she is untrained, what Sonea must learn is control, but she must decide whether to study to become a Magician or return to Imardin.

There is the requisite villain, Fergun, a Magician who is trying to manipulate Sonea to attain power; and it appears, also, that a head Magician may be a traitor. It does seem, so far, to follow a fairly predicatable good-versus-evil pattern. These features do add to the generic feel of the book, though Fergun's character and motives are well presented, as are other characters, such as Ceri, and Dannyl, the Magician who befriends Sonea, as well as Sonea herself, who is satisfyingly complex and interesting. By the end of the book, the intricacies of magic, the development of Sonea and the prospect of larger, intriguing issues about to open up in the second volume left me not only anticipating the next instalment but prepared to consider the first volume a success.

It can be only too easy and tempting to make sweeping statements about the state of genre writing today. It seems to me that all is not necessarily the way it appears. I am aware that the books reviewed here are only a tiny sample of what is available in the bookshops, and that, while there is so much out there that I would not consider wasting my time on, there are also books, not touched on in this review, that would be considered superior generic fantasy. By most accounts, for instance, George R. R. Martin's 'A Song of Ice and Fire' trilogy seems to be original and wonderfully plotted, with vivid characters and tight writing, and these books must certainly come under the general category of epic generic fantasy. Of the books reviewed here, it seems to me that *The Bone Doll's Twin* (and, I hope, the second and third volumes) is truly original, and either transcends the boundaries of generic fantasy, or else can be said to use of the themes of generic fantasy in exciting, different ways; Elizabeth Haydon's trilogy sits firmly in the realm of epic, generic fantasy, but she writes so skilfully and with enough originality as to make it excellent generic fantasy; and Trudi Canavan's *The Magician's Guild*, while clearly employing generic fantasy elements in less original ways than the other two writers, also promises to be the first book of a competently written, intriguing generic fantasy. None of the other novels comes close to the imaginative and emotional power of *The Bone Doll's Twin*, which, whether or not it can be classified as generic, undoubtedly uses several of the conventions of generic fantasy. It certainly looks as though solid, entertaining epic/generic fantasy is still being written. What these books show is that there is still life left, and plenty of potential, in this much-maligned form of fantasy writing. Sometimes you really just can't tell a book by its cover.

— Roslyn Kopel Gross, August 2002

David Langford is a figure so covered in glory (when he isn't covered in Hugo Awards, which pile up around his house) that he scarcely needs an introduction. He somehow makes a living as a freelance writer, and also contributes greatly to fandom. Editor of SF fandom's newszine, the monthly *Ansible* (which wins him many of those Hugo Awards), he writes delightful and knowledgeable articles for fanzines and pre- and after-dinner speeches, and runs a computer software firm in partnership with Chris Priest. David and his wife Hazel live in a large book-filled house in Reading, England.

David Langford

The genial Mr White

[***Alien Emergencies*** is the second US Tor/Orb omnibus of James White's 'Sector General' stories, edited by Teresa Nielsen Hayden and published in April 2002. It comprises two collections, *Ambulance Ship* (1979/1980) and *Sector General* (1983), and one novel, *Star Healer* (1985). This is the introduction.]

Sector Twelve General Hospital is one of the most charming and intelligently wish-fulfilling conceptions in science fiction, and its Irish creator James White — tall, bespectacled, balding, soft-spoken and eternally self-deprecating — was himself something of a charmer. Not merely a nice man, he was the cause of niceness in others. No one in the SF community could ever dream of being horrid to James.

While others joined literary or fan factions and entangled themselves in heated feuding, James could be found at British SF conventions solemnly inducting qualified attendees — those who like himself were several inches over six feet — into the SOPOAH or Society Of Persons Of Average Height. A luckily short-sighted few had the further credentials required for admission to the inner circle, the SOPOAH (WG) (With Glasses). Naturally James continued to treat the inner circle, the outer circle and the great unwashed masses beyond with identical benevolence, which somehow lent all those other embattled in-groups the same aura of gentle silliness.

James was and is much loved as a science fiction writer. I fondly remember scouring British bookshops in the 1960s for instalments of his Sector General space-hospital saga, which in those days was appearing in maddeningly brief instalments in E. John Carnell's original anthology *New Writings in SF*, later edited by Kenneth Bulmer. The last to feature there was the first story in this volume, 'Spacebird', from Bulmer's *New Writings in SF 22*, published in 1973. British fans of Sector General had a long wait for this xenobiological extravaganza's inclusion in the 1980 *Ambulance Ship*. Americans had to wait longer still — until now, in fact — since the 1979 US version of *Ambulance Ship* omitted 'Spacebird'.

