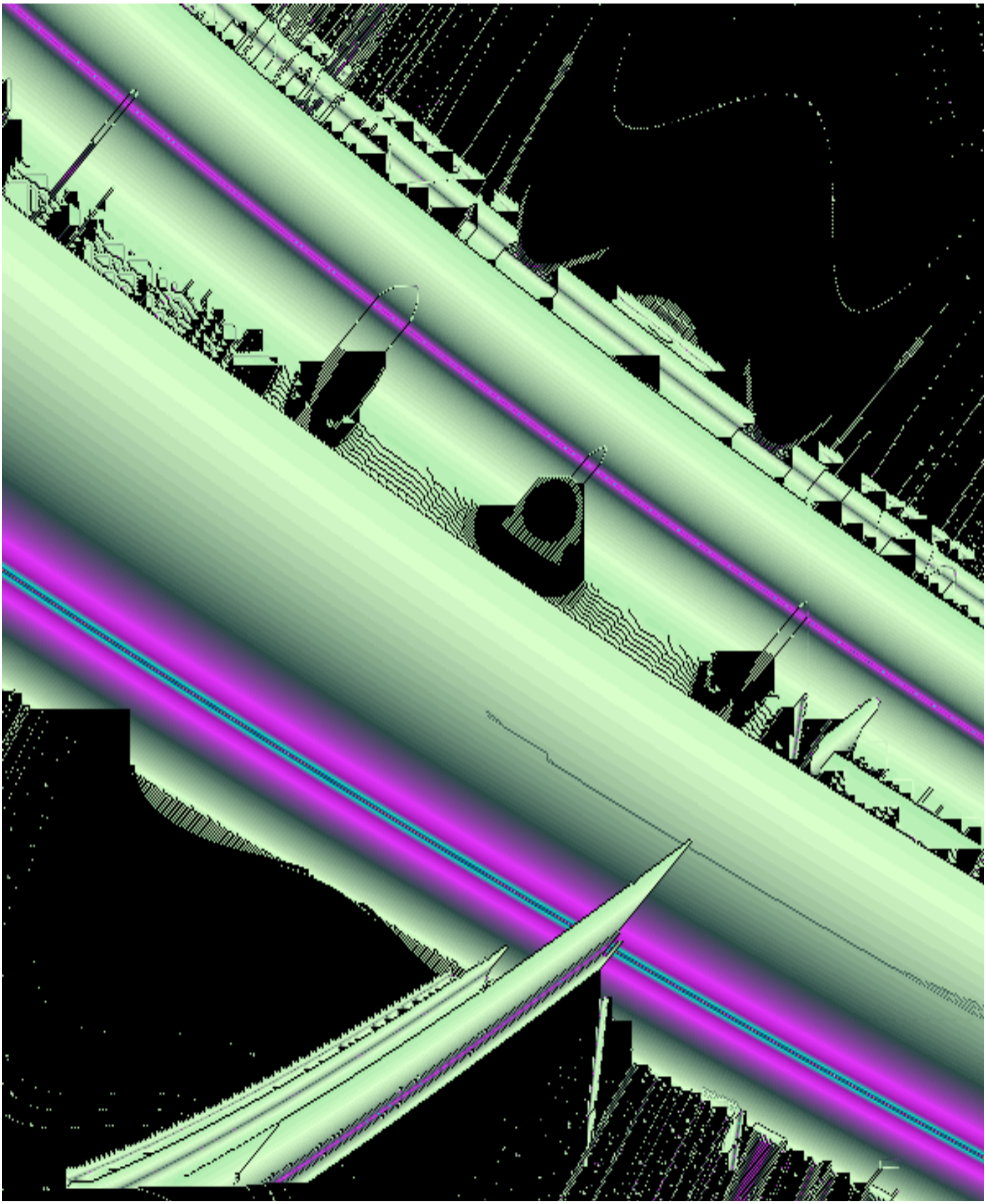
Scratch Pad

No 29 September 1998



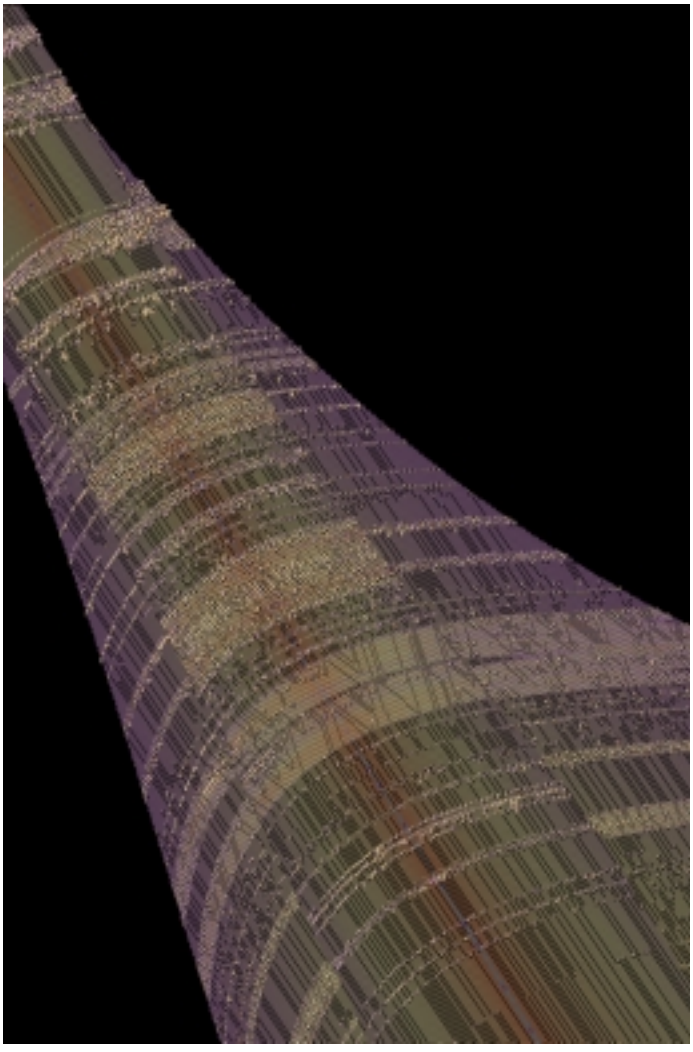
Scratch Pad 29

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 15, a magazine written and published by Bruce Gillespie, 59 Keele Street, Victoria 3066, Australia (phone (03) 9419-4797; email: gandc@mira.net) for the September 1998 Acnestis mailing. Cover: 'Titanic Ho!': graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals.

Contents

TMR lives! Gillespie returns! Acnestis quakes!

Gestating and aborning two double issues of *The Metaphysical Review* took more months than I anticipated, followed by boring Paying Work which swallowed the other months, leaving not a jot or tittle of time for Acnestis. I don't apologise for that lapse, or even for the footer-in-mouth in *TMR* 28/29 that only Acnestids noticed. The response to these issues has been great. Particular thanks to members of Acnestis who've sent letters of comment already — and a gentle reminder to those haven't sent anything yet.



