Scratch Pad 3

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Jonathan Carroll, story-teller

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I

During the last few years I have been looking around for a new and interesting sf or fantasy author. Most of my favourite writers are either dead or off the boil. Most of the award-winning authors are bad writers, or good writers but insufferably long-winded.

What were my criteria in looking for a new and interesting writer?

To use a very unoriginal phrase, I was looking for stories that are really stories. These are stories told by someone with something so urgent to tell you that the story-teller pins you to the wall and gives the tale so much energy and vividness that you do not want to leave until you have heard every word. I was looking for stories that are told concisely: stories that are only as long as need be, or perhaps a bit shorter than that. Thick books have become the plague of sf during the last twenty years. I was looking for stories that are made up principally of events, characters, places, sights, sounds and smells; in other words, stories in which the author does not generalize for the reader. I want stories that tell you wonderful things you've never heard before, but are not afraid to upset your expectations. As Harlan Ellison is supposed to have said many years ago, a good story is one that answers back when you demand of it: 'Astonish me!'

I was prepared to mix genres when looking for this interesting author. My favourite book for the year so far is James Morrow's *Only Begotten Daughter*, which mixes sf and fantasy categories in an exuberant way. During recent years, my ideal for the modern story is the category I would call the 'urban fantasy' — realistic fiction in which events are gradually invaded by elements of the fantastic. Tom Disch called this category 'tales of unease', rather than fantasy or horror. These are stories that are about one's own world, but in which the perspective is twisted so that you see the world quite differently from the way you saw it before.

There must be someone new, I thought, who meets most or all of these criteria.

The clue came from a review that I published myself. Dave Langford is the reviewer I have to thank. In *SF Commentary* 68, some of Dave Langford's review columns from the English *GM* magazine appeared under the title 'Critical Hits'. This is what he wrote:

> Jonathan Carroll is an author who deserves your attention despite, or because of, being weirdly difficult to classify. You could call his books psychological-fantasy-mystery-horror stories, with an elusive magic in the writing and vivid characters reminiscent of the larger-than-life creations of the late Theodore Sturgeon. Carroll's first, *The Land of Laughs*, baffled publishers and suffered from desperately misleading cover designs: the American paperback resembled a twee, Oz-style children's book, the British one looked like routinely grotty horror. More sensibly, his present publishers have opted for colourfully surreal jackets on *Bones of the Moon* — one of my 1987 Best books — and the latest, *Sleeping in Flame*.
>
> This time, Carroll's favourite elements emerge quickly enough: a setting in Vienna (where he lives), a relish for life, places and food, a moving second-time-around love affair . . . and something nasty in the woodshed. The blackness from the hero's past has such weird ramifications that few writers could have made it work: our man's life seems prefigured by past incarnations going back to a bit-part from the Brothers Grimm, his diminutive father may or may not be a famous character with a very silly name, and the conclusion is an outrageous psychological rabbit punch. I'll read this one again. (p. 15)

It's hard to specify what in that review made me determined to track down the books by this author. Perhaps it was Dave Langford saying 'I'll read this one again.' He wouldn't have much time in his schedule for reading anything a second time. Perhaps it was that reference to Vienna. I don't know of any other American writers who live in Vienna. Perhaps I was hooked by that phrase about outrageous psychological rabbit punches. Little did I know how outrageous . . .

II

Luckily the first Carroll novel I found was *The Land of Laughs*,

his first published novel. It is such a fine achievement that much of my quest in reading Carroll's work has been seeking another novel as good as it.

The Land of Laughs meets all of my criteria.

It is the right length: 241 pages, about 70,000 words. Not many fantasy authors today can restrict themselves to a length under 300 pages.

It is an 'urban fantasy': it begins with some seemingly ordinary yuppies on the east coast of America, progresses to the heartland of America, and doesn't begin to get weird until half way through the book.

Its style is admirably restricted to the places, events, sights, sounds and rather hectic observations of the narrator. The author has other things on his mind, but you have to work them out for yourself. His books are unputdownable, which I suppose is my one basic criterion for any good book.

And by its end, it is a novel the pulls the rug from under all the reader's expectations.

A bonus is the unnamed cover artist of most of the Legend paperback editions. These covers are irresistible, with their combination of surrealism, menace, wit, and a vivid sense of colour and design.

