# Scratch Pad 21

## February 1997

*Graphic by Ditmar*

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**Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 10, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the February 1997 mailing of Acnestis. Cover: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen).**

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# Iain M. Banks: The 'Culture' science-fiction novels and the economics and politics of scarcity and abundance

## by Race Mathews

**Paper delivered for the Nova Mob by Race Mathews, 6 November 1996. This was delivered on the same night as my own 'A Taste for Mayhem: Iain Banks's Non-SF Novels'. Both are preprints from *SF Commentary* 76.**

In 1993, the American scholars Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky made a much-discussed contribution to futurology with their book *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil*.[1] Their theme is the economics and politics of scarcity. The book argues that it will be roughly another hundred years before science and technology reach a point where the world's consumption requirements can be satisfied. Throughout the intervening period, the globe will be divided into zones of peace and zones of turmoil. The zones of peace will be those areas — roughly corresponding to the current developed world — where conditions of relative abundance take the sting out of social frictions and enable democratic institutions and relative social harmony to be maintained. The zones of turmoil are the rest of the world — roughly corresponding to today's lesser-developed countries — where life continues to be dominated by the struggle for scarce resources among individuals, interest groups, social classes and nations. Singer and Wildavsky argue that the challenge for policy-makers is how to contain and quarantine the tensions in the zones of turmoil so that the zones of peace can as much as possible get on with developing the scientific and technological know-how which will ultimately — a century from now — enable us to come together as a unified and harmonious planet-wide social order.

Objection could be taken to this view on the grounds that it is — among other things — unoriginal, superficial,

1 Singer, M. and Wildavsky, A., *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil*, Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1993.

immoral and at variance with such observable facts as that the increasing aggregate wealth of the prospective zones of peace is not so far resulting in any appreciable diminution in the struggle for resources within them, or enhancing either democratic institutions or social harmony or preventing the emergence of an under-class whose deprivation in many cases is as great as could be found, for the most part, in any zone of turmoil. Science fiction readers may well suspect that social and political pathologies will result in a global future that more closely resembles the world of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* than John W. Campbell Jr's *Forgetfulness*.

What is also apparent from the science-fiction perspective is that we have been here before. Singer and Wildavsky are one more instance of science playing catch-up with science fiction. That problems arise where societies characterised by abundance co-exist with those characterised by scarcity has been a science-fiction trope for as long virtually as the genre has existed. Moreover, it is in science fiction that the consequent moral and political complexities of the juxtaposition have the more successfully been identified and explored. For example, to what extent is quarantine or containment either a moral or a practical option? Is there an obligation on the part of societies characterised by abundance to assist those which are less well off, and, if so, to what extent and by what means? Where does alleviating scarcity leave off and intrusion by the donors on the cultural and social integrity of the recipients take over? Can intervention in the interests of averting loss of life and suffering be reconciled with respect for the independence of the society where they are being experienced and the need for it to make mistakes in order to learn from them, and, if so, what are the limits of intervention?

These and other related questions have nowhere been more effectively posed in science-fiction terms than in the work of Iain M. Banks. Banks's intellectual stock in trade in key respects resembles that of Singer and Wildavsky, albeit restated against a galactic backdrop. The major preoccupation of his science fiction is with whether — and, if so, on what terms — societies characterised respectively by abundance and scarcity can co-exist. Unlike Singer and Wildavsky, Banks also has interesting things to say about the advantages and disadvantages that living in an abundance economy and a utopian social order might be found to have. He is in every respect a more readable, engaging and thought-provoking writer than Singer and Wildavsky. Cynics might go so far as to say that his extrapolations are no less likely than those of Singer and Wildavsky to come true.

**The Culture**

The pre-eminent social order of Banks's universe is known simply as the Culture. Its inhabitants are human, albeit of non-terrestrial origin and in key respects genetically enhanced. Their homes are predominantly the General Systems Vehicles — planet-size spaceships — in which they move between the stars:

> General Systems Vehicles were like encapsulated worlds. They were more than just very big spaceships; they were habitats, universities, factories, museums, dockyards, libraries, even mobile exhibition centres. They represented the Culture — they were the Culture. Almost anything that could be done anywhere in the Culture could be on a GSV. They could make anything the Culture was capable of making, contained all the knowledge the Culture had ever accumulated, carried or could construct specialised equipment of every imaginable type for every conceivable eventuality, and continually manufactured smaller ships. Their complements were measured in millions at least. They crewed their offspring ships out of the gradual increase in their own population. Self-contained, self-sufficient, productive and, in peacetime at least, continually exchanging information, they were the Culture's ambassadors, its most visible citizens and its technological and intellectual big guns. There was no need to travel from the galactic backwoods to some distant Culture home-planet to be amazed and impressed by the stunning scale and awesome power of the Culture: a GSV would bring it right up to your front door.
>
> The ships are operated — and society more generally is largely administered — by Artificial Intelligences known as Minds.[2]