I can only apologise (grovel! grovel!) for whoring after strange fannish ghods, i.e. the sometimes very strange fannish elder ghods who inhabit the Timebinders listserver. (I still don't know the difference between a listserver and a newsgroup, but I like the way Timebinders does things.) It's enabled me to get in touch with people I haven't talked with for many years, made me some new friends, and given me a way of reminding Americans that Norstrilia Press still has Greg Egan's first novel for sale.

But the cost of staying on Timebinders is high: 100 messages a day, an average of an hour and a half to scan and reply to.

Is it worth it? Being part of an electronic apa prompts me to write a lot very quickly, but I was already doing a fair bit for my two written apas, Acnestis and ANZAPA. Timebinders members include people such as Bill Donaho and Ted White, who tell the scurrilous stories that didn't make it into Harry Warner's fan histories. Timebinders people don't discuss books much; although Denny Lien works in a library and can access the bibliographic knowledge of the entire world in order to answer a one-line query.

Timebinders is an addiction: either I keep up or drop out. Lots of valuable correspondents have dropped out; 100 messages a day is just too daunting. I'll stay for the time being.

'THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD I WILL NOT SEE':

THE GEORGE TURNER MEMORIAL LECTURE 1998

**Delivered by Bruce Gillespie on Friday, 4 September 1998
at the Melbourne Science Fiction Club,
74 Melville Road, West Brunswick, Victoria.**

Introduction:
If it were not for the inconvenient fact that I went to his funeral, I would say that George is still alive and controlling my life.

Bev Hope, who is arranging the discussion program for the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, told me some time ago about a planned series of George Turner Memorial Lectures, to be held once a year at a Friday night meeting of the Club. The first lecture would be given by Dr Richard Slaughter, who runs a Futures Program at Melbourne University, and with whom George Turner kept in contact during the last few years of his life. George gave a few talks to the Futures Program, and his *The Sea and Summer* was its central text.

I was looking forward to Slaughter's talk, although because of problems of reaching the Clubrooms by public transport I don't usually attend meetings. On Friday, 28 August, Bev told me that Slaughter was overseas, and could I give the George Turner Memorial Lecture the following Friday?

My first instinct was to wing it — spend half an hour or so nattering about George and his influence on my life. It wouldn't be hard. But . . . I am not a public speaker by inclination or ability. I've made an embarrassing mess of good material on several occasions because I've relied on notes instead of writing out a lecture properly. Bev particularly wanted me to talk about the connection between George and futurology. Two days before the Lecture I sat down at the keyboard, and two hours later I had 3000 words sitting on disk. I find it easier to write about George than any other topic. On Friday, 4 September, I gave the lecture, to an audience of about thirty kind souls. Here it is:

During the last twenty years of his life George Turner developed an increasingly urgent interest in the actual future of humanity, in what will happen to the world during the early years of next century — that is, during the years he knew he would not live to see. George said it best in the following two paragraphs of one of his most important books, *In the Heart or in the Head*, published in 1984:

> Do I really care that this science fiction, which I find myself damning heartily for its shortcomings, could play a useful role in the society it feeds with dreams? It is after all, only one possibility among many, and at sixty-seven [George's age when he wrote these words] I can be fairly certain of escaping the force of the coming storm. Why should I care?
>
> With or without reason I do care for the future, enough to be frightened for it. After an egocentric, selfish lifetime I find, to my surprise, that I care very much what may be the shape of the world I will not see.

You would expect that a writer of science fiction would be concerned with the future, which is, after all, the subject matter of the field. Indeed, more than any other SF writer George regarded science fiction as a realistic literature that happened to be set in the future. But it took him a long time to face up to the future and become interested in it for its own sake.

In coming years it might be difficult to remind SF critics, readers and writers of the enormous influence that George Turner has had on the growth of Australian science fiction since 1966. A short man, he stood ramrod straight, and smiled little. Until a few years before his death, he had a booming voice that dominated an audience. His manner in public reminded me of an Old Testament prophet. His wide-ranging pronouncements stirred audiences to something like discomfort, but George was never as disliked as he claimed he wanted to be. His aim was always to make people think for themselves and examine their own assumptions.

When George Turner met John Bangsund, he was a well-known literary writer in Australia, and had won a Miles Franklin Award for *The Cupboard Under the Stairs*. Although he had been reading science fiction all his life, and had even published a reader's letter in an American magazine in 1932, he had never written science fiction or about it. However, he must have talked about the subject with Bob Sessions, his publisher at Cassell, for in 1966 Sessions introduced him to John Bangsund, the editor of *Australian Science Fiction Review*. The friendship was immediate and productive. George had hidden his interest in science fiction, knowing well how Australian literary people scorned even the mention of it. A fundamentally lonely man, he found through *ASFR* an appreciative audience for ideas he had been developing throughout his life.

George's first essay for *ASFR*, ostensibly a hatchet job on Alfred Bester's *The Demolished Man*, was a clarion call to science fiction writers to lift their game and become the sort of writers they were always claiming to be. George never changed his tune, although he rang variations on it.

During the 1960s George's most elaborate expression of his thoughts was the long essay called 'On Writing About Science Fiction' (*ASFR* 18, December 1968). His argument was that science fiction itself could never improve until the reviewing and criticism of it improved. When *Australian Science Fiction Review* began in July 1966, SF criticism was at a pretty low ebb. The only reviews available were the plodding pieces in the SF magazines — usually little more than descriptions of the plots of new books. Only Algis Budrys in *Galaxy* wrote well, but his approach smacked of the same breathless boosterism that George was to make fun of throughout his reviewing years. My own reaction to the first few issues of *ASFR*, long before George appeared on the

scene, was: 'So there *are* intelligent people who write about science fiction.'

The other problem of the period was that there was no professional reviewing outside the SF magazines. To read intelligent reviews you had to track down the serious fanzines. Except in *ASFR* and a few overseas fanzines, such as *Warhoon*, *Lighthouse* and *Zenith*, the standard of the reviews in fanzines was very low.

George Turner set out to put everybody right. His most unnerving aspect of George, after all, was his belief in the correctness of his own point of view and his unwillingness to yield points to anyone. This he saw as the only way to generate ideas in the field.

I've always found it hard to sum up George's actual approach to science fiction. On the one hand he would say, over and over, that there should be no double standard in science fiction: that any short story or novel in the field should be judged on exactly the same basis as any other piece of literature. Here George stood on firmer ground than his opponents, because since the 1930s George had read everything: general literature, thrillers, mysteries, science fiction and a wide range of non-fiction. He read every important novel that was released in Australia, and continued to do so until his death.

