Scratch Pad 14

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Contents

THE NOT-QUITE CAREER OF KEITH ROBERTS by Bruce Gillespie

(Delivered as a paper to the October 1994 meeting of the Nova Mob, which is Melbourne's sf discussion group.)

It's all Race Mathews' fault. Race attended the Nova Mob meeting at which this year's topics were decided. Stuck for ideas for my 1994 talk, I asked which author merited writing about. Race's suggestion was English writer Keith Roberts, mainly because Roberts' book *Pavane* had stayed in his memory as a fine achievement of science fiction.

Vague memories can make you careless and trap you into doing things you really should have avoided. I agreed to write about Keith Roberts because I also remembered *Pavane* with some affection. Also I recalled that some of Roberts's stories from the early 1970s were very good indeed; he had all the fine qualities of good British science fiction, but had not 'gone experimental' in the manner of the New Wave, at that time the major influence in Britain.

So early this year I launched into what I intended as a major celebration of Keith Roberts's fiction. I've spent 1994 regretting that decision.

I accepted the commission to write about Keith Roberts because I hoped to resurrect the reputation of a neglected writer. Instead I find myself in an awkward position of finding major faults in the work of a dying writer. The latest *Ansible* brings the news that Roberts, who has multiple sclerosis, has had both legs amputated. He expects to spend the rest of his life in hospital. Since the following talk would hardly bring joy to him or his many admirers, I won't feel free to publish it until after his death.

I

Keith Roberts is the mystery man of British science fiction. The sources I have contain little or no biographical material about him. I know that he was born in 1935, and that his main occupation has been visual artist and illustrator, rather than science fiction writer. I can't discover whether he actually earned a living from painting at any time, or whether he's ever earned much of a living from anything.

Roberts was editor of *Science Fantasy* during the mid-1960s, and of *SF Impulse* for the entire year of its existence. More importantly, Roberts is best remembered as the cover artist for the digest-sized *SF Impulse* and the Mike Moorcock-edited *New Worlds*. In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, John Clute comments:

> His boldly Expressionist covers, line-oriented, paralleled the shift in content of these magazines away from genre SF and fantasy towards a more free-form speculative kind of fiction. . . He has illustrated several of his own 1980s titles. (pp. 101–3)

In late 1968, *New Worlds* went to A4 size, and Roberts disappeared from it, both as artist or writer, for several years. Only in the early 1970s, when Moorcock edited the much less experimental original fiction anthology version of *New Worlds*, did Keith Roberts return to the fold. Several of his very best stories appeared there, and he provided interior illustrations for *New Worlds*.

It's hard to summarise Keith Roberts' career in fiction. Yes, it's true that has had an important place in English sf since the mid-1960s. But it's not *that* important. I always think of him as a figure standing to one side of the stage, looking on, making the occasional dazzling contribution. He's never been at the centre of activity, like Clarke, Aldiss, Ballard, Moorcock and even Brunner.

Before his connection with the Mike Moorcock reign, Keith Roberts sold undistinguished stories, mainly to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* in America and Ted Carnell's *New Worlds* and *Science Fantasy* in Britain.

In the mid-1960s he published a rather tedious historical novel, *The Boat of Fate*, and his first sf novel

The Furies. At one level, *The Furies* is a typical British disaster novel, although it is both more vivid and much less competent than anything John Wyndham or John Christopher ever wrote. A nuclear experiment that goes wrong heralds the invasion of giant intelligent wasps, who kill most people in Britain, round up the rest, and establish giant nests. *The Furies* is an odd combination of very vivid scenes and very badly dramatised material.

Roberts achieved acclaim when in 1966 he published in British magazines the stories that were later collected into *Pavane*. Published in 1968, *Pavane* was called a novel, but it is in fact a fix-up: a collection of linked pieces of short fiction.

Pavane remains one of the most successful pieces of British sf of the last thirty years. Apart from two collections of Stanislaw Lem's novels, it is the only sf book picked by Penguin for its prestigious King Penguin series. With the addition of a story missing from the first edition, *Pavane* was reprinted by Gollancz during the 1980s. It continues to be Roberts's best-known work.

