

SF COMMENTARY 79

THE TUCKER ISSUE

SECOND EDITION



Bruce Gillespie
Denny Lien
Hank Luttrell
Lesleigh Luttrell
Philip Stephensen-Payne
Wilson 'Bob' Tucker
Paul Walker
T. K. F. Weisskopf



THANKS

TONI WEISSKOPF, for her many years of work on the Tucker biography. The Second Edition really took off when Toni agreed to write a shortened version of her biography as the Introduction.

Also thanks to Toni for the selection of Tucker photos she went me by email. Apologies in advance to the photographers – perhaps some of them will recognise their photos when they see them in print and can let me know.

HELENA BINNS, who was the official photographer for Aussiecon I, Melbourne, 1975. She scanned and sent me a disk of the original colour photo of Tucker at the convention, as well as photos of other famous people looking impossibly young and hirsute.

DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN), who says that the front cover of this issue, which combines a Tucker photo sent to me by Toni and a computer graphic, is the most difficult and time-consuming fanzine cover he's produced. He points, in particular, to the wonderful glowing effect he's given to the Great Ghod Tucker.

Thanks also to Dick for computer-tweaking the photographs of several book covers in order to make them usable.

BOB TUCKER, who, despite poor health, gave much help during the process of gathering together this issue. Bob alerted me to Toni's biography and introduced me to her (by Internet), and also got in touch with . . .

KEN KELLER, who sent me the copy of his 1975 fanzine, *Nickelodeon* No. 1, which includes the actual last chapter of *The Long Loud Silence*.

PAUL WALKER, **LESLEIGH** and **HANK LUTTRELL**, and **DENNY LIEN**, who gave permission to use material from the first edition of the Tucker Issue (*SF Commentary* No. 43, which appeared in 1976).

PHILIP STEPHENSEN-PAYNE, for making available a copy of his Tucker Bibliography.

BILL BURNS, for his service to fandom in making *SF Commentary* and many other fanzines available for downloading from eFanzines.com.

ELAINE COCHRANE, for putting up with the whole long process.

OUR AMERICAN FRIEND, who contributed financially to this issue.

and the good people at **COPY PLACE**, 405 Bourke Street, Melbourne, who printed this issue.

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66	In reply Bob Tucker Malcolm Edwards Phyrne Bacon Robert Bloch Brian Aldiss James White	Subscriptions: Australia: \$35 for 5. Cheques: 'Gillespie & Cochrane Pty Ltd'. Overseas: \$US35 for 5 or £15 or equivalent. Send folding money, not cheques.
	Back cover Helena Binns	



Tucker leading the assembled fans in a 'smoooooth' ceremony, Melbourne, Aussiecon I, 1975. (Photo: Helena Binns.)

The person

T. K. F. Weisskopf Reinhardt is a long-time Southern fan and science fiction reader. Past Official Editor of SFPA, in her professional life she is also an editor, executive editor at Baen Books. She has been working on a biography of Tucker for more years than either of them want to recall.

T. K. F. Weisskopf

Introduction: A brief history of Bob Tucker, fan

Writing this for Bruce Gillespie's Second Edition of the Tucker Issue of *SF Commentary* is a bit daunting. What is left to be said about Bob Tucker after close textual analysis of all his novels, the extremely infor-

mative and detailed Paul Walker interview, an autobiographical essay by Tucker himself, to say nothing of a complete bibliography of his professional work? Well, a lot. To look properly at Bob Tucker's history



Tucker producing fanzines in the 1940s. (Photographer unknown; from the collection of Toni Weisskopf.)

as an SF fan is to look at the history of SF fandom itself, and to try to cover it in a short article is about as ambitious as Stephen Hawking covering Time in under 200 pages. But I will try — and I promise no mathematical equations, too.

More than any other, Bob Tucker is the quintessential fan. If one took the distilled essence of fannishness, let it age (eight years, the same as Beam's Choice, Green Label, bourbon) and then decanted, you would have Bob Tucker. The fact that he is also a professional writer of SF and mysteries makes him, paradoxically, all the more the beau ideal fan.

The ability to create new worlds, to tell stories, is something SF fans respect, and many attempt to do. Tucker did it, and became a filthy pro. But he never stopped being a fan, and never viewed fandom as a stepping stone to something more important. As for the 'why' behind it; that's harder. He has a life — a successful career, recognition as a professional

writer, a large, loving family. The stereotype of the socially inept loner doesn't fit Bob. As open as he is, as much of himself as he puts in his work, he is remarkably opaque about motivations. He shapes his presentation of himself in stories, mostly tall tales told about his own deeds. So to start to get a feel for him as a fan, we'll hit the highlights of those deeds, the ones best known in fannish legend. Perhaps by doing so we can begin to get a grasp on that slippery concept of what a fan is, beyond 'that person in the propeller beanie I'm pointing at.'

A fan is born

Bob was born in November 1914, at home on his grandparents' farm near Peoria, Illinois. He and his siblings lost their mother to illness when Bob was seven, not an unusual circumstance in an era when influenza could sweep the US and kill thousands. Tucker had earlier been imbued with a love of theatre

and drama when a grandfather would take him to town and to the brand new cinema; his father was himself the manager of vaudeville theatres. After a series of adventures, the sixteen-year-old Tucker came to live with his father in a boarding house in Bloomington and at that tender age to start work by following in his father's footsteps in the local theatre workers' union.

It was at one of his father's theatres that Tucker was first exposed to science fiction, in the form of those seductive, beautiful pulp magazines. Someone had left behind a copy of *Weird Tales*. At about the same time he was given a closet full of *Argosy* magazines, and that was all it took. Here finally in print were the stories he had been trying to tell for years.

At that time science fiction as we know it was a fresh new genre. Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, the clear starting point for modern SF, was only four years old, the first issue shipping in 1926. Perhaps it was only a marketing ploy (if so, a brilliant one), but early on the Gernsback magazines and the slew of competitors that followed it carried letters from readers. He and Palmer and Tremaine and the other editors encouraged their readers to send in their opinions of their ground-breaking stories. And the readers, captivated by the mind-expanding possibilities of the stories and ideas, did so in bunches. Back then, the bright possibilities were infinite — but only certain people could see what that meant.

Though it's hard to believe in this age of the Internet, tourists to space stations, and artificial intelligences running your microwave oven, not everyone then saw the obviousness of scientific and technological progress. The idea of getting a man into outer space was seen as crazy, let alone bug-eyed aliens, ray guns, robots and all the romantic rest. So those few who got it, who *understood*, they were a band of brothers, united not in space but by the crumbly pages of the pulps. The magazines gave them a place to gather together; and thus fandom was born.

And Tucker was a part of it.

The brave new fan

Though he had sent in a story (rejected) to *Argosy* in 1931, his first appearance in a pro magazine was as a 'WAHF' in the June 1932 *Astounding*. Tucker was already corresponding in the letter columns with fellows such as Ted Lutwin and Julie Schwartz who had sent him their fanzines, and Tucker soon became a regular in the columns. The nature of the medium meant that judgments about character could only be made on the basis of the text: age, appearance, sex, handicap, religious affiliation were as nothing. This egalitarian setting meant that comparative youngsters could have a field day. And so they did. Soon, the letter columns began to have early 'flame wars', even hoaxes. It is a sign of Tucker's character that his first great fanac was to participate in the great Staple War of 1935-36. In his alter ego of Hoy Ping Pong, Tucker was a proponent of the anti-staple faction, founder of the Society for the Prevention of Wire Staples in Scientifiction Magazines, with the deliberately unwieldy acronym of SftPWSSM. The other side was represented by Donald Wollheim, and both were deliberately spoofing the burgeoning pomposity of the young fans of the day. Nevertheless, this lark ended

badly, as did Tucker's letter column career. After a fake obituary of Bob was run in *Astounding*, Tucker, as well as the perpetrators, was banned from the letter columns in 1936. But an older and wiser Tucker by now had other outlets for his fanac.

The fanzine editor

Tucker had started publishing a fanzine in 1932, *The Planetoid*. Though I have not seen a copy, I suspect that like most first fanzines it is probably also a crudzine, though I'm sure one that reveals much promise . . . (Note: If anybody has one, I'd love to get my hands on a xerox copy of it, hint, hint.) His fame as a humourist spread with the long-running *Le Zombie* ('Published every time a zombie awakens'), making its two-page debut piggy-backing along with Jimmy Taurasi's *Fantasy News* in 1938. (After a long hiatus, new issues are now available thanks to the work of Keith Stokes on-line at: <http://www.kcsciencefiction.org/currentlez.htm>). In the same year, he also joined FAPA.

Tucker has said he has published over a million words of fanzine writing. As someone who is attempting to compile at least a representative sampling of fanzines he's contributed to, I believe it. His alter ego, Hoy Ping Pong, introduced in a fake con report for *Wonder Stories* in 1934, shows up in the 14 October 1939 issue (Vol. 2, No. 3) with an 'interview' of pulp editor Ray Palmer, and would make periodic appearances over the years, gently poking fun at fannish ways. (I could be wrong about this being Hoy's first appearance in *LeZ*: I am missing numbers 8-13 and 17-30. Yet more hints.). And while other fans and fanzines were embroiled in mundane world political controversy and sectarian strife between clubs, Tucker remained above the fray, always the voice of reason, deflating pretension with pointed humor. It is my belief that Tucker's attitude charted the course of fandom, and helped make it the inclusive, essentially laidback subculture that has won so many adherents. Note: his attitude was not in the least bit unconscious. 'I am trying to develop into another Shaw, I am trying to out-Miller Miller, I am doing my darnedest to provide fandom with a big bucket full of humor it so sorely needs, and above all, I am not trying to bait, tease, ridicule or besmirch anybody.' So says Tucker, as quoted by Harry Warner, Jr. in *Spaceways*, August 1939.

While waiting to be called up for the draft himself, Tucker, who was then a single father of two, did all he could for fans who were already in uniform, including sending copies of his zines to them gratis. He and British fan Ken Slater started up a program to bundle zines together so the fans in uniform could continue to get them.

The convention organiser

The other thing the letter columns of the pulps spawned were SF clubs. And once you have clubs, you inevitably have contact between clubs, trips, and thence conventions. By the early forties Tucker was making trips up to Michigan to meet with the Slan Shack folk. E. E. Evans of Battle Creek was even on masthead of *Le Zombie* for a few years. In 1939, Tucker travelled to Philadelphia for the Philcon and met convention organiser and Futurian Donald Wollheim.

Tucker himself became involved in the planning for the second ever Worldcon, Chicon I, in 1941. Mark Reinsberg was the chair, and unfortunately feuding tainted the preparations. Not coincidentally, Tucker at age 26, was one of the oldest people involved in convention, and he brought a note of responsibility, especially fiscal responsibility, to the organisation. The convention was a sterling success, with Doc Smith and a slew of Chicago pulp publishing pros speaking. The program also included a spoof film, *Monsters of the Moon*, created by Tucker and fellow Bloomington fan and movie projectionist Sully Roberds, mostly from clips Forry Ackerman had sent him from western movies (to show cowboys riding on the moon). Tucker says the movie ran about 10 minutes.

The responsible adult

In the twenty years after the end of World War II, Tucker worked full time, raised a family of three boys with his second wife, Fern, and also managed to write sixteen of his twenty-two mystery and SF novels and enough short stories to fill a collection. Nevertheless, he still never missed a Midwestcon until very recently, becoming its traditional toastmaster, and wrote for the leading fanzines of the times. He was published in *Hyphen*, the glorious fanzine edited by Walt Willis of Irish Fandom in the early fifties, was a stalwart of Lee Hoffman's *Quandry* in the fifties (issue No. 24 is dedicated to him — and if anyone can get me a copy of that . . .), and of Buck and Juanita Coulson's *Yandro* in the sixties. Indeed, in 2001 he received a retro-Hugo for his work in 1951.

Le Zombie was replaced by the more professionally oriented, and shorter, newszine, *The Bloomington Newsletter*, which soon became the *Science Fiction Newsletter* and ran from 1945 to 1953.

The toastmaster

By the time the kids were starting to get big and move on, Tucker's fame as a toastmaster had spread from Midwestcon. His routines with Bob Bloch — much like the vaudeville shows both remembered — became the stuff of legend. As more and more conventions were established all over the country, Tucker started appearing more and more often as a guest, either in his capacity as a pro, or a fan, or a toastmaster. By the late 1980s Tucker's name was so ubiquitous that *Analog* ran a hoax convention listing with Tucker as the guest in every one.

Popular as he was, this did not prevent a cabal of women from conspiring to raise money to send Tucker to Australia for the Worldcon in 1975. Led by Midwesterner Jackie Causgrove with the help of Joni Stopa and Martha Beck in the US and helped by John Foyster, Bruce Gillespie and others in Australia, fanzines were published (*The Really Incomplete Bob Tucker*), buttons were sold, auctions with donations from all over fandom were held, who knows what all else was done to get Tucker out of the country. They were so successful, though, a return ticket was bought. The flight there led to one of my all-time favourite Tucker stories: the tale of how he invented an old Australian custom, 'smoothing', and how a whole planeload of people, fan and mundane alike,

were led to practise it. As with so many Tucker stories, he tells them better than anyone else, and I refer the reader to the special *Le Zombie* (No. 67, now on the Web), which contains his trip and convention report.

At conventions Bob's affability, his abiding interest in people, delight in his observations of humanity, and his incisive wit make him not only a joy to be with, but also a wonderful ambassador. At my first convention in the early eighties he was gracious and kind, explaining the Bug Club to a brand new neo, and helping orient me, making sure I knew where the con suite was, the huckster room, introducing me to his friends and even giving me one of his cards ('Natural Inseminations. By Appointment'). I have seen him play native guide over and over again — and not just to femme fans, either. He is the nicely dressed gentleman that mundanes sharing the hotel elevator look to to explain us — and he does. He is also the nicely dressed gentleman at three in the morning leading an entire hillside outside a con hotel in Nashville — about 100 people — in a 'smooth'. In a word, Tucker is just plain *fun* to be around.

The Web surfer

In the 1990s, entropy caught up with Tucker, and though he survived a fall in a hot tub at a Chattacon in 1983 with only a broken foot, on his way to a Midwestern convention a latent heart problem revealed itself in dramatic fashion and he had to spend a few days in a hospital. Luckily, Roger Tener, a fan from Wichita, was on hand and able to fly him home in a private plane, thus making the whole enterprise a fanac. So in the late 1990s Tucker's peripatetic convention schedule finally eased up, and he even had to miss Midwestcon last year for the first time in its over fifty-year history. Still, he continues to travel a good bit, visiting his scattered family. And, despite cataracts, he took up flying — for his adventures there, talk to Tener.