On the other hand, George was always far more convincing when he was writing about individual works than he was when delivering general statements about the whole SF field. He looked very carefully at what a writer was trying to do *and* how well it was done. He disliked fantasy, but if he had to review a fantasy novel, he would not dismiss it out of hand. He would assume that the writer had a serious intention until the book proved otherwise, and would try to show how well or poorly that author accomplished his or her aims. He was more vehement about science fiction books, because he expected the author to have thought seriously about the ideas that formed the basis of the book.

So there was always a conflict between what George said he was looking for in an SF book and what he actually found there. He did expect other reviewers to be aware of these distinctions, and to practise their own craft as best they could. Which is what he wrote about in the essay 'On Writing About Science Fiction'. (Thanks to the generosity of Bill Wright, this issue can be found in the Wright Collection of the Melbourne Science Fiction Club.) When the essay appeared, Harry Warner Jr, still a constant letter writer to *Ethel the Aardvark* and many other fanzines, said that it should be reprinted every year.

Many of us tried to persuade George to allow such a reprint. I asked him quite a few times, without success. He said that his thinking had moved on from there, but in fact he stuck to its tenets in all his own reviewing.

In answer to my requests, he eventually wrote a revised, much longer version for the Melbourne University SF Association's magazine *Yggdrasil*, which I was typing at the time. Titled rather awkwardly 'And Finally, Not Taking It All Too Seriously', it appeared in episodes during 1977 and 1978. It was overlong, added little to the ideas of the original, and didn't have the punch that readers had come to expect from George's criticism. George had begun to write his own science fiction novels, beginning with *Beloved Son*, and was getting sick of reviewing and criticism. He abandoned the long version eventually, and it has never been reprinted.

But I did keep pestering George to reprint 'On Writing About Science Fiction'. In the early 1980s this prompted him to try something far more ambitious, which became the book-length *In the Heart or in the Head*, a strange mixture of genres which George subtitled 'An Essay in Time Travel'. Every chapter of autobiography alternates with a chapter of the history of science fiction. Connecting the chapters is George's assumption that what you read is essential to the shape your life takes. After all, he had begun reading science fiction very early in his life. A major theme of *In the Heart or in the Head* is George's extreme isolation from other human beings at various periods of his life, which conflicted with his lifetime ambition to become a writer. The need to make a connection between one's reading and the events of ordinary life is something that raises difficulties for people who are interested in science fiction. Is this stuff we read an escape from what is laughingly called 'real life', or is it somehow a much grander, truer shape of life itself?

Somewhat to his own surprise, after he had finished *In the Heart or in the Head*, George found himself writing a new long last chapter. In this chapter, called 'For Those in Peril . . .', he found himself working away at ideas he had not tackled before. That's the chapter from which I quoted at the beginning of this talk.

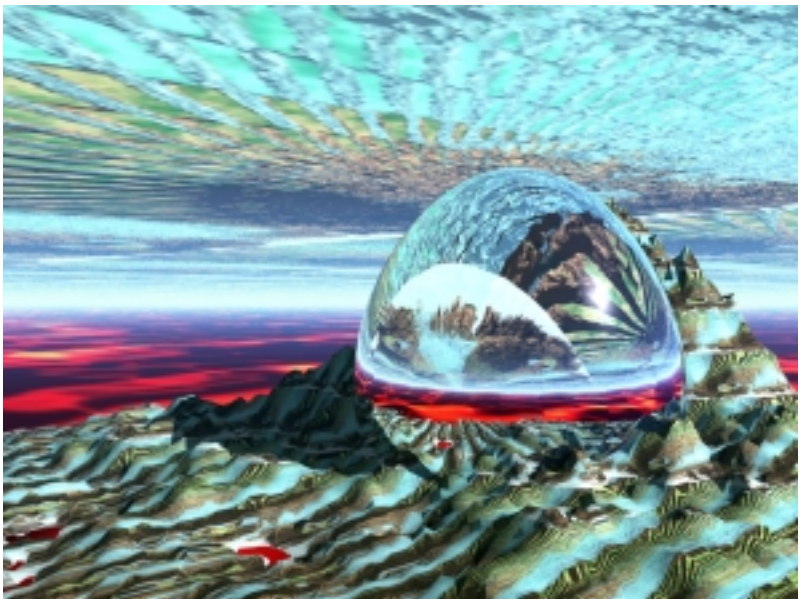
His thoughts began with a stray comment in 1983 by newly elected Prime Minister Robert Hawke:

> On the night of 20 May 1983 I heard Prime Minister Robert Hawke speak of the future of employment and recommend that people seek new ways of applying their abilities and energies; he mentioned, specifically, cottage industries, with something of the air of a man grateful for any suggestion to throw into a yawning gap. Then I knew that science fiction had hit our Prime Minister squarely between the eyes, whether he reads it or not, because he was thinking like a science fiction writer taking a worried sight on the dangerous, amorphous future and at first finding only the obvious.

It is sobering to realise that fifteen years later much of the political rhetoric about employment and industry is still the sort of growth-equals-jobs talk that Hawke was trying to update, however temporarily, in 1983. The shape of the future has become much more amorphous and dangerous than it was in 1983, but nobody now seems capable of science-fictional thinking about the situation. In *In the Heart or in the Head* George mentions the early 1980s' best guess that by the year 2000 only 3 per cent of us would be employed. Two years short of this target, was the prediction wrong? Are employment figures being sustained artificially, or are processes going on that George could not have guessed at in 1983?

The question George set himself in *In the Heart or in the Head* was: if science fiction writers really thought hard about the future, what would a really good novel about the future be like? Since George believed that such a novel had not been written, he felt it necessary to try writing it.

Most of the last chapter of *In the Heart or in the Head* is devoted to the many ways in which SF writers currently talk about the future, and why these methods are inadequate. He quotes, twice, T. S. Eliot's statement: 'It is not enough to understand what we ought to be, unless we know what we are.' Most SF writers, according to George's accounts, jump ahead to a far future and merely describe it. No matter how simple or complex they make it, they give little idea of how we got from here to there. Worse, they take no responsibility for their ideas, which become merely skeletons on which to hang a tale. In the pages with which I found myself disagreeing vehemently at the time, George makes a strong case for science fiction being preachy, or at least carrying strong



'Mount Egg', graphic by Ditmar.

messages that actually make us think about the future.

George takes a number of SF ideas, throws them up in the air, and watches them come down splat. He shows how inaccurately SF writers predicted the future during the 1940s and 1950s, often because they concentrated on technological problems and technological solutions.

What solutions did SF offer for truly awesome problems, such as nuclear brinkmanship? 'The most common is the simply brazen cop-out,' writes George, 'wherein the story is set so far in the future that the whole matter is by then over and done with, lost in history.' Other SF 'solutions' include a One World State, wiping out regional and cultural enmities. George's first three SF novels, *Beloved Son*, *Vaneglory* and *Yesterday's Men*, were aimed at sinking this idea. The third 'solution' was the non-solution offered in many SF novels of the fifties and sixties: that somehow enough people would survive a nuclear holocaust to begin rebuilding a society. *A Canticle for Leibowitiz*, by Walter Miller Jr, is the most famous example, with Edgar Pangborn's *Davy* a well-written but not completely convincing variation on the theme.

