Scratch Pad 20

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 9, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the December 1996 mailing of Acnestis.

Contents

A TASTE FOR MAYHEM: Preliminary notes on IAIN BANKS'S NON-SF NOVELS

Presented as a talk to the Nova Mob, Melbourne's SF discussion group, 6 November 1996. At the same meeting, Race Mathews gave a talk about Iain Bank's SF novels, which I'll reprint as soon as possible.

The legend

Banks, Iain with or without a middle 'M.', is the stuff of legend.

The legend runs that he had published three novels before someone told him he was an SF writer and dragged him along to a convention. The legend adds that he decided to join the SF community and write real SF books when he discovered the capacity of the British fan for putting away booze at conventions.

The legend hints that he absorbs as much booze and illegal chemicals as he ascribes to his characters. This can't be true, or he'd be dead by now.

Another legend has him abseiling the outside wall of a hotel during a convention, an adventure that he ascribes to a character in *Espedair Street*.

Are these legends true? Iain Banks confirms some of them in an interview with Alan Stewart (*Ethel the Aardvark*, March 1992). The story of the wall-climbing incident is even weirder than the legend:

> It used to be when I got drunk I loved climbing things like buildings and bits of industrial plant and machinery: that sort of stuff. I promised my girl friend I'd stop doing it, but then I was standing on the outside of the Metropole Hotel chatting with Tony Roxborough who's editor at Ventura. It was part of a suite of rooms with this enormous gigantic bedroom and I was standing at the end of this balcony after an enormously long party — about 5 o'clock in the morning — the sun was just coming up. I spotted that this other balcony outside the sitting room was only about six or seven feet away so I handed my drink to one of the people (I think they were from Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham) cause I'd spotted a loophole, you see, because I wasn't actually climbing. This was about the third or fourth storey, and it was actually a traverse; I wasn't actually gaining any height. So I did this, but unfortunately at the same time as this there was a burglar taking things next door and the suite adjoining that, which was part of the convention where they were getting together the daily newspaper. This person appeared and walked off with some jewellery and a camera and other bits and pieces. Fortunately the lady who was asleep in there got a glimpse of him and he didn't look at all like me. He had short hair and no beard — at the time I had much longer hair — and he didn't have a Scottish accent.
>
> About half an hour later I was sitting talking to this totally young-looking policeman who looked like he shouldn't be out on the streets at that time of night, saying, well, actually I was staying at the hotel. They didn't even take my name, let alone take a statement from me.
>
> After about four hours' sleep, myself and John Jarrold, my science fiction editor for Orbit, went down to the bar and found out what exactly had happened. At ten o'clock in the morning we were there for a morning hot starter as it were, and I was ordering John's gin and tonic and my bloody mary when this American guy came up and said 'Hey, they let you out'. I didn't believe him, and said, 'What are you talking about?' 'Why aren't you in jail or prison?' he wanted to know. I'm still asking him

what's he talking about.

It seems that this rumour had started up instantly that I was a cat burglar, an international jewel thief, and that either I'd been abseiling down from the top of the hotel dressed as an SAS, you know anti-terrorist squad, with the balaclava and all the rest, dressed in black, or that I was dressed in a Spiderman outfit. Several people swore blind they'd seen all this happen. One and a half thousand Americans left that day to go back to the States and they all left believing this had happened.

When Banks was in Melbourne, although he was not allowed by his Penguin minder to meet the SF fans, he was interviewed on radio by Terry Lane. During that interview he confessed to a 'taste for mayhem'.

In talking about the main character of a much later novel, *Complicity*, Banks said of him: 'A deeply unpleasant character. My hope and expectation was to offend as many people with *Complicity* as I did with *The Wasp Factory*.'

Is the legend true?

Mayhem? Offensive? All part of the legend, no doubt, but the secret of Banks's success is that he never offends, no matter what his characters do. His style is chatty but always precise and vivid, funny without being wildly grotesque, visionary without being pretentious. In short, Banks is not 'the artist as public nuisance', as Robert Hughes described the visual artist of the late twentieth-century, but the artist as private charmer. This is art that hides art, delicious to read, but difficult to talk about.

Banks can write well because he's had lots of practice. In the *Interzone* interview (No. 86, August 1994) Banks says that he wrote and submitted, during a period of 16 years, six novels before he had anything accepted for publication. Also, he wrote *Consider Phlebas* before *The Wasp Factory*, his first novel, was published.

