Scratch Pad

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Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of **brg No. 19, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the December 1997 ANZAPA (Australian and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) mailing. Cover graphic by Ditmar.**

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Has Anybody Out There Anything Good to Say about 1997?

Well, I haven't. 1997 put the boot in, didn't it?

Here's my 1997: A loss of income security, and real reduction in income. The death of George Turner, and too many others. (I've just heard of the death of Margaret Aldiss, a great lady and fine hostess.) Major illnesses for Ian Gunn, Nick Stathopoulos and (I've just heard) Eric Lindsay. Our burglary, and the feeling it gives me that the world has become a crummy place. The sale of the tall buildings on each side of us; three months of noise while one of them is degutted; the prospect of four new neighbours. The death of machines and systems: the sewerage pipe and washing machine at the beginning of the year; the computer crashing six times in the first six months of the year; the hot water system crashing at this end of the year. After doing lots of work towards the next *SF Commentary*, I now find I have no money to publish it. The list goes on.

Fill in your own 1997 list. I've just read four mailings of ANZAPA, and found that most of you had a worse year than Elaine and I did.

Fortunately, some of you had a good year. Even I must admit that 1997 had its occasional high spots.

My fiftieth birthday bash . . . thanks to everybody who turned up. Our friend Frances's fiftieth, at the same restaurant. Lots of enjoyable fortieths, fiftieths and sixtieths. Basicon . . . thanks, Ian and Karen (but no thanks to 1997 for playing such a cruel joke on you). That totally unexpected Ditmar award; thanks to those who voted. Good fellowship with good friends: thanks, Dick, Bill, Richard, Race and Iola, Frances and Robin, Jim, Andy, Geoff, Dora and many many others. Many hours of ingenious computer help from Dick and Richard. Lots of good books and films.

And, of course, the vast wave of best wishes and practical help from friends when they heard that I'd been made George Turner's literary executor.

The temptation is to say: bring on 1998. At the moment I can't see how it can be better than 1997. My income has become so uncertain that I don't know how to pay some current bills, let alone return to the real purpose of life: publishing fanzines. (Any suggestions welcome.) I hate grovelling to prospective clients, but find there's no other way to get work. We face the prospective of lots of new neighbours. And the carpet and roofing iron must be replaced sometime soon.

And that's just the 1998 disasters I can predict!

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

These are books read since the end of November 1997.

THE MERMAIDS SINGING
by Val McDermid
(HarperCollins 0-00-649358-0; 1995; 387 pp.)

This is the beginning of a new series of mystery novels by Val McDermid, about whom I had never heard until HarperCollins sent me this review copy. Detective Inspector Carol Jordan is paired with Tony Hill, a psychologist brought in to catch a serial murder using the 'clinical profile' method. This sounds like mumbo-jumbo to the Bradfield police, so they aren't much help. Acknowledging the influence of Iain Banks's *Complicity*, McDermid also shows us the murders from the viewpoint of the murderer. Why is it so difficult for Hill and his team to track him down? This is an inventive plot, although it includes what is now a cliché of the genre:

the detective set up to become the last victim. Nevertheless the book's cliffhanger ending has real punch.

REFLECTIONS IN A JAUNDICED EYE
by Florence King
(Black Swan 0-522-99376-X; 1989; 198 pp.)
This is not as entertaining as *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* (reviewed last time) because it is not autobiographical narrative. The various characters from King's autobiography are mentioned from time to time, but *Reflections* is not a narrative. It is a series of articles written for various major American magazines. Only King would write an article about why such magazines keep scrubbing her from their contributors' lists. The book includes a merciless parody of the work of John Updike and various funny diatribes against the decline of the American language. Thanks to Yvonne Rousseau for finding this book for me.