Another SF 'solution' mentioned by George was the 'force field' with which countries could protect themselves against nuclear attack. George called this an approach for 'fantasy buffs with fairy godmothers'. George hated anything in SF that smacked of wish-fulfilment or daydreaming.

George turns to the most urgent problem of the near future: the stripping of the world's resources because of overpopulation and the inability of the world right now to feed its population. Virtually all the solutions offered in SF 'smacked of the jackboots', says George, and indeed the possibilities he offers in his last four novels also depend on heavy-handed political forces. In three of his last four published novels, *The Sea and Summer*, *The Destiny Makers* and *Genetic Soldier*, he gives a lot of thought to the mechanics of the 'cull': a worldwide government-organised deliberate destruction of most of the world's people. In *Genetic Soldier* he carries the idea one step further, and shows how a virus capable of creating a new kind of low-reproductive humanity might be spread throughout the world, reducing its population permanently to a few millions.

George's first attempt to meet his own challenge and write about a tangible near future was the short story 'The Fittest', which appeared in an anthology *Urban Fantasies*, edited by David King and Russell Blackford. It tells of the slow running down of our society as the Greenhouse Effect kicks in and the waters of Port Phillip Bay begin to engulf the low-lying parts of Melbourne. It works because it is told in terms of four characters, is set in the place George knew best, Melbourne, and shows how small increments of change will destroy our current way of life much more effectively than sudden catastrophes.

In turn, George used 'The Fittest' as the seed of a novel called *The Sea and Summer*, which appeared in Britain in 1987. It won the Arthur Clarke Award, and came second in both the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Campbell Memorial Award. Released in America in 1988 and renamed *Drowning Towers*, it began a profitable association between George and Avon Books in New York. During the last decade of his life, George published three more novels, *Brain Child*, *The Destiny Makers* and *Genetic Soldier*, all among his very best work, wrote another novel, *Down There in Darkness*, which will be published posthumously, and began another novel, the first 20,000 words of which will be published in *Dreaming Down Under*, a huge anthology of Australian short fiction edited by Jack Dann and Janeen Webb.

Few writers, let alone SF writers, have their most fruitful years between the ages of seventy and eighty. Everything George had been considering during his whole life comes together in these late novels. He gives an outline of our possible future, which I suspect is far too optimistic. The total meltdown of the world's monetary system, which George places at about 2020, has been averted only narrowly several times during the last few years. The Greenhouse Effect is well underway, although it is still not clear whether this will lead to noticeable increases in sea level. And the dumbing down and unemployment of total populations, shown clearly in *The Sea and Summer*, has begun in earnest.

Yet if George had been merely right, or prophetic, would anybody read his books? His greatest literary talent, which makes him more interesting than virtually all other Australian writers of the last forty years, has always been his ability to tell a good yarn, and this talent is shown at its best in the novels I've just been mentioning. George always said that a good novel is based on 'character in action' — he gives his main characters a strenuous time of it. In form, his novels are usually thrillers or mysteries, and he had little time for

the prettified 'good writing' that is so uninteresting in most Australian literary fiction.

George wrote his best work in his last decade, but much of the impetus for this best work was his rapidly increasing interest in the future as a thing in itself. He wrote for *21C* and newspapers about overpopulation. He spoke to clubs, societies and university groups.

Superficial readers throughout the last thirty years have regarded George as a gloomy writer, but he regarded himself as one of the most optimistic SF writers. That optimism is not based on whistling a happy tune, but his belief (which I've never much shared) that humanity is rational enough to work through the current horrific problems and find workable solutions. These solutions will give little comfort to any particular group in society, because the problems are mind-boggling, but he believed SF writers of talent could help in finding solutions that worked. Let George himself have the last word, again from *In the Heart or in the Head*:

> Science fiction can play a small role [in considering the future] if ever it ceases to regard itself at one extreme as a set of rarefied exercises in philosophy, metaphysics or increasingly tired satire, or at the other, as mindless escapism. A middle course — consideration of change in terms of contemporary preparation and understanding — could direct attention to the realities of cultural evolution and revolution, where at present it peddles only dreams of success or nightmares of destruction.

Seek out George's books wherever they may be found, read them, then start thinking for yourself about the dangerous future that George will never see.

— Bruce Gillespie, 4 September 1998

NORSTRILIA PRESS: THE FANNISH WAY TO PUBLISH

Introduction:

When I mentioned on Timebinders that Norstrilia Press still had for sale Greg Egan's first novel, *An Unusual Angle*, there was some interest (although nobody has actually sent money yet). Richard Newsome asked for a catalogue of Norstrilia Press publications, which seemed a pretty boring document to post for people who are interested in fannish history. Instead of sending a catalogue, I listed each of our publications in terms of the people who contributed to each book, and tried to capture the atmosphere of a time when rank amateurs such as Carey, Rob and me could keep a publishing company solvent for ten years. As Paul Simon wrote: 'A time of innocence, A time of confidences . . . I have a photograph. Preserve your memories.' Let's not overdo the nostalgia — Carey and Rob and I disagreed on most things most of the time — but we still like looking through those NP books sitting on the shelves.

The unheralded heroes of this story are Maggie Gerrand; Jo Handfield, whose husband eventually emptied the garage of all those boxes of books; and Elaine Cochrane, who had to endure Norstrilia Press board meetings in her own living room.

One fateful day in the fateful year of 1975, I said to Carey Handfield that there must be a way to earn the money to produce *SF Commentary* regularly. (Certain patterns repeat themselves constantly in my life.) 'Sure,' said Carey. 'You put together a *Best of SF Commentary*. We'll publish it, and the profits will pay for regular issues of the magazine.'

Since we were both Cordwainer Smith fans, and liked the title *Norstrilian News* (John Foyster's newszine of the early seventies), we wrote to Linebarger's widow, and received permission to call ourselves Norstrilia Press. Irene Pagram, then partner of Lee Harding, designed our logo and the cover of our first book, *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, which was edited by me, based on all the stuff on Dick that had appeared in *SFC* since Issue No. 1, January 1969. Roger Zelazny, who had made Australia's presentation at Torcon in 1973, wrote the Introduction. Carey raised the money to print it by soliciting 'investments' (long-term loans) from all the fans he knew, and found a printer who lived 100 miles away. Only Carey's persistence dragged copies of the book from the printer on the eve of Aussiecon I in August 1975. We printed 1000 copies.

No profits reached the constantly empty coffers of *SF Commentary* until well over ten years later, but Carey had found a hobby, a Mission In Life. He did 90 per cent of the work on Norstrilia Press for the next ten years.