But it was in the early 1970s that Roberts published the stories that I remember best. They include 'Weihnachtsabend', set in a Britain occupied by Nazi Germany, and 'The Grain Kings', which tells of gigantic combine harvesters that operate like ships as they cross the newly-made-fertile plains of Northern Europe and Russia. To make a pilgrimage back to such stories was the main reason why I took on the task of preparing this talk. Unfortunately in the process I overdosed on Keith Roberts's science fiction. I had hoped to celebrate his work; now I find I must make excuses for his peculiarities.

During the mid-1970s and the 1980s Roberts has had steadily decreasing financial success. After the release of a collection, *The Passing of the Dragons*, in America, but he has failed to sell any more of his books there. In Britain Gollancz published him, without making money on his books, until the mid-1980s, when Roberts went to Kerosina Books, a small publisher in which he had a half interest. His most recent books have appeared from Morrigan and Sirius, two very small British publishers, and none of his recent books has been bought by a paperback publisher.

Roberts's only continued success has been with a loyal core of British sf readers. He has won the British SF Fantasy Award twice in recent years: for the short story 'Kitemaster', which became the basis of the fix-up 'novel' *Kiteworld*, and for *Grainne*, a novel I haven't read yet. 'Kitemaster' also was voted by readers of *Interzone* as its year's best short story.

Most of his books are now hard to get, and one, *Anita*, seems to have disappeared altogether. Alan Stewart has lent me several missing books, including a 1986 collection, *The Lordly Ones*, that I had quite forgotten about. I haven't had time to read Roberts' last six books. The two main bio-bibliographical pieces I've found on Roberts, in the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* and in the St James Press *Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers*, cover his books, but provide little information about the individual stories from which most of them are constructed. The sources I've looked at tend to be respectful rather than enthusiastic about Roberts's work. The only information I have about Roberts as a person comes from Paul Voermans, and Clare Coney, who was his editor at Gollancz, but I don't feel free to quote conversations that have not been written down.

II

Because Keith Roberts' reputation rests to such a large extent on *Pavane*, I must start there to give any idea of what his writing is like. But it's because *Pavane* is *not* typical of Roberts's work that I've had much trouble coming to terms with his other books.

Pavane, for instance, is the only one of Keith Roberts' books to be built solidly on a science fiction idea that makes sense. To quote Paul Kincaid, in *Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers*:

> *Pavane* has been acclaimed as one of the finest of all alternate-universe novels, though Roberts himself would dispute this, since he sees it more as an examination of cyclic history, which he makes clear in the Coda to the book. . . . [*Pavane*] provides a mosaic portrait of a world in which Elizabeth I was assassinated, the Spanish Armada was successful, and, in the later years of the 20th-century, England is still under the sway of the Catholic Church. Set mostly in the English West Country around Corfe Castle . . . the novel tells of a world in which social and technological progress has been slow indeed. There are steam-powered road trains, and communication is by a network of semaphore stations, though Roberts is at pains to make these curiosities as much as possible a part of the ordinary daily life of his characters. (p. 666)

In *Trillion Year Spree*, Brian Aldiss writes affectionately and perhaps even too kindly about *Pavane*:

> Roberts's setting for *Pavane*, as for so much of his work, will be familiar to anyone who has read Thomas Hardy. Rural Dorset at the heart of Wessex is seen with the sharpest of eyes and presented with a haunting visual clarity. Corfe Castle and its surroundings — the Isle of Purbeck — are marvellously and unforgettably evoked. Roberts' alternate world is credible because its landscape is so lovingly re-created for us.
>
> The story unfolds slowly, like the dance from which the novel takes its title. The story-line itself is one common enough in SF, but its manner of telling is rare. . . . The Catholic Church and its Pope have held sway over the whole of the globe for four hundred years, suppressing all technological development. . . The forces of rebellion — of suppressed technological progress — spark and ignite against a rigidly static society. In simple terms it is the tale of the coming of freedom to the world.
>
> Roberts's gift in *Pavane* is to make us see both the delights and the horrors of this simpler alternative; to see this alternate world as a complex, functioning reality, filled with living, breathing, suffering people. (pp. 373–4)

I could easily have quoted Aldiss's entire piece on *Pavane* and made that the essence of my talk. You will not escape that easily. Aldiss praises *Pavane* for all the elements that I remember best about it; particularly its sense of one world dying and another emerging to take its place.