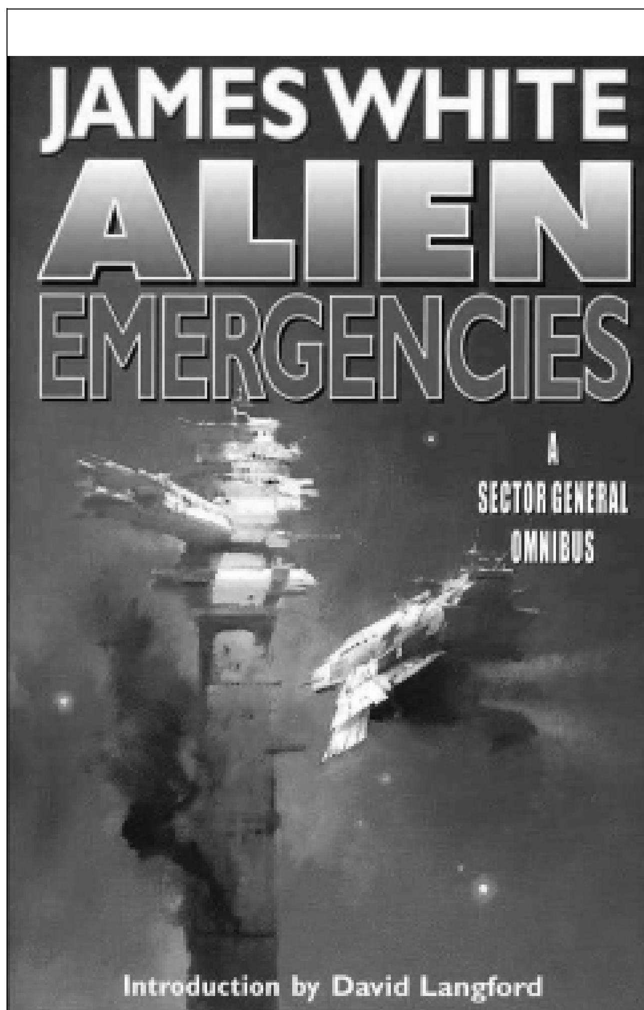
As every SF reader should know, Sector Twelve General Hospital is a huge interstellar construction built in a spirit of glorious idealism by many cooperating galactic races, with its 384 levels equipped to simulate the home environment of any conceivable alien patient. Conceivable, that is, to the builders' imaginations. From the outset James gleefully harassed his Sector General medics with a steady stream of inconceivables and seeming-impossibles, ranging in size from an intelligent virus and spacefaring barnacles, via beasties without hearts who must keep rolling forever to prevent their circulation from halting, and a levitating brontosaur called Emily, to 'macro' life-forms, such as the miles-long Midgard Serpent which is discovered scattered through space in dismantled form and must be painstakingly reassembled, or the continent-sized inhabitant of planet Meatball, whose treatment in *Major Operation* requires not so much surgery as military action.

In short, Sector General is the definitive medical SF series. Its precursors include L. Ron Hubbard's moderately dire *Ole Doc Methuselah* stories and the competent hackwork of Murray Leinster's Med Service tales. It may perhaps have helped inspire Piers Anthony's amusing exploits of an interstellar dentist in *Prostho Plus*. Nothing else in the genre is at all comparable.

To call these stories' repeated pattern of medical mystery and elucidation a formula is far from being a put-down. As with detective fiction, the basic pattern offers scope for endless variations limited only by ingenuity and narrative sleight, with James's lifelong fascination with medical techniques clearly visible throughout. There's even room in Sector General for G. K. Chesterton's favourite mystery trope of the Happy Surprise, whereby suitable illumination causes sinister and misleading clues to reverse themselves or cancel out, revealing that, despite all appearances, there has been no crime (or serious threat to health) at all.

Several well-loved props run through the sequence. The most famous is the species classification system, which sums up a creature's shape and physiology in four terse letters. Theoretically this coding can extend to many further 'decimal places', but the first four suffice for practical and narrative purposes. Earth-humans are DBDG, and 'similar' warm-blooded oxygen-breathers have similar codes, with teddy-bear Nidians and Orligians also being DBDG, while the furry, caterpillar-shaped Kelgians are DBLF. Weirder creatures include chlorine-breathing PVSJs and psi-talented V-codes. One buried joke concerns the unfortunate Gogleskan species of *Star Healer*, classification FOKT, who are almost unable to prevent themselves from forming mindlessly destructive mobs. This, by intention, greatly tickled the local SF fan group in the traditionally tough city of Glasgow, Scotland: the Friends Of Kilgore Trout.

The classification scheme began as homage to E. E. 'Doc' Smith's perhaps unworkably human-centred version from *Grey Lensman* and *Children of the Lens*, in which true *Homo Sapiens* is classed AAAAAA, while the most alien monstrosities imaginable — the horrid Ploorans in their cryogenic winter metamorphosis — register as 'straight Z's



to ten or twelve places'. It is a happy coincidence that James's firstever published words, in his and Walt Willis's fanzine *Slant 4*, were firmly inserted into a contribution that was being horrid to Doc Smith: '[These opinions of the great Smith are not those of the typesetter, J. White.]'

Nearly half a century later he was honoured with the 1998 Skylark Award, presented by the New England SF Association in memory of Doc Smith and his Lensmen, and so consisting of an absolutely enormous magnifying lens. James found this practical as well as decorative, since by then his sight was failing to the stage where he needed such a glass to read even large type on the computer screen.