Rob Gerrand joined the partnership six months later, originally because he invested a whole lot of money into the venture. He and Carey changed the direction of our publishing policy from the Shining Vision of Pure Criticism that I had envisioned. I wanted Norstrilia Press to become the next Advent Press, concentrating on critical books derived from *SFC* articles. Instead, Carey announced to me that Lee Harding had offered to put together a book about the Ursula Le Guin Writers Workshop that had been held the week before Aussiecon I. *The Altered I* would feature submission stories, stories written at the workshop, and 'atmosphere articles' about that magical week in the Dandenong Ranges. Again Irene designed the cover. Berkley paid for American reprint rights, immediately enabling us to pay back our most pressing debts and start thinking about a program for publishing new works. (Not that Carey, Rob or I were in any way earning a living from our work on Norstrilia Press, but we could now see a way clear to publishing without going broke after the release of each book.)

In those heady days there were very useful publication grants from the Federal Government's Literature Board. With one of these, we published a book of the next major Writers Workshop in Melbourne, starring George Turner, Christopher Priest and Vonda McIntyre. George edited *The View from the Edge*. More didactic about the art of writing than *The Altered I*, it gives a vivid idea of the workshop method (that is, the Clarion Method adapted for Australian conditions).

Even after three releases, our position was precarious, and Carey always had to put a hand out to some 'investor' or other to keep the program going. However, we felt that we were doing books that would never be looked at by the

mainstream publishers. Only ten years later did we conclude that books that probably won't make money for Murdoch or Pearson probably would never make money for us either.

In the late 1970s we kept going because (a) we succeeded in gaining publishing grants from the Literature Board, which meant we could break even on a book after it had sold 500 copies; and (b) we bought an IBM Electronic Composer (the golfball-type typesetting machine), with which I typeset about twenty books, both for us and for other publishers. This typesetting business gave me a healthy income from 1978 to 1982, and saved a small fortune in costs for NP itself.

Gradually we became more and more ambitious and foolish. In 1970 John Bangsund had been in touch with Keith Antill, whose book, *The Moon in the Ground*, had won The Dame Mary Gilmore Award in manuscript, but had not found a publisher. No Australian mainstream publisher would touch SF at that time. Carey tracked down Antill, bought the manuscript, and that became our next project. Stephen Campbell, whom I had met in Ararat in 1969 when I was publishing the very first issues of *SFC*, did the cover.

We sold enough copies of *Moon in the Ground* to consider publishing another novel. My great dream of publishing SF criticism was politely but firmly squelched. I was always outvoted two to one. NP decided to do Damien Broderick's *The Dreaming Dragons*, which I had read in manuscript before Norstrilia Press came together. It had languished for two years, but when we came back to it, Damien had already sold it to Dave Hartwell's Timescape Books in America. We had to buy rights from Timescape in America, which added $2000 to our upfront costs. However, both the American paperback and our hardback were well reviewed, and we were able to sell Australian paperback rights to Penguin Books. Again, we had snatched poverty from the jaws of bankruptcy. *The Dreaming Dragons* came second in the Campbell Award, was chosen by David Pringle as one of the Top 100 SF Novels Ever, and generally gained us a fair bit of prestige. (It was hardly a bestseller in Australia, which is why we can offer the only edition still in print.)

At about this time Roger Zelazny offered us the only edition, in both hardback and paperback, of his second book of poems, *When Pussywillows Last in the Catyard Bloomed*. Poetry! Had we gone stark mad? If we'd had adequate American distribution, we probably could have sold quite a few copies of this book. In the end, we didn't. Worse, because we were publishing a non-Australian author, *Pussywillows* wasn't eligible for a publishing grant.

Our greatest publishing disaster was, you guessed, a book of SF criticism. At the time Kirpal Singh and Michael Tolley were both teaching in the English Department at Adelaide University. They put together *The Stellar Gauge*, a collection of fine critical essays written by prestigious people. Sladek's essay on Disch was my favourite essay (never reprinted anywhere, although it's one of the best things ever written on Disch), and I had glee in my fingertips as I typeset George Turner's magnificently nasty essay about Fred Pohl's *Gateway*. *The Stellar Gauge* seemed to me then, and still does, a repository of Fabulous Stuff, but . . .

The Stellar Gauge was the third book we did in one year. Usually we did one book a year, then waited for the returns before considering the next project. Broke, we were doing a risky project. We borrowed almost all the costs from a friend of Mike Tolley. She was not a fan; she did expect to be paid back within a reasonable time; and the book failed utterly. I still don't know whether she ever received back all her money. The book failed because there was no definable audience for it in Australia. If we could have clicked into the American college market we might have done quite well. The book had a rotten cover, about which I protested. I was outvoted again. I've always been afraid to ask what Carey did with the umpteen boxes of unsold *Stellar Gauge*s.

Norstrilia Press was the first Australian specialist SF publisher since the downmarket fan presses of the early 1950s. Manuscripts poured in. Almost without exception, they made us flinch. Many of them, rescued from deep desk drawers, were literally stinkers. Phew!

But there were exceptions. One day the mail disgorged the manuscript of a nicely satirical novel, *Lavington Pugh*, by Adelaide writer Jay Bland. He used SF as an enabling device for quite a funny novel about the lunacies of the 1960s. Not a great success, but it didn't lose money and we've never regretted publishing it.

One day we received an astonishing manuscript from a bloke from Western Australia called Greg Egan. The first twenty pages were almost incomprehensible, but they were real writing, chewy and funny and passionate. At length the reader discovers that the main character is a teenager, living in Perth, Western Australia, who has a camera in his head. Day by day he films his life, but he can't retrieve the film to develop it. *An Unusual Angle* is the story of him and the film he can never make. The subject matter is suburban high school life in Australia in the 1970s. That might not sound exciting, but it was, and still is, unique in Australia. All other Australian school stories have been written about impoverished kids in isolated country schools or (Gillespie grits teeth) rich kids in private schools.

As it proceeds, *An Unusual Angle* becomes increasingly zany and funny and vivid. We discovered that Greg had written it when he was seventeen. When we published it, he was still in his early twenties. It received only one major review (Veronica Brady in Van Ikin's *Science Fiction*), didn't sell much, but it put a bomb under Greg Egan. In the next few years he sent us five novels and three books of short stories. They were brilliant but unpublishable. They still have not been published. At the 1985 Worldcon Carey, Lucy and I actually met Greg. He lurked at the edge of the last hours of Aussiecon II, observing fandom in all its glory. Nobody in the SF world has set eyes on him since.

Because of Norstrilia Press's fabulous incapacity for publicity, most Greg Egan fans still do not realise that *An Unusual Angle* ever existed, and do not know that we still have copies for sale. Meanwhile, I'm told that secondhand copies fetch fabulous sums in America.

Our greatest success arose from a commission, not a submitted manuscript. In 1971 I had been worked with Gerald Murnane at the Publications Branch of the Education Department. Although we shared a passionate interest in books, I did not realise that Gerald had been writing a novel for the previous ten years. That first novel, *Tamarisk Row*, appeared in 1973, to considerable acclaim. For some years I typed the manuscripts of his novels, including a large book that would not sell. I suggested detaching one 20,000-word section from it and releasing it as a novella/novel (in a large-print edition). Norstrilia Press published it in 1981 as *The Plains*.