Recently, Bob has discovered the Internet. I suspect he's been able to indulge his lifelong interests in archaeology and aviation this way, but I *know* he's been able to find strange, weird and just plain silly sites because he shares them in a joke/webzine edited by longtime 'granddaughter' Nancy Hathaway, *The Dusk Patrol*.

As mentioned above, the Web has inspired Bob to produce new, electronic editions of *Le Zombie*. His humour and the sense of wonder he has retained for so long is evident in these zines, too.

Where will fandom go in the next decade? I don't know, but I'll be following Tucker to find out. If anybody finds a way to reverse entropy, it'll be Bob.

[Author's note: In addition to the earlier *SF Commentary* (No. 43, August 1975), I am indebted to Harry Warner's fan histories, *All Our Yesterdays* and the second edition of *A Wealth of Fable*, his private notes which he shared with me years ago when I started this project, and the Nicholls *SF Encyclopedia* for background material, dates, and titles. And to Bob for reviewing all of this! Any errors or infelicities herein are my own.]

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The writer

Introduction to the 1976 version:

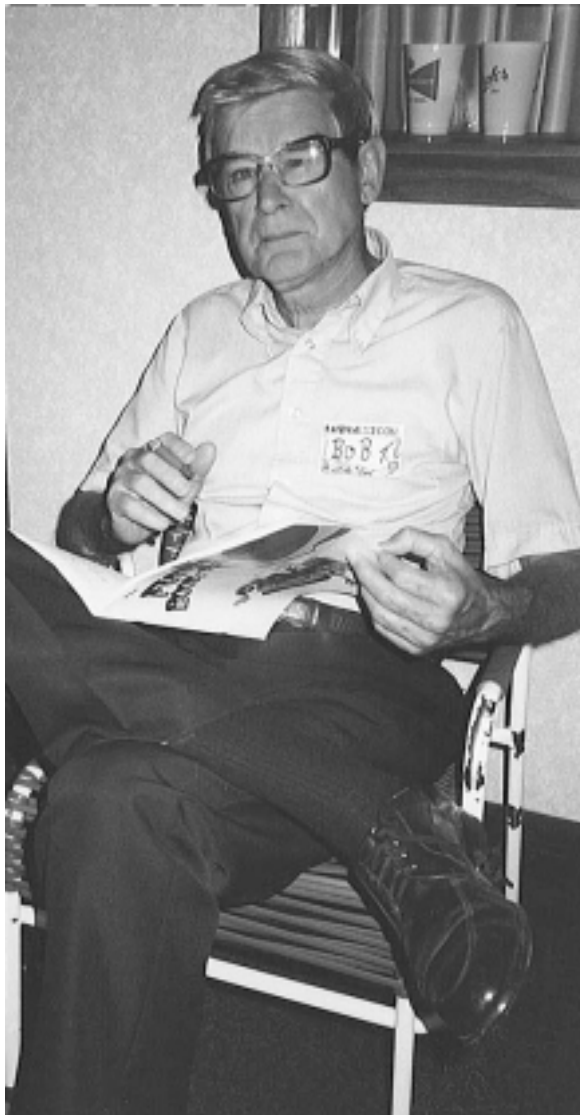
'Paul Walker has had a long career of writing for fanzines. Several years ago he was best known for his reviews in *Science Fiction Review* and *Luna*, and recently he has published a number of interviews with science fiction writers. Paul has also sold several short stories. The following interview with Bob Tucker appeared first in *SF Echo* 22, April 1975, edited by Ed Connor. Thank you, Paul Walker, Ed Connor and Bob Tucker for permission to reprint this interview.'

Introduction to the 2003 version:

You'll be pleased to know that Paul Walker is still alive and at the same address at which I first found him. He's not much interested in writing about SF these days, but is still interested in the personality and works of Bob Tucker.

Paul Walker

interviews Bob Tucker



Bob Tucker

All of my father's family are long dead, and on my mother's side only two aged aunts remain, and I've already discovered their memories aren't too reliable. I was sixty last November, and my own memories of the early years are somewhat shaky.

Born 23 November 1914, on a farm near the village of Deer Creek, Illinois. My mother's family were farmers, although she had some connection with Illinois State University, at Normal, when she met and married my father at a date not known to me. I'm reasonably certain she was not an employee of the university, but I suspect she was an employee of some faculty member, perhaps a maid or housekeeper. I don't know how or when they met, nor when they were married. My mother died in 1921, when I was seven.

My father was a circus man, a bill-poster, a publicity agent, an advance man, and what was called a 'twenty-four-hour' man in circus lingo. He travelled for several years with the big shows such as Barnum & Bailey, Ringling Brothers, Hagenback and Miller's Wild West Show. Sometime prior to 1914 he left the road and settled in Bloomington, Illinois, where he became a stagehand in the local theatres. He stayed with the theatres and was stage manager of a vaudeville house when he retired about 1940. (Of course, vaudeville was also long gone, but the theatre was still used for home talent shows, occasional touring companies, and the like.) He died in 1948.

My brother and I grew up in an orphanage. After my mother's death, my father kept the family (three children) together for a few years and then gave up the struggle. My brother and I were sent to an orphan-

Wilson 'Bob' Tucker. (Photo: Toni Weisskopf.)

age while my sister was placed with a grandmother. This happened about 1926. I ran away from the orphanage in 1930 because I simply couldn't stomach it any longer, and spent the summer of 1930 bumming around the country by freight train and by hitch-hiking, sometimes doing odd jobs and sometimes doing farm work for room and board. I was picked up by the police for vagrancy and sent home to my father sometime during 1930, and lived with him in a boarding-house for the next few years.

My schooling ended when I quit the orphanage, and I had not completed the eighth grade when I ran away. I've had no formal education since, nor have I attended trade schools, taken correspondence courses, etc. I've always been a greedy reader and prefer non-fiction to fiction *except* for science fiction. The education I have today can be termed half taught, in that I soon learned — or realised — my shortcomings and began reading everything the local libraries could offer in an attempt to educate myself. I'm still reading for that knowledge, and to gain useful background materials for my novels. My favourite disciplines are archaeology and anthropology, geography, geology and astronomy to a lesser extent. I believe in the Big Bang theory of the birth of the universe; it appears more logical to me than the steady state theory.

I taught myself spelling and the poor English I use because I wanted to be a writer, and I taught myself to type for the same reason. I've since learned that editors don't expect writers to know beans about spelling and grammar, and that they expect to rewrite every manuscript they accept. I've had my troubles with English majors in publishing houses who insist upon reworking my deathless prose over into the rigid forms they were taught at Bryn Mawr or wherever.

I bought a very-much-used typewriter in 1931 and wrote my first story, a war story, for *Argosy* — the old *Argosy* that existed in the 1930s. They rejected it, of course, because it was a terrible thing. I wrote war, adventure, mystery and science fiction for the next ten years, and managed to make my first sale in 1941 to Fred Pohl. It was titled 'Interstellar Way Station', it appeared in the May 1941 *Super Science Novels Magazine*, and I'm ashamed of it today because it was dreadful. I was then, and still am, a very poor writer of short stories. I can't decently plot or construct them in the short space allowed, and I've managed to sell only one or two dozen (I haven't kept count) in these past forty years.

I fell into science fiction by accident. My father gave me (or perhaps I found) a copy of *Weird Tales* some actor had left behind in one of his theatres, about 1930 or 1931. Meanwhile, one of the other boarders in the rooming house gave me a closetful of old *Argosys*, and I discovered science fiction when I read the Ray Cummings serial *A Brand New World*, which, I think, was published in 1929. Science fiction has been my first choice ever since, with mystery and detective stories running a close second. I began buying *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Stories* whenever I had a few coins to spare (food came first during the Depression of the thirties), and I believe I discovered *Wonder Stories* a year or so after that.

I got into fandom by reading the letters in the first two magazines, and by entering into correspondence

with another young fan in Jersey City. I think I found his name and address in a 1931 issue, and I became fairly well known to other fans at about that time because I received a sample copy of *The Time Traveller* about January 1932, and promptly subscribed to that. I was well hooked on fanzines that year, and published my first fanzine in December 1932 (*The Planetoid*).

My first marriage was in 1937, and I have two children by that marriage, a son and a daughter. It didn't last long. My wife deserted me and the two children in 1942 and I got a divorce and custody the same year. (She had her good reasons. I'm difficult to live with.) Those two children are married and have families of their own, of course; my eldest granddaughter is eighteen and I expect she will make me a great-grandfather before too long.

My second marriage was in 1953 and we're still together. We have three sons by this marriage, with the eldest twenty. My wife is a Traffic Assistant for General Telephone Company; among other things she teaches the new girls how to manipulate the switchboards. (Which are wonderfully complicated. I've studied them.)

I haven't had many jobs, unlike those writers who parade a long list of occupations, ranging from cowboy to short-order cook. First job was that of a delivery boy for a printing company about 1930 (possibly 1931) earning a dollar a day. And at about the same time my father started my apprenticeship on the stage and in the projection booth at one of his theatres. This has always been a moonlighting business; I spent the days delivering print-shop orders, and the nights in the theatre. With two exceptions noted below, I've stayed at the trade ever since. I lost my long-time projection job two years ago when the theatre installed automated machinery, and when I developed a cataract which made me temporarily blind. These two events happened a few months apart, but when I returned from the hospital and recuperation the theatre refused to rehire me so, in *that* sense, I'm unemployed.

In another sense, I'm still working part time. For about the last twenty-five years I've been the stage electrician at Illinois State University, at Normal, and still am. I work perhaps thirty or forty days a year at the University of Illinois (fifty miles away) whenever road shows are booked onto the campus. Other than that I'm unemployed, and spend my time writing novels.

The two exceptions to theatre work are as follows: In 1945 I quit a theatre to work for an advertising agency that wanted someone to write and edit house organs, both for themselves and for their clients. I failed at the job and lasted barely three months. In 1946 I went to the Los Angeles World Convention, and afterward went around to a hiring hall that furnished electricians for the movie studios. They signed me on and sent me to work at the Twentieth Century Fox studios. I stayed there about five months and was laid off when movie production was completed for the year (about November 1946; hundreds were laid off, an annual event). I came back to Bloomington and back to the same old theatre jobs.

I won't complain about the loss of a steady job. I lasted about forty-one years in the trade and that was

worthwhile.

And that's my status at the present time. I'm living in Jacksonville with my wife and my three sons; we moved here from Heyworth in June 1974 when the telephone company transferred her to a new job. The eldest son of this marriage is in his third year of college, a physics major, on some scholarship he wangled. I continue to work on the stage when the shows come along, and write the remainder of the time.

My present hobby is cooking. I'm quite enthused about it, and the family endures it, complaining only at those times when something goes wrong and they get belly aches. I'm fond of cigars and bourbon and, unlike everyone else I know, I had an absolutely enjoyable time in the hospital during my cataract surgery. It was a ball, and I'm trying to find a way to incorporate the entire episode into a novel, or write it up as a fact article for one of the men's magazines. I've had twenty-one novels published, and four others rejected. I'm working on one at the present time.

Paul Walker

The parts about your youth reminded me of the opening of *Wild Talent*, with that kid wandering alone in Chicago. Gone to the World's Fair, if I remember rightly; it's been (what?) fifteen years since I read it. I remember feeling for the kid when he sat down to breakfast and was given that sandwich, two slices of bread, one stale slice of meat between: 'What do you want for nothing?'

I'd like to know about your beginnings as a writer. Your first attempts; the writers you most admired, imitated (?); the advice you received; your first successes. I'd like to know about why and when you began writing mysteries. And how you've fared in both. What are your work habits; how do you outline, revise and rewrite, etc.?

Tucker

Those opening pages of *Wild Talent*, in which the young Paul Breen wandered around Chicago, visited the World's Fair and slept overnight in a cheap flophouse, were strictly autobiographical. I rode into Chicago on a freight train in the summer of either 1933 or 1934 (the Fair was open two years) and spent two or three days at the Fair, sleeping each night in some 25-cent or 35-cent 'hotel', which offered a free breakfast the next morning. The vivid impressions of that visit have always stayed with me and I have used them to good advantage in *Wild Talent*. The fictional parts begin where the boy finds the wounded man in the alley.

I sometimes think I was born writing something or other. My grandmother and my only two living aunts have all told me that I wrote newspapers when I was visiting or staying with them in the very early years (I must have been between two and six years old). According to their descriptions (and memories), I went about the neighbourhood gathering news, then printed that news in crude newspaper format, and then tried to sell those papers back to the people who'd first given me the news. In the seventh grade of grammar school I habitually wrote fantastic stories

for English class assignments. I didn't yet know the term 'science fiction', but my stories were always about around-the-world flights in a matter of hours, and digging deep tunnels into the earth, or whatever. Also in that seventh grade I founded the school newspaper, and continued to write and edit it through the eighth grade. I've sometimes wondered if it is still being published.

My first attempt at pro writing was a war story for the old *Argosy* in 1931. I know now it was a very bad story, and they quickly rejected it. I was reading all the copies of *Argosy* I could find in those days; I liked the fiction and its writers, although I remember only a handful of them today. I was very fond of George F. Worts, Ray Cummings and, if memory serves correctly, Richard Sale. (I *think* Richard Sale was writing for the 1930 *Argosys*.) I remember being impressed by Tiffany Thayer, and I now suspect this impression happened at a later date, because I once tried to write a book in his style and I wasn't in the book business until after 1945.

In the science fiction magazines, my favourites were Ross Rocklynne, Nat Schachner, Jack Williamson, Sprague de Camp and Lloyd Eschbach. I don't know if I imitated any of them, or admired them to the degree where I attempted to write like them, but probably not; all my early stories were poor and none of these writers would be flattered to know I knowingly imitated them. As mentioned above, the only writer I knowingly imitated was Tiffany Thayer. I also discovered the H. G. Wells novels in the middle 1930s and was, of course, impressed by him and them.

In sum, I wrote and submitted my first story in 1931 but did not manage a sale until 1941. During that ten-year period I would guess that I wrote, submitted and then destroyed after rejection perhaps one to two hundred stories: adventure, war, detective, science fiction. I received my first worthwhile advice from Fred Pohl in 1941 when he showed me how to revise a short story and submit it to him a second time. With that, I got an inkling of why all those stories had failed to sell in the previous ten years: I was constructing them wrongly, awkwardly, not getting the proper beginning, middle and ending in their proper places; not allowing the background to develop as the characters moved through it; not saving a goody for the ending. I revised that 1941 story according to Fred's formula and sold it to him on the second submission. I think was paid one-half cent a word, and it appeared in the May 1941 *Super Science Novels Magazine*.

