

K. V. Bailey:
XANADU AND
YGGDRASIL



Scratch Pad 34

Based on the non-Mailing Comments section of *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life*, 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 August 1999 issue of *Acnestis*. Cover and all other illustrations: Ditmar (see below.)

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This article appeared first in *Shipyards Blues*, Spring 1990. Ken asked me to reprint it in *SF Commentary* or *The Metaphysical Review*, with illustrations by Ditmar (Dick Jessen). Ditmar rose to the challenge, providing a cover illustration plus theme and variations. BRG failed to meet the challenge, conspicuously failing to produce recent issues of *SFC* or *TMR*. Both author and artist deserve better, so here is the first public showing of:

Xanadu and Yggdrasil

by K. V. Bailey

'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure dome decree.' The dome, surmounter and summit of palaces, cathedrals and mosques, is also now firmly with us as a pleasure-encloser. In fact, the whole of Coleridge's Xanadu 'architecture', sunny dome and caves of ice merging into one cavernous ambience, is capable of translation into recognisable, if less romantic, contemporary equivalents. Alph, sacred river of the Xanadu caverns, tumbles now through flumes and water-chutes. The dome's inner curvature is screen for the simulated galaxies of planetaria; or in Disney World will embrace the approaching surface of Mars.

In geodesic form the dome encourages an infinite variety of purposes. Such a dome I discovered some time ago in a park in Vancouver. It almost envelops the biosphere. Maze-like paths at changing levels thread its interior, where sections are so conditioned as to create mini-climates, so that you can go from rainforest to subtropic to desert in a twinkling of the feet, while birds of those ecologies flutter around your head. At its outer rim, in morphological contrast, rises a group of Henry Moore perpendicular abstracts. Their orientation, twisting upwards and skywards, is a late modern-

ist manifestation of the tensions and dynamics of Gothic form — of the soaring arch, the pinnacle and spire, which Oswald Spengler saw as having affinity with the northern forests, and with such symbols as the World-Ash, Yggdrasil, archetypal Cosmic Tree in axial tension between heaven and earth.

Such contrasts direct the imagination back towards origins and on towards the future. There is a striking description in Suzy McKee Charnas's novel *Motherlines* of the terrain of her Amazonian 'Riding Women', the outer 'Grasslands' that stretch beyond the bounds of a male-dominated dystopia. These lands appear as 'a great disc of earth revolving endlessly under the great disc of sky and season'. The Women's dim, curving-roofed tents match the terrain and, as seasons change, are moved around it by the semi-nomadic Women. The tents provide a protective cavernish space shielding them from climatic extremes.

Ms Charnas models her 'Grasslands' on the wide steppes, plains and deserts of our planet, bringing elements of the ways of life of their historic hordes and tribes to enter into the pattern of 'Grasslands' existence. And it is out of such historic environmental ecologies



that the architecture of what Spengler termed then 'Magian' or 'Arabian' culture (and Toynbee, more or less equivalently, the 'Syriac') first arose: an architecture preeminently of the dome, a form which, it has been said, 'excludes all tension between heaven and earth'.

High-arching, high-aspiring Gothic is the grand style of the West, but the dome too has its place in European architecture. Such great domed High Renaissance churches as St Peter's in Rome and St Paul's in London owe their domes in part to a heritage originating in Magian, or Syriac, and ancient Classical (Roman) minglings. One of Wren's inspirations for St Paul's was St Peter's; and one of Michelangelo's inspirations for St Peter's was the vast dome of the Emperor Hadrian's Pantheon, which in its turn embodied an Eastern influence — in fact, Spengler called it 'the earliest of all Mosques'. This Eastern (Syriac) 'dormal' form, while going on to manifest itself classically in such buildings as the Dome of the Rock at Jerusalem and the Great Mosque of Damascus, was to make its impress on Byzantine-Greek, Byzantine-Venetian, or Russian and, by various transmissions, on Romanesque, Gothic and Classical Western church architecture.

To stand beneath a great dome is to experience something of what is meant by that phrase 'exclud(ing) all tension'. There is a hint of it in the opening chapter of Gwyneth Jones's novel *Kyros*, where her fraught and bedraggled 'heroine', Sandy Brize, comes into St Paul's out of the 'bitter city air' to be 'swallowed up in the deep, shadowy, whispering immensity' of 'a vast fluted shell'. It isn't quite the same feeling as that which you get in the interior of a purely Gothic cathedral, where vision and spirit soar and fall again, impelled by the dynamics of column, shaft and vault, exhilarated by their interrelationships within the overall cruciform structure. Tensions are in a Gothic nave of the essence; and light is the medium through which the tensions are resolved. Nowhere is this more felt than at Chartres, where there appears to be a virtual transfiguration of space into light — light chromatically filtered through windows which themselves as structural components seem to defy or negate both matter and gravity.