The first cover we put on it was so blindingly awful that the distributor refused to put copies in bookshops. In one week, Carey gained a marginally better cover from an artist friend of his and had 1500 copies of the new cover printed. The ecstatic reviews began to appear before copies were in bookshops.

It's impossible to describe *The Plains*, although I have a go in my entry on it in the Nicholls/Clute *SF Encyclopedia*. I talked about it in a Conference paper that Van Ikin published in *Science Fiction* in 1982. No longer was Norstrilia Press publishing only science fiction; we had waded out into the big wide puddle of Australian Literature, literary establishment style. *The Plains* was nominated for, and came very near to winning *The Age* Book of the Year for 1982. It's our bestseller — the only book of ours to sell more than a thousand copies in hardback. It might now be out of print.

Flush with Murnane success, we did his next book, *Landscape with Landscape*, a series of five linked novellas, including at least two stories that I would call SF. It did not sell nearly as well as *The Plains*, and gained no prizes. Murnane announced that he would be sending his next book to another publisher, but never again sold as many copies in hardback as he did for us.

We weren't good at publicity. Carey wouldn't untighten the purse strings to spend money on advertising, and we didn't know how to get our authors featured on radio (which, more than TV, sells books in Australia). However, Carey's mother Esta, who had been in the PR business, decided to have one last fling to putting us on the map. She organised the launch at the Melbourne Planetarium of David King's collection of SF/fantasy/magic realist stories called *Dreamworks* (1982). (We weren't to know we should have patented the title.) Some very good stories there, including Greg Egan's first published short story, Lucy Sussex's first, and the last piece of Gillespie fiction. We had good reviews; I think we made our money back.

Time was running out for the small publishers. With its funds constantly crimped by both conservative and Labor governments, in the mid 1980s the Australia Council started to move away from funding books of fiction, but at the time were still not doing much non-fiction. In the mid-1980s I met for the first time in many years my English tutor from 1966, Dinny O'Hearn. He remembered me, as he remembered all his former students, and agreed to write a one-page critique/puff for George Turner's *In the Heart or in the Head*, his literary biography. George's book got a grant, John Bangsund edited it (whereas all the other NP books had been edited at the keyboard by me during the process of typesetting), and the book came out. There are lots of copies left in storage. Somehow many boxes of them were left under a house in a western suburb of Melbourne, and have never been seen since. Ask Carey the full story. (Also, I still have a box of *In the Heart* at my place.)

In the Heart or in the Head is, of course, my particular favourite among the books we published. At least half of it a literary essay (a history of SF), it was therefore a return to the world of criticism for Norstrilia Press. It arose from my attempts to get George to do a new version of his 'On Writing About Science Fiction', his famous long essay from 1968. And George's writing credo, contained in *In the Heart*'s last chapter, posed a challenge to himself: what would this ideal SF novel read like? George's answer was *The Sea and Summer* (*Drowning Towers* in USA), his magnum opus, Arthur Clarke Award winner, etc. etc.

And that is the story of Norstrilia Press. It's all about fannish friendships, fabulous Carey Handfield publishing stunts, and our naivety at mistaking the impossible for the possible. We didn't lose any money, but we didn't make much. Eventually we came unstuck because Carey got a new hobby. In 1984 (as I remember) he and Jo got together, and shortly they were thinking about marriage, and kids, and houses, and they had a shed full of unsold Norstrilia Press books. Jo said 'I only married him for his junk', but eventually the junk was disposed of, and Carey distributed a modest profit to the three of us. Between us we still have a few copies for sale of all our books except *Electric Shepherd*. Our prices are $A14.95 for paperbacks plus $A24.95 for hardbacks, plus postage. Try us for a good deal. I don't know what to charge for *An Unusual Angle* now. Anybody know the current secondhand price?

Norstrilia Press stopped publishing because (a) Carey gained new interests in life: wife, kids and household; (b) Gerald Murnane did not offer us the novel that followed *Landscape with Landscape*; and (c) our next project, a book of SF stories set in Australia, to be edited by Harlan Ellison and Terry Dowling, was scuppered by exactly the same factors that have stopped *The Last Dangerous Visions*. Ellison made all the noise; Terry was left out of pocket; in the end Carey, Rob and I couldn't care less. Each of us had livings to make and other fish to fry. A few years later, Carey declared a dividend, which helped to pay my pressing debts of the time, but there was never that silver tinkle of cash to push *SF Commentary* back into regular publication. Instead I began publishing *The Metaphysical Review*. Most people have forgotten what we did (although other people, such as Jonathan Strahan, have chosen to misrepresent everything we attempted to do), and in the end our main 'rival', Cory & Collins, made no more money than we did. Australian SF stalled for a few years until the mainstream publishers began to take it up; once the big birds moved in, the boom really began.

Footnote: Why there may never be a Second Edition of Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd

The centrepiece of *Philip K. Dick: Electric Shepherd*, Norstrilia Press's only book to sell out, is Stanislaw Lem's essay 'SF: A Hopeless Case, with Exceptions'. The exception, of course, was Philip K. Dick, who repaid the compliment by coming to regard Lem as his deadly enemy. It's not worth doing a second edition of *Electric Shepherd* without including that essay (plus George Turner's long article of comment on it), but meanwhile Stanislaw Lem has turned on Franz Rottensteiner, his main English-language publicist for nearly thirty years, believing that Franz had turned on him. Meanwhile, I'll reprint Famous Phil Dick Essays from *SFC* here if anybody has anything she or he particularly wants to see in a hurry.

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

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

** Books highly recommended.

* Books recommended.

ℌ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** **MINOR ARCANA by Diana Wynne Jones**
(Vista 0-575-60191-4; 1996; 287 pp.)
After nine months of reading the entries for the Young Adults category of Australia's Aurealis Awards (see next page), I've begun to wish I could find a trace of Diana Wynne Jones's brilliance in the books I've looked at. I feel vaguely ashamed that I have not yet read all the other Wynne Jones books I have on the shelves. *Minor Arcana* contains a number of short stories, including the quicksilver hilarious 'The Sage of Theare' and the passionate 'The Girl Who Loved the Sun'. One of the best pieces of fiction I've read this year is the novella 'The True State of Affairs', which seems to consist only of the thoughts and observations of a girl (hints that she is a time traveller arrested by troops of this alternate, vaguely Renaissance Britain because she has been mistaken for a princess on the run) who is locked in a cell and can observe nothing but her jailers and the other prisoner (male, obviously Someone Important) who paces incommunicado in a nearby courtyard. Wynne Jones fills this arid space with the wonderful voice of her main character and the strength of her storytelling.