But I can't successfully write short stories; I don't feel comfortable with them; I dislike their shortness, I dislike the tight plotting and characterisation that must be packed into them because of their brevity, I dislike the total lack of room in which to work. (As noted before), I haven't kept a count but I probably haven't sold more than two dozen short stories in the forty-odd years I've been writing. Don Day's *Index to Science Fiction 1926-1950* lists six stories and two 'Probability Zero's published up until the 1950 cutoff date, and that is a gauge of my non-productivity.

I began writing novels about 1944 because of the failure of my short stories. I don't recall the precise date the first novel was started, but 1944 is an educated guess because it was revised once, sold in

1945, revised again, and published in 1946. I've been a mystery fan as long as I've been a science fiction fan — since *Argosy* in the early 1930s — and I wrote a mystery novel to determine if my luck (and my skill) was any better in the novel field than in the short-story field. I don't know why I chose to write a mystery as the first novel, rather than science fiction, but it was probably because I was already aware of the market at that date: science fiction novels were few and far between whereas hundreds of mysteries appeared every year for the lending-library trade. Private-eye stories were quite popular in the 1940s, and so I wrote a private-eye story, a low-key and somewhat humorous private-eye story instead of the hardboiled kind that was so prevalent. At that time I had not read *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and I didn't realise what I was plotting in my first book; I realised only that I had a keen idea and some way had to be found to make it work. I titled it *The Chinese Babe*.

The novel sold on its second submission, to Rinehart and Co. in the summer of 1945. It was published in 1946 under the title *The Chinese Doll* and Tony Boucher paid me the highest compliment of my writing career; he wished he had written it, and complimented me in my reviews for having introduced a successful variation of the Roger Ackroyd theme.

The twenty-five novels I've written are roughly divided between mystery and science fiction. Of those, the four rejected novels were not total losses, in that I salvaged parts of them and incorporated those parts into other books which did sell. (The artillery barrage section in Jordan, appearing in *This Witch*, is an example of a part taken from a reject and incorporated into a sale.)

Until recently I've regarded writing as a hobby, or even a second occupation, and relegated it to my leisure hours. I was in the habit of writing after the end of my daily stint in the theatre, or on my days off, and as a result of that unhurried schedule I usually completed a book each eight or nine months. I would begin work in the late summer or early autumn after cool weather chased me indoors, and work on a book until the following spring or early summer; I kept no schedule, working only when the mood struck me and the time was available. Lately I've devoted more time to writing now that an outside job no longer interferes, but I still don't maintain a schedule. I may work steadily for several days or weeks, eight to ten hours a day, and then drop off for one or two weeks and not type at all. I don't have a deadline sense, driving me to fill pages by the quota.

I start a book with the beginning and ending fixed firmly in mind, and a handful of notes beside me to guide me through the middle. Usually, two drafts complete the novel, although it is common to go back and revise individual pages here and there to make those pages fit the ending. With a firm idea of the first chapter in mind, plus handwritten notes, I write the chapter and reread it seeking flaws. Almost always that chapter is revised and a second (and final) draft is typed. Sometimes, but not often, a first draft will stand as written, subject only to revising individual pages to make those pages fit later developments. As the writing progresses, more and more ideas will occur for later chapters and those ideas are put down as handwritten or typed notes for embellishment

when their times come. I like to finish a chapter completely (first, second and/or final draft) before moving on to the next chapter.

I know that editors will always ask for further revisions, and I'm prepared for them; I keep all my notes until the book is actually in print so that I can revise at any time. Only once have I later regretted agreeing to a revision: a lady editor at Rinehart asked me to remove the cannibal scene from *The Long, Loud Silence* and I did, because I wanted publication. Reviewers and critics of all stripes later spotted the tame substitution and the more perceptive of them correctly guessed what had been deleted. The cannibalism would be acceptable today, but it was not in 1952.

With one exception, mystery and science fiction novels earn me about the same amount of money but over varying lengths of time. Mystery novels represent a larger initial income; the bulk of the earnings come in the first two years after publication and then the books go out of print. Science fiction novels earn me less money in those first few years but they have a greater staying power in the firm of paperback reprints, and overseas sales. Several of my science fiction novels from the period 1951–58 have been reprinted in recent years, but the mystery novels have long since vanished from sight and are not likely to be reprinted. If I took the trouble to audit my accounts I would likely find that science fiction books have earned more over a twenty-year period than mystery novels have.

The exception mentioned above is *Wild Talent* (titled *The Man from Tomorrow* in one paperback edition). This book has been reprinted more often in more countries than any other five books of mine; it was first published in 1954 and it has been in print continuously since that time, somewhere in the world. This one book has also earned me more than any other five books I've written, because of those continuous reprints and because it was sold to Hollywood — although it was never filmed.

Walker

Are all your books under the 'Wilson Tucker' name?

Tucker

All my books were published under the Wilson Tucker name. Those early short stories in the forties were signed Bob Tucker because everyone in our field at that time knew me as Bob, but in 1946 the Rinehart editor wanted a better given name; she pointed out I wasn't another Bob Davis. Later short stories were also published as Wilson, I believe.

Walker

You said your first sale was to Fred Pohl in 1941, from whom you received your first worthwhile advice that led to that first sale. Do you remember what that advice was?

Tucker

Fred Pohl showed me how to properly construct a

short story. The first one I submitted to him concerned a man, a young woman and an alien who were brought together in a space station; it was really a refuelling depot for starships travelling between Earth and the Alpha Centauri system and my mistake was to ram all the background into the first few pages before the characters were introduced and started moving around the station. Speaking as the omniscient author, I launched into a complete description of the station and its workings, its schedules, its booby traps, everything I thought the reader should know in advance before the people appeared. When the people did appear, they raced through the story with little or no attention to background detail and arrived at the climax rather empty-handed. Fred Pohl told me how to introduce first the one or two people who would be living the story, and then dribble in some of the technical background, and then introduce the woman along with still more background information, and finally let the three of them work through the story to its end by employing (or being thwarted by) the technical details I had originally crammed into the beginning.

It can be stated simply another way: if a character is walking down the street to mail a letter, don't describe the street and the mailbox before he leaves the house. Describe the scene as he passes through it and describe the mailbox as he nears it or actually drops in the letter. And at the same time make the descriptive passages so unobtrusive they can't be mistaken for lectures or travelogues.

That is sound construction advice but I lacked the wit to recognise it in time, despite several years of pulp reading. The writers I'd been reading knew the technique, of course, and used it so skilfully I was never aware of what they were doing. The same technique applies to novels as well, and those novels which introduce the protagonist on the first page (and especially the first paragraph) read the best. I thank Fred for that.

Do you recall the ancient stories and serials of the 1930s in which some windy character (usually the Head Scientist) stopped the action cold by delivering a science lecture? Embedded in that lecture would be the facts a reader should know to understand something of importance to follow. Sometimes the writer was so unskilled he would use a shovel in this manner:

Professor Greenspoon adopted his best classroom manner. 'As you all know,' he enunciated, 'there is nothing up there for a rocket to push against, so we must rely on . . .'

'Oh no!' Harry groaned in an aside. 'Not another lecture!'

That writer and those magazines *needed* Fred Pohl.

Walker

As you have had to revise and rewrite so often, what is your procedure and philosophy of revision? Some writers, if not many, find it an impossible job; and I suppose most amateurs asked by an editor to revise their stories would not know how to begin. How do you do it?

Tucker

I don't mind revisions (well, not too much!) where the editor has pointed up a real need for them, and has offered suggestions or an outline of what *should* happen during the revisions. I'd certainly be lost without suggestions or an outline, and I've been very fortunate in having a series of articulate editors who, after having spotted my wrong turn, supplied me with a full and lucid explanation of the error and how to correct it. Some of the letters from editors have run as many as four and five pages (typed, single-spaced), and those letters are gold mines. It is my habit to revise the manuscript by studying each paragraph of the letter and turning the novel in the direction indicated in that particular paragraph; the story will then flow in a new direction until I reach the point of objection in the next paragraph, and it will turn again. By the time I have covered the twenty-five or so paragraphs in the five-page letter, I will have a whole new ending to the novel. (This happened to *This Witch*, causing the entire last half of the novel to be rewritten in a new direction, but yet arriving at the desired ending.)

Sometimes, of course, the objections refer only to a person or place or thing, which can be corrected by revising a single page; sometimes I have fouled up my own time sequences, or inserted a wrong date or a wrong fact, and once I placed the wrong Roman legion marching down the Jordan valley. Some reader would have caught it, if the editor did not. That happened to me more than twenty years back when, through carelessness, I allowed the protagonist to drive across the Illinois River at St Louis. After the book was published, a loyal St Louis reader wrote in, asking whatever happened to the Mississippi River. A map, or an alert editor or copy reader, would have saved me that error. The best and only advice I can give a new writer faced with a demand for revision is to ask his editor for a bill of particulars, and be sure to say 'please'. And then make the revisions. If that writer is lucky he will get a long letter chock full of suggestions designed to save his story and save his sale.

Walker

I'd like to ask you for two case histories in details. One of *Wild Talent* and the other of *The Year of the Quiet Sun*. Granted, much time passed between them, but I was struck by the enormous jump in quality, seriousness, in maturity between the two. I'd like to know about the origins of the ideas for both; the work you put in on them; their themes, etc., and what you think of them.

Tucker

Wild Talent: I seldom keep old manuscripts and the records for those manuscripts beyond a few years, so reconstructing the history of that book will be by guesswork. It was published in January 1954 and so I would think it was written during the winter of 1952-53 and delivered to the publisher in the spring of 1953. I wrote one book each winter for nearly twenty years and that book fits neatly into the schedule.

Unlike some of my other novels, it was never a short story or novelette. For a period of time during the very late forties or early fifties, the mundane world was interested in telepaths; I recall a few press mentions here and there, and once *Newsweek* launched a fishing expedition by reporting that both Soviet Russia and the Pentagon were conducting a secret telepath search against the day a new breed of spies would be needed. These may have sparked the idea for this book, or perhaps I'm putting the cart before the horse, in that I began seeing the press notices *after* the book was written. I once received a letter from a *Newsweek* editor commenting briefly on the book and I assumed it was a routine letter designed to make sure I really existed before they published a review, but no such review appeared.

In any event, *something* sparked the idea of a telepath working as a spy; in the mystery-novel sense rather than the science fiction sense. No exotic aliens, no spaceships and star kingdoms, no overthrow of an empire, but rather a bread-and-butter story of an ordinary telepath working in ordinary Washington — the first of his kind. Because he would be the first of his kind in a square, mundane world, the plot invited trouble. The book was cast in a mystery-novel mould. I used my own youthful background as the protagonist's background; all of the details of riding a boxcar to Chicago, of the slum hotels and cheapside restaurants, the all-night theatres for sleeping, and the World's Fair of 1933–34 were taken from life. You can easily determine where fictitious events were inserted: the finding of a wounded FBI agent in an alley, the naïve letters mailed to Washington, the later induction into the Army and the discovery by fingerprints were interwoven fictions to move the boy into a man, and the man to Washington. By that point, the mystery-story technique had taken hold and the remainder of the novel followed formula, including that flashback (flash forward?) opening chapter in which the hero appears to be killed. It was really a chase story in which the chase has ended and the quarry apprehended by the first chapter. The remainder is his education and escape.

I thought then, and still think today, that if a telepath is discovered and put to work for the Pentagon (or any other US agency) his life will be miserable *unless* he is one of them in every philosophical respect; that is, if he is a super-patriotic, gung-ho, conservative citizen who believes in big government and the square military mind, he will get along splendidly because he will be among his brothers; but if he is other than that he will make the biggest mistake of his life in joining them. My protagonist soon realised he'd made a mistake, and the story was that much easier to write because of the mistake. Undoubtedly I had to rewrite parts of it, adding or subtracting pages or incidents because of things that happened later, but the only situation I now recall was the ending, the final chapter on the beach.

I no longer remember the original ending — I don't remember what happened to whom, or why — but my Rinehart editor did ask for a new final chapter and it was supplied to her — the chapter you can see in the book. Later, that chapter again had to be rewritten for the British edition (Michael Joseph, 1955). My editor in London was Clemence Dane, and she was dissat-

isfied with the ending because it appeared brief, sketchy to the eye. At her bidding I rewrote the chapter again and so in the British edition is a few thousand words longer than the American ditto.

I was astonished many times on and after the book's publication. I had always regarded it as a competent but common novel, a run-of-the-mill work that would be read and dropped from print in the usual year or so. Just the opposite occurred. First I received a small avalanche of fan mail, something that had not happened after my previous novels appeared; this fan mail was from strangers in the mundane world, and it continued for many years afterward whenever another reprint edition would appear.

Next, it got reprinted here and there all over the world, and in many languages, including the proverbial Scandinavian. Japan, Israel, Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Argentina, Australia (as distinct from the Australian market mined by British publishing houses) — it seemed half the world wanted the book. Bantam Books published the first American paperback edition in 1955, and went back to press with a second hundred thousand copies after the first hundred thousand sold out. Tony Boucher told me at the time that it was the first time a science fiction novel had done that. Judging by the trickle of royalties still coming in, that book has remained in print, somewhere in the world, continuously since 1954. The book was also sold to the movies. It never appeared, although a screenplay was prepared and some few production plans were made. I've often speculated on that, on what postponed or cancelled the picture.

The Year of the Quiet Sun: This particular sun forced a break in my routine of one book each winter, because people kept rejecting it. It was written three times between 1966 and 1969. The first version was titled *Cry Down the Quiet Sun* and was completed in May 1967 after the usual eight or nine months' work. The editors at Doubleday rejected it. The following winter it was completely revised and rewritten in a somewhat different form and again submitted to Doubleday in 1968. They said they were sorry, but it would be best shelved and forgotten. The manuscript then went to Ace Books where Terry Carr was editing and he also rejected it, *but* he said that if I cared to give it one more try he would be pleased to read it again.

Meanwhile, I had become discouraged with the failures and had started work on a mystery-adventure novel using much the same background. I was reading everything I could find on the Dead Sea Scrolls and, by that time, I'd turned up so much information that I had enough for two or three novels. *Quiet Sun* made extensive use of two fictitious scrolls and, at the same time, employed some real ones for background information. The mystery novel *This Witch* relied on a real scroll to launch a treasure hunt.