In discussing Jonathan Carroll, one must begin with his sense of style and flair for drama. Last week I heard on radio Professor Stephen Knight speculating about why the novels of the Sydney thriller writer Peter Corris had improved recently. I paraphrase him: 'Perhaps it's because he's been writing film scripts recently; he's learned to enter a scene late and leave early.' The mysterious Jonathan Carroll, who admits only to living in Vienna, seems to have had some film experience, since three of his novels are directly concerned with film-making. And I've found few other authors who know better how to enter a scene late and leave early.

Here's the beginning of *The Land of Laughs*:

> 'Look, Thomas, I know you've probably been asked this question a million times before, but what was it really like to be Stephen Abbey's —'
>
> '— Son?' Ah, the eternal question. I recently told my mother that my name isn't Thomas Abbey, but rather Stephen Abbey's Son. This time I sighed and pushed what was left of my cheesecake around the plate. 'It's very hard to say.' (LL, p. 1)

In with both feet, in the middle of a conversation, in the middle of a question and, as it turns out, into the middle of a main theme of the novel. Within a few pages we learn that Thomas Abbey's father had been a famous Hollywood actor, that he was dead, that evading his memory is one of the main preoccupations of his son. Thomas Abbey is a bored teacher. We overhear the middle of a conversation is between him and an unnamed girl. He chats her up, and takes her back to his apartment, which is filled with exotic masks. The first section ends:

> 'But they're just so *creepy!* How can you sleep in here with them? Don't they scare you?'
>
> 'No more than you do, my dear.'
>
> That was that. Five minutes later she was gone and I was putting some of the linseed oil on another mask. (LL, pp. 4)

I almost forgot to say that another criterion of the good story is that it should be funny. I even heard Elaine cracking up, quite often, when reading *The Land of Laughs*. Most of his humour comes from the incongruous and unexpected, rather than jokes or puns as such.

Carroll doesn't muck around. In three pages you learn more about Thomas Abbey and his family and his preoccupations than you learn about the characters of most novels in the first twenty pages. Carroll puts his characters on stage, vivid, talking, interesting. He becomes even better at it in the later novels.

In those first few pages, you also catch a glimpse of an important minor theme: the importance of masks and puppets. It becomes very important in this novel to discover who is the puppet and who is pulling the strings.

In the first line of the novel, Carroll has already declared his first major theme: Abbey's inability to deal with the memory of his father. On page 4 we are told straight out the second major theme:

> My dream was to write a biography of Marshall France, the very mysterious, very wonderful author of the greatest children's books in the world. Books like *The Land of Laughs* and *The Pool of Stars* that had helped me to keep my sanity on and off throughout my thirty years. (LL, p. 4)

That one paragraph determined that I would not put down this book until I had finished it. The reason why I appreciate Jonathan Carroll's books is that he speaks directly for me, and presumably to lots of others as well. What is most important in life? Good stories and beautiful books come high in my list. This will be a story about story-telling. Already we can feel endless possibilities opening up. The search for a mysterious author. The reasons why a novel contains in it a novel with the same name as itself. Already the reader has a sense of sitting on the edge of a precipice above an unexplored valley, waiting to slither down the side and start exploring.

Thomas Abbey quickly returns to his major theme. He received *The Land of Laughs* as a present from his father on his ninth birthday:

> I sat in the car because I knew that was what my father wanted me to do and read the book from cover to cover for the first time. When I refused to put it down after a year, my mother threatened to call Dr. Kintner, my hundred-dollar-a-minute analyst, and tell him that I wasn't 'cooperating.' As always in those days, I ignored her and turned the page.
>
> 'The Land of Laughs was lit by eyes that saw the lights that no one's seen.' (LL, p. 5)

So Marshall France seems to be worthy of Thomas Abbey's devotion. Now to find out secrets about him.

The psychology of obsession is a major theme of all Carroll's novels, particularly the obsession of the writer or film-maker or artist or architect to create something great. Thomas Abbey's obsession is to become the biographer of Marshall France. This obsession leads him, via a Marshall France rare volume, to Saxony Gardner, a woman whose obsession with the dead author is nearly as strong as his. Together, he and Saxony discover that Marshall France is dead, but his daughter Anna still lives in the small Missouri town of Galen, where the author died. Marshall France's publisher warns Stephen and Saxony not to bother going to Galen, since Anna will not talk to them. They go anyway.