** **PICNIC ON PARADISE by Joanna Russ**
(Ace 020-08072-060; 1968; 157 pp.)
Whenever somebody asks me what I'm reading lately, I say that I'm either reading a Young Adults book or a Joanna Russ. I won't say much about the Russ books here, since I'm supposed to be delivering a talk about them to the Nova Mob in November. Russ is very unclear about the initial setup for this story. I can't work out why this small group of terrestrial travellers is hiking over dangerous countryside on an alien planet, except that it has something to do with some kind of war in which they've become trapped. Startling is the voice of Russ's famous hero Alyx, hired as a guide but finding herself dragged into the role of nursemaid to a vaguely upper middle class types who have few survival skills.

** **THE ADVENTURES OF ALYX by Joanna Russ**
(Timescape 0-671-45900-7; 1983; 192 pp.)
Joanna Russ is good at puzzling me. The 'Alyx' of each of these stories has the same voice and personality of the 'Alyx' of *Picnic on Paradise* (which is reprinted in this book), but the rest of her background falls into the spaces between the stories. We guess that she was born in Phoenician times ('The Barbarian'), was picked up by the far-future Time Patrol ('I Thought She Was Afeerd . . .'), and is trained to travel between time zones ('The Second Inquisition') and planets (*Picnic on Paradise*). But whereas she is described as a feisty *small* person in four of the stories in this volume, in 'The Second Inquisition', that classic time traveller story, she is shown as very tall and seemingly awkward. Which makes me think that this story should be part of the *Extra (Ordinary) People* series, and that the unnamed main character is not Alyx. But surely Joanna Russ assembled this volume and knows which of her characters is which? The quality of the writing varies greatly, from a nervous, rather high-pitched yabbering ('I Thought She Was Afeerd . . .') to deeply felt, intense story-telling ('The Second Inquisition'). At least the reader can never take her for granted.

** **THE FEMALE MAN by Joanna Russ**
(Bantam 553- 08765-125; 1975; 214 pp.)
I've read so much vague crap or well-meant explicating about this book that I'll save my comments for November. If you've never read it, hear ye! hear ye! *The Female Man* is a fiercely funny and wildly surrealistic comedy about four characters in search of a time zone of their own. This novel shows the best of New Wave SF style: take nothing for granted, ride the English language like a roller coaster, and let the reader enjoy the ride or fall off behind. A reminder that SF was exciting stuff for about seven years (1968–1975).

** **CHILDREN OF GOD by Mary Doria Russell**
(Villard 0-679-45635-X; 1998; 438 pp.)
Since I'm just a bit behind in reading Acnestis mailings, I haven't read the three million words that must have been written already about *Children of God*. It doesn't have the formal shapeliness of *The Sparrow*, and after about the halfway mark it is not based primarily on revelation of character, which is the basis of the success of the *The Sparrow*. But it does weave together a number of mighty themes; the set pieces are visually splendid; and it shows that this two-novels-that-are- really-one is as much about music and science as it is about religion.

** **THE HIDDEN SIDE OF THE MOON by Joanna Russ**
(St Martin's Press 0-312-02219-0; 1987; 229 pp.)
Here's Joanna, ace writer, all claws shining and literary muscles rippling. Here's the writer who should turn up in every year's *Best American Short Stories*, but doesn't, probably because she chooses to publish her stories in magazines with titles such as *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Much less experimental than the novels, her short stories are filled with sharply observed conversations, memorable scenery, and unexpected shifts of perspective. Every word is picked carefully, every nuance caresses the consciousness. A wide variety of styles and approaches includes conventional SF stories such as 'Elf Hill' and 'Nor Custom Stale', based on startling SF ideas, dreamlike fables such as 'How Dorothy Kept Away the Spring' and, best of all, realistic, dagger-thrust-into-author's-heart revelations such as 'The Dirty Little Girl' (a key story in understanding all of Russ's work) and 'The View from this Window'. At her worst, Russ runs off at the typewriter, barely containing her fury at having to stick within the limitations of fiction.

** **WE WHO ARE ABOUT TO . . . by Joanna Russ**
(Dell 0-440-19428-8; 1975/1977; 170 pp.)
A few weeks before I read this book, I witnessed a rather silly discussion about it on Timebinders. This

novel was judged to be boring because all it related was the story of people who were waiting to die. Um. We know *that* after reading the first three pages. An interstellar ship explodes before the crew can send a beacon; the survivors plus a minimum of equipment and food supplies land on an Earthlike planet; they can drink the water but the planet contains nothing they can eat. What is the best way to die? Most of the characters pretend that they won't, and try to set up a small community that repeats all the authoritarian aspects of the various societies that produced them. Not so the story-teller, seemingly another incarnation of Alyx (although that is not her name). She wants to die in isolation, in the least humiliating way possible, and she'll fight anyone who stops her. The book is a vivid mixture of a kill-or-be-killed yarn, stray memories of home and thoughts about the value of life itself, and effective scene-setting: the planet, barren yet seemingly alive, becomes one of the main characters.

** **THE EIGHTH STAGE OF FANDOM by Robert Bloch (Wildside Press; 1991/1962; 208 pp.)**

This is a 1991 reprint of Bloch's book of fanzine articles originally published by Advent in 1962. His pieces from the late 1940s and the 1950s are models of fannish writing: amusing and filled with puns, but also filled with affection for that small band of happy rogues who made up fandom during the fifties. Harry Warner Jr told us all the facts in his account of the period, but it's left to Bloch to pour out the true spirit of fandom (especially in the inspiring 'A Way of Life') and draw sketches of the personages of the period (Willis perhaps captured better than Tucker, although the whole book can be seen as an *hommage* to Bob Tucker). Short essays about the advent of the beatniks, the death of pulp magazine SF, the rise of the influence of TV, and the first boom in filmed SF (twenty years before 'media fandom') let us step back into the fifties more effectively than a perusing a book of *Life* photos. Bloch's convention reports show us how far convention-going has deteriorated since the early fifties. Unexpectedly, Bloch ends with a tribute to James Joyce and two poems based on Lewis Carroll. 'Jabberwocky for Fandom' and 'A Non-Lewis Carroll' should be reprinted often. But so should most of these articles. No trace here of Robert Bloch the unutterably boring horror writer or Robert Bloch the fairly boring fantasy and SF writer. Here is the work of a master, and should be read by anybody who tries to write well for fanzines. (Thanks to Alan Stewart for lending it to me.)

** **THE ZANZIBAR CAT by Joanna Russ (Arkham House 0-87054-097-1; 1983; 244 pp.)**

Repeat everything I said about *The Hidden Side of the Moon*, only more so. This book shows that Joanna Russ is one of America's greatest modern short story writers. I'm tempted to restrict my Nova Mob ramblings to her short stories. Four-star items are 'The Extraordinary Voyages of Amélie Bertrand', 'The Soul of a Servant', 'Gleepsite', 'My Dear Emily', 'The New Men' — two great vampire stories placed side by side — 'My Boat', 'Corruption', 'There Is Another Shore, You Know, Upon the Other Side', 'A Game of Vlet', 'How Dorothy Kept Away the Spring' (a repeat from *Hidden Side*), and 'Poor Man, Beggar Man'.