I don't want to mislead you when I say I was using much the same background for both books. *This Witch* is set in Gaza, Israel and Jordan a few years after the 1967 war when Nasser was still alive; *Quiet Sun* is set in Illinois in the near future beginning in 1978. But both books are solidly based on certain scrolls, real and imaginary, and in both books the

protagonist is propelled into motion by what his own researches into the scrolls revealed to him; there is also an interchange in which the protagonist in one book refers to a key scroll that moved the protagonist of the other book. (The fragmented scroll in *This Witch* that purports to reveal a treasure of two hundred tons of gold is a real one; it has been deciphered and read but the Israeli authorities claim to disbelieve it.)

I was also discouraged by the times; in 1967 and 1968 the burnings of Watts, Chicago, Washington and other cities was only a short time behind us and it was easy to imagine what could happen if the blacks continued to endure winters of discontent. I really expected them to continue, and it is surprising to me they didn't follow up the early gains of their guerrilla warfare; after the burning of Washington the politicians were so frightened of impending civil war they would have handed over the key to the White House — if it wasn't burned. I am also surprised that many other science fiction writers don't employ the same events; I think the 'riots' were the nearest we have come to civil war since 1961, yet our writers seem to have ignored events.

That's the backgrounding of *The Year of the Quiet Sun*. A new uprising, combined with newly discovered prophetic scrolls, were too much temptation to resist, and one easily reinforced the other. I carried the story forward to what I considered one logical ending; other and equally logical endings could be written. Meanwhile, *This Witch* was completed and submitted to Doubleday, where it was conditionally accepted; they wanted the entire last half of the book rewritten in a new direction. And I had *two* books on my hands in need of major work.

I chose to work on *Quiet Sun* first because it was the more immediate, the more 'dated' of the two, and because it was closer to my heart. Perhaps I was inspired — I don't know now — but I tackled it a third time in September 1969 and rewrote the story from the beginning; this third version is related to the first only in that a man goes forward in a time machine, and finds there a woman he knows. It was finished in December the same year, and Terry Carr contracted for it that same month — with the request that I make a few more minor revisions in the last chapter. I did, of course. If he had rejected it once more I would have thrown the manuscript away, finally convinced of its uselessness.

About three weeks later (12 January 1970) I began rewriting the latter half of *This Witch* and finished it at the end of March. It was accepted the following month and I heaved another great sigh of relief and thankfulness.

There isn't much more to add. I wrote a screenplay for *Quiet Sun* two years ago but it hasn't found a buyer anywhere. Both that book and *This Witch* are now reappearing here and there around the world in various reprint editions, with the mystery novel earning the better sales — which is to be expected. My mysteries have always sold better than my science fiction but, as I think I told you before, the science fiction offers a better return over a period of one or two decades because it is frequently reprinted in paperback where mysteries are not. Reviews on both books are mixed, which is also to be expected. I sometimes think that if there are precisely one hundred thou-

sand science fiction readers, half of them will like a book — any book by any writer — and the other half will not. In mystery novels the same does not apply, mostly because of a lack of a large mystery fandom with fanzines to provide a feedback. In mysteries, a writer must rely on newspaper reviewers (not critics), who are a very strange lot, provincial to a fault.

In England, a gentle lady reviewer strongly objected to the bloodshed in *This Witch*. In Indiana, another gentle lady reviewer recommended the book because it was set in 'the Holy Land', where she had travelled extensively. And almost everywhere in the United States, several reviewers objected to *Quiet Sun* because the protagonist did not enter the first chapter carrying a large sign which read, 'Look: I am black'. But in Australia another reviewer realised that without being told, and wondered why his American counterparts were so blind.

Walker

You've written mysteries and SF: do you prefer, however slightly, one genre to another? How would you compare them as fiction, as to how they appeal to people? What is the central appeal of a mystery as opposed to an SF book?

Tucker

I prefer to write mysteries over science fiction, but the divisional line of preference is a very thin one. A mystery isn't as difficult to write because this world doesn't have to be described to the reader, and science lectures (however disguised) aren't necessary unless the story employs some technical gadget the reader might be ignorant of. I have used spy-in-the-sky satellites, and a proton magnetometer, and even a 'foolproof' method of smuggling diamonds or dope into the United States in a coffin but because these are mundane things a mystery reader is likely to read about in newspapers, it was only necessary to include a few paragraphs of explanation to make them work. No need to build a space station or a refuelling depot complete with booby traps just to move people through an adventure. A mystery novel is still easier when it is set in an ordinary American city, peopled with ordinary American characters using ordinary guns or knives or poisons; the writer need only be certain the gun he describes actually exists and will perform in the manner indicated, and the laws of that city and its state permit the detective to act in the way he does. I'm not suggesting that writing a mystery novel is easy. It is *not*. But writing a mystery novel is somewhat less work than writing a science fiction novel.

Other than that, I prefer mysteries because of the sheer *fun* of writing them, constructing and plotting them; they are exhilarating. If you have been a long and careful reader, you will have already noticed that many science fiction novels are really mysteries set in alien landscapes. I think the mystery story is the basic one and is universally employed to spin out gothic, historical, adventure and science fiction novels. Many of the charted 'bestsellers' are mysteries in disguise. Consider the many well-known science fiction novels of the past that were basically mysteries: a search for

an answer to some mysterious event, the search being made in space, or a long ship, or on an alien planet. Clarke's *2001* is a mystery story.

I've learned that the hardcore readerships are direct opposites. Men predominate in the science fiction field; women rule in the mystery-reader world. Of course, there are large numbers of the opposite sex reading each, but the majority are as stated. I've had the opportunity to check two libraries over the past quarter-century, and both studies revealed the same results: women borrow mysteries; men borrow science fiction books — although in the last ten years or so the number of women checking out science fiction has been increasing.

The library nearest my recent Heyworth home uses a different system than is usually employed. Instead of a number being stamped on the card pocketed in the front of the book, the borrower writes his/her name on the card and deposits it at the check-out desk. While in Heyworth, I frequently checked these cards to determine who read my books. If there were thirty names written on a card in a mystery novel, one or two would be males. If there were thirty names written on a card in a science fiction novel, about half would be males — and, in that town, that half consisted of high-school students and their teachers. (I don't believe that sampling is a true one because *there* all the borrowers knew me or knew of me. This was curiosity to know what I was doing. The other library showing male-to-female ratios is more accurate.)

Writing science fiction is more demanding and a little less fun, unless I'm deliberately writing a fun book. I'm painfully aware of my lack of education in physics, astronomy or whatever is required for the task at hand, and so I rely on pseudo-science, which robs the reader. Whenever and wherever possible, I write a basic mystery novel placed in a science fiction setting. I feel safest when I employ only one science-fictional gadget — a time machine, perhaps — and then form the remainder in a mystery or an adventure mould. I once wrote an historical novel in this way, which came off rather well. I can do nothing but envy writers like Poul Anderson who have a firm knowledge of science.

Walker

I'd also like to know why you've remained in fandom. What 'good' is fandom anyway? — to pose a rhetorical question.

Tucker

I've stayed in fandom (my entry was circa 1931) because I thoroughly enjoy it, everything in it: the people, the fanzines, the conventions and the long-term friends who have developed from what were only 'people' in the beginning. I first became acquainted with Don Wollheim, as an example, about 1933-34, and met him the first time in 1939; since then we have remained in contact via fitful correspondence and infrequent meetings at conventions. We had an enjoyable talk at Toronto, together with his wife, and this kind of thing has been going on for about forty years. And at my last convention in Champaign, Illinois, a few months ago, I became acquainted with two brand-new people (to me) from Nashville who — I hope — remain friends for many years to come. It's a never-ending process, and I remain in fandom because I like it.

I learned to write in fandom and for many years published there, taking a beating from critics who weren't bashful about discussing my shortcomings; of course, those critics helped me to do better, whether I fully realised it or not. In one larger sense, publishing in fanzines was my writer's school, and I would recommend it over any of those commercial mail-order schools. Fandom can be 'good' for you if you want to write and publish, if you want to mix with peers, if you *must* display your ego or burst.

Walker

Assuming you were asked to prepare a Viking Portable Wilson Tucker, what works would you select as your best, as your most representative? Also, please list those works you consider your worst.

The definitive Tucker

My choices of best novels, in descending order:

- 1 *The Lincoln Hunters* (Rinehart, 1958; Ace Books, 1968)
- 2 *The Long, Loud Silence* (Rinehart, 1952; Dell Books, 1954; Lancer Books, 1970)
- 3 *The Warlock* (Doubleday, 1967; Avon Books, 1969)
- 4 *The Year of the Quiet Sun* (Ace Books, 1970)
- 5 *Wild Talent* (Rinehart, 1954; Bantam Books, 1955; Avon Books, 1966).

The worst books, which are thankfully out of print:

- 1 *The City in the Sea* (Rinehart, 1951)
- 2 *To the Tombaugh Station* (Ace, 1960).

— Paul Walker, Bob Tucker, 1975

The person

Starling editors' (Hank and Lesleigh Luttrell) original introduction to this article: 'Bob Tucker first appeared in *Starling* 16, with an odd little article about how he was allowing his hair to grow a bit longer. By *Starling* 17, Tucker was already attending and reporting on rock festivals. This article deals with an aspect of Tucker's life that may be a surprise to those who thought he was a science fiction writer.'

Bob Tucker

A thousand and one nights at the Bijou

[First appeared in *Starling*, No. 27, January 1974, pp. 23-8.]

When I was 17½ years old my father apprenticed me out as a projectionist in a sleazy little downtown theatre affectionately known to its patrons as 'The Bucket of Blood'. A lovely name, and one that must have decorated similar establishments in other cities. This theatre gained the name because it was small (300 seats), intimate (the ladies of the street met their customers there), cozy (it had a coal-burning stove down front near the screen), cheap (tickets were only 10 cents), and was located but a half-block from wino row. The name also applied because the theatre possessed wildlife. Patrons were accustomed to stepping on roaches as they marched, lurched or staggered down the aisle to their seats, and it was sometimes necessary to swat rats or mice from those seats before sitting down. I never heard a report of a rodent or a wino being stepped on. The intimate little theatre also had its quota of birds, hungry sparrows which came in from the back alley through a hole in the wall just above the screen; the birds competed with the roaches and rodents for the stale popcorn carpeting the floor.

It was a keen theatre in keen times, the best of times — the Depression year of 1932 when somebody named Mr Hoover was on his way out and somebody else named Mr Roosevelt was on his way in. The bitter Republicans of the day called him 'King Franklin'. I'd been attending that theatre as a paying patron for ever so long and knew every slashed seat, every broken chair-arm. I was a loyal fan of Tom Mix, Jack Hoxie and Mary Philbin.

You don't remember Mary Philbin? Shame on you.

When stated baldly, 'my father apprenticed me out' sounds as if I'd been sold to the salt mines as a slave, there to eke out a precarious living for the rest of my days in Dickens-like misery. Bosh and nonsense. It was the first run up the ladder to fame, fortune and a pinch of glory. In those days, the projectionists' and stagehands' union was a closed circle tighter than the AMA, and only blood relatives need apply. I applied

eagerly, because the only job I had was that of a delivery boy for a printing company where I earned a dollar a day — and that sum was a bit less than much even for Depression times. In March 1932 the union assigned me to the Bucket of Blood, the smallest, grungiest and most archaic theatre in town, and advised me to sink or swim. It was sound advice. The equipment was the oldest and the least reliable, the film was the most beat-up stock remaining in the vaults, and the apprentice who survived the Bucket of Blood could work in any other theatre with little trouble.

I survived forty years.

The first movie, my very first picture projected with my own two hands and an electric motor which didn't always maintain speed, was *Hell's Angels*. Somebody named Mr Howard Hughes produced it and two somebodies named Mr Ben Lyon and Mr James Hall acted in it, along with a lovely blonde named Miss Jean Harlow. I was quite thrilled and managed not to muck up the film, or get my feet tangled in the drive belts. I also spent more time watching the picture than watching the machinery, and had to be reminded what I was there for. The reels were small, each containing from seven to ten minutes of film, and so it was frequently necessary to switch back and forth (by hand) from one projector to the other, all evening long. Because I was the green hand I was awarded the job of rewinding the reels, all evening long. (It was a great day when electric rewinds were installed several years later.) First impressions being what they are, I should have total recall of *Hell's Angels* but, alas, I do not. I remember only that it was filled with serial dogfights, officers snapping at enlisted men, and Jean Harlow standing behind a canteen counter doling out tee, coffee and hot chocolate to the weary flyboys. Each time Mr Lyon or Mr Hall worked up enough courage to approach the blonde and beg for a date or other favours, some other churlish character in the picture would saunter up to the counter and cry 'Another chocolate, please miss!' Romance took a beating.

For the first several years I kept a record book, a diary of all the pictures shown wherever I worked. The book listed the title, the stars, the number of reels, the producing company, the print number and other pertinent data concerning the film itself. Today I kick myself — frequently, severely — because I abandoned the record-keeping after several years and several hundred flics, thus cutting myself off from a treasure trove of trivia memory. Record-keeping had become a chore and I failed to realise the value the diary would afford me today. Names like George Bancroft, Richard Barthelmess, Monte Blue, Lionel Atwill, Madge Evans, Ann Harding, Anita Page . . . ah, thousands of names, really . . . would brighten my old age when I had retired from The Theatre. Just mark me down a damned fool.

Are you sure you don't remember Mary Philbin?

Surviving my apprenticeship, I was eventually hired by the same theatre and continued to work there until 1939, seven years in all. (And like many of our patrons, I also became acquainted with my first street lady there. The friendship lasted more than two decades.) During my first five years the Bucket showed single features and changed the program three times a week, perhaps 780 pictures in all; during the next two years they offered double features with the same three changes a week, which added another 600-odd flics to my diary. I would estimate that I'd seen 1400 pictures by the time I left there and moved up another rung. (Today, alas, the old Bucket is long gone, the entire block of buildings torn down to make room for a new courthouse. Who in hell needs a new courthouse?)

The next run up the ladder was a lark, a lovely cup of tea. Once again it was a small theatre (500 seats) located about two blocks in the other direction across skid row, and once again it became meeting place for the street ladies and their comers, but it had two really nice things going for it and after a while a third fringe benefit was added: the house had new projection and sound equipment, and it had about a dozen rooms on the second floor — hotel rooms for rent by the hour or the night, rooms which could be reached only by climbing the stairs running past the projection room door. Because you are a bright fan, you instantly perceive my position. My brother and I rented a room on a monthly basis from the landlady (who also owned the theatre) and it was there, upstairs, that I really learned how to play poker, drink well and wench in all-night sessions which began as soon as the movies ended at midnight. I became a dissolute projectionist, a skilled poker hound, a boozier who learned how to drink without hangovers, and I became acquainted with every lady and customer who trod those stairs. I also got acquainted with several members of the police force because they trod the same stairs frequently — sometimes as non-paying customers and sometimes as raiders making their monthly quota.