Double career?

Banks has surprisingly little to say about the nature of his double career. 'I definitely feel more at home with SF because you've got far more control . . . But by a degree, *fraction*, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you've achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination.'

The dividing lines between Banks's SF and his non-SF are thin. The first three novels purport to be founded in 'ordinary' reality, but it's a rickety foundation. *Walking on Glass*, for instance, is divided into three sections, seemingly unconnected. In the most typical section, a young man on the loose — not at all sure of his place in the world — falls in love with a delectable young lady, but is in turn betrayed by the delectable young lady and his best friend. This becomes a familiar theme in Banks's non-SF books. In another section, two people sit playing impossible games in a tower that looks out over a bleak landscape. They cannot remember how they came to be in the tower. They will be allowed to escape the tower only if they think of the right question, not the right answer. This 'fantasy' section proves to be a connected part of the whole story.

In *The Bridge*, as we are shown at the beginning of the novel, a car accident has pitched the main character into a self-constructed alternate reality. In this alternate reality, a city exists on a bridge that stretches in each direction to the horizon. Its pylons are anchored in a line of islands that stretch across this huge stretch of water. A train service provides transport along the city, and all human activity, including work, entertainment and living areas can be found on the bridge. In the book's last pages, the main character awakes after many months in a coma. It has all been a dream, not a separate fantasy world.

'The Wasp Factory'

Banks's first great success, the book that created the Banks legend at one go, was *The Wasp Factory*, a bizarre concoction that seems to surpass all barriers of good or bad taste. As the uniquely icky character says of himself: 'Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my young cousin, Esmerelda, more or less on a whim. That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through.'

The Wasp Factory's main character is an isolated chap who spends most of his time on an island that is barely joined to the mainland by dunes. He has set it up as a private fortress. His father has allowed him to miss school altogether, and he has constructed around himself a primeval world of signs, portents and warnings that keep everybody at bay except his father. The book begins as the boy's father warns him that his psychotic brother Eric has escaped from custody and his heading back home.

As I've said, Banks confesses to an enjoyment of mayhem. 'Mayhem' is a mild word for what happens in *The Wasp Factory*, which is narrated by a very unreliable witness. The thesis of Kev McVeigh is that not only has Frank not killed his brother, sister and cousin, but that they probably never existed. Mad Eric might not exist either. If that is the case, who is Frank's father, and what does he believe is happening when Frank purports to take phone calls from the crazed Eric? And what happens at the end, when Eric does seem to put in an appearance?

The power of this book is in its tone of cheerful malevolence. A tale told by a funny, articulate murderous paranoid is a lot more interesting than the biography of John Q. Citizen. Here, more than anywhere else in his work, Banks uses the power of seemingly simple language to make the most unlikely events seem inevitable.

'The Bridge'

The Bridge, on the other hand, is not completely satisfactory, because its intensity is undermined by its 'He woke up and found it was all a dream' structure. It is given validity by Banks's down-to-earth style. While the main character is living within the Bridge world he really tries to adjust himself to the shifting expectations of the other inhabitants. Why, for instance, is he given a luxury apartment in what is otherwise a rundown, rather seedy

world? Why is he given an allowance that enables him to dress well and make friends? He doesn't question the world itself because it is completely lived in. Banks shows us that the elements of this world are skewed artifacts of the main character's Scotland: a world of bridges, lakes, trains, rundown apartments, old lifts, stone rather than concrete. Each major section of the bridge seems to him like a fortress, and the image of the castle/fortress remains central to Banks's later novels. This is warm, user-friendly Kafka; skewed, but not alienating.

'Espedair Street'

I read Iain Banks's next non-SF novels, *The Crow Road*, *Espedair Street* and *Canal Dreams*, in that wrong order, which proved to be a disservice to *Espedair Street*. To read *The Crow Road* after the first three novels is to see a pupa, the amusing, twisted entertainer, replaced by a glorious butterfly, a major artist. To travel backwards to *Espedair Street*, as I did, is to find a novel halfway between the two states.

Espedair Street first. It seems to have no fantasy elements, except that it is based on one of the most luscious of modern fantasies: what it would be like to be a rich, popular and talented pop star. Banks asks: what it would it *really* be like? Why are all those fabulously successful pop stars often struck down by ghastly events?