If you haven't read the book, you would be annoyed to have the story recounted to you. If you've read the book, you will realize that it is *all* story, that there is no detail in the

book that does not relate to the major themes of the book and does not contribute to its forward movement. And the ending, when you reach it, sends you straight back to beginning. Therefore I must discuss some of the secrets that Thomas Abbey learns, and try to make sense of some of the secrets of Jonathan Carroll.

Carroll's sexual politics are always a problem. In *The Land of Laughs*, as in most of the other books, the main character oscillates between two lovers. Saxony and Thomas arrive in Galen, Missouri, as a research team. They are welcomed, not rejected, by the townspeople. Thomas is more than welcomed by Anna France, the daughter of the dead author. She lives alone in a house that is filled with France memorabilia. The process of auditioning the possible new biographer quickly turns into seduction.

As in the other novels, the result is curiously non-sexy. Perhaps Carroll is merely careful of his American audience. His whole emphasis is on choice. Abbey is quite willing to be loved by both women, and he is aware that eventually he must make his choice, but he also wants everything anyone offers him. The possibility that Anna might be using him for non-amatory purposes does not occur to him. The problem is made worse when Saxony, wounded by Thomas's betrayal, leaves the town temporarily. *She* has been his muse, not Anna, and it is she who is necessary to his work.

The Land of Laughs is a modern adult fairy-tale, and as in any fairy-tale, the hero must undergo a series of tests. First he must produce a first chapter that satisfies the standards of Anna. The real test he must pass is to prove that he is just as obsessed as she is by Marshall France's work.

When he passes the literary test, he must pass new tests, the nature of which remain puzzling even to the reader until the end of the book.

> Early morning in Galen, Missouri. A few cars drove by, and I yawned. Then a little kid passed, licking an ice-cream cone and running his free hand along the top of Mrs. Fletcher's fence. Tom Sawyer with a bright green pistachio cone. I dreamily watched him and wondered how anyone could eat ice cream at eight o'clock in the morning.
>
> Without looking either way, the boy started across the street and was instantly punched into the air by a pickup truck. The truck was moving fast, so he was thrown far beyond the view from our window. When he disappeared, he was still going up. . . .
>
> The driver was out of the truck and stooped over the body. The first thing I saw when I got there was the green ice cream, half-covered with dirt and pebbles and already beginning to melt on the black pavement. . .
>
> 'Is there anything I can do? I'll call an ambulance, okay? I mean, you stay here and I'll go call the ambulance.'
>
> The man turned around, and I recognized him from the barbecue. . . .
>
> 'All this is *wrong*. I knew it, though. Yeah, sure, go get that ambulance. I can't tell nothin' yet.' His face was pinched and frightened as hell, but the tone of his voice was what surprised me. It was half-angry, half-self-pitying. There was no fear there at all. No remorse either. . . .
>
> 'Joe Jordan! It wasn't supposed to be you!'
>
> Mrs. Fletcher had come up from behind us and was standing there with a pink dish towel in her hand. (LL, pp. 89-90)

With that one line, 'Joe Jordan! It wasn't supposed to be you!', Carroll changes gears in his story by changing Thomas's and our perception of the town. As Thomas Abbey says several times, Galen, Missouri, looks like a picture painted by Norman Rockwell, the sentimental portrayer of small-town American life. Galen is a small American mid-western town preserved from the 1940s. More to the point, it feels like a town out of a 1940s movie. But in some way that neither the main character nor we can work out, people from the town see things quite differently from the way out-of-towners do. A child has died, but Joe Jordan the driver was not supposed to be the killer. What is going on?

I will have to tell you, in order to discuss the book as a whole. *The Land of Laughs* is based on one major idea. In Anna France's words: 'Marshall France had discovered that when he wrote something, it happened: it was: it came into being. Just like that.'

So the main attraction of *The Land of Laughs*, apart from its highly readable style and vivid characters, is that it is based on a what-if principle. What if a writer found that anything he or she wrote came true? It's rather like the what- if idea of Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven*: what if a person's dreams came true and somebody found a way to manipulate those dreams? In Le Guin's book, the creator is a naive person who is manipulated by the psychiatrist who wants to save the world through his main character's dreams. Marshall France, on the other hand, has no interest in the rest of the world. Instead he protects himself through art. In Carroll's book, the observer is the naive one.