That lark continued for nearly ten years before I was transferred to yet another theatre a distance away. Those were the war years and their immediate aftermath, 1939–49, and the Andrews Sisters made a new picture every month using the same hoary plot: marching up and down flights of stairs singing patriotic songs by night, and working on assembly lines by day to Help Our Boys. I watched Victor Mature,

Hedy Lamarr, Alice Faye, Don Ameche, Joseph Calleia and Tex Ritter. I was rather fond of Tex Ritter, who knew the proper way to sit on a horse. In one of those early years after going to work at the lark, a third fringe benefit was added: the landlady purchased the saloon next door to the theatre. She had made so much money selling tickets below and beds above that she cast about for a wise way to invest her money, and decided on another profitable line: booze. She promptly installed the theatre manager as saloon manager.

Well, Henry, we were in clover.

It was an open secret the theatre manager was robbing her till every night, and now he was given the splendid opportunity to rob the one next door by day. Business was so good at all three establishments that they both earned tidy livings without harming the other. If you owned a theatre during wartime you could sell tickets to anything, and often did; there were long lines at the box office. Sin and booze have always been at the top of the best-seller charts. The dissolute projectionists (my brother, myself and a few others who drifted in and out) kept the inner fires warm with free booze handed out next door and kept the pictures on the screen to entertain those solid citizens who worked on assembly lines by day and paid a quarter by night to watch the Andrews Sisters strut around in patriotic costumes. I would estimate another 3000 movies during those ten years at the lark; they always showed double features, and frequently threw in comedies, serials and newsreels as well. Are you quite certain you don't remember Mary Philbin? How about Donald Meek? Alan Dinehart? Patricia Ellis? Jean Muir? Walter Huston? Well, jeez, where were all you people during the great war, the *second* great war? The Republicans called it King Franklin's war.

Although they were far from new — they were usually second, third or even fourth-run films by the time they reached us — I saw for the first time some of the better films of that decade: *Gone With the Wind* (which was entertaining the first ten or twelve times), *Fantasia*, *A Bell for Adano*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Kismet*, *The Outlaw* (never mind Jane Russell; keep your eye on two pros, Walter Huston and Thomas Mitchell), *The Bank Dick*, *Goodbye Mr Chips*, *Between Two Worlds* (which may have been an uncredited remake of *Outward Bound*), oh, thousands. Perhaps three hundred of the aforementioned three thousand were worthwhile; the remainder were potboilers. I remember the magnificent horses in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, the beautiful camera work which captured those horses during the charge, but Errol Flynn and his cohorts can be dismissed. Always keep your eye on the horses. And by chance did you ever see a picture called *Adam's Rib*, about 1949? It's worth watching because of Judy Holliday. She played second fiddle, a supporting role to Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn. Ten years earlier John Ford made the second-best picture of his career, *Stagecoach*, and if you have the opportunity to watch it on the telly, do so: it's rewarding. You can safely ignore John Wayne — he was as hammy then as he is today — but pay close attention to Claire Trevor and Thomas Mitchell who, along with the cameraman, made that classic what it is today. The photography is purely

stunning, particularly those scenes involving running horses and marauding Indians, and I like to think the cameraman was a genius who knew his job better than did Ford. Some shots, especially those of the stagecoach in flight from pursuing Indians, were deliberately modelled after the famous Western paintings by Russell, Remington and possibly others.

I made an excursion in the middle of the decade: in 1946 I treated myself to a California vacation, partly to attend the Worldcon in Los Angeles that year, and partly to spend some of my ill-gotten gains. My first mystery novel, *The Chinese Doll*, had been published and I was filthy rich for a little while, until the money was dissipated. After the convention in July I was knocking about the town and chanced to stop in at union headquarters to say hello, and go through the motion of asking for work — just to see if it was available. It was. I was given a job immediately and sent to work at the 20th Century Fox studios, where I spent the next three or four months watching them making the potboilers I'd been showing for so long. It was an education. I saw Maureen O'Hara, she who'd made so many potboilers, and actually worked on the one then being filmed, a horse-raising and racing picture whose title has long since vanished into the limbo of senility. I was among the electricians who wired the racetrack tote board which showed the odds when her horse won, and I helped rig the phony wiring on a phony ship when she and her racing steeds sailed for Argentina or wherever they were going. When she entered her stateroom and snapped the wall switch the overhead lights went on, but that wall switch and the conduit leading to it were dummies; the electricians on the catwalks above the set lit their lamps. I wired a locomotive headlight, which pulled into a railroad station and took on board Ronald Coleman and company for a trip to Boston, and later I helped wire the street lights in the park so that Mr Coleman would be illuminated when he strolled through the park.

It was fakery, of course. He strolled through the park in daylight with filters over the camera lenses to suggest darkness, and the lighted street lamps helped further the illusion.

I showed George Montgomery how to turn on the switch on a 16 mm projector, in a Raymond Chandler picture called *The Brasher Doubloon* (*The High Window*) because the poor man didn't know how to start the projector; and later I watched a stunt man take a fall from a twelve-story window when the plot called for a victim to suffer defenestration. Fakery again. The stunt man dropped out of a window about fifteen feet above his concealed net. I helped hang, and later rehung the same chandelier in the dining room of Mr Coleman's Boston house. It was my task to light up a small test stage where John Payne was undergoing camera tests for some forthcoming pictures; he and a utility actress were rattling on about a streetcar he wanted to buy for his very own. Along with a crew of other electricians I worked for weeks on a musical starring June Haver and a Mark Somebody, a turgid drama about the little girl making good in the big theatre. The theatre was real — a complete auditorium and stage existed in the studio — but all the people in the balcony were painted in, or on, or whatever. It was while I worked on Hollywood sets and

climbed the rigging above them that I satisfied myself about a minor mystery on the soundtrack of an old Bert Lytell movie. I confirmed a suspicion.

Bert Lytell was a Broadway actor who wandered into pictures by mistake, I like to think, or perhaps he needed the spare change. In the early and middle thirties he was cast as a detective known as the Lone Wolf and he went about solving dark deeds and foul crimes. He was a contemporary of Chester Morris and Warren William but older than either, and more polished, although like them he was continually being flung into grade B and C melodramas which were cranked out on a shoestring and a monthly shooting schedule. In some long-forgotten picture which played at the Bucket of Blood he was seen descending a staircase just after confronting a lady in her upstairs parlour; pausing a moment at the bottom to peer into the dining room, he contemplates his next move in thoughtful silence. The sound of a fart is clearly heard on the soundtrack, and Mr Lytell glances heavenward with a frown on his face. When I was in Hollywood I romped around on those very same catwalks above the sets, where some long-ago electrician had expressed his critical opinion of the Lone Wolf.

The next move in my struggling career was made about 1949 or 1950 when I was again transferred to a neighbourhood theatre two blocks from a college campus. I stayed there three years, and another 600 pictures. Some of the earlier pictures, such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Fantasia*, caught up to me there, beginning their second or third general round of playoffs, but the only notable event of that stay was the coed who belonged to the theatre. She didn't attach herself to a particular man; she attached herself to the theatre and various men in it. It and they were her property, and I've often wondered if she was the college bum so often heard of; I know she was there longer than the customary four years. I was transferred to that theatre to replace a man who was being moved into a vacancy downtown, and as that man left he said to me 'Watch out for Maggie'. It developed that he, among others, had been dating Maggie for quite some time. The door to the projection room was pulled open one night when I'd been there a few weeks, and Maggie marched in. She helped herself to the coffee we always kept brewing, pulled a chair up to the porthole, placed the headset on her ears and sat down to watch the picture. Maintaining my usual dignity and aplomb, I went on reading my fanzine. (That was the way I spent my time during the trouble-free hours; after the picture had been watched the first time through I fell back on the fanzines which had arrived that day. I suppose I've read thousands of them while on duty.)

At the end of the show Maggie put away the headset and the chair, washed out her coffee cup and asked me if I had a car. I did. She then told me I was taking her home. I probably took her home several times in the following years, and when I finally left the theatre to take my rightful place in the sun at a downtown first-run house she was working there as a cashier. Perhaps she is still there, dating the manager or the doorman.

How long has it been since you've seen Buck Jones or Raymond Hatton?

A first-run downtown house is the ultimate goal of

every self-respecting and lazy projectionist because of several factors. It pays the best, it usually has the most reliable equipment, it changes pictures only once a week or once a month depending on the popularity of the film, and the film itself is fresh and new and a joy to work with. Right out of the vaults, with nary a scratch or a broken sprocket hole. I moved into the downtown house in 1953 and lasted nineteen years before they tied the sack to my tail. It is difficult to estimate the number of pictures viewed during that long period because of the vagaries of programming; better ones stayed four and five weeks. If I may assign a rough average of one picture per week for nineteen years, I witnessed another 980 flics to make a grand total of five thousand, nine hundred and eighty. Sometimes I think that's too much.

The first novelty of the day was three-dimensional pictures, but that novelty wore off pretty fast and theatres everywhere were stuck with equipment they didn't want and couldn't use. Both projectors were used at the same time, running in perfect synchronisation with each other; the film companies furnished two prints of a picture marked 'Left' and 'Right' and those prints would only be used in the proper projector. The film was wound on large reels capable of holding an hour or more of programming, the 3-D pictures were made so that they never ran more than two hours — no more than one intermission in the middle was necessary — while the projectionist placed the two second reels in the two machines. The audience wore thin plastic or gelatin glasses which allowed the left eye to see the image projected by the left projector, and the right eye to see the other image from the right projector. The two images on the screen were a small distance apart, which gave the illusion of depth, or 'third dimension'. The fad didn't last long. People objected to wearing the glasses, people declined to spend money to see the wretched pictures, and people with only one working eye were shamefully cheated. I never saw much in 3-D pictures myself; I was blind in one eye.

At about the same time a process called Cinerama appeared in the very largest cities. It was frightfully expensive because it required three cameras to film a scene, and then three projectors in the theatres to reproduce the scene on a giant screen which stretched all the way around you from ear to ear. Later, with the development of superior lenses, the three projectors were reduced to only one, but that fad too went its way.

The last invention, or development, the one that saved theatres from bankruptcy in the dog days of the fifties, was the process called Cinemascope. This process is principally a superior lens system which, on a camera, can see twice as much as a single lens, and in a theatre can project a picture almost twice as wide as the old standard picture. The film itself is also treated in a different matter to prevent distortion and exaggeration; on the film people and objects appear as thin as toothpicks, but once the image is passed

through the Cinemascope lenses they regain their normal proportions on the screen — no matter the size of that screen. (The lens train and the screen must be matched, of course, when they are installed in a theatre. Once the size of a proposed screen is known, and the distance between the project and the screen is measured, lenses can be assembled to match.) My first two Cinemascope pictures in 1953 were *The Robe*, which bored me, and *Niagara*. Marilyn Monroe was nice, but the Falls were much the more impressive.

There is really little more to tell, except of my downfall. I stayed the nineteen years in that theatre, with only small side excursions. Because I was one of the few men who knew the workings of every theatre in town I was used as relief man during sick spells and vacations, and I shuttled about a lot between the indoor houses and the drive-in, but in the main I remained at the downtown first-run house until March 1972, and if you are a sharp-eyed fan you will have noticed that my sometimes glorious, sometimes fortunate career lasted forty years to the month. Fate struck in a devil's guise, an instrument of Satan called automation. Many theatres were facing bankruptcy again because of shoddy pictures, dirty theatres and incompetent management. It is an axiom of the entertainment business that when trade falls off you don't improve the product or cut prices; you fire the help. My downtown theatre had long fallen on evil times, and like many others in similar misfortune had turned to skin flics to survive. (The most amusing skin flic I saw was one in which a blonde Swedish sexpot and an actor playing an orchestra conductor did their thing on a bed to the accompaniment of the William Tell Overture. It revived my sense of wonder.) The devil sold the theatre company a number of automation units to install in their string of theatres, and my career came to an inglorious end. Automation, when it works, is so simple an usher, a doorman or even the manager, if he cares to soil his hands, can operate it, and high-priced projectionists are no longer needed.

I miss the Bucket of Blood and its colourful collection of patrons, I miss the sparrows squirming through the hole in the wall above the screen and the smoky coal stove below the screen. I miss that other larkly theatre, with the ladies upstairs and the manager handing out booze next door, I miss the coed who adopted a theatre and its personnel. I miss Warner Baxter and Tim McCoy and William Powell and Paul Muni and Slim Summerville and Marie Dressler and Zasu Pitts. I miss Leslie Howard.

If you'd care to see a superior version of *My Fair Lady*, try to see *Pygmalion* (1938) with Leslie Howard and Wendy Hiller. And in the meantime keep an eye open for Mary Philbin. She had lovely long dark hair to her waist.

— Bob Tucker, 1974

The mysteries

Introduction to the 1975 edition:

'**Lesleigh Luttrell**'s achievements within science fiction fandom are too many to remember, let alone list. With Hank Luttrell, she is famous as co-editor of *Starling*, one of the very best fanzines since it was revived in 1969. Under her Official Editorship, APA-45 had the most successful four years of its run as one of the best-known amateur press associations. Lesleigh was the first winner of the Down Under Fan Fund (DUFF), undertaking a very successful trip to Australia in 1972, and has done a great deal to make sure that DUFF has remained successful. Her most recent achievements include articles about subjects as diverse as Carl Barks and Dorothy Sayers, mainly for *Starling*, and the fact that she initiated and was an Official Editor for the Cinema Amateur Press Association. Lesleigh and Hank live in Madison, Wisconsin, where Lesleigh is completing her PhD in physical anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, and Hank is publishing fanzines, writing reviews and fiction, and organising a new SF club.'

Introduction to the 2003 edition:

Lesleigh and Hank split up in the late seventies, and Lesleigh remarried and left fandom in the mid 1980s. She continues to work at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and recently sent me an email that brought her story up to date: 'Things are okay in my life. I still really like Madison, love my job (one of many I've had over the years at the University, and this is my favorite so far) and am very happy in my personal life. I don't mind being over 50 (52 in May) as I spend my days with people much younger than myself (undergraduates) and at least some of my free time with people much older (I work with a Senior Center). So I get to be the grown-up during the day, and the youngster at my volunteer activities. The sad part of getting older is that people you love die, and others have health problems. I guess that happened when we were younger too, but it seems more frequent now' (17 April 2003).