John Clute's entry on Banks in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* rightly notes that: 'There are no Empires in the Culture, no tentacled Corporations, no Enclave whose hidden knowledge gives its inhabitants a vital edge in their attempts to maintain independence against the military hardware of the far-off Czar at the apex of the pyramid of power.'[3] Abundance born of science and technology has long since made redundant the need for the population to compete economically with one another. Inasmuch as the Culture has a political philosophy, it loosely combines the better elements of anarchism, socialism and communitarianism, in a manner broadly reminiscent of William Morris and *News from Nowhere*. 'The Culture', says Banks, 'is my idea of Utopia':

> Or at least as close as you can get to Utopia with what we regard as recognisably human stock. I'd love to live there, and that's been the guiding principle behind the whole thing. Not that it always comes out that way in the books, because I'm trying hard not to make it look wonderful and goody-goody and all the rest of it.[4]

The Culture's preferred relationship with other species and societies is one of peaceful co-existence, tempered by the need to fend off such military challenges as may occasionally arise, and the urge to intervene — some within the Culture might call it meddle — where the predicament of local populations is felt to be intolerable. Intervention is the business of a Special Circumstances agency, which is frequently violent and unscrupulous in meeting its objectives. The activities of the Special Circumstances agency are what much of Banks's writing is about.

***The State of the Art***

The core Banks issues are posed in simplest and starkest terms in the novella *The State of the Art*, from Banks's collection of short fiction of the same name. The year is 1977. A General Contact Unit from the Culture — a spaceship of massive size and awesome capacities, but in turn only a minor component of the infinitely larger General Systems Vehicle which Banks describes casually as currently 'tramping a thousand years core-ward' — stations itself in the

2 Banks, I., *Consider Phlebas*, London: Orbit, 1987, pp. 220–1.

3 Clute, J., 'Iain M. Banks', in Clute, J. and Nicholls, P. (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, London: Orbit, 1993, p. 88.

4 Banks, I. M., Interview with Stan Nicholls, *Interzone*, No. 86, August 1994, p. 22.

vicinity of Earth. The purpose of the visit is to enable the ship's Mind — and the wider community of Artificial Intelligences of which the Mind belongs — to assess whether mankind is at a point where contact should be initiated. Crew members travel widely on the surface to observe human behaviour at first hand and experience human society. One of their number is seduced by the relative variety and unpredictability of what he is seeing, opts to stay behind when the GCU leaves and goes so far as to have the Mind strip him of his genetic enhancements in order to approximate more closely to the race he proposes to join.[5] At the same time the Mind is concluding that mankind is not yet ready for contact, and that the Earth should be categorised as a control world in a wider process of observing whether certain social pathologies inevitably cause the societies which exhibit them to self-destruct.

The downside of the Culture — the tug of decadence — is hinted at by Banks's description of an Earth-style banquet which takes place on the GCU. It reads in part:

> Li walked purposefully to the head of the middle table, tramped on an empty seat at its head and strode purposefully on to the table top, clumping down the brightly polished surface between the glittering place settings (the cutlery had been borrowed from a locked and forgotten storeroom in a palace in India; it hadn't been used for fifty years, and would be returned, cleaned, the next day . . . as would the dinner service itself, borrowed for the night from the Sultan of Brunei — without his permission), past the starched white napkins (from the *Titanic*; they'd be cleaned too and put back on the floor of the Atlantic), in the midst of the glittering glassware (Edinburgh Crystal, removed for a few hours from packing cases stowed deep in the hold of a freighter in the South China Sea, bound for Yokohama) and the candelabra (from a cache of loot lying under a lake near Kiev, sunk there by retreating Nazis judging from the sacks; also due to be replaced after their bizarre orbital excursion) until he stood in the centre of the middle table.

The passage continues a little later:

> 'Ladies and gentlemen,' Li said, standing with a bowl in one hand and a silver fork in the other. 'A little taste of Earth . . . no; more than that: a chance for you to participate in the rough and tumble of living on a squalid backwater planet without actually having to leave your seat or get your feet dirty.' He stabbed a bit of the meat, put it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. 'Human flesh, ladies and gents; cooked muscle of *hom. sap.* . . . as I suspect a few of you might have guessed. A little on the sweet side for my palate, but quite acceptable. Eat up . . . I had the ship take a few cells from a variety of people on earth. Without their knowledge of course. . . . Most of you over there will be eating either stewed Idi Amin or General Pinochet Chilli Con Carne; here in the centre we have a combination of General Stroessner Meat Balls and Richard Nixon Burgers. The rest of you have Ferdinand Marcos Saute and Shah of Iran Kebabs. There are, in addition, Fricaseed Kim Il Sung, Boiled General Videla and Ian Smith in Black Bean Sauce . . . all done just right by the excellent — if leaderless — chef we have around us. Eat up! Eat up!'[6]

The novella ends with the crew member who has decided to stay behind dying in a back alley brawl, and the departure of the GCU from the solar system. Observation machines have been put in place, but mankind is to remain undisturbed and free to work out its destiny for itself.