When Marshall France discovered his ability, he chose to write down the fates of the people of Galen, Missouri, for the next thousand years. He makes the town itself into his own great work. Through his writing, gradually he moved all the real people away from the town, and replaced them with people he invented. He filled vast notebooks with details of these people and their lives. There was one difficulty; Marshall France died. After several years, the story he had written started to come unstuck. Things start to happen that were not predicted. Anna decides to return the town to normality by finding a biographer who can recreate the spirit of Marshall France by writing a great biography of him. Thomas Abbey, as the writer, and Saxony Gardner, as his muse, are to be the saviours of the town. Except, in the nastiest touch of the novel, Thomas does not tell Saxony what is going on.

It would take hours to unpack the implications of this parable. It's enough to say that Jonathan Carroll has thought of a wonderful fantasy idea, then takes it for a walk, then takes it for a very long hike. His narrator, Thomas Abbey, is always a bit behind the action. He's too busy worrying about his women, and his book, and his self-importance, to notice the implications of the fable. One example, from one of the greatest scenes I've read for years:

> 'Uh, Larry, what does it feel like to be . . . uh, created?'
>
> Larry farted and smiled at me. 'Created? What d'ya mean, created? Look, man, you shot out of your old man, right?' I nodded and shrugged. 'Well, I just shot out of someplace else. You want another beer?'
>
> Catherine petted her gray rabbit as gently as if it were made of glass. 'Created? Hmm. That's a funny word to use. Created.' She rolled it around her tongue and smiled down at the rabbit. 'I don't really think about it, Thomas. There's always so much else on my mind.'
>
> If I was expecting answers from the Inner Sanctum, I didn't get them. Galen was a lower-middle-class town

in the heart of Missouri, made up of hardworking people who went bowling on Wednesday night, loved *The Bionic Woman*, ate ham sandwiches, and were saving up to buy new Roto-tillers or a vacation cottage out on Lake Tekawitha.

The most interesting anecdote I heard was from a guy who accidentally shot his brother in the face with a police revolver. The trigger pulled, the gun exploded, smoke, lots of noise . . . but nothing happened to the brother. . .

The more people I asked, the more it seemed that the vast majority were content with France's 'way,' and horrified that suddenly, cruelly, they had been turned over to the clumsy hands of fate. (LL, pp. 192-3)

We all think about our own creation, or rather, the difference between the time we were not alive and the time we remember being alive, but I know of no other depiction of characters who calmly consider the possibility they were written into existence. Again we consider: what does this say about the author and the man who is supposed to be his biographer? Why did a man who, after he discovered his own power, use it merely to create a small town of the absolutely and endlessly mundane? Why did he not create one of the fabulous worlds that came from his children's novels? Abbey fails to ask this question, because to ask it would be to admit that he does not know Marshall France at all.

The penultimate scene is quite brilliant, all the more so for its compactness. Thomas is the last to realize the real reason the townspeople want the biography written, which is, that in doing so, he will resurrect the writer. After several months of effort, he reaches the page in the biography that tells of the day Marshall France first arrived by train in Galen, Missouri. No train has visited Galen in many years. Yet all the townspeople gather at the station. On the horizon can be heard the sound of a train whistle. I will tell no more of the end; it's a potent mixture of irony, melodrama, humour and horror.

But without telling you the exact events of the ending, I do need to discuss its implications. In the scene I quoted from, Carroll the author appears to be merely whimsical, with more than a touch of the metaphysical: Marshall France as God; Stephen Abbey and Saxony Gardner as the unwitting prophets who save him through writing the biography. In depicting the gathering of the townspeople at the station, Carroll recalled for me yet another image: that of the deliriously happy German burghers who were always greeting Adolf Hitler in 1930s German propaganda films. Fascism can take many forms. Marshall France knew he would die. He knew he could create the town. Could he then write his own resurrection? My guess, never confirmed in the novel, is that France had written down the visit by Thomas and Saxony and the writing of the biography, in order to bring himself back as absolute ruler of his own tinpot kingdom. As we discover, his two saviours would then be dispensable.

The very last scene takes place some time later. Thomas manages to escape from Galen. Several years later, one of the residents of Galen, hot on his trail, finds him in a European town and is about to murder him. The last five lines of the book are:

When Richard was five or six feet away, Pop stepped out of the pitch dark behind him and said lightly over my shoulder, 'Want me to hold your hat for you, kiddo?'

