Scratch Pad 6

Based on ***brg*** **No. 6, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the October 1992 ANZAPA mailing.**

Contents

JAMES MORROW AND THE ERNI: A Reply to Scott Campbell and John Clute

(A talk given at Nova Mob, 7 October 1992.)

At the start of this year I put myself down to give this talk in October. I hoped that by then I would have discovered something innovative to talk about. Perhaps an exciting new author to talk about; perhaps some interesting general topic. Perhaps I might even have hit the jackpot — something *entertaining* to talk about.

As the months have rolled by, I've been driven to despair. In a mild sort of way, of course. I've heard some very good talks at Nova Mob this year, but none of them prompted my brain juices to start sloshing. I've looked at a few newish authors, but none has excited me much. I've even asked members of the Nova Mob to suggest topics I should talk about. Blank looks. Perhaps you were just hoping I would not turn up on the night.

No such luck. There was no way I could push this talk spot onto somebody else. Nobody volunteered.

So, although I still feel that I have nothing very urgent to say, I've held my head up high, whistled a happy tune, and have eventually managed to dredge up these few thoughts.

When in doubt, get annoyed. Or rather, when something annoying tugs on the fishing line of thought, reel it in. Also, when in doubt, quote yourself.

For this talk I've combined these deep insights. What emerged is what follows.

First, the annoyance. What rankled in my mind was the discrepancy between several different reviews I ran of the same book in the most recent issue of *SF Commentary*. The book is *Only Begotten Daughter*, by James Morrow.

Morrow is the most interesting writer in the field today, apart from Jonathan Carroll and George Turner. His earlier novels are *The Wine of Violence, The Continent of Lies* and *This Is the Way the World Ends*. I thought I was on pretty safe ground when I sent *Only Begotten Daughter* to Scott Campbell to review. Scott Campbell lives in Tasmania, and is attached to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tasmania. I've never met him, but he writes quite lively reviews that get up people's spouts.

The other, much shorter review was mine, but in it I quoted John Clute's review in *Interzone*, in which Clute dismissed the book. Campbell's review might be excusable, I thought, but how could a critic so usually acute as Clute have misread a book so badly?

First, to Scott Campbell, who really gets steamed up about James Morrow. 'Biggest wimp in contemporary sf.' That's in his first paragraph. 'Morrow's cheerful mediocrity.' Etcetera.

Morrow begins his article (*SFC* 71/72, pages 59-61) with a putdown of *The Continent of Lies*. Later he discusses *Only Begotten Daughter*: 'Morrow's tale of the Second Coming of Christ, who is of course female (though not black), as is God Herself . . . It's simply inept and unimaginative . . . I can only compare it to the film *Jesus of Montreal*. If you liked such an obvious and hamfisted work, then you'll probably like *Only Begotten Daughter*.'

Campbell gives us no examples from the novel of what he considers inept or unimaginative, or indeed of what in general he considers ept or imaginative. I get the idea that he doesn't approve of allegories in general, or perhaps only allegories based on the life of Christ. Which is more or less what he admits in his next paragraph: 'There is just so much scope for retelling the life of Jesus. I think the whole idea of the retelling is an unoriginal waste of time unless you are going to do something with it, such as Ballard's inspired work in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, "Zodiac 2000", *The Unlimited Dream Company* and "The Object of the Attack".' Since I haven't read those pieces, I can't argue with Campbell about his comparison. Needless to say, I think Morrow does a great deal more with the Christ allegory than anybody I've read.

I can't argue with Campbell line by line, because I don't know what his assumptions are. But for some reason I got particularly annoyed with this element in his review:

'Morrow's main characters seem to be the same as you'd find in any standard American Sterling-sucked cyberwimp book, except that Morrow draws his characters in a more light-hearted way. They're basically ideologically sound, but a bit rough around the edges, with a few idiosyncrasies and character failings that just make them all the more human

and lovable. If you actually met anybody like this you'd want to strangle them.'