***Consider Phlebas***

Conflict between the Culture and another space-faring species — the Idirans, who see the 'repressive tolerance' of the Culture as a threat to their independence and religious faith — is the backdrop to Banks's first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*, which appeared in 1987. The spaceship of a recently created Mind is destroyed by more numerous Idiran forces, so obliging the Mind to take refuge on a nearby planet to which access has been generally closed-off on instructions from the Dra'Azon, beings so superior to — and remote from — either the Culture or the Idirans as to be regarded by both as to be given a wide birth and on no account provoked. Recovering the Mind becomes the task of Bora Horza Gorbuchul, from an endangered species known as Changers, who trade in impersonations on the basis of their ability to physically alter their appearances. Banks sees *Consider Phlebas* as having 'distinctly yarnish tendencies':

> I mean, when you come down to it, that was a story about a ship-wrecked sailor falling in with a gang of pirates and going in search of buried treasure.[7]

In fact, *Consider Phlebas* has far more to it than Banks's flippancies allow. As Banks elsewhere acknowledges, one of the ideas behind the book is that 'What usually happens is that people suffer and die and get involved in all sorts of mayhem and catastrophe and it doesn't make that much difference in the end':

> There's a big war going on in that novel, and various individuals and groups manage to influence its outcome. But even being able to do that doesn't ultimately change things much. At the end of the book, I have a section pointing this out by telling what happened after the war, which was an attempt to pose the question 'what was it all for?'[8]

Consider Phlebas is also notable in at least two other respects. Banks's drones — autonomous air-borne minor artificial intelligences tasked to serve and protect citizens of the Culture — are a major addition to the long line of memorable alien lifeforms created by science-fiction writers, from Stanley Weinbaum's ostrich-like Martian, Tweel, to the Moties of Larry Niven's *The Mote in God's Eye*. Some drones are the pure stuff of P. G. Wodehouse humour, reminiscent in particular of the greatest of all Wodehouse's characters, Jeeves, but also of servants more generally as Wodehouse contrasts them with the lotus-eaters of his effete and ineffectual aristocracy. Others are arch-manipulators in the tradition of Machiavelli. 'It's wonderfully easy to get into the machine's mind,' says Banks. 'I think my best characters are actually machines.'[9]

Banks similarly is into *homage*, notably — if sometimes tongue-in-cheek — to the tradition of space opera pio-

5 Renunciation of the Culture is also the theme of Banks's short story 'A Gift from the Culture'. See Banks, I. M., *The State of the Art*, London: Orbit, 1991, pp. 10–28.

6 Banks, 1991, pp. 180–1.

7 Banks, 1994, p. 23.

8 Banks, 1994, p. 22.

9 Banks, I. M., Interview with Alan Stewart, *Ethel the Aardvark*, No. 94, March 1992.

neered sixty and more years ago by E. E. Smith. Space warfare as described in *Consider Phlebas* evokes nothing so powerfully as classic passages of space opera overkill such as in Smith's 1934 novella *Triplanetary*, which reads in part:

> Far below, in number ten converter room, massive switches drove home and the enormous mass of the vessel quivered under the terrific energy of the newly-calculated, semi-material beam of energy that was hurled out, backed by the mightiest of all the mighty converters and generators of Triplanetary's superdreadnought. The beam, a pipelike hollow cylinder of intolerable energy, flashed out, and there was a rending, tearing crash as it struck Roger's hitherto impenetrable wall. . . . And speeding through that terrific conduit came package after package of destruction. Bombs, armour-piercing shells, gas shells of poisonous and corrosive fluids followed each other in quick succession. . . . Thus it was that the end came soon. A war-head touched steel plating and there ensued a space-wracking explosion of atomic iron. Gaping wide, helpless, with all defences down, other torpedoes entered the stricken hull and completed its destruction even before they could be recalled. Atomic bombs literally volatilized most of the pirate vessel; vials of pure corrosion began to dissolve the solid fabric of her substance into dripping corruption. Reeking gases filled every cranny of circumambient space as what was left of Roger's battle cruiser began the long plunge to the ground.[10]

Few readers will doubt that Banks's inspiration owes something to Smith's example. As Clute points out, *Consider Phlebas* exposes the reader to a number of sly ironies, in that the losing Idiran side, which Gorbuchul initially supports, is remarkably similar to the standard backdrop Galactic Empire found in routine space opera.[11]