Not that the situation is as straightforward as it seems throughout most of the novel. The novel's Coda shows that the events do not take place in an alternative twentieth century, but in a far-future world at a point when the year 1968 has rolled by again. In this world,

unknown to any of the characters, a seemingly oppressive Church has tried to prevent technology from re-emerging too fast, rather than not at all. The Church has tried to make sure that in the process of reinventing technology, humanity does not re-invent its worst aspects, such as atomic weapons, which wiped out the old world: ours. As Aldiss writes: 'We aren't wholly convinced', as the emotional force of *Pavane* comes from its opposition to a Church that is trying, by any means available, to suppress individual political freedoms and prevent the development of most modern forms of technology. The Coda, which might better have been left out, makes *Pavane* into a kind of English *Canticle for Leibowitz*: surely another reason why it is remembered fondly.

In trying to come to terms with Roberts's strengths as a writer, Aldiss perhaps over-emphasises the Hardy connection. Roberts's real strengths are perhaps closer to those of some American science fiction writers, such as Ward Moore in *Bring the Jubilee*, who are as interested in the nuts and bolts of the alternative world as in its landscapes. In *Pavane*, Roberts invents and lovingly describes the details of two complete alternative technologies: that of steam-powered land vehicles, the transportation system of this society, and of the semaphore signal network and the Guild of Signallers who control it.

The following is from the *Pavane* story 'The Lady Margaret':

> Working head, a hundred and fifty pounds to the inch. The driver hooked the hand lamp over the push pole bracket on the front of the smokebox, climbed back to the footplate, checked gear for neutral, opened the cylinder cocks, inched the regulator across. The *Lady Margaret* woke up, pistons thumping, crossheads sliding in their guides, exhaust beating sudden thunder under the low roof. (p. 5)

Roberts knows his alternate technology well. As his main character travels over the moors, Roberts takes great pleasure in the workings of this machine, *The Lady Margaret*, which is the most interesting character in the book.

Even more exact and complete is Roberts's description of his semaphore system. The chain of line-of-sight semaphores is controlled by a guild that, in effect, keeps this world running, although the Church sees itself as the main authority. At the end of the novel, the most vivid sign that the old world is breaking down occurs when a character sees on the horizon 'the arms of the tower drop to its side like the arms of a man suddenly tired'. In the story called 'The Signaller', Roberts describes the world and working methods of the Signallers:

> The long message that had been going through now for nearly an hour was a list of current grain and fat-stock prices from Londinium. The Guild system was invaluable for regulating the complex economy of the country; farmers and merchants, taking the Londinium prices as a yardstick, knew exactly what to pay when buying and selling for themselves. . . .
>
> The actual transmitted information, what the Serjeant called the payspeech, occupied only a part of the signalling; a message was often almost swamped by the codings necessary to secure its distribution. The current figures for instance had to reach certain centres . . by nightfall. How they arrived, their routing on the way, was very much the concern of the branch Signallers through whose stations the cyphers passed. It took years of experience coupled with a certain degree of intuition to route signals in such a way as to avoid lines already congested with information; and of course while a line was in use in one direction, as in the present case with a complex message being moved from east to west, it was very difficult to employ it in reverse. It was in fact possible to pass two messages in different directions at the same time . . . When that happened every third cypher of a northbound might be part of another signal moving south; the stations transmitted in bursts, swapping the messages forward and back. (pp. 65–6)

This is a world entirely lived in, as Aldiss points out. In fact, it is difficult to think of another alternative world, apart from Philip Dick's in *The Man in the High Castle*, that the author inhabits so completely and yet can communicate so satisfactorily to the reader.

But here is the problem of *Pavane*. Does Roberts actually find a more primitive society more congenial than our own? Each character is, to a greater or lesser extent, challenging the conservatism of the Church. Each is creeping or rushing towards a new world of freedom and modernised technology. Yet the emotional richness of the book comes from its celebration of a simpler Britain, a country uncluttered by cities, whose people are in tune with the landscape, if not with each other or the Church. It is actually, as described by Roberts, a more satisfying world to live in than ours.