Besides demoting humans from AAAAAA to the modest DBDG, James distanced himself in other little ways from the traditional SF anthropocentrism of an era when John W. Campbell still stalked the earth. (It should be remembered that the first Sector General story appeared in 1957.) Smart and sympathetic aliens are foregrounded from the very beginning. Virtually all the hospital's top medical consultants, the eccentric Diagnosticians, are nonhuman. When a roving ambulance ship is introduced, it's named *Rhabwar* after a great doctor from the history of its Tralthan FGLI builders. When *Rhabwar*'s first mission appears to be a simple rescue of boring old humans and someone remarks, 'There will be no juicy extra-terrestrial cases on *this* trip', he is crushingly answered by a Kelgian nurse: 'To us, Earth-human DBDG's *are* juicy extra-terrestrials.' In three later novels, beginning with *Code Blue — Emergency* (1987), the viewpoint characters are aliens who are not only as likeable as the human medics but every bit as accident prone. Real equality includes the equal right to make blazing mistakes.

Another notable and fruitful series prop is Sector General's system of Educator tapes, which help prepare doctors for other-species surgery by uploading the skills of an expert from the relevant world. The dark side of this piece of narrative convenience is that a complete and often cantankerous e-t personality is loose in your head, objecting to your vile choice of food (a regular Sector General canteen sight is a Senior Physician eating 'visually noncontroversial' sandwiches of uncertain content, with his eyes tight shut) and possibly imposing strange glandular urges. In the short 'Countercharm', series hero Senior Physician Conway uses a tape recorded from a randy Melfan ELNT, and finds himself distracted from vital operations by an uncontrollable case of the hots for his gorgeous Melfan pupil — who happens to be a giant crab.

The regular human cast includes wisecracking, problem-solving Conway (who for ages appeared to have no first name — very late in the series it's revealed to be Peter); his busty girlfriend and eventual wife Nurse (later Pathologist) Murchison, whose forename I have yet to detect; and the irascible Chief Psychologist O'Mara, wielder of deadly sarcasm and — at his worst — a feared politeness. Reasons for O'Mara's peculiarly blunt, abrasive nature and multispecies insight lie at the heart of the penultimate Sector General novel, the elegiac *Mind Changer*, which allows us inside this thorny character's head for only the second time in the entire sequence.

Meanwhile Conway's closest friend is the universally popular Dr Prilicla, a fragile GLNO e-t who resembles a giant and beautiful dragonfly, carries diplomacy to the point of fibbing since its empathic talent makes it cringe from hostile emotion, and likes to weave its canteen spaghetti into an edible cable to be chomped while hovering in mid-air. Sector General's staff and wards contain countless further aliens, each with their own quirky charm — engaging stock characters in a comedy of humours shaped by exotic racial traits. It's a running joke that the hottest hospital gossip concerns sexual antics in the methane level, whose ethereal, crystalline SNLU patients live at 120–140 degrees below zero.

Thus the sequence offers copious fun and a warm feeling of extended community in addition to its xenobiological cleverness. 'Almost wilfully upbeat,' wrote John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of SF*. What it also contains — showing clearly through transparent storytelling that puts on no literary airs — is the compassion and rare anger of a good man. From that first novella in 1957 to *Double Contact* 42 years later, it is repeatedly stressed that xenophobia in all its forms is a loathsome disease requiring salutary treatment. The Monitor Corps, this loose interstellar Federation's tough but kindly police force, hates war and stamps it out ruthlessly with nonlethal weapons like intimidation and sleepy gas. At Sector General's bleakest hour in *Star Surgeon*, when the hospital is besieged by a space fleet and under missile attack, the defending Monitors grit their teeth and accept that 'fanatically tolerant' medical staff will — must — give enemy casualties the same degree of care as their own wounded.

It's impossible not to see these gentle stories' deep horror of war as fuelled by the author's revulsion at events in his home town of Belfast. Generally he downplayed these feelings, but the shades of melancholy emerged in his 1975 fanzine contribution 'The Exorcists of IF', which miraculously preserved a light touch while mourning the ghosts of an older IF (Irish Fandom), then partly sundered by the

Troubles, and which has with some justice been called the finest piece of fan fiction ever written. It is collected in *The White Papers* (1996).

On a related note, I have a vivid memory of James at the 1992 British national SF convention, Illumination, held in a Blackpool seafront hotel and featuring a hugely noisy fireworks display on the adjacent beach. Thunderous detonations of mortar shells could be felt as visceral jolts; the vibrations set off car alarms all around the hotel. Amid these terrific bangs and flashes and siren-wailings, James's plaintive Irish voice murmured into my ear: 'They're trying to make me feel at home.'

A later Sector General volume makes a deadpan gesture to the death-or-glory school of military SF, with war and violence being presented as a sick, enfeebled species's last remaining means of sexual stimulation. The Marquis de Sade might recognise his own face in that mirror. One early story spoke wistfully of 'the diagnosis and treatment of a diseased interstellar culture, entailing the surgical removal of deeply rooted prejudice and unsane moral values . . .' If only.

It's worth noting that in the James White universe outright villains are extraordinarily few. Even that 'diseased culture' which despicably attacks the hospital (via armed forces duped into believing it a prison and torture chamber) is rotten only at the top, and reforms itself in the light of sweet reason. The most murderous-seeming threats within Sector General all prove to be confused innocents: examples include a traumatised, out-of-control pet, a presentient saurian, and frightened alien children with odd biological defences.