Well, I do from time to time — meet people like those in *Only Begotten Daughter* — and I quite enjoy their company. Who are these people? The main characters are Murray Sparks, who is a dropout who lives in a lighthouse, his ex vitro daughter Julie, whose other parent is God Herself, Murray's lesbian friend Georgina Sparks, and her in vitro daughter Phoebe. As one of them says: 'The All-American family. Who'd ever know it's a hermit, a bastard, a dyke, and a deity?'

I suspect that it is this line in particular that annoyed Scott Campbell. He suggests that Morrow has somehow had to manufactured these characters to meet the expectations of a particular audience. Which implies that Scott Campbell doesn't meet people like these. Which tells me a lot about what it must be like to live in Hobart. Obviously it doesn't have the equivalent of Friday night at K&M's. It's equally clear that Scott Campbell never gets to science fiction conventions. I guess that Morrow probably took all the main characters from people he knows.

Here's Campbell's final shot: 'Morrow ends the book with the daring and provocative suggestion that the character of Amanda the Sea Sponge is really God. This is because sponges are "faceless, shapeless, holey, undifferentiated, . . . inscrutable . . . and a hermaphrodite to boot . . . cannot be fatally dismembered, for each part quickly becomes the whole . . . both immortal and infinite". Get it? Saying that God is a sponge is saying that our concept of God can "soak up" whatever we want God to be. What an original idea!'

If that was what Morrow was saying, Campbell would be right. But how could one reviewer so completely fail to read a novel? I tried a feeble preliminary answer in my own short review (*SFC*, 71/72, p. 86). As I said earlier: when in doubt, quote yourself:

'I can't describe this book, so I'm grateful for the following written by John Clute in *Interzone* 55, January 1992, which arrived this morning: "*Only Begotten Daughter* is a fable about the life of the sister of Jesus, whose name is Julie Katz; who was born in an ectogenesis machine in New Jersey in 1974 to a Jewish sperm-donator, a desperately nice fellow who dies of heart failure later on; who grows up capable of performing miracles, though her father persuades her not to; who is forced into action by fundamentalist Reverend Milk's assault on Atlantic City, which seems likely to burn the place to the ground . . . It is funny, impassioned, decent, concerned and rakish. That is good.' Clute has doubts about the book, because the characters seem too nice. I suppose so; but no more nice than other people I know who find the world hard going. Would Julie Katz stay nice if her earthly father had not persuaded her to hold the tidal waves each time she got annoyed? What is *not* nice is the world Julie Katz lives in — a world designed to crush people of goodwill, and most of the others as well. It's our world, a few years hence. Clute says that *Only Begotten Daughter* fails 'to bite into the great rotten apple of the world'. *I* say that Morrow's frenetic rhetoric, dancing speech rhythms and daring command of fantastic and religious metaphors enables him to skewer the world, material and otherworldly, to its core. Julie has a look at the afterlife. There is no comfort there; only two people have ever been judged worthy of heaven, so everybody else, including Julie's 2000-year-old brother Jesus Christ, burns forever in hell. This terrestrial life is as good as it gets! Clute finds this nice and comforting?

'I keep hoping someone will write me a long essay that will explore this book's intricacies, games and dilemmas. *Only Begotten Daughter* is a funny, ferocious torrent of words that leaves the reader exhausted and exhilarated, certain only of one truth: that only great fantasy can tell great truths about our lives.'

Since nobody has taken my hint and written me the long essay about *Only Begotten Daughter* that I asked for, I've just had to do it myself. But I could not work out what to say about the book until I found myself writing this down while preparing my most recent ANZAPA contribution (**brg** No. 5, August 1992, p. 6):

'*Only Begotten Daughter* didn't offer any "solutions" at all. It was essentially a fairy tale. The point about a fairy tale is that the "happy ending" is always the reverse of the ending you would expect from the events that are in the tale. Morrow ends the book quite neatly, but in the process he has brilliantly dissected the real situation of good people in an evil world, and hence undercut any reassuring sounds that he seems to be making. Is there a technical name for this sort of writing? I'd call it an ERNI: an "extensively recomplicated nasty irony". I must deliver a paper on "ERNI" for Nova Mob sometime.