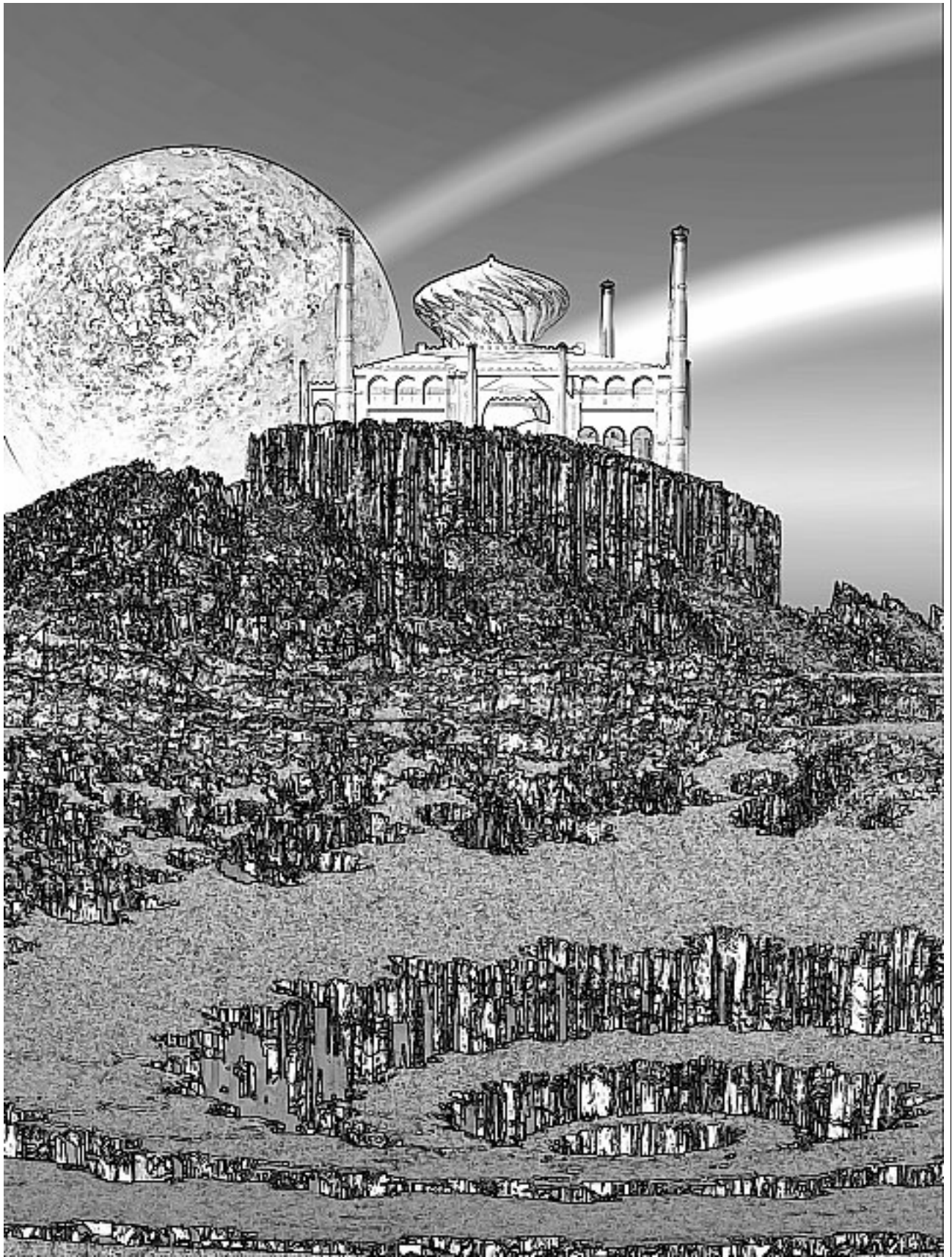
There is one especial spot where the two experiences — of soaring arches and enclosing cupola — are convergent. The Octagon at Ely was built by Alan of Walsingham early in the fourteenth century after the cathedral's central Norman tower had collapsed. It is a



miraculous structure, once described as ‘the only Gothic dome in existence’. Its width is that of the entire building; its lower octagonally sprung oak vaulting is surmounted by an eight-sided Lantern, flooded with light from thirty-two high set windows, and arched over by an airily soaring eight-cornered vaulted roof centred by a Christ-adorned boss. All the tensions of the Gothic are displayed, and are resolved by light. At the same time the Lantern conveys the enclosing and containing peace of a dome.