One of the few characters ever to have engaged in deliberate killing is Monitor Fleet Commander (later Sector Marshal) Dermod, who has spent his life expiating his role in the small but bloody conflict of 'Occupation: Warrior' (1959), a story whose Sector General links were removed by an editor who thought it too grim for the series. Now Dermod's colossal Emperor-class battleship *Vespasian* is chiefly called on for shows of force or vast rescue manoeuvres — as in *Major Operation*, where it literally has to hold a giant tourniquet, and the present volume's 'Combined Operation'.

That underlying moral sense illuminates such later and slightly darker segments as *Star Healer*, where after all the fireworks of his brilliant diagnoses and miracle cures, Conway is kicked upstairs to try his hand at the full responsibilities of a Diagnostician and to tackle cases that can't be solved with a single dazzling intuition. Instead he must brace himself for tougher tussles: with the grim evolutionary dilemmas of the Gogleskans, who daren't approach each other, and the reflexively violent Protectors, who cannot be approached, with terminal injuries and recognition of the need for triage after major accidents, with normally cheerful and ultra-tough Hudlar FROB space roustabouts, who have been reduced to a pitiable state by post-transplant shock or crippling senility.

Before this chance of promotion, though, the lighter-hearted *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* take Conway far away from the massive presence of the hospital and its permanent staff, to investigate medical enigmas with no immediate resources but the tiny *Rhabwar* team. This makes for a pleasant series of shorter adventures revisiting favourite auctorial themes.

Without too overtly giving away surprises, it can be said that most of *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* see our man working his way thoughtfully around two pet concepts which crop up elsewhere in the sequence. One is best phrased as a question: is there any inherent biological or physical handicap to space travel that sufficient intelligence and ingenuity cannot overcome? Series readers will remember that a certain immodest alien in *Major Operation*, whose deeply weird physiology should have trapped him for life on the sea bed, is first encountered as an orbiting astronaut.

Stories building on this question in *Ambulance Ship* and *Sector General* confront the baffled but eventually insightful Conway with five even more extreme cases. How can the dream of space possibly apply to e-t species who are blind, or limbless, or utterly devoid of mechanical technology, or helpless prisoners within insensately violent host-bodies, or larger than the greatest monsters of Earth's deep seas? Aha.

The stories' other repeated issue is the cheeky challenging of a Sector General axiom: that cross-species infection is as a rule impossible and that Conway and friends therefore need never fear catching something awful from their patients. Three clever exceptions are presented, though not of the kind that disprove the rule. Gulfs of time, a common chemistry, and the established (through Prilicla) premise of psychic empathy all sneak around the apparent constraints. A fourth and particularly far-out possibility – already planted in the early *Star Surgeon* – becomes the heart of the medical mystery in the later novel *Final Diagnosis*.

Among this volume's shorts, the odd man out is 'Accident', set before the building of Sector General and linking it to James's moving war or antiwar story 'Tableau', which can be found in his 1970 collection *The Aliens Among Us*. An all too credible accident in a multi-species spaceport facility, and the resulting nightmare struggle with intractable wreckage in an increasingly toxic atmosphere, crystallise the need for medical and paramedical expertise that extends over many different physiologies and biochemistries. This plants the seed of Sector General, and of the recurring notion — found also in James's non-series stories — that being able to give medical assistance to a distressed alien brings a priceless bonus of goodwill to the ever-tricky SF situation of First Contact.

As already indicated, James White was a highly popular SF author and convention guest whom everyone liked and whose kindliness extended even to such loathed creatures ('straight Z's to ten or twelve places') as parodists and critics. I happen to know this, because in my wickedness I wrote both a Sector General parody and a critical essay on the series, and each time James replied with a letter too embarrassingly generous for even such an egotist as David Langford to quote.

His death from a stroke in 1999 came too soon — he was 71 — but was mercifully quick. A lot of us miss him badly. Reading the Sector General books yet again brings back so many happy memories. It's hackneyed but entirely true to say that I envy readers who are meeting them for the first time.

— David Langford, 2002

I don't know a lot about **Steve Jeffery** except that he lives in Kidlington, Oxford, with Vicki Lee France, has been involved in almost every aspect of British SF activity over the years, is currently a member of Acnestis, the British apa of which I'm also a member, and reviews SF books for the British SF Association's *Vector* and other British journals. Now, I'm pleased to say, he writes reviews for *SF Commentary*.

Steve Jeffery

Worlds shifted sideways

Discussed:
THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRD
by Patrick O'Leary (Tor 0-765-30337-X; 2002; 356 pp. $US25.95/$A59.95)

[A version of this review appeared in 'Diary of a World Cup Widower', a contribution to *Acnestis* mailing 113, June 2002, combined with the version that appeared in *Vector* 224, July/August 2002.]

I'm missing something. Several reviews have hailed Patrick O'Leary's ***The Impossible Bird*** as 'deeply moving', a 'mature work' of 'profound wisdom', the sort of uncommonly effusive comment usually reserved for works by writers like Crowley, Carroll, Le Guin and Gaiman.