I screamed with laughter and shot right into the middle of Richard's sad, astonished face. (LL, p. 241)

Sometime after he left Galen, Thomas Abbey had realized the implications of Marshall France's resurrection: that France was not a benign god, but a loony absolute dictator; that Marshall France, by blessing Thomas Abbey with his own powers for his own purposes, had also conferred on him a gift that Abbey needed in his own life. Whatever Thomas Abbey wrote from now on would also come true. And when he realizes this, he uses his powers to write the biography he had always run away from: that of his father. And therefore he has been able to resurrect his father. Which takes us right back to the first paragraph of the book. Thomas Abbey's role in life is to get to know his own father, and ultimately bring him back to life.

III

That is how I discovered Jonathan Carroll, whose first novel, *The Land of Laughs*, meets all my criteria of a good story. Could the same author produce another novel as interesting as his first?

The answer is no. Jonathan Carroll does not seem to have realized what the central strength of *The Land of Laughs* was: its what-if idea. Works of urban fantasy need the same good strong backbone as great works of science fiction. To work satisfactorily, they need to say: what if the following aspect of our world were entirely different? It's no good having too many what-if ideas; perhaps one is enough for any book. But that one idea be a strong skeleton in which you can hang every bone and tissue of the rest of the body. Carroll's later books have strong bones and tissues, but fragile skeletons.

Not that I've given up Jonathan Carroll's books in disgust. Far from it. He still meets my *other* criteria of a good story.

All of his other books are about the right length; the shortest just under 200 pages, and the longest is 268 pages. All of them show signs of intense pruning. Although all of them are narrated in the first person and retain a chatty style, the chattiness is itself a mask for packed narratives in which every element is essential to the whole. Often you think characters are merely yabbering, when actually they are telling something you must know to make sense of the rest of the book.

All of his books begin at a gallop and don't slow down to the last page. Admittedly, not all of them start with anything as effective as the first line of *A Child Across the Sky*:

An hour before he shot himself, my best friend Philip Strayhorn called to talk about thumbs. (CAS, p. 11)

If you guess that Philip Strayhorn, though dead at the beginning of the book, remains a main character in it, you would be correct.

The first line of *Sleeping in Flame* is:

It took me less than half a lifetime to realize regret is one of the few guaranteed certainties. (SIF, p. 1)

Apart from being a theme of all Carroll's novels, this line points you so directly to the end of the book that you feel you ought to read the last page first. Not that that would tell you anything meaningful. Instead you must read the book once, knowing already that the last page will send you straight back to the first.

The first line of *Voice of our Shadow*, Carroll's second novel is:

Formori, Greece
At night here I often dream of my parents. (VS, p. 3)

I don't have time to give separate little talks about Carroll's later novels. From book to book the narrative voice has developed and and gained in confidence. The main character of *Voice of our Shadow* is, like Thomas Abbey of *The Land of Laughs*, a fairly ordinary bloke who runs foul of not only his parents but also his brother. Like *Land of Laughs*, *Voice of our Shadow* is a straightforward realist novel for about half its length. Again we are back in middle America; again we hear a lot about a whole load of seemingly unwarranted guilt. Again, it takes much of the book before Carroll begins to flash his magic effects.

From the third novel onwards, we meet a series of characters who are all minor characters in the others' stories. They are habitués of the Spider Club, a Los Angeles dinner club dedicated to the telling of good stories. These characters are decidedly upmarket from those of the first two novels, perhaps reflecting a newfound prosperity for their author. Weber Gregston, the narrator of *A Child Across the Sky* and a main character in *Bones of the Moon*, is a famous film-maker who has dropped out of the Hollywood system in order to direct a New York theatre group called the Actors Cancer Theatre. Walker Easterling, the main character in *Sleeping in Flame* and a minor character in *Outside the Dog Museum*, is a famous actor. Harry Radcliffe, in the most recent novel *Outside the Dog Museum*, is nothing less than the world's greatest architect.

In this way, the so-called 'everyday realities' of Carroll's novels are becoming less and less like our own — more glamorous, more fantastic — and therefore losing some credibility. If fantasy is to astonish us by entering our world, our world needs to be sufficiently mundane to represent a contrasting milieu.

