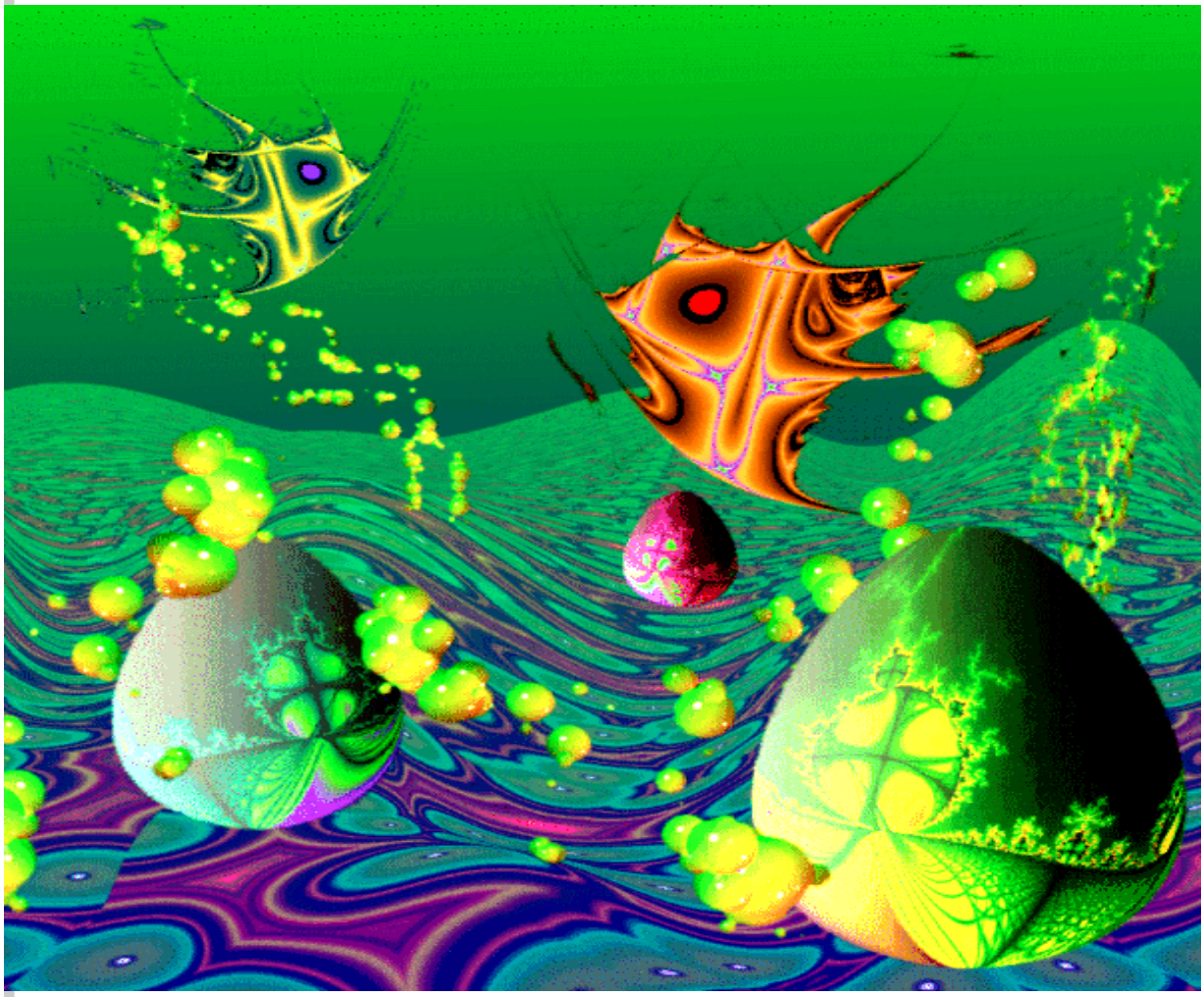
Scratch Pad 23

May 1997



Graphic by Ditmar

Scratch Pad 23

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 11, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the May 1997 mailing of Acnestis. Cover graphic by Ditmar.

Contents

'IF YOU DO NOT LOVE WORDS': THE PLEASURE OF READING R. A. LAFFERTY

by Elaine Cochrane

(Author's note: The following was written for presentation to the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group), 2 October 1996, and was not intended for publication. I don't even get around to listing my favourite Lafferty stories.)

Because I make no attempt to keep up with what's new, my subject for this talk had to be someone who has been around for long enough for me to have read some of his or her work, and to know that he or she was someone I liked reading and wouldn't mind reading in quantity. It also had to be someone who was well represented on our shelves (because I wasn't going to go book-hunting if I could help it), and who was not so prolific that I could not read a reasonable fraction of his or her output in the time available.

And so I picked on R. A. Lafferty.

Raphael Aloysius Lafferty was born in Iowa in 1914, and moved to Oklahoma at the age of four. Apart from four and a half years army service he has lived there ever since. He worked as an electrical engineer. In his biog. at the start of *Past Master* (Ace, 1968), he writes 'I was a heavy drinker till about eight years ago at which time I cut down on it, beginning my writing attempts at the same time to fill up a certain void.'

Most of his some 150 short stories and 20-odd novels (including several non-SF) were published in the 1960s and 1970s; the Hugo-winning short story 'Eurema's Dam' appeared in 1972, and the most recent short story I've tracked down was published in 1995. Most references I've come across say he stopped writing in the 1980s because of ill health, which implies that the trickle of short stories appearing since then is mainly desk-drawer stuff. Perhaps; but many of the early short stories appeared in the *Orbit* collections and *Galaxy*, *If* and *F&SF*; the anthology *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* was published by Ace and *Strange Doings* and *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?* by Scribners, and the novels were published by Avon, Ace, Scribners and Berkley. The anthologies and novels since then have been small press publications, and many of the short stories are still to be collected into anthologies, suggesting that a declining output has coincided with a declining market.

Lafferty says of his work, quoted in *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers* (3rd ed., St James Press 1991), 'My novels, which I wrote myself at great labor, have received more attention than my short stories, which wrote themselves. Nevertheless, the short stories are greatly superior to the novels.'

He is unclassifiable as to genre. His settings include other planets, and his stories sometimes feature spaceships and often the interactions between non-human species, but as Sandra Miesel says in *Twentieth-Century Science-Fiction Writers*, 'There is not a bit of science in Lafferty's SF'. He has technology coexisting with doubles and fetches and ghosts, but with the matter-of-fact flavour of magic realism and myth rather than the fantastic flavour of sword and sorcery. And he is often very funny. Miesel describes him as 'science fiction's most prodigious teller of tall tales'.

One thing that makes Lafferty special is his style. He loves language. In *Arrive at Easterwine* (Scribners, 1971) he has Epiktistes, the computer who is the putative author of the book, introduce the work:

Oh, come along, reader of the High Journal; if you do not

> love words, how will you love the communication? How will you forgive me my tropes, communicate the love?

and the entire novel is a joyful celebration of language.