The only person who could tell you if Banks has guessed right would be some rich, popular and talented pop star whose success peaked in the late 1970s, only to find the members of his band dying like flies and his own desire to go on perform extinguished.

Is this self-pitying stuff? Tragic? Not a bit of it. Daniel Weir, the pop star and song writer who tells the tale, is self-pitying, but Banks has no pity for Weir's self-pity. At the moment of his first great success, Weir has this moment of revelation:

> I remember taking rather a lot of drugs that autumn, staying in that grand, impressive house. Once I climbed a tree and reclined on a long oak bough, quite at my ease, head buzzing, while watching a juggler on the gravel path beneath me. I lay there, elbow on branch, head in hand, looking down at the circus juggler, and watched the Indian clubs whirling up towards me and then back down, and thought that there was something quite profound and remarkable about watching juggling from above, especially when the juggler was too intent on his skill to notice the observer. It was one of those perfect metaphors one only ever experiences under the simplicities of a drug; at the time it is both obviously unique and impregnably apt, and — afterwards — utterly unfathomable.
>
> And several times, in those balmy autumn days, I thought, *This is the life.*
>
> Do you blame me?

Banks is in all his work trying to capture an experience that is 'both obviously unique and impregnably apt', yet his comic spirit rebels against mysticism. He gives his characters wonderful moments of intense experience, but drops clues that they presage disaster. This reminds me of Jonathan Carroll's propensity for allowing his characters delirious happiness the moment before dropping them through the trapdoor to hell.

Banks's characters meet the hard realities of life, all right, but the attractiveness of Banks's work is that his characters savour their disasters. His life having ground to a stop, years after his great successes, Daniel Weir sits feeling useless in a giant mausoleum of a house in Edinburgh. In one of Banks's funniest scenes, two friends drop in, accompanied by a gigantic, stupid and slobbery 'dug'. The dog commits Banksian mayhem throughout the house.

Espedair Street is about Weir slowly awakening from his mood of despondency.

> I left the flat depressed but, as I walked down Espedair Street, back into town under a glorious sunset of red and gold, slowly a feeling of contentment, intensifying almost to elation, filled me. I couldn't say why; it felt like more than having gone through a period of mourning and come out the other side, and more than just having reassessed my woes and decided they were slight compared to what some people had to bear; it felt like faith, like revelation: that things went on, that life ground on regardless, and mindless, and produced pain and pleasure and hope and fear and joy and despair, and you dodged some of it and you sought some of it and sometimes you were lucky and sometimes you weren't, and sometimes you could plan your way ahead and that would be the right thing to have done, but other times all you could do was forget about plans and just be ready to *react*, and sometimes the obvious was true and sometimes it wasn't, and sometimes experience helped but not always, and it was all luck, fate, in the end; you lived, and you waited to see what happened, and you would rarely ever be sure that what you had done was really the right thing or the wrong thing, because things can always be better, and things can always be worse.
>
> Then, being me, I felt guilty about starting to feel better, and thought, *So, you've heard a little bit of home-crocheted philosophy, and seen somebody worse off than yourself; is this all it takes? Your revelations come cheap, Daniel Weir; and your soul is shallow . . .* but even that was part of the experience, and so explained, and expiated, by it, and under that startlingly gaudy sky — like something from one of my ma's Woolworth's paintings — I walked, and felt I could be happy again.

This passage, showing Banks at his best, revels in the ecstasy felt by his character at a particular moment, but laughs at the idea of ecstasy arising out of simple revelation.

'The Crow Road'

In *The Crow Road* we find a vast elaboration of all the themes from earlier Banks non-SF novels, combined with a swaggering mastery of the novelist's craft.

As in *Walking on Glass*, *The Bridge* and *Espedair Street*, the main story-teller, Prentice McHoan, is surely a version of how Banks sees himself: a bit awkward and shy, a youngish man who keeps failing in great enterprises; desired by every girl but the one he worships; a chap who ingests lots of grog and illegal substances; whose fate works out for the best, no matter what mayhem he wreaks on himself and others.

But Prentice only appears to be the main character of the novel, since he is the story-teller of large sections.

Much of it, however, he could know nothing about. The complex structure of the book, telling the story of three generations, gives importance to every member of the McHoan family.