***The Player of Games***

From the Culture locked in conflict with its enemies, Banks now moved on to intervention by the Culture in the affairs of the more unattractive of its neighbouring civilisations. Jernau Morat Gurgeh — the protagonist of *The Player of Games* — has become bored with defeating his competitors. His request for a greater challenge results in his being sent on a 100,000-light-year-journey to the Empire of Azad, where the Culture wants to bring down an exceptionally cruel regime. The nature of the Empire's unpleasantness is revealed in part when a drone attending Gurgeh — Flere-Imsaho — taps into an Imperial communication channel:

> Gurgeh watched the screen. Flere-Imsaho watched Gurgeh. The man's eyes glittered in the screen-light, unused photons reflecting from the halo of iris. The pupils widened at first, then shrank, became pinpoints. The drone waited for the wide, staring eyes to fill with moisture, for the tiny muscles around the eyes to flinch and the eyelids to close and the man to shake his head and turn away, but nothing of the sort happened. The screen held his gaze, as though the infinitesimal pressure of light it spent upon the room had somehow reversed, and so sucked the watching man forward, to hold him, teetering before the fall, fixed and steady and pointed at the flickering surface like some long-stilled moon. The screams echoed throughout the lounge, over its formseats and couches and low tables; the screams of species, men, women, children. Sometimes they were silenced quickly, but usually not. Each instrument, and each part of the tortured people, made its own noise; blood, knives, bones, lasers, flesh, ripsaws, chemicals, leeches, fleshworms, vibraguns, even phalluses, fingers and claws; each made or produced their own distinctive sounds, counterpoints to the theme of screams. . . . 'This is no special night, Gurgeh, no festival of sado-erotica', explained Flere-Imsaho, 'These things go on every evening. . . . There is more, but you've seen a representative cross-section'.[12]

There is a conspicuous echo here of Li's banquet in *Consider Phlebas*.

Elevation to the office of Emperor of Azad goes to the winner of the game of the same name. That Gurgeh is victorious — that the regime is destroyed — is due in part to the Special Circumstances agency. Gurgeh returns home, troubled by a feeling of having been manipulated which he can neither explain nor dismiss. Banks has the doomed Emperor, Nicosar, speak for critics of the Culture whose outlook is less benign:

> 'You disgust me, Morat Gurgeh', Nicosar said to the red glow in the west, 'Your blind, insipid morality can't even account for your own success here, and you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you've attempted to seduce it. You've perverted it; replaced our holy witnessing with your own foul pornography. . . . 'Repulsive' is barely adequate for what I feel for your precious Culture, Gurgeh. I'm not sure I possess the words to explain to you what I feel for your . . . Culture. You know no glory, no pride, no worship. You have power: I've seen that; I know what you can do . . . but you're still impotent. You always will be. The meek, the pathetic, the frightened and the cowed . . . they can only last so long, no matter how terrible and awesome the machines they crawl around within. In the end you will fail; all your glittering machinery won't save you. The strong survive. That's what life teaches us, Gurgeh, that's what the game shows us. Struggle to prevail; fight to prove worth. These are no hollow phrases: they are the truth'[13]

***Use of Weapons***

Banks stays with the theme of manipulation in *Use of Weapons*. Deziet Sma — a Special Circumstances controller — has recruited and trained a brilliant agent in Cheradenine Zakalwe. Zakalwe's warrior skills are used repeatedly to further the agency's projects. As often as his assignments result in his death, the agency resurrects him. As often as he is resurrected he resumes duty. He is also increasingly a prey to self-doubt: 'The Culture', he reflects in the aftermath of a significant intervention, 'would take him away from here, and put him down somewhere else, and this adventure would collapse with the rest into meaninglessness, and nothing very much would be left, as he went on to do roughly the same thing somewhere else.'[14] In time, Deziet Sma discovers that she has known less about her agent than she has supposed. A replacement for him is selected, and the cycle of intervention is resumed.

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10 Smith, E. E., *Triplanetary*, 1934, British edition: London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1971, pp. 222–3.

11 Clute, 1993, p. 88.

12 Banks, I. M., *The Player of Games*, London: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 209–10.

13 Banks, 1988, p. 283.

14 Banks, I. M., *Use of Weapons*, London: Orbit, 1990, p. 253.

**Conclusion**
Substitute for the Culture any of the major developed nations, either singly or aggregated as in the United Nations, and for Azad Somalia, Zaire or the former Yugoslavia. Banks is a richly talented writer, whose science fiction entertains while at the same time raising serious issues of public policy. How those of us who inhabit Singer and Wildavsky's prospective zones of peace conduct ourselves towards the prospective zones of turmoil whose inhabitants are in every respect less fortunate is a question which we can neither on moral nor practical grounds afford to ignore. What is needed in part is for us to better tolerate ambiguity and disappointment. That Banks makes the task easier — that he encourages us to care and think — sets him apart decisively from science-fiction practitioners of lesser stature.