He delights in the sounds of words. In 'Ginny Wrapped in the Sun' (1967, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*, Ace, 1970)

> 'I'm going to read my paper tonight, Dismas' Dr Minden said, 'and they'll hoot me out of the hall. [. . .] Hauser honks like a gander! That clattering laugh of Goldbeater! Snodden sniggers so loud that it echoes! Cooper's boom is like barrels rolling downstairs, and your own — it'll shrivel me, Dismas.'

and in jokes: 'It is no ignorant man who tells you this. I have read the booklets in your orderly tents: *Physics without Mathematics, Cosmology without Chaos, Psychology without Brains*' ('The Cliffs That Laughed', 1968, in *Strange Doings*, Scribners, 1972).

Rhyme is used frequently, just for the fun of it and as a structural device (e.g. the chapter openings in *Space Chantey*, all dreadful doggerel and deliberately painful rhymes), but more importantly as a story element. For example, the Pucas, the visiting aliens in *Reefs of Earth* (Berkley, 1968), use 'Bagarthach verses' to curse hostile humans: 'Old Crocker man, be belled and banged!/You hound-dog hunk, we'll have you hounded!/On else than gallows be you hanged! In else than water be you drownd-ed!' and in the delightful 'The Transcendent Tigers' (1964, in *Strange Doings*), the children shout rhymes as they jab a needle into a map:

> 'Peas and Beans—/New Orleans!' She jabbed the needle into New Orleans on the map, and the great shaft a hundred thousand miles long came down into the middle of the Crescent City. [then, several cities later]
>
> 'I know one,' said Eustace, and he clapped the red cap on his own head:
>
> 'Eggs and Batter —
>
> Cincinnater.'
>
> He rhymed and jabbed, manfully but badly.
>
> 'That didn't rhyme very good,' said Carnadine. 'I bet you botched it.'
>
> He did. It wasn't a clean-cut holocaust at all. It was a clumsy, bloody, grinding job — not what you'd like. [more good rhymes and destruction, then]
>
> 'Let me do one,' pleaded Peewee, and he snatched the red cap:
>
> 'Hopping Froggo —
>
> Chicago.'
>
> 'I do wish that you people would let me handle this,' said Carnadine. 'That was awful.'
>
> It was. It was horrible. That giant needle didn't go in clean at all. It buckled great chunks of land and tore a ragged gap. Nothing pretty, nothing round about it. It was plain brutal destruction. [interlude and aside: get out quick! and then the story ends:]
>
> Carnadine plunged ahead:
>
> 'What the hecktady —
>
> Schenectady.'
>
> That was one of the roundest and cleanest holes of all.
>
> 'Flour and Crisco —
>
> San Francisco.'
>
> That was a good one. It got all the people at once, and then set up tidal waves and earthquakes all over everywhere.
>
> 'Knife and Fork —

The delight in language extends to mythological and literary puns and allusions. I've probably missed most of them; here are a few I've spotted.

The demon-like aliens in *The Reefs of Earth* are called Pucas; 'pwca' is the Welsh version of Puck, and I suspect that the Irish name is much the same: in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds* the demon is called 'the Pooka'. (Although in *The Devil is Dead* we are told that the Irish for Devil is Ifreann.)

In *Not to Mention Camels* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), a character aspires to archetype status; and among the already existing archetypes listed there is Gyne Peri-bebleene-ton-Helion (Woman-Wrapped-in-the-Sun) (p. 155) — compare the short-story title 'Ginny Wrapped in the Sun'.

The author of 'a series of nineteen interlocked equations of cosmic shapeliness and simplicity', of which 'it was almost as though nothing else could ever be added on any subject whatsoever' is one Professor Aloys Foucault-Oeg. ('Aloys', *Strange Doings*.)

In 'Thus We Frustrate Charlemagne' (1967, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*) members of the Institute of Impure Science have built a high-tech device they call an Avatar in order to tamper with the past:

> 'I hope the Avatar isn't expensive,' Willy McGilly said. 'When I was a boy we got by with a dart whittled out of slippery elm wood.'
>
> 'This is no place for humor,' Glasser protested. 'Who did you, as a boy, ever kill in time, Willy?'
>
> 'Lots of them. King Wu of the Manchu, Pope Adrian VII, President Hardy of our own country, King Marcel of Auvergne, the philosopher Gabriel Toeplitz. It's a good thing we got them. They were a bad lot.'
>
> 'But I never heard of any of them, Willy,' Glasser insisted.
>
> 'Of course not. We killed them when they were kids.'

Glasser may not have heard of any of them, but *Hadrian VII* is the biography of a fictitious pope written by Baron Corvo, the equally fictitious persona of the writer Frederick Rolfe. I wouldn't mind betting that the others have similar references that I haven't identified.

The short stories are very varied. They tend to be conventionally structured developments of an idea, often enlivened and sometimes burdened by expository lumps. For example, 'Narrow Valley' (1966, in *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*):

> 'It is a psychic nexus in the form of an elongated dome,' said the eminent scientist Dr Velikof Vonk. 'It is maintained subconsciously by the concatenation of at least two minds, the stronger of them belonging to a man dead for many years. It has apparently existed for a little less than a hundred years. [. . .] There is nothing meteorological about it. It is strictly psychological. I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to it or it would have worried me.'
>
> 'It is a continental fault coinciding with a noospheric fault,' said the eminent scientist Arpad Arkabaranan. 'The valley really is half a mile wide, and at the same time it is really only five feet wide. If we measured correctly we would get these dual measurements. Of course it is meteorological! Everything including dreams is meteorological [. . .] I'm glad I was able to give a scientific explanation to this or it would have worried me.'
>
> 'I just don't understand how he worked it,' said the eminent scientist Willy McGilly. 'Cedar bark, jack-oak leaves, and the word 'Petahauerat'. The thing's impossible! When I was a boy and we wanted to make a hide-out, we used bark from the skunk-spruce tree, the leaves of a box elder, and the word was 'Boadicea'. All three elements are

wrong here. I cannot find a scientific explanation for it, and it does worry me.'

Often the expository lump is given in the form of a quotation from some reference, such as 'The Back Door of History' by Arpad Arutinov, or the writings of Diogenes Pontifex or Audifax O'Hanlon, two worthies excluded from the Institute of Impure Science by the minimum decency rule.

The novels also tend to be idea-driven rather than plot-driven, and this is not always enough to tie them together. In the first edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (ed. Nicholls, Granada, 1979), John Clute describes the novels *The Devil is Dead* and *Arrive at Easterwine* as tangled; in the new edition (ed. Clute and Nicholls, Orbit, 1993) he says of *Arrive at Easterwine* that 'it begins to evince a tangledness that comes, at times, close to incoherence'. Miesel says of the same novels that Lafferty 'mistakes the accumulation of vignettes for the construction of a novel.'