The book begins with the explosion of Prentice's grandmother, Margot McHoan, at her funeral. Somebody forgot to remove her pacemaker before she was cremated. When Banks takes us back in time, we find that Margot McHoan is one of the most attractive characters in the novel.

At the beginning of the novel it seems that the main family problem is Prentice's split with his father Kenneth. This impression is subverted when Banks takes us back twenty years into a world in which Kenneth is a young man about to meet the woman who will become his wife. If Prentice is self-pitying and self-destructive, Kenneth is a much more attractive character: a man of honour and humour who becomes a successful writer of children's stories. His relationship with his brothers and cousins and his own sublime final act overshadow Prentice's continued petty attempts at self-destruction.

The telling of stories

The Crow Road is essentially a novel about the telling of stories. In one of the flashbacks, Kenneth takes his kids up into the hills, and tells them about the 'mythosaur'. Accompanying them are Prentice's cousins, including Ashley Watt, the little tomboy who later becomes Prentice's confidante. Kenneth assures Prentice that the mythosaur is just a story, but this episode is contrasted with an episode in the childhood of Rory, Kenneth's brother. Rory is too scared to sleep one night after being told stories of dragons. He is reassured that dragons don't exist, but discovers many years later that they do. In *The Crow Road*, even the simplest story has treacherous possibilities.

Rory disappeared ten years before the main action of the novel, but Banks makes him its the pivotal character. Rory is somebody who passionately believes in stories; his only real success in life has been as a travel writer. His mistake is to winkle out some true stories about members of the McHoan family.

Super plotter

But that is to anticipate the last quarter of the novel, which I leave for you to discover. I mention it because it shows one of Iain Banks's great skills: plotting. This takes the form of misdirection. For two-thirds of the novel's length we believe that it is just a funny and vivid oldfashioned family saga.

As I've said, the central story seems to focus on the split in the McHoan family caused by Prentice's unwillingness to talk to his father. Their dispute seems to be about religion: Prentice's father is fanatically against it; Prentice is sort of in favour of it. His protestations of mild agnosticism enrage his father; his father's rage enrages Prentice. Prentice refuses to take money from his father for his university fees, then proceeds to drop out.

While this story rolls along, Banks constructs an entirely different story, placing little clues seemingly at random throughout the narrative. This is the story of Prentice's missing uncle Rory and his relationship to two of Prentice's other uncles, Hamish and Fergus. Banks makes the last quarter of the book into a murder mystery without disrupting the rich pattern of the rest of the book.

Banks's passion

But careful plotting is not enough to make a masterpiece, and *The Crow Road* is, so far, Banks's only masterpiece. The main quality in the novel — in fact, the only quality that matters in any novel — is passion.

Banks endorses a rich all-encompassing belief in experience itself, the same belief that appears in *Espedair Street*. Prentice, like all the family, swings wildly from delight to despair, but they all believe that nothing should be shirked from.

Some members of the family express this directly through a pungent version of ultra-fundamentalist Christianity.

Kenneth McHoan, Prentice's father, believes in the direct power of story and myth:

> . . . my father taught us that there was, generally, a fire at the core of things, and that change was the only constant, and that we — like everybody else — were both the most important people in the universe, and utterly without significance, depending, and that individuals mattered before their institutions, and that people, were people, much the same everywhere, and when they appeared to do things that were stupid or evil, often you hadn't been told the whole story, but that sometimes people did behave badly, usually because some idea had taken hold of them and given them an excuse to regard other people as expendable (or bad), and that was part of who we were too, as a species, and it wasn't always possible to know that you were right and they were wrong, but the important thing was to keep trying to find out, and always to face the truth. Because truth mattered.

Which is wonderfully highminded, and as close as any character in any novel has come to expressing my own general position. Unfortunately, as Prentice discovers, at least two characters in the novel have died because of their unflinching willingness to face the truth. Prentice survives: it's experience rather than truth that matters.

There are many truths, and Banks sees them summed up best in the Scottish landscape, which is the unshakable foundation of his non-SF novels. Banks's finely etched images of Scotland bestow greatness on *The Crow Road* and, to a lesser extent, *Espedair Street*, *Whit*, *Complicity* and *The Bridge*.