# My Career Goes Bung

- My worst fears about unemployment have proved to be justified. My last regular cheque from Macmillan is on 1 February (or will fail to appear on 1 February; this is not clear *right at this moment*, 27 January). My meagre savings will need to last until I receive the first cheque of whatever freelance work I can find. There are certainly possibilities around, but nothing is yet sitting on the desk. 1997 is definitely not going to be my year. I just hope to survive it somehow. More importantly, I hope I can save *SF Commentary* and *The Metaphysical Review* from being the main casualties of 1997.

# BOOKS READ RECENTLY

These are books read since the end of November 1996. The ratings are:
** Books highly recommended.
* Books recommended

** ***The Detached Retina: Aspects of SF and Fantasy***
**by Brian W. Aldiss (Liverpool University Press 0-85323-289-X; 1995; 224 pp.)**
In this book's last paragraph, Aldiss quotes one of my favourite writers, George Borrow: 'There's day and night, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?' The passage ends 'A Personal Parabola', a talk in which Aldiss seeks to sum up Existence, Writing and the RIL (Repressed Inner Life). Usually I flinch when Aldiss generalises, but I find in this essay a valid faith in life — its power to change, to reveal new facets of itself, to upwell into consciousness. Reach back to the beginning of the book and you find Aldiss's ebullience flowing through an appreciation of Salvador Dali ('Thanks for Drowning the Ocelot'), the British New Wave ('"A Robot Tended Your Remains . . ."'), Aldous Huxley ('Between Privy and Universe'), Olaf Stapledon ('The Immanent Will Returns — 2') and many more. The endless questions and assertions flow through this book, but Aldiss remains best when his eye is fixed on the works of individual authors. The pieces on Huxley and Stapledon, already mentioned, are valuable, but even more so are remarkable readings of Orwell's *1984* ('The Downward Journey') and H. G. Wells, always Aldiss's best subject ('Wells and the Leopard Lady'), and a tear-inspiring farewell to Theodore Sturgeon ('The Cruelty of the Gods'). To read Aldiss's essays about SF is to be reminded, for reminding is often needed, that we SF readers feast at a laden table, no matter how rotten some of the individual dishes might be.

** ***If Morning Ever Comes***
**by Anne Tyler (Hamlyn 0-600-20411-1; original publication date 1964; 187 pp.)**
When life and books seem stale, I sit down to enjoy an Anne Tyler novel. Fortunately, a few of them remain unread. *If Morning Ever Comes* tells of a vague, unformed boy who decides that college study in New York is not for him. He returns home, south, unexpectedly, and realises that he is just as baffled by 'home' as by leaving it. It's Tyler's usual plot, but the details, as ever in Tyler's work, are fresh and arresting. I bought this book the last time all of Tyler's novels were reprinted; I notice that they have just all been reissued in a new uniform edition. Buy them all, and savour them over the years.

** ***A Very British Genre***
**by Paul Kincaid (British Science Fiction Association 1-870824-37-7; 1995; 63 pp.)**
My first reaction to this book was 'It's a bit short, isn't it? And it's not telling me things I don't know already.' Which, as I came to realise, is the point of the book. Where else would anyone find a short history of British science fiction and fantasy, with all the right people mentioned in the right places and, despite the restrictions of length, all the things said about each that should be said? In *Trillion Year Spree*? No, because in that book it became too difficult to separate the story of a national genre from that of the whole SF boom of the 1970s and 1980s. *A Very British Genre* even has room in its last few pages for many authors whose books have never been distributed in Australia: a neat must-buy list. The book's only fault springs from that tricky word 'genre'; here is the story of *New Worlds* in all its guises, but Kincaid makes no mention of the role of the great post-War book publishers, especially Penguin during the early sixties and Victor Gollancz, with its 'yellow jackets'. The latter comprised almost the only SF read by Australian (and probably British) library borrowers

# *Precious time*

**by Marc Ortlieb**

The character in *Catch-22* who claimed that if one were bored enough one could live forever was right. I'm sure of it. At least the converse of his theory, which is also explained in the book, goes some way towards explaining the fact that my life has been flashing past my eyes at a rare old state of knots.

It seems to me that your average fannish life can be divided up into several stages. The first stage is that of neohood. At this time, our archetypal fan engages in a prodigious fannish output. This fact was driven home to me when I received a copy of the first volume of the *SF Commentary Reprint*, which only covers one year, and yet includes eight issues of *SFC*.