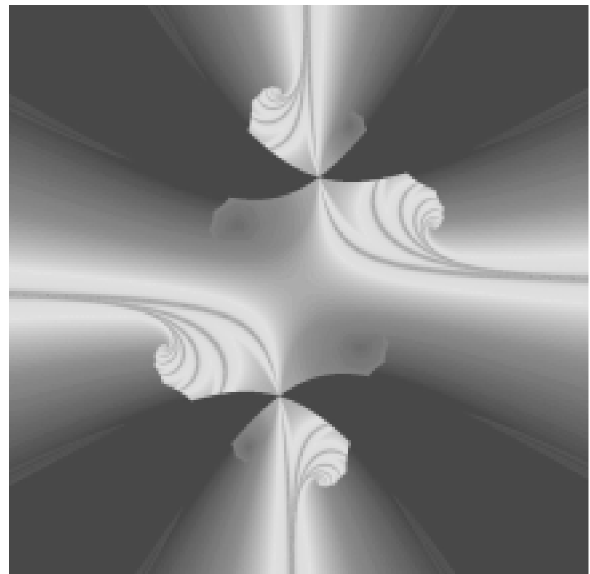
So I picked up O'Leary's book (his third) from where it had been languishing on the reviews pile, and found myself almost immediately puzzled by it.

It starts with brothers Mike and Danny Glynn, lying in a Michigan cornfield, discussing favourite SF movies ('Klaatu Barada Nikto!'), when a silvery something passes overhead.

> For an infinite moment they were treated to a bird's-eye view of two boys lying in a golden field. Two tiny stick-figures side-by-side. Abandoned. The picture would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

And somewhat beyond. By chapter two, we are told, both Danny and Mike, now in adulthood (Danny a father and a professor of literature, Mike a successful but rootless advertising director) are dead, although they are yet unaware of the fact. *The Impossible Bird* then moves into conspiracy thriller territory, when both Mike and Danny are (separately) raided by armed gangs, each apparently under the apprehension that the brother is the other one, and in possession of some mysterious 'code'. Mike ends up killing the woman who leads one gang, and then, when he goes on the run, following a lead to a run-down diner, even stranger things happen. A young woman kills her brother in cold blood (the prospect inspires both with joy rather than hate or fear). From then on, it all gets very strange, and the book becomes populated with more walking and talking dead people than in an episode of *Buffy*.

By this point *The Impossible Bird* appears to be moving into the supernatural horror of Jonathan Carroll territory. However, it is also the point at which the book seems to take an abrupt left turn (echoing back to the first opening chapter) into a crazy skiffy plot where everyone who has died recently has been 'stored' in a neural network (this has become one of those SF handwaving concepts bandied around by people who have little or no understanding of what they or how they actually work) running on — and this

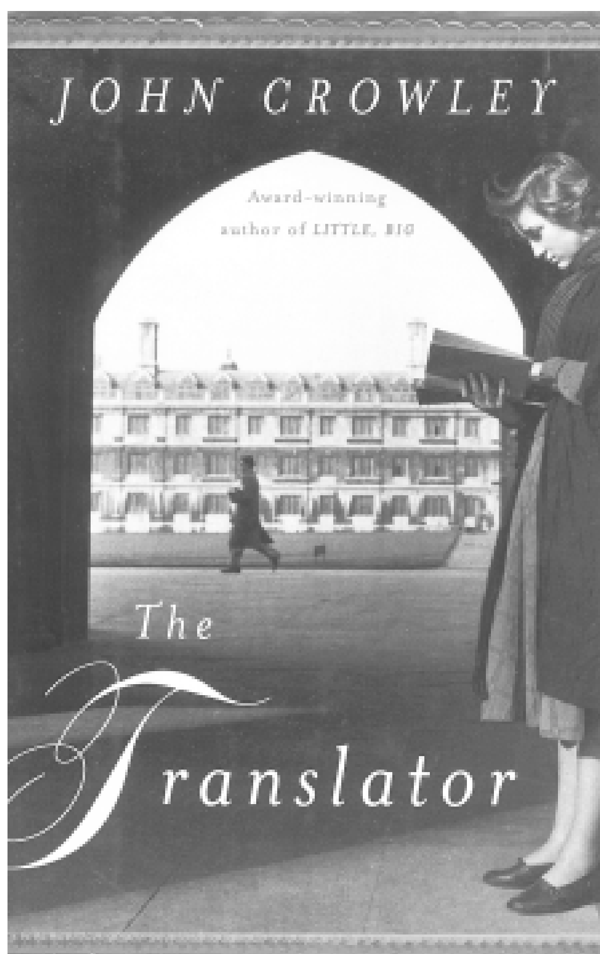


GraphicbyElaineCochrane,usingDJFractals.

is where it starts to shade into silliness — the brains of hummingbirds. The recipients of this unexpected virtual afterlife have split into two warring groups: the Crossovers, who wish to preserve their new immortality, and the Correctors, who have discovered a 'three strikes and you're out' loophole; that you can be 'erased' forever by killing three people: a stranger, someone you like, and someone you love.