'*Brainwave* — Until right now I haven't been able to think of a subject for the paper I've promised to give later in the year. Now I have a topic: "ERNI: How Writers Stick the Knife In".'

That would be the finish of the talk, except that I found it hard to define an ERNI. After I had done a bit of research and reading, I decided that the term is probably unnecessary. All you need is the basic term 'irony', which can be used in many ways, including extensively recomplicated nasty ways.

'Irony' has a number of meanings, some of which barely overlap with each other. I'm quoting the *Macquarie Dictionary* definitions because they say the same thing as the definitions in *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, but in clearer prose. '**1.** a figure of speech or literary device in which the literal meaning is the opposite of that intended, esp., as in the Greek sense, when the locution understates the effect intended, employed in ridicule or merely playfully. **2.** an ironical utterance or expression. **3.** simulated ignorance in discussion (Socratic irony). **4.** the quality or effect, or implication of a speech or situation in a play or the like understood by the audience but not grasped by the characters of the piece (dramatic irony).**5.** an outcome of events contrary to what was, or might have been, expected. **6.** an ironical quality.' *Macquarie* lists the derivation as the Latin *ironia* from the Greek *eironia* dissimulation, understatement.

As you can see, the word irony has so many overlapping meanings that it really means 'extensively recomplicated' and 'nasty' all along, especially when applied to a book like *Only Begotten Daughter*. This book moves continually between the whole range of ironies, often within the same sentence. The meaning that best applies to this book and science fiction in general would be dramatic irony: 'the quality or effect, or implication of a speech or situation in a play or the like understood by the audience but not grasped by the characters of the piece'.

After looking through my critical books, I can find only one extended discussion of irony. That's in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, a book I've so far avoided reading because it's been used by bad writers of fantasy and science fiction to justify writing equally bad stories about superheroes and gods. Frye is actually a pretty sharp writer, although he bases his classification of narratives on the scheme offered by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago.

I don't have time to go into Frye's rather intricate use of

Aristotle's scheme, except to mention that he gives a specific meaning to the 'ironic mode' in narrative: 'If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scheme of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the *ironic* mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of a greater freedom.'

Since Frye is not using the usual meaning of 'inferior' here, he sharpens his point by contrasting tragedy with irony. In a tragedy, the hero is an *alazon*, someone who 'pretends or tries to be something more than he is'. In irony, however, the hero is the *eiron*, the man who deprecates himself, and irony is 'technique of appearing to be less than one is, which in literature becomes most commonly a technique of saying as little and meaning as much as possible, or, in a more general way, a pattern of words that turns away from direct statement or its own obvious meaning'. Here, to me, is the essence of irony.

James Morrow is very much an ironic writer, although he manages his effects not by saying too little, but by seeming to say so much that the statements cancel out each other and lead away from any direct statement. Frye continues: 'The ironic fiction-writer, then, deprecates himself and, like Socrates, pretends to know nothing, even that he is ironic. Complete objectivity and suppression of all explicit moral judgements is essential to this method.' One result is that often there is no particular reason why the hero should deserve the fate that falls on him or her. This is often the everyday use of irony. Someone says, 'Isn't it ironic that she never drank alcohol, but died of liver failure?'

How does all this relate to science fiction? Better still, how does this relate to fiction? This, I note, is not a question that Frye asks. He assumes that all fictions are interesting and valid, although they are telling us things we know not to be true. In this sense, *all* fiction is ironic. Perhaps Frye would not have admitted this, because it would have upset the rest of his scheme.

It seems to me that science fiction is a particularly ironic form, although often it is also romantic. How often have you been asked by people who know nothing about science fiction: 'Do you *believe in* science fiction?' Your jaw drops, and you say in disbelief 'Of course not. Science fiction isn't the sort of thing you *believe* in.' And you'd be right. The essence of science fiction stories is to throw up a series of possibilities. These possibilities could be extrapolated in some way from today's world, but they don't really have to be. The important thing is that they have some internal coherence and, like science experiments, are both explicable and disprovable. In other words, you put a science fiction idea up in the air, then fire bullets at it to test it to destruction. The whole process depends on contrasting possibilities. If you really think that any one of these possibilities is the actual way the world will go, you tend to sour the experiment and produce nothing more than propaganda.