Bruce Gillespie is not the only fan who started his career by an incredible explosion of written fanac. Many have sought to explain this in terms of the extra energy that neos have when compared to old and tired fen. However, the real explanation is far more wonderful. You see, when you are a neofan, you get so bored by the things that you don't understand that you have to do something to use up that extra subjective time, and what better to kill time than to sit in front of a typewriter and pound out fanzines???

As the fan grows older, and more experienced in the ways of fans and fanac, he/she becomes more and more interested, or drops out entirely through sheer boredom. Now, as we have seen from *Catch-22*, being interested in something makes the time go faster. The initial symptoms are quite minor, and can go unnoticed. The time between apa deadlines seems somehow to shrink. The plans for a monthly zine go by the boards, the faned starts to think about a bimonthly schedule which he/she is all too aware is unlikely to be met. Copies of quarterly fanzines appear in the mail before the previous issue of that zine has made its way out of the 'to be LoCed' pile. The faned finds that the convention that seemed so far away last Easter is just around the corner, and that he/she has still not made a room booking.

The results of this are easily noticed in older fans. They slow down in their zine production, considering an annual zine to be an ideal format, while expecting the readership to be able to follow arguments stemming from an obscure comment in the editorial of the issue before last. Such fans desert the monthly and bimonthly apas, and are found in the FAPA membership list with ATM next to their names. When they do contribute, it's usually the required eight pages, six and three quarters of which are taken up with explanations of why the member missed the previous three mailings. This is the sort of fan who takes great joy in remembering the details of the last three issues of *Science Fiction Five Yearly*.

It's quite understandable, of course, as, for the deeply committed fan, it seems months between issues of *SFFY*. The time dilation effect has taken such a hold that the mind has difficulty in relating to mundane time scales.

Of course this effect tends to telescope time for the inflicted fan, so that the last five years take up as much memory space as the three years prior to that, and so on, until one's first year in fandom can take up as much space as the last ten or so. Thus it isn't surprising to find that some of the more elderly fen consider fen who have been around a mere seven or so years to be Johnnie-come-latelies.

Of course, there are those young fen who will unkindly write off these phenomena as advancing senility, but it is far more than that. If you look at the symptoms described here, they bear marked similarities to the time dilation effect observed when objects approach the speed of light. Now, although this seems obvious enough once pointed out here, it's not a concept that comes readily to the mind, because, when one looks at these aged fen, high speed is the last thing that one thinks of.

The mistake here is in using the outmoded concepts of fifties science fiction, which emphasised outer space rather than inner space. Each of us, you see, is travelling life's path towards some unimagined goal. It's just that the older and more involved fen are further along the path than neos, and, having a better idea of their destination, can travel far faster than the newer voyagers.

I guess that this still hasn't explained how a metaphorical concept relates to good solid physics like the time dilation effect. To do this one must go to those scientific theories that show how, at the moment of death, the body loses a few grams in weight — the soul. If we are travelling towards our goal, then surely it is the soul's journey, thus it is the speed of the soul that is affected by this time dilation effect.

Further confirmation of this comes from what might otherwise be considered a snide comment from neo to bnf. Older fen are often accused of being 'big heads', and rightfully so, because one of the consequences of the increased velocity of the soul is that it gains weight as it approaches the speed of light. (All right, purists, I know that, strictly speaking, mass is the correct term.) This also explains why some experiments chosen to determine the mass of the soul have failed. The souls were obviously not travelling fast enough, and so were of negligible mass.

That fanac does indeed help the soul to reach its eventual destination is clearly documented in fanspeak, where encouragement is referred to as 'egoboost'. This obviously sets the soul in motion.

Naturally there is still a great deal of research needed in order to determine the implications of this discovery for the science fiction world in general. Is it, for instance, possible to slow a fannish soul down to the point that the frequency of the fan's publication schedule can be increased to something more relevant to younger fen?

In the meantime it behooves we younger fen to perhaps take a little more notice of the infrequently appearing fanzines, for in them we may well see our own fannish futures. Boredom is, after all, merely a stopgap measure, and given, the quality of Australian fandom, it's not easy to get bored at a convention. Even if one is bored, not every convention features Jack Vance or Frank Herbert as GoH, so sooner or later, one is going to get to an interesting convention, and the rot will set in. I guess we're just going to have to face it: the sands of time do tend to get into everything, especially at beach parties.

during the 1950s and 1960s. Next the BSFA should advance Kincaid the money to write *The Trillion Year British Genre*, a thousand pages long, studded with footnotes and appendices.