MINMERS MAROONED AND PLANET OF THE MARSUPIALS: THE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF CHERRY WILDER
by Yvonne Rousseau
(Nimrod 1326-561-X; 1997; 26 pp.)
You might have read a shorter version of this essay in *Foundation* in 1992. It is Yvonne Rousseau's brilliant analysis of the underlying structures behind Cherry Wilder's science fiction, illuminated by an intimate knowledge of the texts. Rousseau points to major differences between Wilder's New Zealand/Australian view of fantasy (the 'lost child in the bush' story) and American fantasy structures. *Minmers Marooned* appears in Norman Talbot's 'Babel Handbooks' series of monographs from Nimrod Publications, PO Box 170, New Lambton NSW 2305; $10 per volume.

ROAD RAGE
by Ruth Rendell
(Hutchinson 0-09-180204-0; 1997; 328 pp.)
There's not much point in discussing *Road Rage*, the latest Inspector Wexford novel, since the *Age* reviewer gave away most of the plot a few weeks ago. Yet it's hard not to discuss this fairly substantial novel without revealing what it is all about. Dora Wexford takes a taxi to the local railway station, only to be kidnapped by a group who claim to be eco-terrorists. Several other people are kidnapped in the same way during the same week. The message is received: stop the superhighway going past Kingsmartin or one hostage after another will be killed! This is an odd book, since the reader's sympathy for the criminals, whoever they might be, is enlisted from the beginning, and the ending only heightens this effect. Yet we feel completely Wexford's horror at finding that his wife is one of the kidnap victims. Rendell has obviously been bored with Wexford for some time, and has decided to use his investigations to highlight some major problems in English society. *Simisola*, the previous Wexford novel, was a bore, but *Road Rage* is an offbeat classic of the mystery genre.

THE VOICE THAT THUNDERS: ESSAYS AND LECTURES
by Alan Garner
(Harvill 1-86046-332-0; 1997; 244 pp.)
A lecture by Alan Garner must be an arresting, even frightening event. Here is a Biblical prophet without a Bible, a writer who treats the past as alive as the present, a declaimer who upbraids the whole of modern English literature for its failures without lapsing into generalities. He makes extravagant claims for his novels, delivering expositions that are sometimes more interesting than the novels they talk about. These lectures and essays, written over twenty years, cover an extraordinary range of material. He shows that a ballad from his local area can be derived not from the sixteenth century but from the Bronze Age. Similarly, he shows that an implement found in the area was made of metal mined in the area more than 4000 years ago. He reads selections from his fan mail, and in so doing gives us great insights into why he writes his novels. He provides the background for *Strandloper* and many of his other famous books. He shows us just what it is like to go mad suddenly. He challenges listeners and readers to explore their own past. This is a memorable book; I wish it didn't make me feel so inadequate.

STRANDLOPER
by Alan Garner
(Harvill 1-86146-160-3; 1996; 200 pp.)
This novel is so challenging that I suspect I could not have read it without first reading Garner's essay about it in *The Voice That Thunders*. It is more poetry than prose; highly concentrated, offering few concessions to the conventions of narrative. William Buckley, a transported convict, escaped from the first expedition to Corio Bay. The settlement failed, and Buckley was left for dead. He was adopted by the local Aboriginal tribe, who believed him to be the ghost of a dead shaman. Buckley lived with the tribe for 32 years. After he was 'rescued' by white settlers, he returned to England. Even if you know this before you begin reading the novel, much else is difficult, demanding close scrutiny: the pagan village rituals during which Buckley and his future wife choose each other; the equally strange pre-Christian church service during which Buckley is arrested for crimes he cannot comprehend; the terrifying sea voyage to New Holland; the escape; and the mystical process during which Buckley learns the insights given only to a shaman. Garner does his best to stretch his perceptions back into eighteenth-century Chester, then into pre-white settlement Australia. Garner links the symbols on an early Christian church window with the symbols found on Aboriginal weapons; pagan rituals in Chester with the initiation rites that Buckley undergoes in Australia. Mysticism is never far away, but what remains true is the intense earthiness and sensuality of the writing. For the first time I understood much that was unclear about the reality-world of the people who lived here for 40,000 years. If *Strandloper* were easier to read, I would say that every white Australian should read it. But it's valuable only because it's difficult to read! It's a Garner book: it should not be read, but reread.