Admirers of *Pavane* make much of Roberts' ability at characterisation. That certain something called 'characterisation' is, after all, the little tick of superiority that British sf writers always give to themselves. If *Pavane* had been Roberts's only book, I might have agreed with Aldiss when he writes:

> These things seem starkly real to us. And it is a world in which unrequited love can blight a life and channel a man's energies elsewhere. Jesse Strange, a shy, awkward man, is rejected by his only love, Margaret. He will go on to build a strong commercial empire, but on the morning after his painful rejection there seems nothing for him. (p. 374)

Aldiss quotes at length one scene from the book, and comments that:

> This and the long rejection scene that preceded it and colours it, one of the most poignant in science fiction, compares not unfavourably with Hardy. (p. 374)

One could say much the same about Roberts's other characters, such as Brother John, who, after rejecting the Church while being forced to take part in its Inquisition, begins a movement of rebellion against the rulers of this society. The most vivid character in *Pavane* is the Lady Eleanor, star of the second-last story, 'Corfe Gate'. The rebellion of her fortress, Corfe Gate, fails after a magnificently described battle scene, but the act of rebellion itself begins the first real changes that her society has undergone for hundreds of year.

I don't have a great deal of difficulty with dealing with the characters in *Pavane*. If you've read a lot of other British science fiction, however, you might be worried that Roberts shows no irony when dealing with those

characters. Jesse Strange is a tortured man, but Roberts never questions that a man might stay tortured for the rest of his life merely because one woman rejected him during his youth. In 'The Signaller', Rafe Bigland dies while still young. His role in the book is to provide a viewpoint by which we can gain an insight into the methods of the Signallers. 'Brother John' is a hero in his story; Lady Eleanor is the hero of 'Corfe Gate'. In each case, we remember the character because he or she is a hero, not because of any psychological complexity in the way Roberts writes. These characters are brought to life only within and because of the rich corroborating detail that surrounds the character.

But this doubt about Roberts's approach didn't irritate me until I began to read large slabs of his other works. At first with irritation, and then with boredom, I found the same characters appearing over and over again.

The main character in most of Roberts' fiction is the self-protective, self-pitying male who is incapable of sexual expression except as a worshipper of a beautiful woman who rejects him. A variation on this character is the priest figure, who gains enormous spiritual power through denying himself sexual relationships.

The Lady Eleanor is one of Roberts's two female versions of the powerful sexual isolate. She is the equivalent of the virgin Queen Elizabeth I, the woman who is so powerful that she cannot allow herself a relationship with a man, for fear that that relationship would detract from the power she shields.

The other side of this character is the figure who increasingly dominates Roberts' later fiction: the beautiful, powerful, primitive, carefree young woman who is too intelligent and moves too fast to form a relationship with any man. There is one glimpse of her in *Pavane*: the girl who befriends the technology smugglers in 'The White Boat'.

Since sexual relationships are the basis of social relationships, and Roberts's characters are incapable of fulfilling sexual relationships, his worlds seem increasingly narrow and incomplete as one reads more and more of his fiction. In short, Roberts, who in *Pavane* seems to inhabit a large theatre of humanity, actually crouches in his own little burrow. However, if you read any one of his other major works without reading the others, the power of his visual imagination will sweep aside any doubts you might have about his characters.

III

In preparing this talk, I found it more than usually difficult to account for my feelings about this particular author. I still haven't succeeded. I can say that I dislike Roberts's work in total because, if he is using parts of himself in his work, he shows himself to be a very limited human being. This looks very much as if I'm berating his writing because of his personal inadequacies, which is the last thing I'd want to do. The problem is that the personal limitations limit the effectiveness of the writing itself. If he could take off his blinkers, he would write much better stories. And yet, his claim to fame is *seeing*. He shows clearly his origins as a visual artist. What, then, has gone wrong?