I've enjoyed *Arrive at Easterwine* both times I've read it, as I've been carried along by the exuberance of the writing. Of the others I've read, *Past Master* comes closest to a conventional plot, although I was disappointed when I first read it some 15 years ago because I was looking for the same mad inventiveness that characterises the short stories. On re-reading it a couple of weeks ago I did find wonderful flashes of pure Lafferty humour, but like most of the novels it is essentially serious in intent and dark in mood. *Space Chantey* (Ace, 1968), which purports to be a retelling of the Odyssey, and *Annals of Klepsis* (Ace, 1983) are exceptions to this, and they do fit the description 'a series of vignettes'. There is the wonderful Lafferty humour in them, but not much else. At the other extreme, *Not to Mention Camels* (1976) and *Where Have You Been, Sandaliotis* (one of the two novels published in *Apocalypses*, Pinnacle, 1977), are typically quirky but are short on redeeming humour. *Not to Mention Camels* is almost embarrassingly gruesome.

Miesel says 'So closely do Lafferty's novels resemble each other, they might as well be alternate drafts of the same story.' A recurrent theme, particularly in the novels, is the battle between Good and Evil, but Lafferty has his own ideas of what these words mean. In 'Horns on their Heads' (Pendragon Press, 1976, collected in *Iron Tears*, Edgewood Press, 1992), he writes:

> The 'odor of sanctity' is not all lilacs and roses, nor is sanctity (the sacred, the *sacer*) a thing that stays within straited limits. It is too stark and rank for those limits. It pertains to holiness and sacredness; but also to awfulness; and further, to cursedness, to wickedness, execrability; to devotion; and again, to seizure and epilepsy.
>
> Now the 'odor of sanctity', the smell of the thing (stay with us; strong smells and stenches are the vitality itself), is compounded of the deepest and most eroding of sweating, the sweating of blood and blood-serum; of nervous and speaking [a typo? I think it should be sweating] muck of adrenal rivers; of the excited fever of bodies and the quaking deliriums of minds; of the sharp sanity of igneous; and the bruised rankness of desert bush. Oh, it is a strong and lively stench. It's the smell of adoration, of passion seized in rigid aestivation.

Clute refers to Lafferty's conservative Catholicism. I don't know enough about Catholicism to pick up any references, but Lafferty is strenuously life-affirming. Those fighting on the side of 'good' are fallible and sinners, and the battles are bloody and often joyful; Lafferty rejects sterility and austerity and compromise and 'moderation in all things.' Equally he rejects the attempts to popularise and modernise the Church.

In *Past Master*, Sir Thomas More, being shown around the planet Astrobe, asks his guide to find him a church because he wants to hear Mass:

> ' . . . While the mass itself cannot be found in any of them here, the replica can be played on demand.'
>
> 'Let us go to one of them.'
>
> After groping about in some rather obscure streets that Paul knew imperfectly, they found one. It was quite small and tucked away in a corner. They entered. There was the sense of total emptiness. There was no Presence.
>
> 'I wonder what time is the next mass.' Thomas said. 'Or the mass that is not quite a mass. I'm not sure that I understand you on it.'
>
> 'Oh, put in a stoimenof d'or in the slot, and push the button. Then the mass will begin.'
>
> Thomas did. And it did.
>
> The priest came up out of the floor. He was not human, unless he was a zombie human. He was probably not even a programmed person. He may have been a mechanical device. He wore a pearl-gray derby hat, swish-boy sideburns, and common green shorts or breechcloth. His depilated torso was hermaphroditic. He or it smoked a long weedjy-weed cigarette in a period holder. He began to jerk and to intone with dreadful dissonance.
>
> Then a number of other contrivances arrived from somewhere, intoning in mock chorus to the priest, and twanging instruments. [. . .]
>
> Well, the replica mass ran its short course to the jerking and bawling of the ancient ritual guitar. At sermon time was given a straight news-broadcast, so that one should not be out of contact with the world for the entire fifteen minutes.
>
> At the Consecration, a sign lit up:
>
> *'Brought to you Courtesy of Grailo Grape-Ape, the Finest of the Bogus Wines.'*
>
> The bread was ancient-style hot-dog rolls. The puppets or mechanisms danced up orgasmically and used the old vein-needle before taking the rolls.
>
> 'How do you stop the dirty little thing?' Thomas asked.
>
> 'Push the *Stop* button,' Paul said. 'Here, I'll do it.' And he stopped it. (p. 68)

Unusually for Lafferty, in *Past Master* the evil itself is given a name and a voice: it is Ouden, which means nothingness:

> But the Paul-Thomas host knew who Ouden was. They shriveled together in his presence, and their bones grew hollow.
>
> 'You are like ghosts,' said the Paul-Thomas. 'Are you here only because we see you here? Which was first, you, or the belief in you?'
>
> 'I was always, and the belief in me comes and goes,' Ouden said. 'Ask the ansel: was I not of the Ocean from the beginning?'
>
> 'What have you done to Rimrock?' the Paul-Thomas asked. 'He diminishes.'
>
> 'Yes, he turns back into an animal in my presence,' said Ouden. 'So will you, and all your kind. You will turn further back, and further. I will annihilate you.'
>
> 'I deny you completely,' said the Paul-Thomas. 'You are nothing at all.'
>
> 'Yes, I am that. But all who encounter me make the mistake of misunderstanding my nothingness. It is a vortex. There is no quiet or static aspect to it. Consider me topologically. Do I not envelop all the universes? Consider them as

turned inside out. Now everything is on the inside of my nothingness. Many consider the Nothing a mere negative, and they consider it so to their death and obliteration.'

'We laugh you off the scene,' said Paul-Thomas. 'You lose.'

'No. I am winning easily on Astrobe,' Ouden said. 'I have my own creatures going for me. Your own mind and its imagery weakens; it is myself putting out the flame. Every dull thing you do, every cliché you utter, you come closer to me. Every lie you tell, I win. But it is in the tired lies you tell that I win most toweringly.'

'Old nothingness who sucks out the flames, I have known flames to be lighted again,' said the Paul-Thomas.

'It will not kindle,' said the Ouden. *'I eat you up.* I devour your substance. There was only one kindling. I was overwhelmed only once. But I gain on it. I have put it out almost everywhere. It will be put out forever here.' [. . .]

'Never will I leave. Not ever in your life will you sit down that I do not sit down with you. And finally it will happen that only one of us is left to get up, and that will be myself. I suck you dry.'

'I have one juice left that you do not know,' said the Paul-Thomas.

'You have it less than you believe.' (pp. 44–6)

Usually, however, Lafferty's evil is not some disembodied essence, but is manifest through the actions of people who have chosen to commit evil. Their acts are typically cruel, brutal and degraded, and recounted in gory detail. They are also often unconvincing. More convincing is Lafferty's depiction of the desire of those who have chosen evil to destroy the good:

'We'll hound him, we'll rend him, we'll tear him to pieces,' Pilgrim cried out with real excitement. 'We'll ruin him, we'll destroy him, we'll kill him and dismember him, and then we'll befoul his nest and his ashes.'

'Why, Mr Dusmano, why?' the curator asked in shocked puzzlement. 'I could never understand the avidity of a whole nation for the destruction of a Consul. The Consul does fill the highest and most worrisome of jobs, without pay, without thanks, and in total anonymity. And he must be a good person and be certified as such. Why should a populace want to murder and destroy him?'