Why then, do the magic effects work at all? In each of his novels, Carroll follows a basic procedure: the main characters meet, fall in love, usually after one or both of them has been deeply involved with somebody else, and enter a time of unalloyed bliss. This is the giveaway: if you read a passage about unalloyed bliss in a Carroll novel, you know something pretty ghastly or weird is about to happen. In *Bones of the Moon*, Cullen and Danny James have no sooner returned from a deliriously happy honeymoon in Europe and Cullen finds she is pregnant, than she begins to suffer from weird dreams. In *Sleeping in Flame*, Walker Easterling has no sooner met the love of his life, Maris York, and decided to set up house in Vienna than he experiences *this:*

> Vienna is a city where most people go to bed at ten o'clock. You rarely see anyone walking around past midnight, and those you do see are usually going home. . . . A café down the street was still open, so I decided on a quick brandy there, and then home.
>
> As I was walking in that direction, a figure suddenly loomed into sight before me further along the pavement. It took a moment for me to see it was a man riding a bicycle. The bike was completely decked out in a mad glittering jumble of steamers, mirrors, saddlebags, bumper-stickers, antennas, and everything else. The man had a long Rip van Winkle beard. He wore one of those round fur hats that cover most of the head and ears and remind you of woodcutters in Alaska. Pedalling hard enough to make the bike sway from side to side, he came flying towards me as if death (or sanity) were right behind him. The street was completely quiet but for the whizzing sounds of the bike, and the man's loud breathing. I was so tired that I didn't know whether to step left or right to avoid him. He kept coming and I kept standing there. As he got closer I saw more and more of his features. His face was lined and scored. A long and narrow stalactite of a nose hung above a mouth (he seemed to be smiling) full of dark teeth that went in every direction. I still hadn't moved when he was ten feet away and coming fast.
>
> 'Rednaxela! Welcome!' he shouted as he passed within inches of my feet — so close that I could smell his garlic, sweat, and craziness. He didn't look back once he'd passed, just drove straight up to the corner, a sharp right there, and . . . gone. (SIF, pp. 53-4)

Surprising, yes? Vivid, certainly. And as yet, completely unexplained. At this point of the novel, Easterling does not even realize that magic events are about to cascade down upon him like lemonade at a kids' birthday party. And for much of the novel, these events will go entirely unexplained.

This is what troubles me about all the novels other than *The Land of Laughs*: the arbitrariness of the magic employed. The strength of *Land of Laughs* is that Thomas Abbey has gone looking for his magic; he gets what he deserves. The main character of *Voice of our Shadow*, however, cannot possibly deserve the wholly original and ghastly fate that Carroll has lined up for him. And why do the entirely innocent characters in *Land of Laughs* and *Bones of the Moon* suffer worse than other characters?

The magic tricks work because they are always surprising. On the one hand, they are surprising because Carroll remains astonishingly various and experimental in his choice of tricks. Also, I suspect he knows all that vast amount of folklore and religious arcana that I've never read. On the other hand, his mundane realities are so detailed and interesting that they provide a strong backdrop to the magic tricks.

In *A Child Across the Sky*, Weber Gregston reads a story written by Philip Strayhorn, the film-maker whose death began the book. The story, called 'Mr Fiddlehead', is about a woman whose childhood made-up friend Mr Fiddlehead comes to life when she is an adult. In turn, this story was based on the experience of Strayhorn himself, whose childhood made-up guardian angel, called Pinsleepe, has been his companion during his last months on earth. Here is what happens when Gregston returns to Strayhorn's house in California:

> I turned off the motor and sat a while listening to the quiet. Cheerful birds, the busy hiss of insects, a distant car driving off. There were the blooming cactus we'd planted together when he first moved into the house. From the car I could look through one of the front windows and see some of the objects in the living room.
>
> Something moved in there.
>
> I sat up straight in my seat.
>
> Something showed for a moment in the window and then disappeared as quickly. A head? A child hopping across the line of vision of the window? I couldn't tell. No child belonged in the house of a man three days dead.
>
> There it was again. Jumping. It *was* a child. Short hair. Yellow shirt. Waving hands in the air as it bounced past. . . .
>
> Ignoring him, I went to the door and did the necessary twists and turns to de-activate the alarm. I was

curious about who or what was inside, not afraid. Too curious about who or what was inside, not afraid. Too much had happened to cause any more fear. An explanation of some kind was near and I was hungry to know it. . . .

At first I thought it was a seven(?)-year-old boy, the dark hair was cut so short, but the singing voice was the high and delicate bell of a little girl.

Barefoot, she skipped around the room in a pair of bluejean overalls and a yellow shirt. The longer I looked at her, the more I realized she was a *real* beauty. . . .

The beauty part slid away when I saw how misshapen her stomach was. Under the overalls it looked like she was hiding a basketball. She kept looking at me until she knew I was staring at her stomach. Then she stopped in the middle of the floor and took off the jeans and shirt. She was pregnant. . . .