Part of the trouble with Keith Roberts's fiction is that often he seems to have strayed into the wrong playground. It is difficult to work out why he chose to stake out a claim in science fiction, yet that's where we find him. Commenting on his own work in *Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers*, he says:

> I think if we survive our do-it-yourself Armageddon, the 20th century will be remembered as the Age of the Pigeonhole. Everything has to have its tag; Stonehenge is a computer, etc. The particular label attached to me is science-fiction writer. I've nothing against it; but I really know very little science. I suppose I did write some technological fiction in the very early days. But I've simply tried to talk about characters who interested me, and events that moved or disturbed me. If that's science fiction, then so be it. (p. 665)

This seems an unsatisfactory statement to come from a writer who, for many people, probably represents a typical example of 'the British science fiction writer'. At its best, British science fiction, it seems to me, follows the H. G. Wells model: realistic fiction about a future world that is different from our own in some one important respect. Most of Roberts's stories fit this description. But what if the essence of that important change is not explained satisfactorily, or makes no sense when explained? That type of sf story collapses. And all too many of Roberts' works collapse at the end.

In *The Furies*, it is not at all clear where the giant wasps come from, or what is the precise agency that eventually wipes them out. *The Furies* is rather like Wells's *The War of the Worlds* with the thud and blunder left in, but Wells's ironic ending and viewpoint on life left out.

In *The Inner Wheel*, we gain a vague idea that the main character is being seduced or captured by a group of inter-acting telepaths, who read like degraded versions of the telepaths in Sturgeon's *More Than Human*. But the narration of the story and the outcome of this novel are so muddy and the book is written in such a hysterical manner that I cannot work out why Roberts allows it to be reprinted.

The Chalk Giants actually has the organic feeling of a novel, although it is a fix-up. *The Chalk Giants* gives us glimpses of a far-future Britain after a nuclear war. The stories work well, but the framing device makes little sense in itself. The main character, who is the most nerdish of all Roberts' nerdish male characters, is a man who happens to be staying at a very isolated spot on the British coast when the Bomb goes off. Barely alive, he seems to experience all the events of the novel in his head. Or is he somehow connected with later events? The description of the degraded landscape, which has been bombed so severely that Britain has split into a group of islands, is often remarkably effective.

Here is British landscape science fiction at its best. If you like *Pavane*, *The Chalk Giants* is the other Roberts book you should read, although the original paperback had one of the world's worst covers.

The most recent Roberts book I've read is *Molly Zero*, the closest thing to a real novel that he has ever written. It tells the story of Molly Zero, one of those resourceful, sexy but sexually innocent, and very clever young female characters who now dominate most of Roberts's books. Molly and Paul, the bloke who would like to be her boyfriend, escape from what seems a combination of school and prison camp. Wandering around what is obviously a far-future but primitive version of Scotland, they join a gipsy group in order to find a way back to London. London, when they reach it, is more like Dickens's than Dick Whittington's. The narrative invites endless questions about the school they escaped from, the nature of the Britain they are living in, which is divided into fenced zones, and the nature of the political

system that controls the system. Much of it is visually brilliant, from the description of the train journey north, to the landscape of a far-future Scotland, to the sight that meets the main characters as they enter London: mile after mile of uninhabited ruins of buildings. The reader keeps waiting for the answers, and waiting, and waiting.

When then answers arrive at the end of the novel, they don't make sense. The so-called explanation is told in such a fragmented, stuttering way that I still cannot work out the overall situation that governs the action of the book. Is it that Keith Roberts doesn't know the answers, or that he can't tell us?

IV

What, then, do I make of the few Keith Roberts pieces that *do* make sense, those few wonderful stories that you remember as satisfactory pieces of work?

There's *Pavane*.

There's *The Chalk Giants*. If you ignore the framing device, you can accept the consistency of Roberts's description of how society might renew itself after being very nearly destroyed by a nuclear war.

And there are a handful of short stories.

Roberts's most successful short story is 'Weihnachtsabend'. In fact, it is so much more successful than any of his other fiction that one suspects the hand of a very strong editor somewhere, although I'm told that Roberts won't allow his work to be edited.