'It's the devil-revel, curator,' Pilgrim howled. 'It's the pleasure that comes hardly twice in a generation. It's the murder that a whole nation can take part in and enjoy and remember. It becomes a main part of our national heritage, of our world heritage. Curator, we kill him because he is Consul. And because he is a known man now and is vulnerable to be destroyed. And because it is almost the most burning pleasure of them all to destroy a marked person utterly. The ritual hounds must be set to howling and baying. And it is particularly a pleasure to destroy a high person if he is good. 'It is more pleasure to destroy one good man than a hundred indifferent men' — is that not what the Loudon Devil said? This is folk-knitting to form red history.' (*Not to Mention Camels*, pp. 66–7)

This leads to assassination by tabloid journalism:

'What, old Transcendent Muscles Himself is one of the masked men? Old Strength-in-Serenity? Oh, the public will rend him! There has to be something to get him for. Something, many things.'

And the young Lords swarmed out like a crowd of gnats. Somewhere they would find or fake or manufacture the gnat of evidence against the great strong man, Strength-in-Serenity, Strength-in-Purity, Satterfield, who was now revealed as the man behind the code-mask, Mut. Always the Lords could find a gnat's-weight of evidence against any man, and always that gnat's-weight would be enough to declare ruination.

Were they Lords of the Gnats for nothing? Many of these young Lords Spiritual had already scattered to hunt down and hamstring this great strong man.

For a people, even a good people, do not pass gnats easily, once they have gotten inside them. They will huff and puff and strain and turn purple, all over one adolescent gnat. And the gnat must be dissected, minutely dissected before it can be passed. It would never go out all in one piece. This selective passing is an oddity about even good people. They can pass out easily many very large objects, not to mention camels. (*Not to Mention Camels*, pp. 74–5)

A couple of short stories (such as 'Or Little Ducks Each Day', in *Iron Tears*) feature patches or territories that belong to neither God nor the Devil, and in many ways this sums up Lafferty's universe. Typically neither good nor evil triumphs; instead a sort of balance is restored with heavy casualties on both sides.

Lafferty's characters also have recurring types and themes. Children as the agents of gleeful chaos feature in a number of short stories. For example, seven-year-old Carnadine Thompson in 'The Transcendent Tigers' is given her powers because 'on that whole world I found only one person with perfect assurance — one impervious to doubt of any kind and totally impervious to self-doubt.' In 'All the People' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*), we read 'Anthony had always had a healthy hatred for children and dogs, those twin harassers of the unfortunate and the maladjusted.' In 'Through Other Eyes' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*) 'He learned . . . the untarnished evil of small children, the diabolic possession of adolescents.' In 'Primary Education of the Camiroi', 'small children are not yet entirely human'. *Arrive at Easterwine* has: 'Now then, tell me whether you have ever known an innocent child? Innocent, *innocens*, not-*nocens*, not noxious, not harming or threatening, not weaponed. Older persons may sometimes fall into a state of innocence (after they have lost their teeth and their claws), but children are never innocent if they are real. These four were real and not at all innocent.' (p. 188)

His stories often feature outsiders — Gypsies, Native Americans, drunken Irish — who see the world in non-standard ways. There are often not-quite-humans living on the edges of or hidden within normal society.

'There used to be a bunch of them on the edge of my home town,' Willy McGilly said. 'Come to think of it, there used to be a bunch of them on the edge of every hometown. Now they're more likely to be found right in the middle of every town. They're the scrubs, you know, for the bottoming of the breed.' ('Boomer Flats', *Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add*, Scribners, 1974)

There are other remnants of older races, such as the predatory six-fingered pre-Babylonians in 'The Six Fingers of Time' (*Nine Hundred Grandmothers*). I like the variant in 'Adam Had Three Brothers' (*Does Anyone Else Have Something Further to Add?*):

Adam had three brothers: Etienne, Yancy, and Rreq. Etienne and Yancy were bachelors. Rreq had a small family and all his issue have had small families; until now there are about two hundred of them in all, the most who have ever been in the world at one time. They have never intermarried

with the children of Adam except once. And not being of the same recension they are not under the same curse to work for a living.

So they do not.

Instead they batten on the children of Adam by clever devices that are known in police court as swindles.

Neanderthals recur many times, again sometimes but not always benign. For two benign examples, in *Not to Mention Camels* (pp. 4–5) Doctor Wilcove Funk is described in terms similar to those used to describe Dr Velikof Vonk in 'Boomer Flats'. Given the way Lafferty plays with names and swaps characters from story to story, the similarity of names and descriptions would be deliberate, although I can't guess to what purpose.

In *The Devil is Dead* (Avon, 1971), there is a battle taking place within the ranks of these pre-humans:

'The thing is biologically and genetically impossible. Was Mendel wrong? Were Morgan and Galton and Painter? Was even the great Asimov wrong? How is it possible to throw an angry primordial after a thousand generations? How is it possible to do it again and again?

'Where did we primordial aliens vanish when we were defeated and harried from the face of the earth? Into deep caves and swamps, into forests or inaccessible mountains, to distant sea islands like Tasmania? Some of us did, for a few thousand years. But many hid cannily in the bloodstream of the victors. They became the Aliens Within, and they had vowed a vengeance. And now and again, at intervals of centuries, they erupt in numbers, establish centers, and carry on the war to near death. [. . .]

Le Marin was with him there, reading a magazine with a gaudy cover. It was full of stories of monstrous aliens from the stars, written by Van Vogt and Leinster and such.

'Le Marin, you read about aliens from the stars who invade,' Finnegan said. 'Did you not know that there are nearer monsters and aliens?'

'I know it, Monster, and you know it,' said Le Marin, 'but we do not want everyone to know it.' (pp. 163–4)

As well as these there are the doubles and fetches, of planets as well as people, there is the taking over of minds and bodies, there are parallel universes, and playing around with the philosophic problems of perception, reality and illusion. Often simultaneously.

From *Annals of Klepsis* (1983):

The humanly inhabited universe, according to the best — or at least the newest — mathematical theory, does have a tertiary focus, and it is there that it is vulnerable. The humanly inhabited universe, with its four suns and its seventeen planets, is an unstable closed system of human orientation and precarious balance, a kinetic three-dimensional ellipse in form, with its third focus always approaching extinction. As with any similar unstable premise-system, the entire construct must follow its third focus into extinction. This is known as the 'Doomsday Equation'. [. . .]

The third focus of the humanly inhabited universe has been determined to be both a point and a person on the Planet Klepsis, on the *surface* of the planet, which is extraordinary in itself. Of the person, the human element of the anthropo-mathematical function, little is known except the code name the 'Horseshoe Nail', and the fact that the person is more than two hundred years old. This is an added precarious element. Actuary figures show that only one in a hundred billion humans will reach the age of two hundred years, and none will go far beyond it. (Prologue)

The tall tale [. . .] was that Christopher Begorra Brannagan, one of the earliest explorers of the Trader Planets, had been acted against because he had a wooden leg (and explorers are supposed to be physically perfect, how would it look else?), and because he was Irish (and explorers are supposed to be of the superior races, how would a person of an inferior race impress an alien?), and Brannagan resented his ill-treatment.

Having been treated unfairly, Brannagan swore that, as soon as he had acquired a billion thalers, he would set up a fund whereby any one-legged Irishman anywhere in the universe could receive free transportation to Klepsis and could also receive any help he needed after arriving at that blessed place.