The Impossible Bird is an odd-cross-genre blend that sometimes teeters dangerously , but never quite falls apart into a mishmash of styles. It starts as a conspiracy thriller, then moves into something resembling the dark fantasy territory of Jonathan Carroll, and finally resolves though a science-fictional solipsistic nightmare out of Philip K. Dick or Patricia Anthony, while never losing, through its often sudden and disconcerting turns, its central uniting thread as an exploration of family relationships lost, then regained. It is this that grounds *The Impossible Bird* from flying off into the complete silliness that a brief plot synopsis implies. At the end, though, it remains one of those books that I'm still trying to puzzle out a few of weeks after reading it, which is (given the number of books I read and retain no real memory of after I've finished) something to its credit.

Discussed:
THE TRANSLATOR
by John Crowley (William Morrow 0-380-97862- 8; 2002; 295 pp.; $US24.95/$A57.95)



The fantasy element of ***The Translator*** is so subtly understated as to almost slip by unnoticed. As we have come to expect from Crowley, it is beautifully written and with great attention to evoking period detail. In many ways, this reminds me of Chris Priest's novels, especially *The Prestige*, or some of Jonathan Carroll's, in which the world of the novel lies almost imperceptibly shifted sideways across the one we know, so that you have to look hard for the transition point.

Innokenti Falin is an exiled Russian poet, teaching at a Midwestern university in the early sixties. Christa (Kit) Malone comes there on a scholarship, still traumatised by the death of her adored older brother, Ben, reported killed in a freak munitions accident while on Peace Corps duty in the Philippines. A friendship develops between the two, and Falin eventually asks Kit to help him translate some of his poems from Russian to English (but, he stresses, they will no longer be the same poems, his poems, but different, however good the translation.) Meanwhile, Kit becomes involved in a group of left-wing activists, Peace Protesters, who half jokingly refer to themselves as a little 'commie cell'. But this is 1962, and America and the USSR are tottering on the paranoid MAD brink of war over the Cuban missile crisis. Kit's involvement with both the peace groups and Falin starts to bring unwelcome and threatening attention from the authorities. Kit agrees, under pressure, to report on Falin. One of Falin's poems or stories tells of the greater and lesser angels of nations, and that in times of crisis, the lesser angels (who are all that the greater angels are not) can prevail against the madness of the greater angels by an act of love and sacrifice. And, shortly after this, as the crisis deepens, Falin disappears, his empty convertible found in a lake as Kit watches a TV newsflash.

The Translator is framed, many years alter, after *glasnost* and the fall of the Berlin Wall, by Kit's visit to Russia, to meet with Falin's old friends and colleagues, apprehensive as to how they will regard her. (She has published some of the translations in a collection of her own poems). She brings with her a last surviving poem in Russian by Falin, the one that tells of the greater and lesser angels of nations, the rest of Falin's work having been lost, his briefcase recovered empty from the sunken car, disappeared along with the writer.

So who or what is Falin? An exiled poet who is the victim of two paranoid pogroms on each side of the Iron Curtain? A Soviet spy or even double agent (there is some question about his exile), and thus a threat or sudden embarrassment to the authorities? Or an angel who takes the road of sacrifice to save the world from the madness of the greater angels? And if Falin is that of one side, who is that of the other, and is an equal and balancing sacrifice required? It may be important here to remember that Crowley was raised (as is Kit) a Roman Catholic, and the events in Dallas a year later, 1963. To me, neither American or Catholic, this is the perhaps the most problematic aspect of the novel, as to whether Kennedy's attitude in ordering the blockade and ultimatum marks him as one of the lesser angels (if they exist), or greater.

Discussed:
CASTLES MADE OF SAND
by Gwyneth Jones (Gollancz 0-575-07033-1; 2002; 356 pp.; £10.99/$A29.95)

Short review: 'Gosh.'

Accurate as far as it goes, but perhaps not entirely helpful.

Continuing her run through a back catalogue of Hendrix titles (British readers might have been rather taken with that psychedelic car advert on TV that uses Hendrix's 'Third Stone From the Sun'), ***Castles Made of Sand*** follows more or less sequentially from *Bold As Love* and will continue into the next volume *Burning of the Midnight Lamp*. Hendrix was always a sf buff — I remember a few years ago a library display board that showed Jimi engrossed in one of the early paperback anthologies of *Year's Best SF*

edited by Harry Harrison and Brian Aldiss. There's a lot of SF imagery in Hendrix's songs, much of it a cross between Clarke's *Childhood's End* and *The Day The Earth Stood Still*. It would make an interesting article sometime.

Meanwhile, back in the Post-Dissolution England of *Bold As Love*, the first in this series, the three-way relationship of the Triumvirate (Ax , Sage and Firorinda, *de facto* leaders of the Countercultural Revolution, with Ax taking the deliberately ironic and pointed title of Dictator) is showing signs of strain. They are rock and roll children, after all, not politicians and soldiers, despite that circumstances have forced them into such roles. That complex relationship, one of the most touching aspects of *Bold As Love*, is more fully explored in this second volume. Ax and Sage, both in love with Fee, complicate matters further by taking a drug, oxytocsin, that effectively dissolves any remaining heterosexual hangups about their feelings for each other, and then, flushed with chemical love, jointly propose to Fee.