In it, an SS officer in England is invited to the country estate of his commandant. With him is a woman officer. He knows that she is there to assassinate the commandant, the action that will begin the officers' revolution against the Nazi system. He also knows that the Nazis know that she is the assassin. In a wonderful piece of atmospheric writing, Roberts tells of a morning hunt observed by the main character at a distance from his window. The Nazis are, of course, hunting the girl, not the fox. The officer is the real assassin. What he doesn't know is that both he and the girl have been set up in order to botch the assassination attempt, so that the Nazi brass will not realise that the real leader of the coup is the commandant that he has been commissioned to assassinate. All this is told indirectly, without explanations, in a few pages, with a clarity that is missing in all of Roberts's other work.

I'd love to know the circumstances that led to the writing of this story, because it shows that Keith Roberts could have been a much better writer than he ever became.

In 'The Grain Kings', again the situation is clear, not muddied. The Western nations and the Soviet nations have settled their differences sufficiently to set up an enormous joint project: the equivalent of terraforming the vast northern areas of Canada, Europe and Russia. These endless wheat fields are harvested by machines that are the size of ships, travelling in thousand-mile sweeps over the plains. The main character is an observer on one of the western harvesters. It looks very much as if one of the Soviet harvesters is going to side-swipe the Western harvester, destroying both machines and probably triggering the next world war. A simple structure, but the accumulation of detail, about both machines and people, makes the story suspenseful and satisfying to read.

V

When I read large numbers of Keith Roberts's stories I find a disturbing, even embarrassing, psychodrama being played out.

The main character of a Roberts story is often male, sensitive, but unable to form any permanent sexual relationship. The reason often given for the character's predicament is that he has been rejected by his one and only love. However, when offered the chance for sexual fulfilment, this character often rejects the offer for what seem like incomprehensible reasons. The same character finds fulfillment through his work or belonging to army-like organisations, such as the Guilds, that emphasise duty and hard work. However, apart from these formal relationships, the typical Roberts main character is almost completely isolated in what is otherwise a busy world.

The other main character of a Roberts story is a young, beautiful, and extremely resourceful female, usually sexually innocent. She propels the action of the story she's in, and does her best to make changes in her world. Although she is a remarkably effective person, she is also an isolated character. As I've said, her power depends upon her isolation — for example, the priestess figure who appears in several stories of *The Chalk Giants*.

Often the drama in Roberts's work happens because the main characters are pushed into action, not because they initiate action. The characters are pushed through an extremely vivid physical or social landscape. The main characters may be in opposition to this landscape, or fundamentally in tune with it, but it is the working out of this balance between isolated character and wide landscape that gives vividness to his work. He lives so completely in these worlds that he finds it extremely annoying to explain them; in fact, often he simply can't explain them.

The world that Roberts and his main characters cannot live in for any length of time is the real world of social relationships. But British fiction is based on the drama of conflict between social groups. Hence Roberts has found a home in the one section of British fiction, science fiction, where many readers feel the same way about social relationships. But Roberts refuses to write about the standard clichés of science fiction: the gung-ho stupid superman characters, and the cut-out cardboard worlds. He loves his characters, even if I don't, and his lives in his his landscapes so intensely that he cannot allow himself to simplify their details.

The result is that he has never quite found a home in any branch of fiction. As he admits, he doesn't care about technology, except his own lovingly constructed old-fashioned machines that might well have been built in the nineteenth century. He cares about his characters, but they grate on us.

In short, Roberts is a true outsider, and has paid the price that outsiders pay: isolation from the mainstream, even the mainstream of a rivulet like science fiction. Like any outsider, he invites respect and admiration, but rarely liking, except when he breaks through his own limitations, as when he wrote *Pavane*. Like many outsiders, he keeps writing books that don't sell many copies.

Like most outsiders, he doesn't know how use his own energies. His work is full of contradictions: he writes realistically, but is really an expressionist; he tries to write about male characters, but he writes best in the guise of a young female. His frustrations can be seen on

the page. Why does this man have to be his own worst enemy? Because he *is* an outsider. It's the price he pays.

But like some literary outsiders, he has managed to write a handful of truly admirable stories, which I think will be remembered long after more fashionable writers have been forgotten.

— Bruce Gillespie, 26 September 1994

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Keith Roberts: Books and editions that I've read:

1966:
The Furies
GB novel
(edition used: Pan; 220 pp.)