** ***Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future***
**by Robert Crossley (Liverpool University Press 0-85323-388-8; 1994; 474 pp.)**
This is a rich and satisfying biography, a book that lets you feel you've met this strange, distant figure; a book that sends you straight back to the novels, because you feel you could never have read them properly before reading the biography. My memory of this book is dominated by two images: that of Agnes Stapledon, the author's widow, giving Crossley the keys to the author's room thirty years after he had died, whereupon Crossley discovers that everything has been left exactly as it had been on the day he died; and that of Stapledon in New York in 1949, reviled by the American press for attending a large Peace Conference, finding that the only people who know his works are the members of the Hydra Club. There Stapledon spends one happy evening meeting all his favourite SF authors. At last he is able to talk to people who had some idea of what he is on about. When Stapledon dies the next year, none of his books is in print. Pre-images and after-images of these events haunt this account of Stapledon's life and career. He pursued Agnes for many years, despite many difficulties, but in his last years was to insist on an 'open' marriage because, quite simply, he still looked and felt young while she now seemed old. Working within that isolation and detachment that marks every aspect of his life, Stapledon more or less invented modern science fiction, with Wells as his mentor, only to find in his last years that his real literary relatives were the American 'pulp' writers. And they repaid him by including him in SF's group memory. How many 'classic' SF works turn out to be based on Stapledon's ideas! (Two come to mind immediately: the aliens of Lem's *The Invincible* and the Venus of Kuttner's *Fury*.)

** ***Dark Love***
**edited by Nancy A. Collins, Eward E. Kramer & Martin H. Greenberg (NEL 0-340-65439-2; 1995; 402 pp.)**
This original fiction anthology covers pretty much the same territory as *Off Limits*, which I reviewed unfavourably last issue, but it is a much more enjoyable book. The editors' prejudice seems to be: if you mix sex and horror, you might as well have some fun doing so. Of course, some authors, such as Kathryn Ptacek ('Driven') and Lucy Taylor ('Heat') merely enjoy getting down and dirty, without worrying too much about the quality of the fiction. The best writers in this volume take the subject matter as a challenge to their sense of subtlety. The best story is Stuart Kaminsky's 'Hidden', which seems to be about a child's capacity to commit mayhem, but turns out to reveal much deeper matters. Nancy Collins's own 'Hidden Things' also covers territory that is wider than the bloody events described in the surface story. Stephen King's 'Lunch at the Gotham Café', on the other hand, could hardly be called subtle, but it is very funny. It just shows that if you arrange to meet your ex-wife for lunch, you should watch out for whatever's happening at the next table. Unclassifiable, and also very funny, is Bob Burden's 'You've Got Your Troubles, I've Got Mine . . .'. He actually admits that crazy people can have fun. *Dark Love* carries the usual burden of ho-hum stories, but its best stories give it an air of distinction.

** ***Unlocking the Air and Other Stories*** **by Ursula K. Le Guin (HarperCollins 0-06-017260-6; 1996; 207 pp.)**
I keep thinking I know what Ursula Le Guin is up to. With a collection like this, featuring stories that don't quite fit the SF or fantasy categories, I feel I can lean right in and go along for the ride. Many of the early pieces are a bit twee and undeveloped; I found myself sneering '*New Yorker* stories' under my breath. (That's because several of them were published first in *The New Yorker*.) Never underestimate Le Guin. Towards the end of *Unlocking the Air* two stories brought me up short. 'Olders' and 'The Poacher' are two astonishing stories, penetrating and clear and serious, yet revealing themselves in small unfoldings. 'Olders', set (it seems) in the Earthsea world, begins with a voyage, turns into a fantasy, and becomes a pained and burning love story. 'The Poacher' begins as a modernised fairy story, turns into a modern version of yet another fairy story, then transforms itself into a complex metaphor of the possibilities of life and art. Yet the surfaces of both stories seem all so simple. This is not just accomplished writing; these are stories that change your idea of what fiction can achieve.

** ***Last and First Men***
**by Olaf Stapledon (Methuen; 1930; 355 pp.)**
Did *Last and First Men* really stop me in my tracks when I tried reading it in 1973? Armed with the Crossley biography (which demonstrates that even the most esoteric details of Stapledon's far futures are based on incidents and impressions from his life's experience), I launched into *Last and First Men* and found it a long but satisfying journey. Stapledon's style is slightly ponderous, but always readable, and occasionally lyrical. His perceptions are often astonishing. Humanity does not progress upward, but performs evolutionary cycles. We — the First Men — commit suicide, but the Third Men almost make it to Utopia. Stapledon doesn't believe in Utopia; even near-perfect humans sink under the weight of accumulated errors. Natural disasters send humanity off to Venus, then outward to Neptune. Stapledon is a true Darwinian, describing an endless, fascinating game of ping-pong between chance and necessity. My interpretation of his many stages of humanity is that they are a fictional way in which Stapledon can unpack parts of his own soul. What, he asks, are the many possibilities, good and bad, I might find in myself? Of great interest are the number of his SF plot ideas that were used by later writers (for instance, Stapledon's Martians turn up, virtually unchanged, in Lem's *The Invincible*). If Wells's great SF works can be kept in print, why can't the same privilege be given to Stapledon?