Lesleigh Luttrell

The mysterious Wilson Tucker

Warning: This article reveals the ends of some mystery novels.

Most people who are reading this article will have heard of Wilson Tucker, famous science fiction writer, author of such classics as *The Long Loud Silence*, *The Lincoln Hunters* and *The City in the Sea*. Most of you have probably also heard of that legendary fan Bob Tucker, editor of *Le Zombie*, fan writer and famous connoisseur of Beam's Choice.

But fewer of you will be acquainted with the real Wilson Tucker. Hardly anyone knows that Wilson Tucker the SF author, Bob Tucker the fan, and Hoy Ping Pong are merely alter egos of that famous American mystery writer, Wilson Tucker.

Mr Tucker is well known in mystery circles as the author of eleven novels in the mystery-detective genre published between 1946 and 1971. These novels cover the major facets of American mystery fiction — private detective, suspense and spy novels, and several of them are minor classics. The fact that Mr

Tucker has never won an Edgar only proves mystery writers and fans can be as ignorant when it comes to giving out their awards as SF people are.

Unlike most other major American mystery writers, Edgar Allan Poe, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Mary Roberts Rinehart, etc., Mr Tucker is still alive. Thus he was able to explain to this writer just why he started writing mysteries. Mr Tucker stated that he had read and enjoyed many mysteries, especially of the Erle Stanley Gardner-A. A. Fair variety, before he decided to take quill in hand and write his first mystery novel, *The Chinese Doll*. To his surprise, he discovered that mystery editors were much more perceptive than SF editors, and this novel sold the second time out. Not only that, but mystery editors actually paid to print his stuff, something pretty rare in SF circles at the time, and as yet unheard of in fandom. So he kept writing mysteries for the money, and of course, for the satisfaction.

Mr Tucker says: 'I've often said that I write science fiction for fun, and mysteries for money, but that is

no longer true. Science fiction now pays as well as mysteries, except that one must wait a longer number of years for the totals to equal. And I have pure, sheer *fun* researching mysteries.' It is probably a sign of these degenerate times that Tucker now gets paid more for writing that crazy Buck Rogers stuff, which can't possibly be true, than for writing a nice, quiet realistic story about a bloody murder. But it is true, since science fiction books now stay in print much longer, going through lots of paperback and foreign editions, while mysteries no longer fare so well. At least we have Tucker's word that he will continue to write mysteries for the fun of it.

While mystery readers are sure to enjoy Wilson Tucker's works, they are unlikely to get as much out of them as do the SF fans who venture afield to read a Tucker mystery. For it is in his first mystery novel that Tucker invents the famous and much-imitated Tuckerisms. For the uninitiated, a Tuckerism is a veiled reference to some person or thing familiar to fans but not to mundanes, hidden somewhere in the body of a work of fiction. Surely this type of private joke is not unique to Tucker and his imitators. Ghu only knows how many theses are written by literature students every year about just this sort of thing in the work of more famous literary figures, such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Spillane. But as far as fandom is concerned, Tucker invented Tuckerisms, and no one has ever come up with a better name for them.

What inspired Tucker to invent Tuckerisms, which have amused generations of fans? The instant of inspiration is hidden in the mists of the past, but Tucker explains that he started to use them mainly for his own amusement, and for the amusement of the fans who were Tuckerised. Being Tuckerised is a great honour, given to but few fans. But Mr Tucker is careful to point out that he tries not to use fannish names as the names of major characters, lest anyone get upset at an extended portrait of a character bearing their name. But this just adds to the fun, since it makes it that much more difficult to scout out all the Tuckerisms in a particular volume. The intrepid and knowledgeable reader will find that Tuckerisms add that much more to their enjoyment of Tucker's works.

It is possible to divide Wilson Tucker's mysteries into three distinct periods. It's not necessary to do so, of course, but did you ever read a literary article which didn't divide the subject's work up into periods? So, the three periods are: the early period, the five novels written mainly in the mid to late forties which feature Tucker's private detective Charles Horne; the Transitional Period, the three novels written in the late fifties and early sixties which are ventures into other aspects of the mystery field; and the Modern Period, consisting of the three novels written in the late sixties and early seventies.

The early period

The Chinese Doll

The Chinese Doll, Tucker's first mystery novel, appeared in 1946 from Rinehart in a Murray Hill Mystery Edition, and later as an attractive Dell paperback with that sure mark of a good mystery novel, a

map on the back cover. This novel introduces the private detective Charles Horne. Horne lives and works in the small Illinois town of Boone, which is obviously Bloomington, where Tucker lived for a long time. Horne is based on Tucker himself, in appearance and other general characteristics. The first picture the reader gets of Horne is this self-description that Horne ascribes to his new client: 'He also thought I was a skinny, dumb-looking creature who might pass for a private detective in a custard-pie comedy, but he didn't say so with his lips.'

Horne makes up in persistence and occasional flashes of intelligence what he lacks in appearance, though. Most of Horne's remunerative cases do not come from clients who walk in off the street with a nice murder mystery or a little divorce work (which most fictional private detectives won't admit to accepting). Instead Horne does most of his work for a Chicago insurance company, investigating local applicants and claims. In this respect, Horne is probably just a bit more realistic than most other fictional private detectives of the period, not that it makes any difference to the story.

This first book also introduces a few other regular characters, such as Lt Wiedenback, Horne's friendly enemy in the police force, and the romantic interest, Dr Elizabeth Saari. Curious to know why Tucker had chosen to make the lady a doctor, I asked him to explain. He claimed he did it only as a plot device. He also mentioned that the reason Dr Saari is such a sympathetic character is that she is based on several women he liked at the time.

Since it was written in the 1940s, the use of a private detective as the main character puts *The Chinese Doll* in the mainstream of American detective fiction of that time. The novel also features murder, sex and big city vices like gambling. What sets it apart from most mystery fiction of the time is the setting, central Illinois, and the format — the book is done as a series of letters from Charles Horne to an estranged wife living in another city. Actually, the chapters resemble letters only in that they begin with a date and a salutation and are written in the first person. The book includes dialogue, etc., just as if it were a more usual type of narrative.

The main plot device is not just the letters, but the fact that their recipient, Louise, is revealed at the end of the book to be the ring leader of the gangsters who have committed all the dastardly deeds in the book. Horne is a little slow to figure this out, but he finally does awaken to the fact when his wife is a little too quick to send flowers to his hospital room after Horne has been incapacitated by a severe beating from some of the gangsters. Horne also seems a little thick-headed in not knowing what type of person his wife really is.

Because the book is done as a series of letters to the real 'villain', Anthony Boucher compared it favourably to Agatha Christie's classic *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Boucher claimed Tucker had done Christie one better, something a lot of mystery writers at the time wanted to do. But the odd thing is that Tucker had no intention of doing so when he wrote *The Chinese Doll*, and had in fact not even read *Roger Ackroyd*. Even though Tucker hadn't been trying to do an Ackroyd-like book, he ended up with one which

was somewhat like that Christie novel, although perhaps a bit fairer to the reader. On the other hand, it is not really an improvement on *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. The reader never really does get to know the true villain, Louise, through the body of the narrative in the way that the reader of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* comes to appreciate the character of that murderer. The prime fault of *The Chinese Doll* is that the reader never does learn very much about Louise, Horne's ex-wife. She is merely the recipient of his letters, and nothing we learn about Horne really prepares us to believe that he could have married such a conscienceless woman. This is the most unbelievable part of the book. It is easy to believe the parts about gambling dens on the edges of small Illinois towns, corrupt city governments and the murder of people who know too much. But the characters are not completely believable.

The most unbelievable character is the first murder victim, Harry W. Evans. It is almost impossible to reconcile the character we meet in Horne's office shortly before his murder, the associate of gamblers and the keeper of a Chinese mistress, with the man whose background Horne investigates in the book. For Harry Evans was a fan.

Horne, upset by the hit-and-run murder of Evans just as he walks out of Horne's office, decides to investigate his death. He contacts Evans's attorney to try to find out something about the man. He learns that Evans had three hobbies: 'Collecting first editions of fantasy literature, dabbling in table-top photography, publishing a paper in some amateur journalism society'. With this slender lead, Horne asks the local librarian to help get in touch with this amateur journalism society. Amazingly enough, she knows of several such groups and is able to pinpoint the correct one: 'The third outfit, smallest of the three but the only one having international membership, specialised in fantasy and weird books'. Of course it's an apa, but not only that, it's a Tuckerised version of FAPA. So, in order to learn more about Evans, Horne travels to Chicago to meet with one of the members, Joquel Kennedy.

This trip leads to the most entertaining chapters in the book. While looking for Kennedy's home, Horne runs across a large crowd in front of a store window, watching 'Roberto — The Electric Man!' Horne and one other young man in the crowd aren't fooled, but while confiding to each other that it's a damned good act, Horne discovers that the other guy is Joquel Kennedy. After discussing the peculiarities of people who believe that 'a real robot would be used in a drug store window selling hair oil', they go on to discuss Horne's real interest, the murder of Harry W. Evans.

Kennedy is shocked by the murder, and tells Horne that he knew Evans well, 'But I've never met him in my life, if that's what you mean. We had an extensive correspondence, swapped a few books and things like that. Each of us always said we were going to run over and see the other, but we never got around to it.' Which is as good an introduction to fandom as any private detective could want. Kennedy also shows Horne some fanzines, his own *Le Zombi* (a Tuckerism of Tucker's own fanzine) and Evans's *Rosebud*, explaining its connection with the Orson Welles movie and also that the word 'has a slangy connotation

among the membership'. Horne later confides to Louise, 'I didn't dare ask what the connotation was for fear he would tell me'. (If you want to find out what connotation Rosebud has for fans, you'll just have to ask Tucker.)

This expose of fandom and FAPA isn't the only Tuckerism in *The Chinese Doll*. Practically every character has the name of a well-known fan of the time, as you will discover if you read the book with Harry Warner's history of early fandom, *All Our Yesterdays*, at your side. Joquel Kennedy and Evans are references to fans, as is Donny Thompson, the DA in Boone, Doc Burbee, the coroner (Tucker describes him as 'addicted to gaily colored bow ties of large dimensions and forever nagging them as though they were tight around his neck'), Rothman and Leibscher, the slightly comic detective team from the neighbouring city of Croyden (a disguised Peoria) and August Ashley, Evans's attorney. Even Saari and Wiedenbeck are the names of fans. It seems unlikely that Tucker could have sold *The Chinese Doll* if his publisher had known how many real people were mentioned in it. But sell it he did, to the delight of fandom.

To Keep or Kill

To Keep or Kill, the second in the Charles Horne series, appeared in 1947. Again most of the novel takes place in the town of Boone and environs, and again Dr Saari and Lt Wiedenbeck make appearances. By this time the Horne-Saari romance has advanced a bit, with Saari having an office across the hall from Horne and living in the same rooming house, Horne obviously likes Saari, but he can perhaps be accused of having less than honourable intentions toward her. It is hard to blame him for this, though, after his bad experience with Louise in the previous book. 'He found Dr Saari to be an intelligent, attractive, chestnut-haired model with all the standard fixtures; about twenty-seven years old, and single. It pleased him.' Fortunately Saari is a strong enough character to stand up to Horne, able to badger him about his health even while she worries about him. But she's not the only female character in this book with an interest in Horne.

To Keep or Kill begins with a bang, literally, as Horne witnesses a man being blown to kingdom come by a bomb planted in his car, a bomb which is powerful enough to knock out every window on the street and injure bystanders, including Horne. Such a bomb would be an almost unremarkable occurrence in these days of terrorists, but it was not so usual then, and several of the characters seem to think it may have been an A-bomb somehow reduced to an incredibly small size. (Who would have thought of such a thing, except a science fiction writer?) Fortunately for the plot, it turns out to be no such thing, but simply a more ordinary murder weapon. The victim happens to have a rather large policy with the insurance company that Horne sometimes works for, so he sets out to investigate the murder and subsequent insurance claim. He finds that the victim has left the proceeds of the policy to a local animal hospital. That doesn't seem so unusual to me, but it does to Horne and the police. From here on, though, the plot gets a little ridiculous.

It turns out to be insurance fraud all right, but a

fraud rigged by the head of the insurance company and run by his daughter Betty. She is an unusual redhead with ideas of her own about how a life of crime should be lived. She has been following Horne around Boone to make sure that he keeps out of the way, and, when he starts to become dangerous to the plot, she pays the other conspirators to keep them from killing him. In other words, she buys him, as she tells Horne after he is kidnapped: 'I bought you, Jack. Paid out good, hard-earned cash for you. My own money, too! I bought your life for my amusement. I liked you.' This seems to have all the makings of a good pornography novel — a beautiful woman, a captive man, an isolated house — but since it's a mystery, Horne manages to avoid the questionable scenes by getting drunk whenever things start to get interesting.

Betty is a strong, cynical character. She tells Horne that her toughness is derived from her months in the army and her subsequent desertion: 'That war was a racket. Why should I work like a bitch for fifty dollars a month when big men were getting fifty a minute?' A good question. Unfortunately, Tucker ruins a good character by giving her one quirk too many, the desire to have Horne for her very own. And, to make things come out even, Tucker has to kill her off at the end of the book by having her electrocuted accidentally. Too bad, since she had the brains to be a really decent villain. Even in death she can't escape her quirk though, as she leaves Horne her life savings, a room full of silver dollars. (Unfortunately, as we learn in the next book, the government doesn't let Horne keep any of it.)

Although there aren't many Tuckerisms in this book, Tucker does manage to slip in just a few, such as Dr Lainy, the vet at Boone Animal Hospital, and E. E. Everettes, the crooked head of the insurance company. But even without the Tuckerisms and with the flawed characters, *To Keep or Kill* is still an entertaining book.

The Dove

The Dove, released in 1948 as a Murray Hill Mystery Edition, has a lead female who makes up for all the faults of *To Keep or Kill*'s villainess. She is Leila Dove. Horne first runs into her in Boone, where she has been confined to the hospital after a train wreck (she has been riding the rods at the time). The Dove, as she signs herself, hires Horne to get her out of the hospital (where the evil Superintendent Hevelin has been trying to get her to pay the outrageous hospital bill — \$370 for a two-month stay!). She also wants him to accompany her to Hollywood. It seems that Leila Dove is actually a movie star, or was, having been a leading lady in over 100 silent oaters ('Western pitchers . . . Cowboy and Indian pitchers', for the uninformed). She tells Horne and Dr Saari (who is still interested enough in Horne to put him on a weight-gaining diet) that she needs to get back to Los Angeles to retrieve a large sum of money, all she has left in the world. She tells an almost unbelievable story about how she won the money from another silent star, Texas Tanner, in a poker game and hid it on the lot, but had never been able to go back for it. So she wants Horne to take her back for it. Horne takes the

case, despite Leila's current lack of money, because he had been a great fan of hers. 'That word fan goes hand-in-hand with another word: sap.'