1968/1986:
Pavane
GB fix-up/novel
(revised edition: Gollancz; 279 pp.)
Contains: 'Prologue', 'The Lady Margaret', 'The Signaller', 'The White Boat' (included for the first time in this edition), 'Brother John', 'Lords and Ladies', 'Corfe Gate', 'Coda'

1970:
The Inner Wheel
US fix-up/novel
(Playboy Press; 186 pp.)
Contains: 'The Inner Wheel', 'The Death of Libby Maynard', 'The Everything Man'

1971:
The Boat of Fate
US novel
(US edition (1974) Random House; 352 pp.)

1975:
The Chalk Giants
GB collection/fix-up with connecting material
(Panther; 267 pp.)
Contains: 'The Sun Over a Low Hill', 'Fragments', 'Monkey and Pru and Sal', 'The God House', 'The Beautiful One', 'Rand, Rat and the Dancing Man', 'Usk the Jokeman'

1977:
The Passing of the Dragons: The Short Fiction of Keith Roberts
US collection
(Berkley Medallion; 307 pp.)
Contains: 'The Deeps', 'Therapy 2000', 'Boulter's Canaries', 'Synth', 'Manscarer', 'Coranda', 'The Grain Kings', 'The White Boat', 'The Passing of the Dragons', 'The Lake of Tuonela', 'I Lose Medea', 'Weihnachtsabend'.

1979:
Ladies from Hell
GB collection
(Gollancz; 198 pp.)
Contains: 'Our Lady of Desperation', 'The Shack at Great Cross Halt', 'The Ministry of Children', 'The Big Fans', 'Missa Privata'

1980:
Molly Zero
GB novel
(Gollancz; 224 pp.)

1985:
Kiteworld
GB fix-up/novel
(Gollancz; 288 pp.)
Contains: 'Kitemaster', 'Kitecadet', 'Kitemistress', 'Kitecaptain', 'Kiteservant', 'Kitewaif', 'Kitemariner', 'Kitekillers'

1986:
The Lordly Ones
GB collection
(Gollancz; 160 pp.)
Contains: 'The Lordly Ones', 'Ariadne Potts', 'Sphairistike', 'The Checkout', 'The Comfort Station', 'The Castle on the Hoop', 'Diva'

Keith Roberts: Books I've not read yet:

1974:
Men and Machines
GB collection
(Granada; 239 pp.)
Contains: 'Manipulation', 'Escapism', 'Boulter's Canaries', 'Sub-Lim', 'Breakdown', 'Therapy 2000', 'The Deeps', 'Manscarer', 'Synth', 'The Face That Kills'

1986:
Kaeti and Company
GB collection
(Kerosina; 224 pp.)
Contains: 'Kaeti's Nights', 'The Silence of the Land', 'Kaeti and the Potman', 'Kaeti and the Sky Person', 'Kaeti and the Building', 'Kaeti and the Tree', 'Kaeti and the Hangman', 'The Clocktower Girl', 'Kaeti and the Zep', 'The Dream Machine'

1987:
Gráinne
GB novel
(Kerosina; 175 pp.)

1988:
The Road to Paradise
GB novel
(Kerosina; 228 pp.)

1989:
Winterwood and Other Hauntings
GB collection
(Morrigan; 182 pp.)
Contains: 'Susan', 'The Scarlet Lady', 'The Eastern

Windows', 'Winterwood', 'Mrs Cibber', 'The Snake Princess', 'Everything in the Garden'

1992:
Kaeti on Tour
GB collection, with linking material
(Sirius; 320 pp.)
Contains: 'Kaeti and the Shadows', 'The Tiger Sweater', 'Kaeti and the Village', 'Turndown', 'Kaeti and the Airfield', 'The Green Place', 'The Aquatint', 'The Bridge of Dreams', 'Londinium'

Reference material about Keith Roberts

Brian W. Aldiss with David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*.
Gollancz, 1986
pp. 373–5

John Clute: 'ROBERTS, KEITH (JOHN KINGSTON) (1935-)'
in John Clute and Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.
Orbit, 1993
pp. 1011–12