In *Only Begotten Daughter*, James Morrow goes one further. He bases his whole present and future world on an assumption that, even within the terms of the novel, is either a lie or as good as one. Scott Campbell has taken this as anti-propaganda, I suspect, and that's reasonable until you start to look at the complications of the book.

In Morrow's book, there is the solid world of the eastern seaboard of the United States. The New Jersey shore area he refers to is, as I found when I travelled through it by rail, one of the most desolate landscapes in the world, with its endless miles of marshes, rubbish dumps, and abandoned factories and other buildings. Atlantic City itself has fallen on hard times as an entertainment centre. It's a pretty good setting for an apocalypse novel, which is the basic category into which *Only Begotten Daughter* fits.

In Morrow's book, there is also a world that most of us, including the author himself, would regard as wholly fanciful. This is the religious superstructure, including heaven and hell, the Holy Trinity, the Messiah and the Second Coming that has come down to us from our traditional reading of the New Testament of the Bible. In the solid world, a baby named Julie Katz is conceived from the donated sperm of Murray Katz and no traceable donated egg, is raised to full term in an ectogenesis machine, and after birth is found to have supernatural powers similar to those ascribed to Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Because of the whole weight of religious belief that is shared by the characters, they come to believe that Julie Katz must be the daughter of God. Taking a lesson from the Gospels, her father Murray persuades her not to use her powers, since only crucifixion could await her.

Sure enough, there are forces enough who would kill her if they knew who she was. In Atlantic City, there are the forces of Reverend Billy Milk and the Revelationists. They expect the Second Coming of Christ any minute, and aim to put into practice the various horrors described in the Book of Revelation in order to hurry things up a bit. In other words, they are looking for the Anti-Christ. When they get wind of the existence of Julie, she fits the bill.

Now if that were all there were to the novel, it would be ironic, but basically just a realist novel set in the future. Morrow makes it into an ERNI by adding to his cast of characters the Devil himself. Disguised as a handsome fellow named Andrew Wyvern who keeps appearing when least expected, he aims to keep up the level of evil in the world by persuading Julie Katz to begin a new Church that will replace the rather moribund Christian Church. To do this, he must persuade her to use her powers.

It's one of Northrop Frye's better points that the main character of an ironic text is a *pharmakos*, or scapegoat. What better scapegoat to use as a model than Christ, the kingpin scapegoat figure of western religion? Yet for this reason, the ironic character always comes full circle. Rather than being merely a character in a comic realistic irony like Zola's novels or those of Gogol, the ironic character in the twentieth century has often been turned into a legendary figure. For instance, there are Estragon and Vladimir, the two characters forever *Waiting for Godot* in Beckett's play, or Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*. The character who seems most distant from us, least like us, becomes the character who best represents the reader by becoming a mythic figure who represents all humanity.

In Western literature during the twentieth century, this has happened because of the nature of events during this period. It is the age of the innocent victim, where civilians are bombed instead of soldiers, and where millions of people can be hauled away by secret police for no clear reason.

James Morrow aims to write a comedy that will leave the reader weeping 'for every person who'd ever died for what someone else believed in'. He wants to skewer True Belief in all its forms, yet knows that it is not enough to write the same kind of book that every other twentieth-century writer has been trying for. Instead, he aims for a comedy that is so outrageous and entertaining that it turns itself inside out, and therefore can easily be interpreted as the opposite of what it is.