This request takes Horne to Hollywood, paralleling Tucker's own trip there not long before. Tucker had gone to Los Angeles in 1946, and for some months worked as an electrician on 20th Century Fox's lot. So it is not surprising that Leila tells Horne that the only man she really trusted on the old film lot was an electrician. The descriptions of Los Angeles and of the film studio that Horne eventually explores, Foto-Film, are drawn directly from Tucker's own experiences there.

Despite the careful descriptions of locales around Los Angeles, it is in *The Dove* that Tucker makes his classic mistake. When Horne and Leila are on their way to LA, 'They crossed the Illinois River at St Louis just before sunset.' Of course, everyone knows that it is the Mississippi that one would cross when entering St Louis from the east. Tucker corrected this mistake in his next book, and since then he has probably been more careful than most writers in researching the area where his story is to be set.

Besides offering the pipe-smoking, tough-talking, delightful character of Leila Dove, *The Dove* also has a pretty interesting plot. Horne is suspicious about the real reason that Leila wants to return to LA, and what happened to the first private detective she hired, many years before, to help retrieve her money. He is suspicious of Texas Tanner, now a famous director who has a habit of making a brief appearance in every picture without saying a word as 'homage to the silents'. (He, like Leila, was forced to quit acting when talkies came in, because of his voice.) Horne doesn't like Leila's old boyfriend, Sully Wantozki, either. So he snoops around on his own, and discovers that his joking remark back in Boone that Leila must have a 'skeleton buried somewhere' is truer than he thought — there really is a skeleton buried at her old home. He discovers that the reason Texas Tanner hates Leila is because he believes she has been blackmailing him with a pornographic movie taken at a wild Hollywood party back in the silent days. This must be some film, but again Tucker avoids a potentially pornographic situation by giving only tantalising hints about what sorts of embarrassing scenes feature Tanner and Leila in this movie. He learns that the blackmail payments were put into a copy of *Darker Than You Think*, by Jack Williams, in the public library (supposedly in 1924–28, long before the actual book by that title was published). And finally, he learns what really happened to the first private detective: he was murdered by Sully, the real blackmailer. Again it's hard to understand why Sully would do such a thing — blackmail his own girlfriend as well as Tanner, and murder to keep the secret. Tucker doesn't seem able to yet to create a believable villain, except by telling the reader almost nothing about him and letting the reader imagine for himself the villainous character. But it's easy to forgive him this oversight in *The Dove*, when there are characters like Tanner, the Dove and Horne to examine.

The Stalking Man

The remaining two Charles Horne mysteries, *The*

Stalking Man (1949) and *Red Herring* (1951), stick to the Midwest for their locales, but venture further afield than Boone.

The Stalking Man is something of a railroad mystery. The murder victim is a railroad agent, and he is killed when he falls under a train. Tucker is able to use some of his knowledge of railroad jargon and procedures, of railroad timetables and the hobos who ride the rods, to set the scene for this mystery. But he uses a lot more in putting this book together.

For one thing, he uses a pretty unusual murder weapon. It takes the police a long time to figure out just how the murderer caused the agent to fall under the train (although the reader has known all along). Eventually the police figure that the murderer had entangled the victim's legs by wrapping a bola around them. Tucker introduces a new female character, a reporter for the Boone paper named Willie, who is hanging around the police station because her editor wants her to dig up some 'jerk-stuff'. This, she explains, is material guaranteed to cause the readers to 'jerk their damned eyes right out of their heads' and ensure that they keep reading the paper.

Horne decides that the only way to solve the crime is to dig into the past of the victim. This digging takes him to Chicago and neighbouring Hammond, Indiana, to find out something about an old crime, the brutal murder of a theatre manager's wife. While in Hammond, Horne meets up with another lovable old character, Happy Harry, a retired postman living on a small inheritance, who spends all his money on travelling by train, ice cream and books. At one point he tells Horne the way he decides what books to buy: 'I look at page fifty. I read it. And if it sounds good, I buy it.' Happy tells Horne a lot about the background of the victim, and decides to follow Horne around on his investigations in Chicago to learn how a detective works.

Remarkably enough, Horne solves the old murder, determining that the theatre manager had killed his own wife to keep her from telling the police that he had robbed his own movie theatre. Unfortunately, Horne also solves the murder in Boone. Happy is the murderer: he was the father of the murdered woman and he had always been convinced that the man he threw under the train, the man who had been arrested after the first crime but later released because of lack of evidence, had murdered his daughter. Horne proved him wrong, and then had to lead the police to him. Here Tucker has reversed himself and thrown most of his work into painting the character of the 'villain'. But it's hard to see Harry as a real villain. He is such an attractive character that, even while it is possible to believe that he could commit a murder, it's almost impossible not to wish he could have gotten away with it.

Red Herring

Red Herring begins with the dedication: 'For AB. Dedicated, with tongue in cheek, to a critic who abhors the lack of least-suspected-persons.' AB is, of course, Anthony Boucher, and the dedication really is tongue in cheek, since the murderer in *Red Herring* is the most-suspected person.

This case gets Horne involved with some of the

richer people, the Randolphs. It appears to start out as a gag, as the youngest Randolph, Lonna, hires Horne to help her brother disappear. Horne does it, with some misgivings which cause him to call Rothman (now admittedly living in Peoria) and have him follow the man. Unfortunately, Horne's client is murdered the next night as he sleeps in the Moffatt House hotel.

Solving this murder takes Horne to St Louis, where the other Randolph brother lives, but he too has mysteriously disappeared, along with \$10,000 that a sucker had paid him for a supposed copy of a first draft of the US Constitution. The police feel that either Lonna or the missing brother must be the murderer, but can't prove anything. Horne investigates by spending an evening with Lonna, but fortunately he falls back on his trick of passing out whenever it looks like anything the least bit objectionable might happen. So *Red Herring* manages to avoid any real sex scenes. As it turns out, Lonna has actually murdered both her brothers, as the reader has suspected all along. Horne manages to catch up with her when she disappears from town, by remembering she had gotten an advertisement for a riverboat cruise. This leads to another murder as Lonna throws an innocent bystander overboard into the paddle wheel, hoping that Horne will mistake the body for hers and believe that she has committed suicide. But she underestimates Horne, and he takes her back to Boone to face the police.

Again, in *Red Herring* Tucker has put most of his efforts into creating the character of the murderer, and this time he has succeeded quite well. He has taken time along the way to work out the interesting subplot of the fake Constitution (which turns out to be a copy of a genuine document that Lonna has in her possession) and to slip in a few Tuckerisms, such as the private detective, Rothman, Donald Thompson, the alias used by the first murder victim when he registers at the Moffat House, and Woolston, the name of the crooked chemist who helped the eldest Randolph brother to sell the fake Constitution. There isn't much mystery about the book — the reader has probably known all along that Lonna was the real murderer, despite a few red herrings thrown in the path. But with the garnishments that Tucker adds to the book the lack of a real mystery is hardly noticeable.

Red Herring is the last book to feature Charles Horne *et al.*, and marks the end of the early period. During these half dozen years, Tucker has created an entertaining series of books. They are tied together as a series, not only by having the same main character and other important continuing characters, but also by having a number of other points in common. The Tuckerisms are one threat that ties them together, as is the locale.

And there is one plot device which is repeated in some form or other in every single book. This is the idea of the detective helping his adversary to learn what he is up to without realising that he is doing so. This is the main plot device in the first book, as Horne continues to write letters to his wife describing his every movement, not realising until the last part of the book that she is the ring-leader of the gangsters he is investigating. In *To Keep or Kill*, the chief bad

guy is the head of the insurance company that Horne works for, so Horne is revealing his investigations to the villains in the reports he submits to his employer, as well as in his dealings with the disguised Betty, who follows him around town before deciding to 'buy' him. In *The Dove*, Horne doesn't tell the blackmailer-murderer what he's up to, but Leila Dove does, since the true villain is her boyfriend Sully. *The Stalking Man* not only learns of Horne's progress straight from the detective himself but aids Horne in his investigation. And in *Red Herring*, Horne's employer again turns out to be the criminal that the police are looking for. This device is twisted and played on enough that it doesn't really get boring or repetitious, but it is repeated in every book.

During the early period, Wilson Tucker has turned out an interesting series of books which may be considered as regional examples of the forties American private detective. Although Horne travels as far afield as Los Angeles, his investigations are centred in Boone, Illinois and neighbouring midwestern cities. Tucker's Horne series may not always be very realistic, and so may not meet with the approval of the modern reader who demands absolute realism (or what they think is realism) in their mystery novels. Tucker's early novels are not the complete puzzles preferred by other mystery readers, although they cannot be criticised as being unfair to the reader who likes to solve the mystery before the end of the book. They are a lot of fun for the reader who is willing to accept them on their own terms, and especially for the fan who is aware of the additional dimension added by the Tuckerisms.

The transitional period

The five novels of the early period are held together not only by common characters, setting and plot devices but also by a feeling that mysteries are fun. There is a readily identifiable thread holding the three novels of the transitional or middle period together, but one can see Tucker becoming more serious about his mystery writing during this period, as he explores different areas of the genre, and turns out some good books.

The Man in My Grave

The Man in My Grave, published in 1956, is my personal favourite among Tucker's mysteries. At first glance, it does not appear very different from the Charles Horne books, since it takes place in a small Illinois town — this time, Rocky Knoll — which is not far from Tucker's home town, Bloomington — and the lead character is a private detective of sorts. But I cannot see Charles Horne investigating the type of crime which is featured in this book. For the first time, Tucker has gone to the annals of true crime for inspiration — the accounts of the nefarious deeds of Burke and Hare, the Scottish grave robbers and murderers. Tucker says that it is very likely that Anthony Boucher suggested this source to him. Wherever the original idea came from, Tucker turns it into an intriguing mystery novel.

The detective in *The Man in My Grave* is B. G.

Brooks, who works for the Association of American Memorial Parks, investigating reports of illicit practices among undertakers. He returns to his home town of Rocky Knoll, ostensibly for personal reasons. He had left the town as a young man, and has had no contact with anyone there since. So he was rather surprised to see in a book of 'uncommon epitaphs gathered from cemeteries across the country' the following entry from Rocky Knoll:

Here lies buried B. G. Brooks
Dead as a doornail — of course.

Besides the fact that the epitaph doesn't rhyme, Brooks is intrigued to learn that the townspeople think he is dead. The whole thing proves to be mainly a device to get Brooks to Rocky Knoll, but the idea of an employee of an undertakers' union being interested in this kind of graveyard humour, and finding himself too involved with it for comfort, is an excellent touch. The explanation for the mistaken grave, when presented, is fairly trivial, but one is glad to learn that the tombstone had been intended originally for a Mr Eben Morse.

The real reason for Brooks's return to Rocky Knoll is to investigate reports that the local funeral parlour is selling bodies on the black market. Brooks explains the reason for such a ghoulish practice: 'Medical schools exist in almost every state of the Union and the supply of cadavers seldom equals the demand. Especially since the war and the renaissance of higher education, medical students are constantly increasing in numbers and they must be served.' Brooks certainly doesn't condemn the medical schools, and he reinforces the importance of human anatomy courses by asking one character, 'Would you entrust your life to a surgeon who had never before operated on a human body?' Almost too ironically, it turns out that B. G. Brooks's grave is empty, the body which had been buried mistakenly as his having been snatched long before.

There isn't much real mystery about *The Man in My Grave*. Brooks finds out almost immediately that his suspicions concerning the local undertaker are justified, and the rest of the book is more or less a chase around the Illinois countryside, following bodies, digging up graves and learning just who is involved in the 'burking' organisation. Brooks himself is attached by the 'bad guys' but, unlike Horne in a similar situation, he defends himself and kills one of his attackers with the pointed end of his umbrella.

The real mystery of the book is B. G. Brooks himself. He is an extremely attractive character — intelligent and sensitive. The female lead, Ellen Miller, who is young and adventurous and a strong character, almost falls in love with Brooks. But his age and the fact that she is engaged prevent this. It is easy to understand her fascination, though. Several passages are devoted to following Brooks's thoughts on a number of subjects, including his musings on the North Star and how it changes: 'He didn't want to be alive twelve thousand years later, to lose his old friend and see a stranger take its place.' It's hard to see this kind of man as involved in this odd sort of detective work, to think of him as a good detective and a man who is tough enough to kill an attacker and to

catch several of the men he is after single-handedly. Still, it is nice to see Tucker presenting us with a detective who is more of a whole character than Horne was. Despite the flip parts of the book, and the sometimes unbelievable turns of plot, *The Man in My Grave* is a good example of a certain type of American private detective mystery, one with a main character who thinks about what he is doing and why.

Despite its serious aspects, *The Man in My Grave* does not ignore the prime attraction of Tucker's mysteries to SF fans, the Tuckerisms. Only *The Chinese Doll* has more. The inhabitants of Rocky Knoll include Sheriff Moffatt, deputy Grennell, Dr Burbee and Dr Barrett, the coroner. Barrett is described as 'a tremendously large man, smoking a very black, very rank cigar'. Tucker says this is his favourite Tuckerism, but it is also one that backfired on him, as the next time he saw Doc Barrett, he was treated to a face full of smoke from just such a cigar. Among the villains in the book are Abner Rotsler, head of Crawford mortuary, and Bloch, who runs the hotel in Rocky Knoll. 'Block and Rotsler — that figured.' And, in the nature of giving credit where credit is due, the story ends with this Tuckerism: 'Ellen found him as he was leaving the H. H. Holmes Department Store (Big White Sale now going on!).'

The Hired Target

The Hired Target (1957), originally titled *Go Down in Silence*, is really more of an adventure than a mystery. It appeared in only one edition, as half of an Ace double. The lead character is Clay Gordon, who is more of an anti-hero than Tucker's previous male leads. He shows up in Peoria, Illinois to ask an old friend for help. He is down on his luck after having been thrown out of Japan after some shady deals on the high seas. He is ready to take on any kind of a job that his friend, Anson Ford, has for him, no questions asked. The job turns out to be getting two women and a kid who are in the country illegally back to their home. The gangster husband of one woman is unwilling to take them back with him because he fears the Feds are after him for his previous misdeeds, and he doesn't want to add 'harbouring an illegal alien' to his record. Although the book begins in Illinois, the characters proceed south, so that Gordon can get them back to their island home in the Caribbean.