'You're Pinsleepe, aren't you?

'Yes.'

I didn't know what more to say. She was Pinsleepe the angel. The angel that had come to Phil before he died and told him to stop making the *Midnight* films because they were evil. (CAS, pp. 90-2)

Here is a pretty good illustration of Carroll's strengths as a story-teller. The prose is matter-of-fact, but the effect is to bundle together a variety of experiences and levels or reality. The effect on the reader is to make us ask: what the hell can possibly happen next? Carroll plays with all our assumptions: about children, who are not supposed to be pregnant; about magical beings, who are supposed to be ethereal; about Californian suburban bungalows, which are supposed to be dull and suburban. The effect is to keep pulling the carpet out from under the reader.

Carroll even made fun of his own approach in his latest novel, where he has Harry Radcliffe say:

> Lately life had been like a Wild Mouse ride at an amusement park; whipped from one extreme to the other, there'd barely been enough time to gulp a quick breath before the next dip, twist or flip had me loop-de-looped or upside-down, trying to figure out where I was and how to see things from these constantly new perspectives. (ODM, page 136)

In the end, one always returns to the problem: where is the centre of a Jonathan Carroll novel? The details of Carroll's books are dazzling, the characters live, the magic tricks and characters remain interesting, and in some cases as tragic as the humans. But why? Why magic? Why not simply write dazzling satirical novels about Los Angeles, New York and Vienna?

Because — and I say this knowing I have no way of finding out from the author whether it is true or not — I suspect that at some deep level Carroll's novels are autobiographical. Magic is as real for Carroll as so-called ordinary reality. In most of his novels he takes reincarnation as a given. These days he tends to drops the name of God into his books, without giving much idea of which or whose God. It's hard to empathize with some of the zanier assumptions that he slips under the nose of the reader. There is one assumption with which I can empathize: that the most important magic is that of story-telling itself. Much of the magic in his novels comes into being because somebody tells a story or writes down a story. Magic is what we do when we write fiction.

But, I would have to say, authors choose to write their stories, much as Marshall France chose to create the people of Galen, Missouri. In the other Carroll novels, people don't have much choice in the matter. Magic is not sweet and wish-fulfilling in the Jonathan Carroll scheme of things. It falls upon his characters like a curse. Only in his most recent novel does he give Harry Radcliffe the choice of receiving or rejecting magic. Innocent characters are particularly hard-hit: Eliot and Cullen in *Bones of the Moon* and Saxony Gardner in *The Land of Laughs*. In some of the novels, the main character finds out how to break the spell, only to find that breaking of spell invokes yet another curse. Hence the 'psychological rabbit punch' endings mentioned by Dave Langford in the piece I quoted at the beginning of this paper.

If magic is supposed to be a metaphor for life itself, Carroll would seem to believe that life is grossly unfair or, worse, maniacally arbitrary. But this trend in his writing contrasts with his enjoyment of life. Surely his characters deserve something slightly more palatable than the fates he deals out to them?

As yet there is no satisfactory answer to these questions. As yet there are no Jonathan Carroll experts to give us neat academic answers. I wouldn't miss Carroll's novels, but I find much in the later novels to be dismaying, or even distressing. The ending of *A Child Across the Sky* is dazzling, but I don't understand what happened. I think I understand the ending of *Sleeping in Flame*, but rather wish Jonathan Carroll wouldn't keep playing such nasty tricks on the last pages of his books. But I still feel that Carroll is a romantic, desperately caring about worlds that keep slipping out of control. I keep hoping that his story-telling instincts will eventually win out over his instinct for chaos. In other words, may he one day return to the elegance of structure and expression that makes *The Land of Laughs* one of the finest fantasy novels ever written.

Editions used:

LL: *The Land of Laughs* (first published 1980) Legend 0-09-939260- 7. 1989. 241 pp.

VS: *Voice of our Shadow* (first published 1983) Arrow 0-09-937780- 2. 1984. 189 pp.

BM: *Bones of the Moon* (first published 1987) Legend 0-09-949870-7. 217 pp.

SIF: *Sleeping in Flame* (first published 1988) Legend 0-09-957540-X. 1989. 244 pp.

CAS: *A Child Across the Sky* (first published 1989) Legend 0-09- 970950-3. 1990. 268 pp.

ODM: *Outside the Dog Museum* (first published 1991) Macdonald 0-356- 19589-9. 244 pp.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 September 1991