It's not going to happen. This is the Matter of Britain (or rather England, the other parts of the British Isles having broken away as independent nations after the Act of Dissolution) after all, an Arthurian Mythos for the Rock and Roll Reich. Almost immediately Sage leaves, having found the he 'can't do the threesome thing'. Both Ax and Sage are bewildered and hurt.

In the meantime Ax gets a tip-off from Irish expatriate, Feargal, that the nominal official prime minister, David Sale, is being set up in a staged ritual sacrifice by the reactionary neo-Celtic fringe. The ritual is busted in a covert operation and Sale bundled quietly back to Westminster.

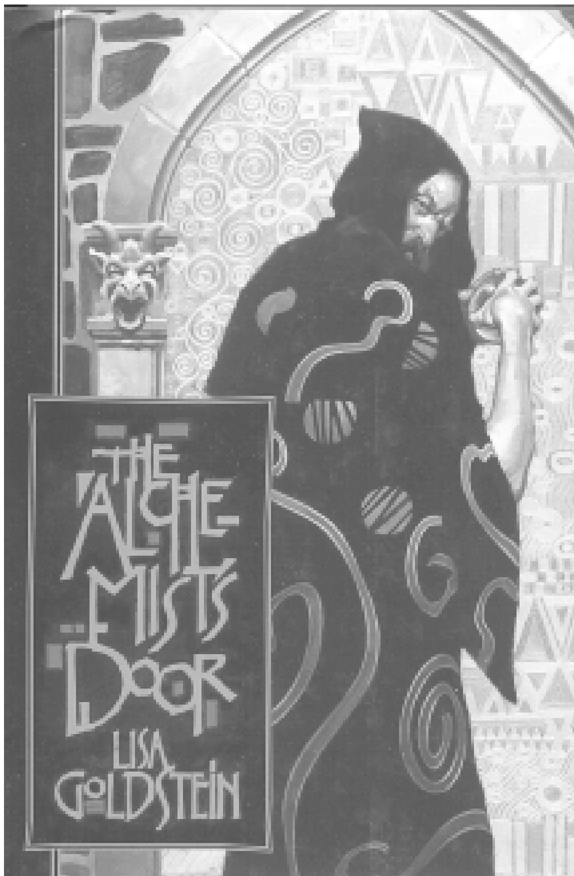
Ax leaves, as an ambassador for England in the Crisis Europe conference in Amsterdam, and gets caught up in the fractious internal politics of the various countercultural movements, while Sage gets caught up in his own odyssey in pursuit of the consciousness-expanding Zen Self experiments. Fiorinda, feeling abandoned (England's data quarantine means that she has no way of communicating with Ax directly), is left to hold things together. Ax is offered a chance to go to America to try and lift the data embargo imposed on England. If normal communications weren't difficult enough, Ax gets kidnapped by extremists, which puts him completely out of the picture.

It's that this point, with Ax as the Wounded Knight (his kidnappers have crudely removed his 'warehouse chip' from his skull and sent it back as proof) and Sage on a personal Grail Quest, and with Fiorinda at her most alone and vulnerable that the trap is sprung, and Fiorinda is confronted with a demon from her past.

Fee (as Guinevere, or even Rebecca in Ivanhoe) is overthrown in another factional coup as the Celtics take control, then accused of witchcraft, for which the new rulers have reinstated the lynch law of death by burning. Unfortunately, Fee, frightened of her powers, has kept it a secret from both of her closest friends and allies.

This also where the undercurrent of magic suddenly comes to the fore, and pivots *Castles Made of Sand* from the realm of techno-green science fiction (similar in mood and tone, in many ways, to Storm Constantine's *Hermetech*) into fantasy as *Castles Made of Sand* moves to its dramatic conclusion.

Discussed:
THE ALCHEMIST'S DOOR
by Lisa Goldstein (Tor 0-765-30150; 2002; 286 pp.; $US23.95/$A54.95)



This book features Dr John Dee and Edward Kelley and their flight to Prague and the Court of Rudolph, Holy Roman Emperor and alchemist manqué. Goldstein builds on the coincidence that this was also the time when Rabbi Loew animated a man of clay, the golem of legend, by placing a parchment bearing the name of God under it its tongue (taking care to remove it before the Sabbath lest his creature profane the holy day). As Goldstein admits — as does Crowley in regard to another fictional meeting between Dee and Giordano Bruno — there is no evidence these two scholars ever met in real life (let alone Dee helping in the construction and animation of the golem, which is entirely a Goldstein intervention), but the coincidence is too good to pass up.

On the face of it, this book could have written for me: Dee and Kelley, angelic conversations and scrying, Loew and his golem, the Kabballah, the mad Emperor Rudolph. And yet . . .

It doesn't ring true (a strange word in this context, I admit). Partly it's the language. Goldstein makes no attempt to emulate sixteenth-century speech. Her character sound contemporary, as if they had stepped, improbably clad in doublet and hose, from twentieth- or twenty-first-century London or New York. Possibly she thinks it wiser not to attempt a reproduction of archaic speech — especially as Dee, of necessity, is constantly switching between a number of European languages, including German, Polish and Czech — than to risk stumbling and spoil the effect. But the main problem is that these character do sound, to

paraphrase Le Guin, more as if they come from modern Poughkeepsie than sixteenth-century Prague. The cadences and contractions (don't, won't, shan't) sound too modern. Even without resort to thees and thous, I suspect dropping these for a more formal approach might have avoided the problem, by giving a little more distance between then and now.