'How will we define "Irish"?' the first administrator of the fund had asked Brannagan.

'If they have Irish names they are Irish altogether,' Brannagan laid it down. 'Few of the other breeds would be caught dead with an Irish name.' (p. 3)

Brannagan's ghost is a major character in the novel and still a power on Klepsis. It is, of course, peg-legged. But Brannagan's body is not.

Does the tiny trickle of Lafferty material still being published reflect his output, or is it desk-drawer material, or is he simply unpublishable these days?

I suspect the answer is yes to all three questions. Lafferty's strength is the short story. The magazines that published much of his early work no longer exist, and the broad-based original fiction anthologies are largely replaced by invitation-only themed anthologies. And although it is possible to trace common threads and themes through much of Lafferty's work, he is difficult to categorise, and I cannot see him writing commissioned pieces for collections such as *Off Limits: Tales of Alien Sex* or *Lovecraft's Legacy*, and only just in *Fires of the Past: Thirteen Contemporary Fantasies about Hometowns*.

— Elaine Cochrane, October 1996

DISCOVERING OLAF STAPLEDON

by Bruce Gillespie

(The following was first presented as a talk to the Nova Mob on 2 April 1997.)

Olaf Stapledon — William Olaf Stapledon — had no Scandinavian family links, but even his given name made him seem slightly alien in Britain during the 1930s and 1940s, when his books appeared. He was brought up mainly in Port Saïd, where he and his family were the only permanent white residents. When he returned to England, he lived in and near Liverpool, becoming one of the few famous Liverpudlians never to move permanently to London. An earnest man who desperately wanted to help humanity, he proved inept at almost everything he did but writing. To his ongoing shame he was only able to support his family because of the inheritance he received after his father died. He remained an outsider all his life, yet few isolates have produced works that are as interesting as those of Olaf Stapledon.

Why should one pay attention to Stapledon and his works? As far back as I can remember, he has always been the *other* great British literary SF writer. H. G. Wells is the first: *the* father of science fiction, the great British SF writer whose works I've read. He's the galaxy where it all begins. An empty space seems to separate him from Stapledon, an island universe there in the 1930s, writing his major works almost before the birth of modern Campbellian science fiction. He's the second great figure in British science fiction: unread today, and for many people, unreadable. When his major novels were reissued in 1973 by Penguin, I gave up on *Star Maker* after reading 70 pages of it, and therefore did not try *Last and First Men*. A few years ago I sold most of my Stapledon books. Thanks, Dick Jenssen and Alan Stewart, for lending me copies of the books I no longer have.

I've returned to Stapledon only because of Robert Crossley's biography, ***Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future***. I came across the biography only because of the indirect intervention of Brian Aldiss, who writes its Foreword.

A few years ago David Seed of Liverpool University was setting up a program of critical books about science fiction. He asked Brian Aldiss for suggestions for volumes. Brian suggested *The Best of SF Commentary*. That book still does not exist, although that's hardly the fault of David Seed, but dealing with Seed alerted me to the fine books that had already appeared in the program. One of the review copies I received was the Crossley biography of Stapledon. Reading it sent me straight back to the fiction.

Two particular images of Olaf Stapledon stay clearly with me after reading *Speaking for the Future*. The first appears in the Acknowledgements:

> The person most instrumental to this project and who most deserved to see it come to fruition is no longer alive. Agnes Stapledon, whose preservation of her husband's papers made a circumstantial account of his life possible, gave me unrestricted access both to manuscripts she had donated to the University of Liverpool and to the great wealth of materials she retained in her possession. Although we had only corresponded, never met, when I first talked with her in a nursing home in 1982, she handed over the keys to her house and invited me to move in and read whatever I found. This was the single most generous offer I have received in my career as a scholar, and now many years later I remain moved by her extraordinary gesture of trust. Agnes Stapledon died in the Spring of 1984, three days before her ninetieth birthday. (p. xv)

As Crossley says, 'when he died in 1950, nearly everything [Stapledon] had written and everything he had stood for was fading from popular memory'.

The second image from Crossley's biography tells us much about the position that Stapledon's work retains today: legendary, but little read:

> On 29 March 1949 my only biographical predecessor, Sam Moskowitz, saw Stapledon on a stage at a peace rally in Newark, New Jersey, in his single brief moment of international notoriety. The Cold War was in progress. He had just crossed the Atlantic for the first time in his life and encountered the new American witch-hunt in its first virulent outbreak. . . . On that March night Moskowitz may have been the only person in the Mosque Theater who had read any of Stapledon's fiction, the only one hadn't come to hear political oratory but to see a legend. The name of Olaf Stapledon had passed by word of mouth through a small group of American science fiction readers who had discovered his out-of-print fantasies and fables in the 1930s. . . . Theodore Sturgeon . . . phoned the Waldorf and asked if he could spare time for a social evening with some New York fans of his fiction. Stapledon had reason to make room in his schedule for Sturgeon and his friends. Several science-fiction writers had learned that his funds were frozen when he entered the United States and that he had appealed, unsuccessfully, to an American publisher for pocket money. Frederik Pohl immediately wrote to Stapledon with an offer of help and asked in return only that he try to meet with some of his American colleagues when he was in New York. On 31 March, Stapledon showed up at the West Side apartment of Fletcher Pratt, who was hosting the Hydra Club, a science-fiction discussion group that included two of the most important American editors of the genre — John W. Campbell and Donald Wollheim. A night of handshaking, autographing, and discussion of *Last and First Men*, *Odd John* and *Sirius* with an author who was a legendary figure for American science-fiction readers provided the solitary and wholly unpublicized moment when Olaf's literary accomplishment was recognized during his American journey. (pp. 8, 9, 379)

Why are these images important for understanding the life and work of Olaf Stapledon?

Meet Agnes Stapledon, Olaf's Australian cousin with whom he fell in love with when she was only twelve and he was in his late teens, but for whom he waited more than a decade; a classic love story that has had its own book written about it. Yet she was a woman much sinned against during the last decade of Stapledon's life. Stapledon, who looked youthful until his death while his wife aged at the normal rate, conducted several love affairs during his last decade, and seriously suggested to Agnes the 1940s equivalent of an open marriage. Yet Agnes maintained the marriage and kept her husband's study intact, nearly as he left it thirty-two years earlier. She had been patiently waiting for the biographer who might never have turned up. She was one of the few human beings to whom Stapledon was close, and she is presented in various idealised guises throughout the novels.

Stapledon's first three novels, *Last and First Men*, *Last Men in London*, and *Odd John*, were received ecstatically by reviewers in Britain and America, and sold very well. Crossley recalls the roll call of puzzled praise from journals such as the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Oxford Magazine*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Tribune*. J. B. Priestley declared *Last and First Men* as the season's 'outstanding odd book', which resisted 'any recognised category'. *The Oxford Magazine* said that the 'boldest imaginings of Mr Wells pale before the dreams of Mr Stapledon'. In the late 1930s *Last and First Men* was well regarded enough to be picked as one of the first ten books in Penguin's series of Pelican paperbacks.