It's hardly surprising that even a critic as astute as John Clute might not have caught the full impact of *Only Begotten Daughter*. The book risks everything. Not only is Julie Katz presented as actually a rather ordinary, but very resilient person who happens to be the daughter of God, but he puts the Devil on stage, then allows the Devil to take Julie off for a tourist's guide to hell. I'll leave this amazing middle section of the book for you to figure out. Morrow's joke is that he takes all the traditional literal ideas about hell and makes them into a highly entertaining fantasy world. He lists great catalogues of the horrors piled on people in Hell, then has the Devil tell us that everyone ends up there after death — even Murray Katz, even Christ himself. As Julie Katz says when she returns to New Jersey: 'Everybody's damned. Earth is as good as it gets.'

Which lands the meaning of the book right back in the reader's lap. Most of us don't believe in a literal hell, or even in any life after death, but rarely do we allow ourselves to think through the implications of this disbelief. The implication stays the same: 'Everybody's damned. Earth is as good as it gets.' For people in Australia who live long lives that, until recent years, have been pretty prosperous and fulfilling, this message might not hit too hard. But in the 1980s Morrow has seen urban life in America deteriorate alarmingly, and no doubt has also seen real possibilities of the emergence of the fascist America that greets Julie when she returns from fifteen years in Hell.

For when Julie returns from Hell, she enters Hell. The Devil only allows her to return if she will give up her divinity, which she does. The New Jersey she returns to has become an independent Revelationist state, ruled by Reverend Billy Milk and a group of fanatics who are trying to bring about the Second Coming by killing as many heretics as possible. There are daily public mass executions presented as entertainment. The gambling casinos of Atlantic City have been turned into religious shrines. The heretics are mainly the disciples of Julie Katz herself, having founded a church during her absence, just as the Devil intended. She finds her former boyfriend and tries to persuade her followers to disband her Church. I'll leave the rest of the story to you.

Irony moves throughout every part of this book, especially its language. Every sentence is barbed with wonderful contradictory implications. Many of them revolve around the contradictions of being Julie. 'What good is it having God for a mother,' she says to herself', 'if she never sends you a birthday card? Why has God stuck you in this place, this filthy old Atlantic City . . . It isn't fair. Phoebe has a mother. Everybody does.'

In the first section of the novel she has powers, yet has no power. She cannot fix the world. 'Like Jesus before you, you know you're not God. A deity, yes, but hardly cocreator of the universe . . . Jesus cured lepers, you often note, Jesus did not cure leprosy. Your powers have bounds; your obligations limits.'

In this novel, you see the Devil in all his splendour, but never set eyes on God. The Devil is a liar, anyway; 'not always, but most of the time'. We never find out if there is a heaven. Perhaps engendering the occasional human child is the only way God make an impact on our world. Or perhaps it's all a gigantic lie, from beginning to end.

The net result is that, no matter what she does, Julie is powerless to help people, or even to give them any happiness. Evil is all-pervading and arbitrary. As the events of the twentieth century seem to prove, even the best intentions of the best people seem powerless against floods of evil.

Why does *Only Begotten Daughter* not leave the reader with a feeling of despair? At the basic level, it's a vast comedy, often very funny from line to line. If it's a cruel world, it's also endlessly contradictory and amusing. There is a fairy-tale ending, which offends both Scott Campbell and John Clute, who fail to see that this is the final irony of the book. Of course in the solid world shown in the novel the Julie Katzes of the world would not survive the depredations of Billy Milk's State of New Jersey. Of course God will never speak, or perhaps she's only a sponge after all. But the unlikelihood of the ending merely points up the bitter meaning of the rest of the book.

As Northrop Frye says, 'Irony never says exactly what it means.' No wonder many readers, even the best, don't get the meaning of ironic works. Readers less acute than Scott Campbell or John Clute often do not see where irony is intended, and are often offended by statements in fiction that seem to be the actual opinions of the authors. The great strength of *Only Begotten Daughter* is that it is a true ERNI: an extensively recomplicated nasty irony. Morrow has found a way to present the whole range of human evil or good without wagging the finger at us to tell us what we should consider good or evil, or how we should live our lives. What might have been a sanctimonious allegory (which seems to be how Scott Campbell took it) becomes a vast, and vastly funny tapestry, a combination of humour, realism, Biblical fantasy and political science fiction. *Only Begotten Daughter* is the best sf/fantasy novel for quite some years.