Here's my favourite moment from *The Crow Road*. Kenneth as a young man returns home after some years away at university:

> He rested his arms on the top of the wall and looked down the fifty feet or so to the tumbling white waters. Just upstream, the river Loran piled down from the forest in a compactly furious cataract. The spray was a taste. Beneath, the river surged round the piers of the viaduct that carried the railway on towards Lochgilphead and Gallanach.
>
> A grey shape flitted silently across the view, from falls

to bridge, then zoomed, turned in the air and swept into the current of the far bank of the river, as though it was a soft fragment of the train's steam that had momentarily lost its way and was now hurrying to catch up. He waited a moment, and the owl hooted once, from inside the dark constituency of the forest. He smiled, took a deep breath that tasted of steam and the sweet sharpness of pine resin, and then turned away, went back to pick up his bags.

— Bruce Gillespie, November 1996

BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since the end of August 1996. The ratings are:

** Books highly recommended.

* Books recommended

℗ Books about which I have severe doubts.

* ***Writers of the Future, Vol. XII***
edited by Dave Wolverton (Bridge 1-57318-1996; 480 pp.)
I received this as a review copy. I know I should ignore any Bridge publication on ideological grounds, but I didn't because (a) the Scientologists, who own Bridge, actually encourage and support young writers by throwing money at them; and (b) I can't see any sign of the prejudices of the organisers affecting the judges' decisions when handing out the prizes. This book might concentrate on new writers, but it is a lot more readable than most original fiction anthologies. The best story, 'After the Rainbow', is by Fruma Klass, the wife of Philip Klass, known to SF readers since the early 1950s as William Tenn. I assume that Fruma is a mature-age beginner. Full marks for maturity; she knows people. What happened to the inhabitants of the Ark when they poured out over dry land, hoping to repopulate the earth? Fruma takes the Biblical proposition literally, and has lots of fun with it. For instance, whence came the people who married Noah's offspring in order to begin the process? From over the hills, of course. Klass shows how you can subvert a myth by seeming to take it seriously. Other promising new writers include Edwina Mayer ('Dead Faces', a powerful psychic-detective story), Jerry Craven ('The Savant Death Syndrome', a scary piece about clumsy foreigners in South-east Asia), and Russell William Asplund (the gently amusing 'The Unhappy Golem of Rabbi Leitch').

* ***Cause of Death***
by Patricia Cornwell (Putnam 0-399-14146-4; 1996; 340 pp.)
Patricia Cornwell won millions of readers with her first four novels; now she seems determined to get rid of them. The first half of *Cause of Death* is claustrophobic and convincing, but Cornwell lets her story slip-slop into a ridiculous tale of sabotage and not-very-suspenseful derring-do. Will I read her next book? I suppose so, but perhaps wait for the paperback.

** ***Whit, or Isis Among the Unsaved***
by Iain Banks (Little Brown 0-316-91436-3; 1995; 455 pp.)
Yes, I should have discussed *Whit* in my piece about Iain Banks's non-SF novels. But I didn't have time to include it in the Nova Mob talk, and speaking there about it wouldn't have added much to my general thoughts on Banks. This is a very clever story, full of delicious surprises, owing as much to SF as general fiction. Isis sets out from the isolated human colony into the big bad alien world and proceeds to find out much about it and herself. But the 'human colony' is an isolated religious community, and the 'alien world' is a strangely twisted version of modern Scotland. Is this, then, merely a version of *Candide*? Or even *Roderick*? An upbringing in the religious settlement has left Isis naïve about modern life, but she shows a remarkable ability to adapt. She needs to, because she discovers that it's not the outside world that is corrupt, but the secluded 'saintly' environment that sent her on her pilgrimage. Nothing defeats Isis, not even a major betrayal of her lifelong beliefs. In the Banksian battle between Life and True Belief, Life wins yet again.

** ***Borderline***
by Leanne Frahm (MirrorDanse 0-9586583-0-7; 1996; 128 pp.)
I enjoyed this book greatly, but then, I knew I would. My regret is that it features only five of Australian writer Leanne Frahm's stories. (*Borderline*'s useful Biblio-graphy lists 25 stories. Will the other 20 remain unreprinted?) 'On the Turn' is one of the best short stories I've read. It merely improves on re-reading. This is rich, dark stuff about fraying marriage, dank undergrowth, creatures of the shore, and the final rejection of earth by the moon. (Of course! Right this moment, by writing that phrase, I've just discovered the way in which every word in this story contributes to the overall pattern.) 'Ithaca Week' and 'Olivetruffles' are one-idea stories with a wry aftertaste. 'The Lamadium Affair', seemingly a conventional tale about humans trying to understand an alien culture, has a very intense feeling to it. You possibly have to read it twice to judge its real depth. 'Borderline', published here for the first time, shows that SF can still be great fun.