TOM FOBBLE'S DAY
by Alan Garner
(Collins 0-00-184832-1; 1977; 72 pp.)
GRANNY REARDUN
by Alan Garner
(Fontana Lions 0-00-671602-4; 1977; 58 pp.)
THE AIMER GATE
by Alan Garner
(Fontana Lions 0-00-671603-2; 1978; 79 pp.)

These three stories, plus *The Stone Book*, were published in America as *The Stone Book Quartet*. Nearly twenty years separates them from the publication of *Strandloper*. Garner works slowly, for reasons made clear in *The Voice That Thunders*. In that volume Garner claims that the 'Stone Book' series have been his best-received work. Each book is scarcely more than a short story, yet each packs in more experience than a good novel. In *The Stone Book* we climb to the top of a newly built spire and descend to the depths of an almost inaccessible cave. In *Tom Fobble's Day* we feel travel very fast over snow on a perfectly made sled. In *Granny Reardun* we find out just what it was like to harvest a field up until the early years of this century. Yet these particular experiences are just part of a complex response to old England itself. Garner talks much in *The Voice That Thunders* about the need to know one's *place*: a peculiarly English concept to an Australian. Yet this concise family saga, various generations indicated from volume to volume by mere hints, connects people and place in a way that proves Garner's contentions. Marketed as children's fiction, these books are not stories I could have read when I was a child; instead, they have a depth rarely achieved by Booker Prize winners.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE ARGONAUTS
by Rob Johnson
(Hodder & Stoughton 0-7336-0528-1; 1997; 270 pp.)

A few years ago I wrote an article about my memories of 'the Argonauts', the radio club that was the central part of the *ABC Children's Session* from the early 1940s to the late 1960s. At that stage the only independent source of information was Ida Elizabeth Osborne's *Good Rowing!*, which concentrated on her own years as head of the Argonauts. Ungenerously, she dismissed post-1950 incarnations of the Club, and left out much that I wanted to know. Anything about the Argonauts that was unclear until now has been clarified by Rob Johnson. Not only does he confirm my memory that 'Chris' was acted by Leonard Teale, long before he became famous as a TV actor, but he gives valuable information about G. K. Saunders, the writer who introduced me to science fiction in 1953 and who wrote the most vivid serials broadcast by the *Children's Session*. Johnson is particularly skilful at conveying the central elements of the Argonauts Club: the emphasis on high achievement in prose, poetry, art, music and science, competition against oneself rather than against others (because each Argonaut was known only by a 'ship name' based on Greek mythology and a number), and the fostering of Australian talent. Barry Humphries, who writes the introduction, was an Argonaut, and so were a large number of other famous Australians who are now over 45. Their stories are here, as well as the stories of each of the 'team members'. Atholl Fleming, who was 'Mac' and 'Jason', survived the death of the Argonauts Club by one month; John Ewart ('Jimmy') died recently, never having fulfilled much of his early promise. The Club did not commit suicide, but was murdered by ABC executives, when a survey in 1970 found that many of its listeners were over forty. Nothing has replaced it, yet young people still discover poetry, prose, art, music and science for themselves. We'll never know whether it could have metamorphosed into something interesting to children of the 1990s; all I know that its high ideals were the brightest light of my 1950s childhood. *The Golden Age of the Argonauts* is a fine tribute.

THE WIRE IN THE BLOOD
by Val McDermid
(HarperCollins 0-00-225704-1; 1997; 373 pp.)

Val McDermid 'borrows' so unashamedly from other mystery and thriller writers that she must know that we know, and she dares us not to find it all fun. In *The Wire in the Blood*, we know from the beginning the identity of the serial killer. Jason and Hill, ordered off the case and suspected of murder, know who he is. How will they nab him? All this resembles some of the latest, weakest Patricia Cornwell novels, even to the ending that isn't an ending. Now we have mystery stories that demand sequels! I forgive McDermid because she is readable and inventive. This is a Guilty Pleasure, not a Fine Novel, but some Guilty Pleasures are much more fun than others.

— Bruce Gillespie, 7 December 1997