Ten years after their success, Stapledon's books could not be bought, except in secondhand stores. His influence remained not in the mainstream of English intellectual life, but deeply imprinted on the field of science fiction, both on writers and fans.

He was the author whose influence set Arthur C. Clarke towards a writing career.

'In a medical officer's quarters in India during World War II, Brian Aldiss glanced through a copy of the Pelican edition while he was awaiting an inoculation and was so captivated that for the only time in his life he stole a book.'

Stanislaw Lem's method of taking an idea for a walk seems to owe much to Stapledon, as does the scope of the work of Cordwainer Smith. Sam Moskowitz, Stapledon's witness in 1949, wrote the only Stapledon biography that precedes Crossley's. It's a 17-page essay, 'Olaf Stapledon: Cosmic Philosopher', that appears in Moskowitz's *Explorers of the Infinite: Shapers of Science Fiction*. In fandom, Stapledon's influence appeared in the famous Eight Stages of Fandom, invented by Jack Speer and Robert Silverberg to mirror Stapledon's Eighteen Stages of Mankind.

If, then, Stapledon's memory is kept faithfully but rather vaguely only by science fiction people, why remember him at all? I find it hard to answer that question, but I can assert that there would be enormous gap in the SF universe if he had never existed.

This is the first time I've prepared a talk or essay about a writer whose *style* I can hardly recommend. In *Last and First Men* and *Last Men in London* his tales are reports from some far-future observer delivering by telepathy a historical document to a receptive scribe of the 1930s. Remember, Penguin first published *Last and First Men* as a Pelican, i.e. non-fiction. There are few definable characters; instead, the characters are entire races of people. Stapledon writes in a nineteenth-century over-fussy style that must have seemed quaint by the 1940s. Even his two novels, *Sirius* and *Odd John*, are related by narrators who are not on stage during most of the events of the book. Relying on secondhand reports, each narrator presents what is more like a documentary than a novel. Only Stapledon's ability to highlight sharp images or events — often very funny images or events despite the solemn imperturbability of the author's sentences — gives artistic power to these books.

Reading Stapledon, then, presents a real problem of style versus content. A reader of science fiction cannot avoid being interested in Stapledon because the whole field is indebted to him. One can make a fairly long list of stories that owe some or all of their ideas to Stapledon, yet I suspect that many of these unwitting plagiarists have never read his works. Between them, Wells and Stapledon created modern science fiction, yet Stapledon knew little of American genre science fiction until after he had done most of his best work.

In ***Last and First Men***, Stapledon's first novel, he tells the history of humanity from his own present time until 2 billion years in the future. Humanity rises and falls on Earth until the year 5 million, when the human race moves to Venus. After several ups and downs there, human beings migrate to Neptune, which has become habitable as the Sun swells into a giant star. After 2 billion years, the Sun is about to fill the entire solar system, destroying the Sixteenth Men even as they try to find a way to spread the seeds of humanity to the stars.

The main features of *Last and First Men* are its sense of time and its emphasis on the cyclic nature of human endeavour. Very little science fiction, even today, embraces the vast amounts of time that Stapledon takes for granted. Given that, he shows an acute sense of current history. For someone writing in 1930, Stapledon gets the main features of World War II fairly right — although I find in a later, 1954, edition of the book, the chapters on the 1930s and 1940s have been deleted because they are regarded as no longer accurate! Stapledon is rather fond of destructive forces, so there is not much left of Europe after World War II. America and China dominate the world. Later, a war between them leaves viable human activity only in small sections of the Southern Hemisphere. Civilisation renews itself in Patagonia: a civilisation that is much more self-aware than ours, but lacks much of our technology, because physical resources have been destroyed during the wars. Every Utopia has an Achilles' heel; the Patagonian civilisation falls; humanity is reduced to a tiny group of people living in the Arctic; but over time the race resurrects itself, only to find that the Moon is about disintegrate into the Earth. Off to Venus we go for umpteen million years; in part as a conquering race, destroying the native Venusians, and later by becoming flying creatures. When humanity gets to Neptune, we adapt ourselves to massive gravitational forces and change shape altogether.

What makes Stapledon a follower of H. G. Wells, but very different from the nineteenth-century British Utopians who preceded him, is his refusal to believe in a prescriptive Utopia. His vision is always Darwinian, not Marxist. Humanity does not inevitably improve; no revolution will settle human destiny once and for all. Instead, every now and again the vastness of time and the profligacy of human activity will enable some great society to emerge. Stapledon has no faith that evolution will automatically turn out a 'superior' species. He clearly approves some of his far-future varieties of humanity, but he sees that nobody is immune to the massive natural forces that actually decide our fates. The overall flavour of *Last and First Men* is of melancholy; even the greatest achievements of humanity will be disappear in time.

It's fairly easy to see in *Last and First Men* an extension of the melancholy that pervades the penultimate scene of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, in which the very last living creature on Earth, possibly our remote descendant, crawls along a beach beside a silent sea while a giant sun fills the sky. The end of everything. What makes Stapledon different is not only the immensely greater time perspective that he gives his book but his unwillingness to confine his viewpoint to that of a lone time traveller. In cutting himself off from a single character, he loses that tactile excitement of adventure that one always finds in Wells. He replaces it with width of perspective and completeness of detail. Using what quickly became one of the main clichés of science fiction — telepathy — as the means by which the far-future narrator tells his history, Stapledon tries to give his book the scope of an epic in which any individual disappears into the background of millions of years of history. The effect is to make all events co-existent, but it also removes the urgency of adventure narrative. To make up for this, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* function as encyclopedias of exciting SF ideas, most of which have been used by later writers, but many of which remain unexplored.

Stapledon is fond of little idea chapters that often have the vivacity lacking in the whole book. For instance, in *Last and First Men* he uses a few chapters to tell of the alien race that develops on Mars and later attempts to conquer Earth. Very different from Wells's Martians, this alien race is a group mind made up of ultra-microscopic independent flying moving creatures. Lem's cloud-like creatures in *The Invincible* are very much like Stapledon's Martians. You can almost watch Stapledon's mind elaborating on the original idea: first the tiny creatures, then 'vital unities' forming nervous systems, then forming complicated neural systems; then 'the Martian cloud-jelly' which 'could bring to bear immense forces which could also be controlled for very delicate manipulation'.

In ***Star Maker***, nearly a decade later, all the elements of *Last and First Men* are pushed to their furthest limit. Despite the recent efforts of such authors as Greg Benford, Stephen Baxter and Greg Bear, *Star Maker* remains the most ambitious SF novel ever written. As with the works of those other authors, its sheer ambition often makes it just a bit unreadable.