** ***Requiem***
**by Graham Joyce (Signet Creed 0-451-18434-3; 1995; 305 pp.)**
After all the trouble I took to gain a copy of this book, mainly because of massed Acnestid recommendations, I found it very slightly disappointing. I can hardly fault the portrait of a man possessed by the ghost (?) of his dead wife, but even by novel's end I was not sure that that is what happens to him. Links to Mary Magdalene and yet another version of the Jesus Conspiracy are fascinating, but again, I was never sure of their connection to the main character. Ghostly apparitions and

bumps in the night are beautifully written, but in the end it's all smoke. Some member of Acnestis must know what's going on here; please tell me.

* ***The Orchard Thieves***
**by Elizabeth Jolley (Penguin 0-14-025211-8; 1995; 131 pp.)**
For more than a decade Elizabeth Jolley has been Australia's most successful senior woman writer, but I've never felt drawn to her work. For the first 50 or 60 pages I wondered why I had bothered to read this novella. (It's because I had promised Ali Kayn to review it for her Web Page.) Then the story comes to life. The rather dotty old aunt who tells the story proves to be more astute than the family realises; a gold-digging daughter who lumps in on the family proves to be so unsubtle that she destroys her own enterprise, which is to force her mother out of the family house. I feel that the last 60 pages forms the original story, whose beginning Jolley later padded. Given that warning, I can recommend this little tale.

** ***King Solomon's Carpet***
**by Barbara Vine (Penguin 0-14-015691-7; 1991; 356 pp.)**
When I read King Solomon's Carpet I had no more Barbara Vine novels to read. Looks as if I'll just have to reread the others. This novel is all about the London Underground. One of the characters is nuts about underground railways. He owns a marvellous mausoleum of a house (houses are usually the main characters of Vine/Rendell novels) that sits between two London Underground lines. The other characters, most of whom board in the old house, are affected by the Underground, which embodies Life itself: remorseless, blind, multifarious, cruel. Vine was not feeling kind towards the human race when she wrote this book. Each character is consumed by some obsession, and each object of obsession is lost. The details about the Underground are luscious, making me want to read more.

**— Bruce Gillespie, 27 January 1997**

# FAVOURITE BOOKS 1996

Throughout 1996 I've been reviewing every book here as I've read it. Hence no mini-reviews:

**1** ***The Prestige*** (Christopher Priest) 1995; Touchstone; 404 pp.
**2** ***Faith Fox: A Nativity*** (Jane Gardam) 1996; Sinclair-Stevenson; 312 pp.
**3** ***The Crow Road*** (Iain Banks) 1992; Abacus; 490 pp.
**4** ***The Blue Mountain in Mujani*** (Aina Vavare) 1988/1990; Penguin; 173 pp.
**5** ***The Brimstone Wedding*** (Barbara Vine) 1996; Vintage; 312 pp.
**6** ***I Served the King of England*** (Bohumil Hrabal) 1989; Chatto & Windus; 243 pp.
**7** ***The Keys to the Street*** (Ruth Rendell) 1996; Hutchinson; 310 pp.
**8** ***Distress*** (Greg Egan) 1995; Millennium; 343 pp.
**9** ***No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*** (Anthony Cronin) 1990; Paladin; 290 pp.
**10** ***Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*** (Robert Crossley) 1994; Liverpool University Press; 474 pp.
**11** ***An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*** (Oliver Sacks) 1995; Picador; 319 pp.
**12** ***Dealers in Light and Darkness*** (Cherry Wilder) 1995; Edgewood Press; 166 pp.
**13** ***The Moth*** (James M. Cain) 1949; Robert Hale; 356 pp.
**14** ***Lilian's Story*** (Kate Grenville) 1986; Allen & Unwin; 211 pp.
**15** ***Whit, or Isis Amongst the Unsaved*** (Iain Banks) 1995; Little, Brown; 455 pp.
**16** ***In the Presence of the Enemy*** (Elizabeth George) 1996; Bantam; 477 pp.
**17** ***CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*** (George Saunders) 1996; Jonathan Cape; 179 pp.
**18** ***Espedair Street*** (Iain Banks) 1987; Futura; 249 pp.
**19** ***Unlocking the Air and Other Stories*** (Ursula K. Le Guin) 1996; HarperPrism; 207 pp.
**20** ***Ladder of Years*** (Anne Tyler) 1995; Chatto & Windus; 326 pp.