The characters, as well as the setting, are more exotic than in previous Tucker novels. The two women, Fugere Leotand and her sister Annette, are an alluring mixture of races. Both the southern US and the Caribbean figure prominently in the book. The main plot device is the doublecross. Ford arranges the death of the gangster employer; one of Ford's employees decides to follow Gordon to see if there is any money to be made out of the mysterious departure; Fugere doublecrosses her sister in an attempt to get the money the gangster must have left with his widow. Finally Gordon doublecrosses everyone, killing Fugere and Ford and leaving for the island paradise with Annette, her son, and her husband's money. It is not a pleasant story, but it fits into the tradition of the American hardboiled detective story, and shows Tucker beginning to experiment with other aspects of the mystery genre. However, he can't resist

falling back on that old plot device of having the 'hero' unknowingly assist his foes in finding out his movements. Gordon is not aware until late in the book that Fugere is in cahoots with Ford and is relaying their every move to him.

Despite the unpleasant aspects of the book, Tucker manages to slip in a few Tuckerisms, such as having his car full of oddly assorted characters stop 'in a small village named Heyworth to buy a bottle of milk'. Heyworth, Illinois was Tucker's home for many years. In perhaps the most esoteric of the Tuckerisms, Tucker uses the following phrase in describing Gordon's murder of Ford: 'It was but the work of a moment to pull the blade and wipe it on the victim's coat'. This is a reference to Dean Grennell's favourite phrase, 'it was but the work of a moment to wipe the blood from my blade'. This was a catch phrase that Grennell had picked up from some pulp detective magazine to use as an example of the lurid, bloody prose typical of such publications, and it was often quoted in Grennell's *Grue*. While *The Hired Target* may be most notable for this fannish coup, it is important as a book wherein Tucker begins to experiment with different sorts of characters and settings.

Last Stop

Last Stop (1963) is the most atypical of Tucker's mystery novels, because it started out as a straight novel, entitled *Blue Island, Tuesday*, written in 1948. It was later rewritten as a suspense novel and called *Death of an Iron Horse*. Doubleday bought it and retitled it. Tucker says, 'Perhaps it would have sold ten more copies under my title.' (It had only one US edition of 3000 or 4000 copies.)

This is the first novel for which Tucker did a lot of background reading. All his later novels were fairly heavily researched. *Last Stop* reflects Tucker's long-standing interest in railroads, also indicated in *The Stalking Man*. Tucker says of it, 'It's all about the last steam locomotive on a western railroad going to a watery grave when a swollen river takes out the bridge. The people on the train had to carry the story, but that locomotive was my secret hero.'

Although No. 484, the Lima Northern, may be the true hero of *Last Stop*, the book also features some very interesting human characters. The main character is Marin Davissey, a mysterious man who boards the train which is also carrying Arthur Lang, convicted of manslaughter in the death of his wife Dora; Brace Tolley, the undersheriff, who resembles Harry Carey and who sits on the aisle so 'No one would make the mistake of confusing policeman for prisoner and everyone would have the opportunity to notice the similarity to Harry Carey, if they had the wit to see it'; and Gertrude Churchill, a reporter who is going along for the ride and hoping to get a confession from Lang.

The suspense of the novel depends on two factors — the torrential rain which threatens to close down the tracks and which eventually takes out a bridge as the train is crossing it, and the gradual revelation that Davissey knows too much about Lang and appears to have some kind of a grudge against him. It turns out that Davissey is Dora's roving father and that he has boarded the train determined to kill Lang. Instead, he discovers he 'lacked the immoral courage to kill a

man', so he contents himself with getting acquainted with Gertrude and finally getting Lang to confess that he did murder his wife in cold blood.

As in most good suspense novels, atmosphere is the whole point of the book. Tucker does a good job of setting up an atmosphere of tension between Davissey and Lang, as well as producing a cozy picture of people riding the train to their various destinations, only to have their journey rudely and, in many cases, fatally interrupted by the train wreck. But Tucker was right — It should have been called *Death of an Iron Horse*. Despite the bathos of the death of a small boy's mother and that of other characters, the most moving description of the train wreck is Davissey's view of the wrecked engine, 'The locomotive was there, lying on its side like a dying giant.'

Tucker can't resist interrupting the suspenseful tone of the book to slip in a few Tuckerisms. Dr Eney is mentioned as a former employee of Davissey. The little town where Lang lived and where Tolley is undersheriff features a fifty-cents-a-night Moffat House, and the train goes through the little town of Rosebud, while it is speeding to its death. It turns out that Lang has the same birthday as Tucker himself, November 23. And several remarks made by revellers at the party in the last coach may sound familiar to fans: 'I had one but the wheel fell off and it died', and 'Marriage is just a goddamn hobby'.

It's interesting to note that Tucker himself was in a train wreck, though it was long after he had written *Last Stop*, and was not so serious. But still, the fan who has read or heard accounts of Tucker's own train wreck may find the following exchange from the last pages of the book amusing.

'I don't intend to sue,' Martin told me.

The agent permitted himself a wry smile. 'Thank you Mr Davissey; you are one in four hundred.'

The modern period

The modern period consists of Tucker's three most recent books. These are basically of the spy-adventure type, and are mainly notable because of their well-researched backgrounds. They also prove that Tucker has learned a bit about writing, as these are well-written, well-plotted books. Perhaps they reflect the fact that Tucker is now writing mysteries as much for fun as for money.

A Procession of the Damned

A Procession of the Damned (1965) is a spy novel. Tucker wrote the book as a spy novel because the market for such books was good at this time (and still is). The title is derived from the writings of Charles Fort. The main character, Ross, uses *The Books of Charles Fort* as a convenient place to hide some of his spy paraphernalia, and is struck by the phrase 'a procession of the damned', which he encounters on one of the pages which has not been hollowed out. He also thinks it is an apt description of the cross-country chase that he takes part in during the last half of the book.

The story begins in Los Angeles, and the city doesn't seem to have changed a whole lot since

Charles Horne visited there in 1948. Ross is there to meet up with a woman named Stone, who wants to hire him and his boat for a job. She sends him to Las Vegas to find out more about the job. Most of the descriptions of Las Vegas, the hotel, the casinos, the streets, the nightclubs, are taken directly from the descriptions of his own visit there which Tucker published in fanzines in 1963 and 1964. (Interested fans can see some of these pieces in *The Really Incomplete Bob Tucker*.) Even Ross's train ride to the city is taken from Tucker's own experiences. That just proves that Tucker writes stuff for fanzines that is good enough to be published professionally.

In Vegas, Ross meets up with the rest of his 'partners': Jolly, Stone's husband and part-owner of The Bucket of Money; Irma Louise, Stone's daughter and Jolly's stepdaughter; and Ballard, a hypochondriac and Irma Louise's boyfriend. Ballard and Jolly describe their business as 'finding things that people just left lying around'. They want Ross's help in getting such things to people who are interested in buying them.

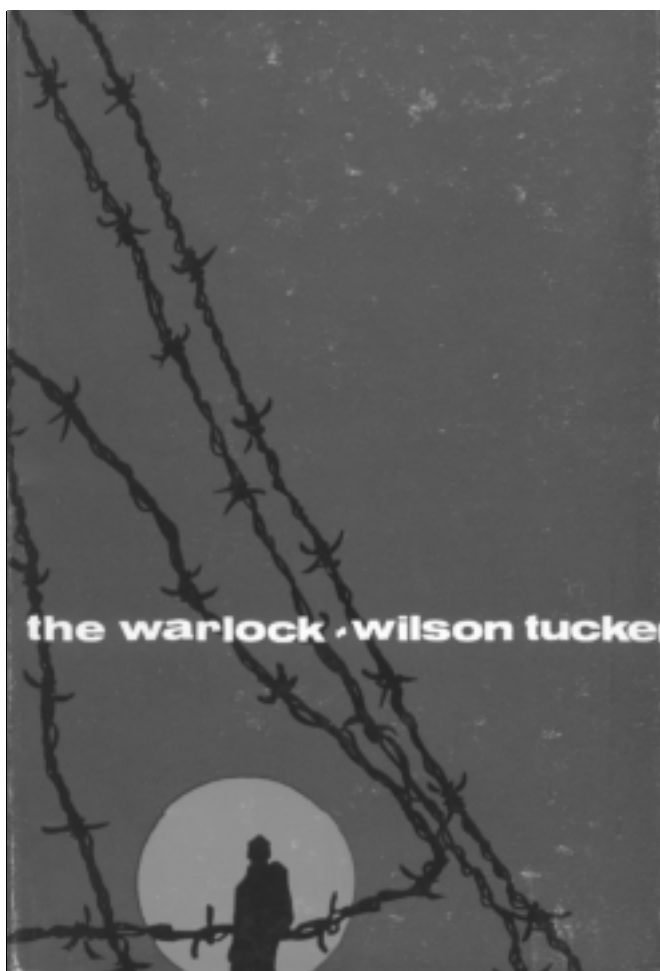
Also in Las Vegas, the reader learns that Ross is actually working for the government, which is very interested in recovering some of the things it had carelessly 'left lying around' after World War II. Eventually the reader learns just what it is that Ballard and Jolly stole when they were in Europe after the war, and why the government is so anxious to get it back. Tucker's description of just how Ballard and Jolly operated after the war builds up an intricate background for the story. The United States Military supply Depot, Zwicksburg Section, was a fairyland department store, a Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward combine operating without fear of trust busters and tax snoopers, operating around the clock against little more than an outraged squawk from an occasional visiting Congressman.'

The descriptions of Las Vegas are matched by the unreal trip across the country, along Route 66, to recover the mysterious stolen objects from their hiding-place at Ballard's boyhood home in Illinois. This trip is very reminiscent of the trip that Gordon, Annette and Fugere took down Highway 51 in *The Hired Target*. Tucker allows himself only one Tuckerism in this book: the final destination of the 'procession of the damned' is the little town of Rosebud, Illinois. It might restore your faith to learn that in Rosebud the government wins and the 'bad guys' get their just desserts, although Ross wonders if they really deserved what happens to them. But just this once, I won't give away the whole ending of the book.

Ross is the first really attractive lead character since B. G. Brooks. In fact, he is very similar to Brooks in being a loner mainly concerned with his job, but also a man who is very sensitive and liked by the female lead. Tucker points up this similarity between the two characters, by having Ross describe the changing of the Pole Star, much as Brooks had done several books previously.

The Warlock

The Warlock (1967) is another Cold War spy novel. This is Tucker's personal favourite of the mysteries he has written. He says that it was the most fun to write,



as well as being his most successful mystery to date. This book takes the reader much farther afield than any previous Tucker novel. The main character is Anson Bolda, born in Poland of a peasant mother who was thought to be a witch, which makes Anson a warlock in the eyes of his peers. Because of the fortunes of war, Bolda finds himself with the US Army, and he is promptly hired when it is discovered that he speaks both Russian and Polish. He becomes an American citizen and a valuable employee of NSA, the army intelligence service. His luck holds good for many years, but eventually he is captured by the Russians while installing a transmitter for a spy satellite, the Nark. Bolda confesses his crimes to save the life of his mother, who is still living in the Eastern bloc, but after some years he is traded back to the West for a Russian spy.

Since he is no longer much good as a spy, Bolda is sent to investigate a relatively minor matter — why does a ‘nut book’ writer have a teletype in his apartment? After roaming about eastern Europe for the first part of the book, the action now settles in St Louis, where the mysterious writer lives. Again Tucker moves his book back to the familiar mid-western territory. Charles Horne had been in St Louis several times, and Tucker has learned a bit about the city since his classic ‘Illinois River at St Louis’ mistake. This time his descriptions of the city are very accurate. This adds to the book, especially for someone who is familiar with St Louis. Tucker chooses one of the quietest parts of the city, and yet one of the odder areas, for the residence of Victor Angoff, the

writer with a teletype in his basement, and his mysterious companion, Karen Collins.

Bolda begins his job with a huge amount of ‘spy equipment’ and several backup agents, but his resources and support mysteriously disappear later in the book, and he finds himself in several very dangerous situations. It turns out that Bolda had actually been proving himself in this way, and he has been chosen for this extra-special assignment, chosen while still imprisoned in Russia, partly because his military records indicated that he was considered to be a warlock by his native people. Needless to say, Bolda passes the test successfully, and he ends up in a position most spies would envy.

This Witch

The Warlock was followed by Tucker’s most recent book, *This Witch* (1971), which wasn’t nearly as successful. However, Tucker did enjoy writing the book because ‘Biblical archaeology is my special interest, and when I got into the history of the scrolls I was delighted. I found enough to background two books, *This Witch* and *Quiet Sun*’.

This Witch is also a spy-adventure type of novel but, unlike any of Tucker’s other mystery novels, it takes place entirely in an exotic setting, the Middle East, especially Israel. It is also the first novel to be written in the first person since *The Chinese Doll*. Tucker’s main character is a sort of adventurer or soldier-of-fortune who works freelance for various governments on a variety of jobs. Westey Ross has been foreshadowed by Tucker’s previous lead characters — Ross of *a Procession of the Damned*, B. G. Brooks and even Charles Horne are very similar to this Ross. Ross is the self-assured man, who knows his own abilities and those of his equipment. He is a man who knows what he is doing, doesn’t particularly want anyone else to know about it, but is not entirely successful in concealing his actions.

In the process of his quest, he meets Kelly, an exotic woman of mysterious origins who seems to know more about Ross and what he is doing than is natural. He finds her when a merchant in a dusty desert town offers her for sale. Ross buys, knowing it is a con but determined to keep the girl away from the mercenary old man. In the process of ‘rescuing’ Kelly, he spears an attacker through the shoulder with his specially constructed umbrella (B. G. Brooks had been able to kill an assailant with the ordinary kind). After this daring rescue, Kelly refuses to leave Ross, and accompanies him on his adventures in the rest of the book, offering help, physical comfort and oddly phrased but accurate pictures of the future.

Perhaps the best parts of the book are the many interesting bits on the archaeology of the Middle East, such as Ross’s description of the history of Jericho. But the plot is also an intriguing one. Ross is hired early in the book by the Israel Tourist Authority to find the treasure of Solomon, the gold hidden by the Jewish rebels before they were invaded by the Romans in 70 AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls have hinted at the whereabouts of this gold, and Ross is in a race with Palestine rebels who also want to get their hands on it. Ross has come to Israel with the intention of finding this treasure, which he had heard about on