A modern church in which a semi-dome is surmounted by a high Lantern is the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King at Liverpool. It has been unkindly described as a cross between a power station and a circus tent — unkindly, but significantly, for in it are combined technologies of the twentieth century with a suggestion of the form of that very structure with which these speculations began — the tent. The building’s curving span, greater even than that of Saint Sophia, largely shuts out, as would a tent, the outer world, while letting fall universal light through its tall Lantern windows, in a filtering of red, yellow and blue, on to the centrally placed white altar.

Having travelled a great distance from Disney World and pleasure domes, I have now come partly back, by way of the circus tent analogy. Architecture today is nothing if not eclectic — and there is Yggdrasil again to be considered. Crowning pinnacles fretting the skylines of San Francisco and New York are as ambitiously heaven-piercing as the tallest forest giants, or as were the medieval spires of Strasbourg and Salisbury. It is, however, the dome, as a form interiorly excluding tensions, which could play the more significant role as we move through years when such therapy may be welcome. Or perhaps the two forms together will appropriately accompany our passage through them. At points in this century those two forms — tower/spire and dome — have sprung up, maybe fortuitously, yet suggestively enough, in mutual proximity: as did the Skylon and the Dome of Discovery at the Festival of Britain. (What a shame that those two splendid structures went from the South Bank. Brussels, wisely, kept its Atomium, and Paris its Eiffel Tower — which looks across but a short distance to the Dome of Les Invalides.) An unplanned near-juxtaposition is that of the Planetarium and the Post



Office Tower in London; and there is a historically interesting nineteenth-century pairing in the dome of the Royal Albert Hall and the Gothic Albert Memorial. Three hundred feet above the Liverpool waterfront the tower-top Liver Bird symbolically stretches its wings, while it actually stands on a crowning dome and is flanked by a host of small cupolas.

The imagery of science fiction has always found place for both forms, investing them with its own varieties of symbolism. Mistaken interpretation of an illustration showing a spaceport field full of towering rockets (he took them for a clustering of skyscrapers) gave James Blish, it is said, the inspiration for his cosmos-voyaging, spindizzy-propelled, enclosed cities.

Asimov in *The Caves of Steel* rang the changes in both images. Although his future City (New York) is roofed over, it is composed of blank-walled towers. To live ant-like in them, and to travel the network of moving ways between them, are shown to be stressful experiences. (Emsch classically illustrated the scene on the cover of the October 1953 issue of *Galaxy*.) The Spacers, on the other hand, paradoxically those who could face happily the open skies and whose ships ascended into them, live not in towers but in separately spaced and spacious family domes, eat natural food, contact freely the out-of-doors, and are a comparatively 'Green' culture.

Among SF cinematic images the Kubrick/Clarke obelisk stands anomalously within a lunar cavern; and at the end of *2001: A Space Odyssey* it appears as stimulus, or catalyst, effecting a peaceful transition from death chamber to encircling womb (both dome-like shapes). In fiction, film and folk faith, the dome-shaped UFO (complemented by mother ship) has often enfolded a tension-resolving interior — as it does in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where its phallic and tension-arousing complement is the Devil's Tower. In the film *Silent Running*, the hydroponic dome is the ultimate in depicting an 'Eden' closed against outer threat.

A more recent example of the 'hardish' SF novel is Gregory Benford's and David Brin's *Heart of the Comet*. There hydroponic domes rise on the surface of, and cavernous 'Edens' lie at the core of the dynamically

starward-bound 'column' of Halley. Le Grand Cavern, with its microgravity, is the central vault 'where various experiments sorted themselves out and where startling new solutions appeared'. The hydroponic domes are described in terms beautifully expressive of a tensionless calm: 'She liked the way the silvered inner surface of the dome reflected a warped surreal vision of Carl immersed in a riot of plant life, as if it were an ocean in which he was afloat.' These domes are remote from the tensions which flow through the labyrinth of passages and the ascending and descending shafts within the Comet's hurtling body. Yet near the Comet's heart are such caverns as 'Stormfield Park', with its planted dwarf-trees and lawns, its cityscape and waterscape holograms, its actual carp-filled pool and willow-shaded glade and teahouse, all reminiscent of the 'walls and towers' and 'gardens bright with sinuous rills' of Xanadu. There, strolling, relaxing and playing games, the Comet's 'captives' enjoy a most peculiar luxury.

These various SF images are, however, chiefly projections of forms which are functionally familiar to us. I finish as I began by stressing the pleasure and leisure-dome aspect of the subject. It has historically existed for long enough. Sidney Smith, the witty Regency reverend, said of Prinny's marvellous folly, the Brighton Pavilion, that it would seem that St Paul's had gone down to the sea and pupped. Looking back again to the Romans, we find not only Syrian 'domal' influence, but architects and craftsmen from western Asia actually employed in constructing the domed Calidarium of that great centre of sophisticated leisure and pleasure, the Baths of Caracalla. Variations on the dome, in fiction and in fact, may, today and in the future, as sites of pleasure or of contemplation — park, stadium, planetarium, museum, concert hall or temple — inherit a similar containing and representational role to that intended by Hadrian for his Pantheon — with its statues and altars to the planetary gods, a circularly enveloping microcosmos; while the sky-aspiring tower, like a Canaveral launch reaching ever higher, may contemporarily embody the vertical and vertiginous tensions of the Gothic.