Paul Kincaid: 'ROBERTS, Keith (John Kingston).'
in Noelle Watson & Paul E. Schellinger, *Twentieth-Century Science Fiction Writers*.
St James Press, 1991
pp. 665–6

CD Reviews

Best CD of the Year:
***Sleeps With Angels* (Neil Young and Crazy Horse) Reprise**
Only every 15 years or so does such a record appear: a record with that absolute authority of brilliant performers reaching the height of their performing and songwriting powers. Neil Young has been steadily stretching his guitar style for twenty years now, until now it has become his servant rather than his obsession. Kurt Cobain's death, and the implied tipping-of-metaphorical-hat to Neil Young contained in his suicide note, seems to have set the older performer off on a voyage to discover all the possibilities of life and death that he might condense into one long musical statement. Yet each song is brilliant in itself; it's the dark lyrics, showing an America killing itself, that weld every piece into a whole. And that mighty guitar sound is now reined in, compressed, part of the statement rather than fighting the songs. There's a fair variety of musical style here: from the blues of 'Blue Eden' to the Neil Young glowing ballad style of 'A Dream That Can Last', accompanied only by tack piano.

***Universal Mother* (Sinead O'Connor) Chrysalis/EMI**
Not yet compared with *Sleeps With Angels*, except by me, *Universal Mother* has the same feeling of a rushing forth of one long statement of belief and musical inspiration. A ravishing album to listen to, since O'Connor's singing improves with each album, its combination of spitting angry and too-tender-to-touch lyrics have upset the critics. Sinead must be doing something right. They liked her when she disembowelled her emotions about herself (*I Do Not Want What I Have Not Got*), but not when she turns her knife on her society ('I'm not no red football'; 'Famine') or writes songs about her love for her baby ('All babies are flown from the universe') and the need to cherish children. Still, nothing would haved worked without her glorious melodies and impeccable musical taste.

***Sweet Journey* (Fay White, Family and Friends Live) Fay White**
Sent to me through the mail, *Sweet Journey* is a reminder of the amazing things local performers are doing with a thousand dollars or so and the right equipment. I listen to a bit of folk music these days because my sister Jeanette is very much involved with local folk music scene. (*Her* fanzine is *Folkvine*, Victoria's folk newsletter.) Open up this CD and I find lots of familiar names in the credits (especially the omnipresent Dave Rackham, harpist). They were all on stage at one time, making a very sweet sound. Like many local folk CDs, *Sweet Journey*'s weakness is in the lyrics, but some of the songs ('Furry', 'Gallery Walls', 'Turning of the Tide') have bite. Folkies, I suspect, like to see themselves as the last true love-and-peace hippies, but all these good feelings seem a bit out of place in today's nasty world. Still, good luck to them: Fay White and her vast family and even vaster number of friends can really sing and play. (Available: PO Box 51, St Kilda 3182 for, I presume, the usual $30 per CD.)

***Sinatra Sings Great Songs from Great Britain* (Frank Sinatra) Reprise**
This review's for Terry Frost. You know, Terry, how Sinatra's great albums are those recorded with Nelson Riddle during the 1950s for Capitol. The rot set in soon after Sinatra formed his own company, Reprise, in 1962, but there is a brief period at Reprise during which Sinatra remained the master of the traditional American ballad. Obviously his sales figures must have been slipping, because he tried a series of spectacular large-orchestra records such as *Sinatra with Strings* and *The Concert Sinatra* before yielding to the demands of mid-sixties pop ('Strangers in the Night', 'Something Stupid', and all that). But in mid-1962, while touring Britain, he hired Robert Farnon, the English conductor and arranger, to put together a group of ballads written by Britons. Farnon proved to be the equal of Nelson Riddle and the recording sessions went wonderfully (as the detailed liner notes show), but Sinatra thought his own voice sounded a bit strained at the end of a strenuous tour, and never allowed *Sinatra Sings Great Songs from Great Britain* to be released in America. A great pity, since this probably the last of his albums in his fifties ballad style: perfect. My favourite tracks are 'Roses of Picardy' and 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square', but you will like them all.

— Bruce Gillespie, 27 November 1994