** ***Canal Dreams***
by Iain Banks (Macmillan 0-333-51768-7; 1989; 198 pp.)
This is the thriller that Iain Banks published between Espedair Street and The Crow Road. A Japa-

nese woman cellist who refuses to fly finds herself on a ship in the Panama Canal at a moment when rebels stop the movement of all shipping. Things worsen from then on. Hisako Ondo's initial fear of life makes a sharp contrast with the contempt for life shown by the rebels who capture the ship. Her growing willingness to take on the responsibility for surviving is compared with the feckless disintegration of these rebels without much of a cause. Like most of Banks's books, Canal Dreams has a reverse Franz Kafka quality; his characters step forward in fear, seemingly about to be crushed by the traps of the twentieth century, yet discover a treacherous path that leads upward and outward from despair. I keep feeling that Banks has not yet discovered what his books are really all about. When he does, he will write a masterpiece that will turn around our whole perception of what fiction might achieve.

** ***The Scarlet Rider***

by Lucy Sussex (Forge 0-312-85293-2; 1996; 350 pp.)

Considering that this novel tells of some desperate matters — loss, murder, isolation, supernatural obsession — it's an oddly cheerful experience. Perhaps this is because *The Scarlet Rider* is such a *frantic* narrative, terse and vivid, covering a huge range of experience. Unemployed one day, next day Mel is hired by a publisher to track down the author of a 'lost' early Australian narrative. As her own household breaks up, Mel meets a wide range of new acquaintances, each of whom lays claims on her life. Mel's life seems about to shatter: somewhere there's a ghost in her machine, pulling apart those strands in Mel's life that she believes should hold firm. I'm not sure that I solved more than a few of this book's mysteries during my first reading, yet I was carried along by the assurance of the author's style and the sharp quirkiness of her humour. Just as I was settling down to savour a quiet, neat ending, the last chapter exploded in my face. What a coup!

** ***Dealers in Light and Darkness***

by Cherry Wilder (Edgewood Press 0-9629066-4-6; 1995; 166 pp.)

Cherry Wilder, the author we love to claim as Australian, is actually a New Zealander who has lived in Germany since the 1970s. Her career began while she was living in Australia, and this remains the country where readers appreciate her. For all that, I did not know of the existence of this American-published collection of Wilder's short stories until Yvonne Rousseau brought it back from overseas. This is an important, if much too short collection from a major SF writer. Wilder combines a quiet authority of experience and utterance with a style that most writers would kill for: apt, compressed, allusive. Hence her stories are mysterious: strange accretions of events that slowly reveal their truths. In 'Odd Man Search' and 'Something Coming Through', the two best stories in this collection, it takes most of the story to find out what kind of a world we have entered, let alone making sense of the nature of its people. As in the stories of Gene Wolfe, many characters are not quite human, and many landscapes would be uninhabitable by twentieth-century people. Yet, as in Wolfe's work, all the clues are here; they are presented so tersely, however, that reaching each story feels like absorbing a novel. Several of the stories, including 'Odd Man Search' and 'The Dreamers of Deliverance', are set in the same post-holocaust world. 'The Ball of Hilo Hill' has connections with *The Luck of Brin's Five*, Wilder's Ditmar-winning novel from the mid-1970s. Despite these connections, each story sets the reader adrift in new waters; exciting experiences all.

** ***Oyster***

by Janette Turner Hospital (Knopf 0-09-183312-4; 1996; 402 pp.)

This is one of those novels released in the right place at the right time. Written well before the Pauline Hanson fiasco, which has dominated Australian newspapers during recent weeks, it illuminates the North Queensland mind-set in a way no newspaper article ever could. For the SF reader it provides an interesting contrast with Iain Banks's *Whit*. Both novels tell of religious communes ruled by charismatic leaders; both tell of the people who try to escape the communes. In *Whit*, good humour and bravery lead to self-discovery and personal freedom; in *Oyster*, paranoia boils off every page like fog; nobody can escape. The disciples of charismatic self-appointed prophet 'Oyster' arrive in the almost invisible North Queensland town of Outer Maroo, only to be whisked off to an out-of-town opal mine. They never leave. Any stranger who arrives in town never leaves. Mail is never sent; nobody but a few landholders owns enough petrol to reach the nearest town, which is hundreds of miles away. The town's inhabitants, suspicious of Oyster and his crew, succumb to their own oppressive version of Christianity. Heat rules. Nobody takes action until disaster takes over. Does this powerful brew of a novel work? Not entirely. *Oyster* has many great pages, and many pretentious, extraneous pages as well. Hospital might have told its story in a less irritating way. But *Oyster* has a ring of absolute truth that will not let you go. Each time I hear bad news from North Queensland, I think of Outer Maroo and *Oyster*. Scary.