APPENDIX:
Arslan
It's a Wonderful Life
It's Always Fair Weather

I haven't left myself enough time, but here are other another two ERNIs.

One of them is M. J. Engh's novel ***Arslan***. I might have talked about this instead of *Only Begotten Daughter*, but Elaine tells me that I once gave a Nova Mob talk about it. I have absolutely no recollection of giving such a talk, but I'll believe her. In that novel, Engh also mixes the magical — the powers of the conqueror Arslan himself — and the highly realistic — the tribulations of the citizens of the small town of Kraftsville, in the middle of America, in which Arslan sets up his headquarters after he conquers the world. That novel also turns on a powerful irony. Arslan believes that the only way to save the world is by ridding it of the human race. He seeks to do this by sterilizing every woman in the world. The irony is that this is the logical conclusion of the most extreme version of the green movement. Engh never shows whether she supports Arslan's aim or not. In the end the conqueror is defeated not by anybody's army, but by the literary equivalent of the bacteria who defeat H. G. Wells' Martians. This is a person who couldn't care less about the fate of humanity, but merely wants a personal revenge on Arslan himself.

The other great ironic narrative is my favourite film, Frank Capra's ***It's a Wonderful Life***. This has become of the great comforting films shown every year on television to cheer people up. Its meaning is the opposite from the one that people take from it. They see the deliriously sentimental ending and think that this is the point of the film. As in any fairy tale, it is the opposite of the film's meaning.

It's a Wonderful Life is the story of George Bailey, played by James Stewart in his greatest role. George spends his entire life trying to find a way to leave the small town of Bedford Falls. His brother escapes, and becomes a war hero. George nearly escapes, but stays in town to help rescue his father's savings and loan bank. He hates the job, and eventually he hates the town and life itself. His enemy, J. R. Potter, played by Lionel Barrymore, is the richest man in town. He wants to destroy the savings and loan bank, indeed the whole idea of lending small amounts to middle-income people so they can build their own homes. When eventually Potter triumphs, George Bailey goes to the bridge over the river to jump off. He is stopped by a stray angel, under the guise of a scruffy old man played by Thomas Mitchell. 'I wish I had never been born,' says George Bailey. In the most brilliant fantasy sequence ever put on film, since it relies solely on imaginative writing, brilliant acting and crafty set design and not at all on special effects, the angel shows what the town would have been like if George Bailey had never existed. After leading George through a nightmare journey, the angel leaves him to return home. Of course there is a happy ending.

The real meaning of the film can be found in the ironic title. George had never had a wonderful life. He didn't want to be self-sacrificing, and had enjoyed no fruits from his own uprightness. His only comforts have been his wife and children. In the end, he cannot bear to bring disgrace on himself and them. Jimmy Stewart, the epitome of Mr Nice Guy until that time, plays the role with a well-judged ambiguous mixture of charm and near-mad desperation that prefigures the sinister roles that Hitchcock gave him during the 1950s.

The real message of the film is that the J. R. Potters of the world always triumph; that the George Baileys go under. There are no angels to perform feats of rescue. We will never find out what the world would have been like if we had never have been born. Since 1947, when *It's a Wonderful Life* was released, critics have kept saying that the film presents an optimistic view of life. The opposite is true. It is Capra's darkest film by far, and since it's one of the few American films to support the lower middle classes against the rich, remains one of the darkest American films yet made. Curiously enough, the audiences who saw it in 1947 seem to have appreciated this, since they stayed away in proverbial droves. Only in the last ten years has the film picked up a consistent audience, usually of people who completely misread it.

An interesting companion film is that other great film with the similar title — the 1955 musical ***It's Always Fair Weather***, which is at once one of the best written and choreographed screen musicals ever made and also one of the bitterest, most disillusioned films ever to made in America. It's difficult to catch up with this film. Made in Technicolor and Cinemascope, its dance sequences appear horribly mangled on television, and the only 35 mm Cinemascope print in the country is reported to be very faded.

— Bruce Gillespie, 19 September 1992