And now for some novels and novellas that I can't talk about, or even rate. They are contenders for the Young Adults section of this year's Aurealis Award. I'll list them now, and talk about them after the awards are announced next year.

SWEETWATER NIGHT by Alison Stewart (Hodder Signature 0-7336-0570-2; 1998; 170 pp.)

KILLING DARCY by Melissa Lucashenko (University of Queensland Press 0-7022-3041-3; 1998; 230 pp.)

COLD IRON by Sophie Masson (Hodder 0-7336-0583-4; 1998; 185 pp.)

THE LYREBIRD'S TAIL by Sue Robinson (Lothian 0-85091-883-9; 1998; 158 pp.)

THE GODDESS: AFTER DARK 25 by Robin Klein and Anne Sudvilas (Lothian 0-85091-894-4; 1998; 48 pp.)

THE CARNIVAL VIRUS: AFTER DARK 26 by Sue Robinson and Peter Gouldthorpe (Lothian 0-85091-900-2; 1998; 48 pp.)

FANTASTIC WORLDS edited by Paul Collins (HarperCollins Moonstone 0-7322-5878-2; 1998; 316 pp.)

THE PLAYGROUND: AFTER DARK 28 by Shaun Tan (Lothian 0-85091-898-7; 1998; 48 pp.)

THE GHOST OF DEADMAN'S BEACH: AFTER DARK 27 by Venera Armanno and Dominique Falla (Lothian 0-85091-897-9; 1998; 48 pp.)

A DARK WINTER: THE TENEBRAN TRILOGY, BOOK ONE by Dave Luckett (Omnibus 1-86291-368-4; 1998; 328 pp.)

PIGGY IN THE MIDDLE by Catherine Jinks (Penguin 0-14-038586-X; 1998; 238 pp.)

RED CITY by Sophie Masson (Moonstone 0-7322-5916-9; 1998; 200 pp.)

VIBES: JIGSAW by Christine Harris (Hodder 0-7336-0884-1; 1998; 136 pp.)

VIBES: SHADOWS by Christine Harris (Hodder 0-7336-0885-X; 1998; 138 pp.)

VIBES: MASKS by Christine Harris (Hodder 0-7336-0886-8; 1998; 136 pp.)

FERAL by Kerry Greenwood (Hodder 0-7336-0888-4; 1998; 220 pp.)

VIBES: SUSPICION by Christine Harris (Hodder 0-7336-0887-6; 1998; 138 pp.)

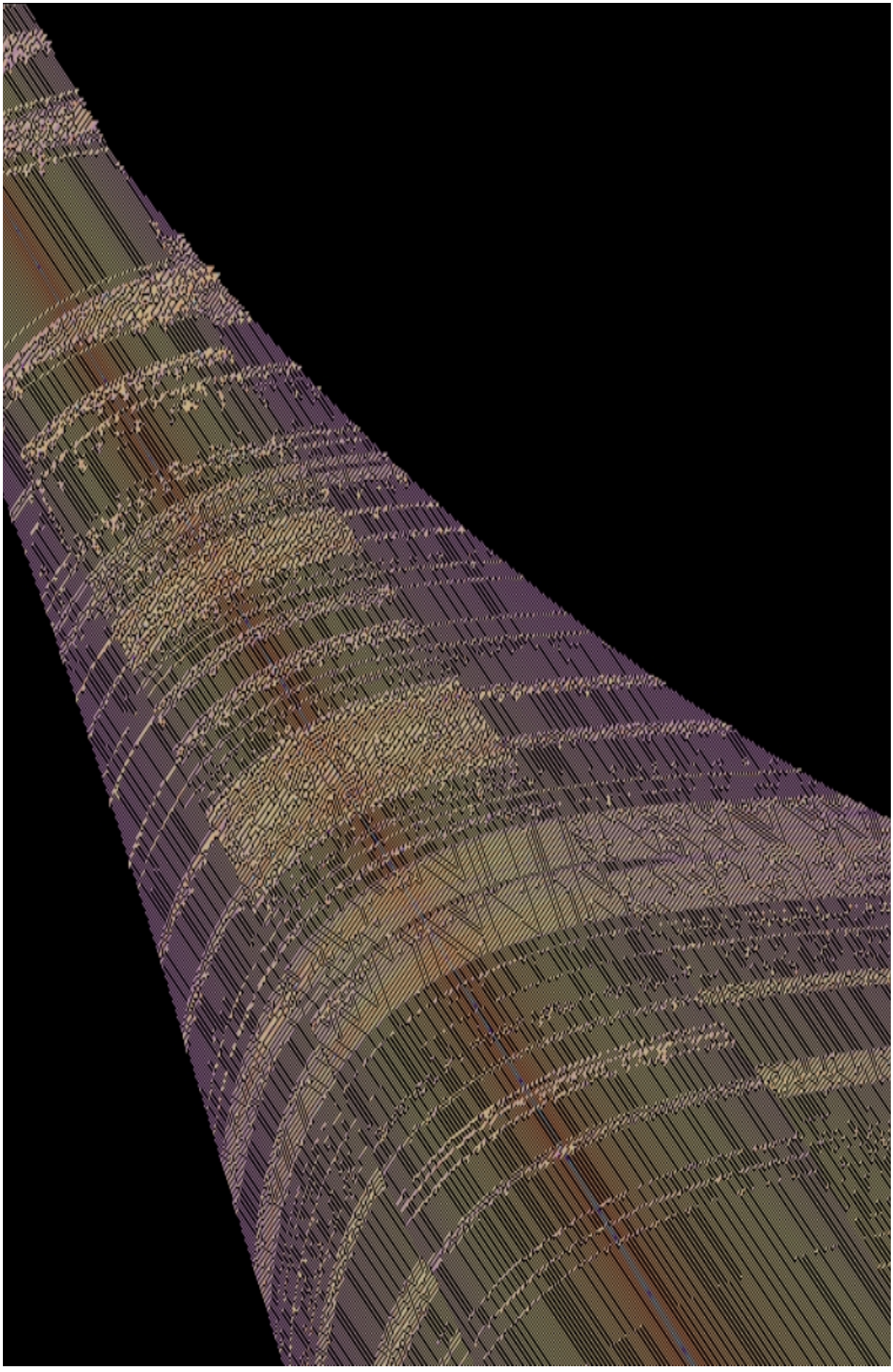
THE HOUSE OF MANY ROOMS (THE DOORWAYS TRILOGY, BOOK ONE) by Michael Pryor (Hodder 0-7336-0926-0; 1998; 222 pp.)

SINGING THE DOGSTAR BLUES by Alison Goodman (HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5967-3; 1998; 200 pp.)

HORSEHEAD BOY by Rory Barnes (Angus & Robertson 0-207-19663-X; 1998; 170 pp.)

TRANSLATIONS IN CELADON by Sally Odgers (HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5908-8; 1998; 269 pp.)

— Bruce Gillespie, 8 September 1998



'Tunnel to the Stars': Elaine Cochrane, using DJFractals.