Then there is the Jewish question, in an age notorious for religious hate, ghettos and pogroms and the blood libel. Goldstein sidesteps this by supposing that Dee's thirst for knowledge of all branches of the mystical arts is sufficient to overcome, with a few mild reservations, the deep social division between Jew and Gentile, for him to strike up a close friendship with Loew, even to be able to freely enter the Jewish Quarter (albeit under Loew's protection). Somehow I don't think so.

But what of the story? Yes, it's fascinating, and (as you'd expect) well written. Kelley is cast as the villain of the piece (but was he? This is one of the most fascinating aspects of this whole period of Dee's life, whether Kelley was just a con man and a charlatan, and possibly a counterfeiter and forger, or something more enigmatic, even self deluded) sent spiralling down a path of opportunism, avarice, paranoia and madness. Goldstein even hints that Kelley's forgery extended to sections of Dee's diary, leading Dee to write in code. Fascinating, but — if Goldstein had had more confidence to truly tackle the language and mindset of sixteenth century Europe, as Crowley and Ackroyd before her – what might this have been?

Discussed:
STONE
by Adam Roberts (Gollancz 0-575-07064-1; 2002; 261 pp.; £9.99/$A29.95)

Adam Roberts is a most frustrating and provocative writer, one almost thinks deliberately so. This is his third novel, following his debut *Salt* and the equally bleak and strange (and to me misjudged) collision of SF and fantasy of *On*.

There's a sense that Roberts is engaged in some sort of personal argument with SF, and perhaps specifically British SF. It's not a new argument, and neither is his approach. In fact he seems to be rerunning a riff that ran through a lot of Ian McDonald's early work, from *Hearts Hands and Voices* to *Sacrifice of Fools*, that of taking ideas, motifs from another writer and twisting them around to present his own take on them. The game is sort of given away by the title of his collection, *Speaking in Tongues*. (It's not a new thing by any means. Delany subtitled *Triton* 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia' as a response that of Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, 'An Ambiguous Utopia'). Thus *Hearts, Hands and Voices* has at its core an alternative take on Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*, and *Sacrifice of Fools* leaned rather heavily towards the ideas in Gwyneth Jone's Aleutian trilogy, started with *White Queen*.

But whatever it was, certainly with *Desolation Road* and *Hearts, Hands and Voices*, it has to be said that McDonald did it with a certain amount of style, wit and verve.

With Roberts I can only detect a wish to provoke. His books have been, so far, unremittingly bleak and dark, his characters either unsympathetic or, like Tighe in *On*, put through an appalling mill of misery and abuse that almost lost this reader at the midpoint of the book.

So what of *Stone*? Again, it's a dark novel. Its protagonist is a serial killer in a hedonistic and crime-free utopia (the clunkily-named t'T) that seems one part Banks's Culture and one part Wells's childish Eloi. His/her name (internal nanotech, the dotTech, make the t'T practically immortal and allows them to modify bodily appearance, even gender, as a matter of choice) is the equally brief Ae. (Roberts says this is arbitrarily chosen as the first two letters of the t'T alphabet, but it both echoes Esthaven's remark on the name of the envoy Genly Ai ('like a cry of pain') in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and perhaps as a reaction against Banks's penchant for giving his characters long and complex names in his Culture novels.) At the beginning and end of the book, Ae is imprisoned in a jailstar, a hollowed-out world dropped into a sun, and the book is cast as a confessional journal, dictated to a stone (there are no other prisoners) he has picked up and placed on his writing table. Ae is jailed initially for murder, a crime almost unheard of in the t'T, and is stripped of dotTech before incarceration. His first escape is as the result of becoming infected with an AI seed, which grows inside him to take up a quasi-symbiotic (can an AI be 'biotic'?) relationship with his body and mind.

The AI presents him with a bargain. It will help him spring himself from the jailstar in return for one job. The job is that he must kill the entire population of a planet, although he is not told which, or given any reason why. As Ae travels, erratically and waywardly, towards his goal we see the t'T through his critical eyes. It is a culture in eternal adolescence, of overgrown children without, damningly, children's sense of wonder or curiosity of the universe around them, even though, at the heart of their civilisation is an object that defies science, the light-years-long Gravity Trench, a discontinuous crease in spacetime and gravitational physics. One of apparent effects of the Trench is to allow many times FTL travel, although only on bodies not much bigger, conveniently, than a human being. (There's some rather dodgy 'quantum' handwaving on this invoking the collapse of local wave function, a discussion that, a decade on from Egan's *Quarantine*, is getting about as original as entropy as a metaphor for social breakdown.) Outside this region that the t'T happily, if mindlessly inhabit, the FTL effect falls off erratically into slowspace (yet another genre tic, one feels, this time to Vinge's *A Fire Upon the Deep*.)

Stone is, I think, more a frustrating book than a bad one. Its genre reflexiveness and lack of sympathy start to irritate more than they serve, as if Roberts is caught between wanting to write a critique of sf tropes and a novel.

— Steve Jeffery, October 2002