The plot, such as it is, of *Star Maker* is founded in an unexplained fantasy, which perhaps explains why the book is not better known:

> One night when I had tasted bitterness I went out on to the hill. Dark heather checked my feet. Below marched the suburban street lamps. Windows, their curtains drawn, were shut eyes, inwardly watching the lives of dreams. Beyond the sea's level darkness a lighthouse pulsed. Overhead, obscurity. . . .
>
> I sat down on the heather. Overhead obscurity was now in full retreat. In its rear the freed population of the sky sprang out of hiding, star by star. On every side the shadowy hills or the guessed, featureless sea extended beyond sight. But the hawk-flight of imagination followed them as they curved downward below the horizon. I perceived that I was on a little round grain of rock and metal, filmed with water and with air, whirling in sunlight and darkness. And on the skin of that little grain all the swarms of men, generation by generation, had lived in labour and blindness, with intermittent joy and intermittent lucidity of spirit. And all their history, with its folk-wanderings, its empires, its philosophies, its proud sciences, its social revolutions, its increasing hunger for community, was but a flicker in one day of the lives of stars. (*To the End of Time*, p. 231)

And then, just like John Carter in the first of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars novels, the narrator looks back down the hill, to find his home and home town vanished. 'I myself was seemingly disembodied, for I could neither see nor touch my own flesh. And when I willed to move my limbs, nothing happened. I had no limbs. The familiar inner perceptions of my body, and the headache which had oppressed me since morning, had given way to a vague lightness and exhilaration.' (*To the End of Time*, p. 233)

Then, just like that, the narrator's disembodied mind takes off for the stars. As a method of transport, it certainly beats the faster-than-light spaceship.

It's impossible to summarise the content of *Star Maker*, so I won't. It's enough to say that it takes in, absorbs and spits out the entire action of *Last and First Men* as the merest footnote in its own time scale, which is the entire history of the universe. The narrator quickly loses track of Earth and our solar system. Somewhere out there he finds an alternative Earth. Life on the other Earth merely mirrors the rather dismal recent history of his own Earth, so obviously heading towards Word War II. He finds as a companion Bvalltu, both an inhabitant of the Other Earth and a mind who can accompany him as he ventures further into the universe.

Star Maker is both dazzling and wearying because Stapledon sets himself free from all constraints of time and space, while maintaining the prose of a scrupulous documentary observer. The nearest thing to passion is:

> As our skill in disembodied flight increased, we found intense pleasure in sweeping hither and thither among the stars. We tasted the delights at once of skating and of flight. Time after time, for sheer joy, we traced huge figures-of-eight in and out around the two partners of a "double star". Sometimes we stayed motionless for long periods to watch at close quarters the waxing and waning of a variable. Often we plunged into a congested cluster, and slid amongst its suns like a car gliding among the lights of a city. . . .' (*To the End of Time*, p. 269)

His range of glimpsed civilisations includes an extraordinary number of biologies that are not based on our own assumptions. Most aliens in most SF books are basically ourselves in funny suits, but Stapledon's aliens are regularly based on truly alien premises. One planet's race has evolved from essentially slug-like ancestors. On another planet, a mollusc-like creature evolves until it becomes a living ship, with sails, rudder and prow, all part of the creature itself. Says the narrator: 'It was a strange experience to enter the mind of an intelligent ship, to see the foam circling under one's nose . . ., to taste the bitter or delicious currents streaming past one's flanks, to feel the pressure of air on the sails as one beat up against the breeze, to hear beneath the water-line the rush and murmur of distant shoals of fishes . . .' (*To the End of Time*, p. 286)

The more alien the creature, the more the narrator seems to identify with it. Towards the end of the book, his main races form a vast empire of associated stars, then universes. Vast plumes of gas erupting from the stars, destroying entirely planetary systems, turn out to be the weapons of sentient creatures — the stars themselves — irritated by pesky upstart planets. The planetary races are able to establish contact with the stars, temporarily ending the havoc. On the surface of stars live the flame creatures, who reappear in a rather poor novella of Stapledon's, 'The

Flames'. Anticipating by some years all those stories of the heat death of the universe, the travellers see a future in which all the stars begin to falter and die. They venture backward in time, looking for the origins of the universe, and discover that even the nebulas were originally aware creatures, before they began to break down into separate stars.

Unfortunately religion raises its ugly head, giving rise to the title of the book. In this, Stapledon was very much a thinker bound by his times. His star travellers look for a barely glimpsed supermind, or super star, that lies behind all this vast activity. What they find is hardly any conventional God, but a remote experimenter that has spent forever making universe after universe. Our universe, billions of years old though it might be, turns out to be merely one of a long series of experiments. In the book's last pages, Stapledon speculates about the evolution of the Star Maker itself, writing some of his finest prose.

Why was Stapledon able to write these two novels, seemingly without any precedent but Wells? Not even his biographer can answer this question. Stapledon destroyed the working notes for all his novels, and once he was published and recognised, he was not above contributing to his own legendary status. Stapledon told the story that *Last and First Men* began with a holiday that he and Agnes took on the cliffs of Wales. In later years he talked about his 'Anglesey experience', of standing on the cliffs and watching seals play on the rocks below him. He would claim later that the plan of *Last and First Men* came to him 'in a flash'. 'The seals he observed were sunning themselves on the rocks, squirming and squealing with almost human vulnerability as the waves hit and drenched their warmed skin with cold spray. This much Agnes Stapledon, nearly fifty years after the event, could say for sure.' Stapledon wrote later: 'Long ago (it was while I was scrambling on a rugged coast, where great waves broke in blossom on the rocks) I had a sudden fantasy of man's whole future, aeon upon aeon of strange vicissitudes and gallant endeavours in world after world, seeking a glory never clearly conceived, often betrayed, but little by little revealed.' Crossley doubts Stapledon's claimed timetable of events, i.e. that *Last and First Men* was written shortly after the 1928 experience. It is much more likely, and much better fits Stapledon's personality, that he had been making laborious notes, and corresponding with researchers in many fields, long before 1928.

Curiously, Crossley fails to mention a very similar incident that occurs in Stapledon's oddest book, ***Last Men in London***. This is the second of the novels supposedly narrated by the far-future Neptunian to someone of Stapledon's time. After a preamble in which the Neptunian tells of his idyllic life in the extreme far future just before the solar system is about to be destroyed, he tells of how became an official time explorer. In order to research Stapledon's own era he hitched his mind to a man of the time, Paul. Paul is, of course, Stapledon, but so is the 1930s teller of the tale, and the far-future Neptunian. In telling Paul's story, Stapledon gives us what must be very close to an autobiography. It lacks the immediacy of an autobiography because it is also the story of a far-future researcher very puzzled by our own civilisation. Crossley finds in *Last Men in London* a valuable record of Stapledon's hair-raising experiences as a stretcher-bearer in France during World War I.