** ***The Firm***

by John Grisham (Arrow 009- 917941-5; 1991; 421 pp.)

I read this book because at a certain point in the film (which fortunately I saw on TV, and therefore could switch off) the plot suddenly goes haywire. 'The book must be better than this,' I said to myself, and sure enough, it is. On the surface, The Firm is a tale of momentous processes: the corruption of American law; the all- invasive quality of the Mafia. This is a book constructed entirely of events and conversations; no extraneous sloppy 'fine writing' here. Rapidly Grisham draws us into the strange life of this Memphis law firm. He bats the plot along at a wonderful pace as ultra-corruption wriggles up from under the carpet of ultra-respectability. For awhile I thought this might be a realistic novel. No

such luck. Grisham's squeaky- clean main character, clever enough to get himself out of this mess, is pure fantasy. I allowed for the fantasy, and found myself with a book that is not so much a suspense novel as a subversive comedy. As in The Client, Grisham sees America divided between two monstrous 'firms', the Mafia and the FBI, each as unscrupulous as the other. Most people are caught in the crossfire; few individuals escape.

* ***The Client***
by John Grisham (Arrow 009- 917941-5; 1993; 458 pp.)
Longer than The Firm, with a plot that tends to slackness in the middle, The Client is an entertainment that never feels believable. Its trigger situation is ludicrous; not that a nine-year-old boy overhears a Mafia secret and thus changes his life forever, but that the secret could have been entrusted to a lawyer hack (and therefore heard by the boy) in the first place. The endless resourcefulness of this nine-year-old is also unbelievable (although Grisham makes grim humour of an American kid's reliance on film and TV characters models when tackling situations), and most of the other characters are too good or too bad to be true. As in The Firm, Grisham's America is a grim cityscape dominated by egotistical lawyers, slack policemen, maniacal FBI agents and murderous Mafia thugs. All very entertaining, but two novels of Grisham are enough for me.

* ***Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex***
edited by Ellen Datlow (St Martin's Press 0-312-14019-3; 1996; 316 pp.)
This is the only disappointing Ellen Datlow collection I've read. Usually she draws out of authors more than they give other editors, but this time most of them are defeated by the subject matter. To hear these writers tell it, sex in America has become a grim and desperate business, replete with every peculiarity but pleasure. Sex, to me, is one of the great agents of human redemption, yet only Roberta Lannes's 'His Angel', grim but shining, rises above the limitations the other authors place upon themselves. There's not much hope for anybody in Bruce McAllister's 'Captain China', but it's a first-class piece of *faux naïf* story-telling. *Off Limits* has a few reprints, including Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah . . .', which doesn't bowl me over in the way it did when I first read it in 1969, and Elizabeth Hand's 'In the Month of Athyr', which is certainly effective, but not redemptive. Robert Silverberg's 'The Reality Trip', which I thoroughly disliked in 1970, now has for me a gleam of humour and real perception which I don't find in most of the other stories.

** ***The Keys to the Street***
by Ruth Rendell (Hutchinson 0-09-180163-X; 1996; 310 pp.)
For pure pleasure, there's nothing like reading a great novel from a favourite author. 'She's done it again!' I said to myself. 'How can she keep pulling the lollies out of the bag, year after year?' Part of Rendell's secret is her sense of place and her love of London. Four seemingly disconnected stories are told about Regent's Park: the people who live near it, those who cross it during the day, and the homeless people who live in it at night. Eventually the stories interconnect to make a pattern like the paths in the park. There is a wonderfully ambling quality to this book that merely disguises its perfect sense of plot and character. I read for pleasure; few writers give more pleasure than Ruth Rendell/ Barbara Vine.

— Bruce Gillespie, 30 November 1996