In *Last Men in London*, Paul and his father stand on a crag overlooking a lake:

> It was his father who first pointed out to him the crossing wave-trains of a mountain tarn, and by eloquent description made him feel that the whole physical word was in some manner a lake rippled by myriads of such crossing waves, great and small, swift and slow. . . . They counted five distinct systems of waves, some small and sharp, some broad and faint. There were also occasional brief "cat's paws" complicating the pattern. Father and son went down to the sheltered side of the lake and contemplated its more peaceful undulations. With a sense almost of sacrilege, Paul stirred the water with his stick, and sent ripple after ripple in widening circles. The father said, "That is what you are yourself, a stirring up of the water, so that waves spread across the world. When the stirring stops, there will be no more ripples." . . . Thus did an imaginative amateur anticipate in a happy guess the "wave mechanics" which was to prove the crowning achievement of the physics of the First Men. Paul was given to understand that even his own body, whatever else it was, was certainly a turmoil of waves, inconceivably complex, but no less orderly than the waves on the tarn. . . . It gave him a sense of the extreme subtlety and inevitability of existence.' (*Last Men in London*, pp. 84–5)

If Stapledon's work is based on certain basic images, then this must be the major one, not just the vision of seals on rocks. To see the universe as a pattern of intersecting ripples appears to have freed Stapledon from the intellectual constraints of traditional religion. At one time he was much influenced by an inner-city pastor, who stood for traditional religion. Paul (i.e. Olaf) shows this pastor, called the Archangel in the novel, some of his youthful poems. What for Paul had seemed a growing sense of God-in-the-Universe seems like heresy to the pastor. His efforts rejected, Paul returns to a sense of 'all that vastness within which man is but a tremulous candle-flame, very soon to be extinguished'. With this sentence we are back at the kernel of *Last and First Men*.

Stapledon wrote two novels that are very different from his time chronicles. ***Odd John*** and ***Sirius*** are both limited to small time and space frames, are structured quite conventionally, and are absorbing as novels. *Sirius* is certainly the best written of all Stapledon's works; the most dramatic, the most comic, the most vivid, and, interestingly, the first of his books to be largely ignored in Britain and not taken up by an American publisher.

Both *Odd John* and *Sirius* are superman novels — or, in the case, of *Sirius*, a super-dog novel. Both owe much to Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wonder*, which is one of the few British novels that link Wells's work and Stapledon's. Beresford's book tells of a super-intelligent child who is eventually so bored and dismayed by the human race that he commits suicide. The hero of *Odd John*, very similar to Beresford's superchild, and also to the main character of George Turner's *Brain Child*, is horrified and disgusted by the human race to which he feels superior. He assembles a small group of like-minded children spread throughout the world and sets up a Utopia on a Pacific island. In turn, the rest of humanity tries to capture the island, whereupon the children destroy their Utopia and commit suicide. The superchild idea has been used plenty of times since, especially in John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* and Sturgeon's *More than Human*, but *Odd John* was rightly judged a remarkable book when it appeared in 1936.

Sirius, published in 1944, is a much more closely observed book, and much more adventurous. Sirius is one of a number of dogs specially bred to be a super-dog, but he

is the only experiment that succeeds. Stapledon's scientific reading is as exemplary as ever, since the combination of gene selection and foetus manipulation he describes sounds much like methods that might be used today. Stapledon had no time for the crude theories of eugenics that were popular in the 1930s and remained prominent in magazine science fiction for decades to come.

Sirius grows up in the household of his 'inventor', Thomas Trelone, his wife Elizabeth (based on Agnes) and his daughter Plaxy (almost certainly based on Stapledon's unconsummated love of that time). Part of Trelone's method is to slow down Sirius's development so that he ages at much the same rate as Plaxy, the daughter. In this way Sirius and Plaxy, who can never become lovers, become deeply attached to each other. The family grows up on a farm outside Liverpool. For much of his life Sirius is employed as a very clever sheep-herder, but Trelone also teaches him to speak and to read. Since Sirius cannot reveal his accomplishments to more than a small number of humans, he is separated from humanity. He is separated from his own kind, except when he can find a willing bitch. Sirius suffers from a deep isolation much like the poignant loneliness of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Sirius, like Odd John before him, is Stapledon's ideal observer of human foibles. Except that, unlike a satirist, Stapledon is not interested in human frailties, except as evidence of some deep horror at the centre of human endeavour. Like Odd John, Sirius is eventually destroyed by stupid, blind humanity, but not before Sirius has invented a new kind of singing and come to some kind of understanding of a world in which he is always a stranger. Much of the cleverness of the book is the way in which Stapledon shows how Sirius remains doggy as well as human: his assumptions based on smell, not sight; constantly frustrated because he does not have hands; constantly tempted to abandon his training program and revert to wild-dog status.

What links the two sides of Stapledon's work? Most of the clues can be found in *Last Men in London*, which on any other grounds in Stapledon's least readable book. In that book he speaks of Paul's sense of the 'overwhelming presence of the Cosmos'. Stapledon's father was an amateur astronomer, and in every one of the books the stars are seen more as personal friends than far-off objects. In *Star Maker* we find sentient stars; in *Last Men in London* Stapledon speaks of most members of the human race as 'unlit beacons'. In 'The Flames', published in 1947, his alien creature wants to take over the human race, saying: 'You will no longer be the frustrated, bewildered, embittered, vindictive mental cripples that most of you now are'. Stapledon's two super-beings, Odd John and Sirius, escape from being 'mental cripples', but there is no place for them in the world.

During the 1920s and 1930s Stapledon became convinced that there was little hope left for civilised humanity. He had undergone World War I. Travelling as a speaker and pamphleteer for the various Working Men's Groups in Liverpool he had seen the effects of the Depression on society during the 1920s and 1930s, and he could see clearly the approach of World War II. He believed that conventional weapons would destroy most of the northern hemisphere during most of the War. At the end of the War itself, his prophecy proved incorrect, but the power of atomic weapons had now been unveiled. No wonder he was pessimistic!

However, many thinking people during the 1930s were as disturbed by events as he was. What made Stapledon different was his unwillingness to see a hope of a solution in any of the alternatives offered. In one of the better passages of *Last Men in London*, the main character debunks every single solution, either social or personal, offered during the 1930s to solve the crises at the time. The social engineering solutions offered by either Nazism or Communism are unacceptable, because they allow no room for the personal; intensely personal solutions, such as Buddhism, are unacceptable because they allow the meditator to ignore the world. Stapledon shows the harsh side of his personality: his belief that only an evolutionary superior human being could bring hope to the world — hence his two most interesting novels, *Odd John* and *Sirius*. But his proposed superior beings are not superior in the way that pervaded fascist thought at the time and continued in much science fiction throughout the next thirty years. Born into our civilisation, Stapledon's superior beings are largely ineffective in society, since they will see things clearly and not be gulled by the assumptions of that society. They will have a sense of responsibility for the whole of humanity, but will put this responsibility into action only at the personal level, not as a collective party of government.

If I'm not clearer than that, it's because Stapledon becomes very muddled when he tries to shows us what his superior human being or cosmic philosophy will be like. It has something to do with the Cosmic Mind; hence his interest in telepathy, but Stapledon would never allow the individual mind to be swallowed up by such a Cosmic Mind. The only way he can think about his ideal humanity is to skip current humanity and write of various Utopias in *Last and First Men*, or skip humanity altogether in *Star Maker*. There's Olaf, and there's the universe, and not much in between.

In Olaf Stapledon we find a fertile mind forced to arid conclusions. Hence the rather dry way he has of writing. Hence the lack of human characters, except in *Odd John* and *Sirius*. Worse, Stapledon is a would-be monk who would throw off traditionally puritanical constraints on sexual expression; a would-be believer in God who cannot believe in anything but the great forces of the universe. What we continue to be grateful for is that this very frustrated individual was also wonderfully inventive, and that we science fiction readers, if hardly anybody else, can still enjoy the best of his inventions.

— Bruce Gillespie, 31 March 1997

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