— K. V. Bailey, 1990

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Books read since 1 March 1999

** Books highly recommended.

* Books recommended.

☞ Books about which I have severe doubts.

** **THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE: MY LIFE AS AN ENGLISHMAN** by **Brian Aldiss**
(Little Brown 0-316-64706-3; 1998; 484 pp.)

'Tis mystery all. Brian Aldiss produces the book we've been waiting for for years — his autobiography. No reviews appeared in Australia, since almost no copies reached here. The book has not even been nominated for a Hugo in the Non-fiction category, whereas it is undoubtedly the year's best book about SF — as well as life, laughter and literature. Surely this situation shows that something is a little rotten in the state of SF, as there have been few autobiographies of SF writers, and fewer that are interesting. Only Jack Williamson's *Wonder's Child* comes to mind, and that does not have any of the exuberance or depth of detail that I find in *The Twinkling of an Eye*. I was intrigued to find out how much it would differ from both *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's*, Brian Aldiss's literary memoir from a few years ago, and various memoirs he's published during the last decade. Here he tells both less, and more: less about the worst of his schooldays, but much more about his army days; still not much about his first marriage, which ended in isolation and *Hothouse* and *Greybeard*, but more than perhaps he meant to tell about the unsuspected (by me) dark days of the 1980s, when life seemed sterile and Brian and Margaret's marriage was under threat. Margaret died just after Brian had written the book, which is a hymn of praise to her and both families of children. The overall tone of the book is anything but melancholy. Brian's message is still: what fun it is to be a writer! But here Brian is willing to admit that it hasn't been all fun.

** **ZONES** by **Damien Broderick and Rory Barnes**
(HarperCollins Moonstone 0-7322-5760-3; 1997; 224 pp.)

What if *Zones* had been released during 1998 rather than 1997? Alison Goodman would have been fighting for that first place in the Aurealis Award for Young Adults fiction. This is the best book by Damien Broderick I've read, though I have to consider that Rory Barnes might have been responsible for the clever insights about the lives of teenagers. Jenny receives weird phone calls, from someone who asks her to believe he's calling from the past. While she's deciding whether or not to get involved in time communication, she's trying to survive her parents' separation and the developing relationship between her best friend and the egghead son of her mother's new boyfriend. Lots of humour here, and vivid characters and action. I thought

Zones was going to lose its point at the end. Instead it comes up with some satisfactory time twisting.

** **MISSING THE MIDNIGHT** by **Jane Gardam**
(Abacus 0-349-11017-4; 1997; 181 pp.)

** **GOING INTO A DARK HOUSE** by **Jane Gardam**
(Abacus 0-349-10661-4; 1994; 183 pp.)

I can't describe how good these stories are, or how finely pitched is Jane Gardam's style. She's one of those great authors who leaves out everything but the essentials, then leaves out some of the essentials, or at least enough to make stories intriguing and uncomfortable in their implications. The best story in both volumes is 'Zoo-Zoo' (from *Going into a Dark House*), an anarchic trip with an old nun who meets a lion and much else besides. This story includes some of the best-written paragraphs I've ever read. Gardam is particularly good at ghost stories that are not quite ghost stories, such as 'Old Filth', 'Dead Children' and 'The Meeting House'.

* **FREFLAUGHT** by **Andrew Whitmore**
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6449-9; 1999; 349 pp.)

Andrew Whitmore is the first to admit that *Fre-flaught* is an expansion of *The Fortress of Eternity*, his only previously published novel. Local HarperCollins commissioned this version, but seems to have made little effort to typeset the additional material clearly so that it makes sense. The sections taken from the earlier version still have a sprightly ring to them, while most of the new sections seem unnecessary. *Fre-flaught* has the usual gang of pilgrims travelling across one of those maps you always find at the beginnings of such books towards a mysterious, dark-magical destination. Whitmore doesn't give a stuff for heroics or idealism, and neither do his main characters. Each of them has an unheroic reason for undertaking the 'quest'. I don't know what fans of heroic fantasy would make of these anarchic, even salacious goings-on, but they are entertaining enough for people such as me who never read heroic fantasy.

** **CHOCKY'S COMING HOME** by **Frank Weissenborn and Guy Browning**
(86 Publishing 0-958690-0-5; 1998; 149 pp.)

This is an unusual and attractive attempt at self-publishing. Frank Weissenborn writes the story and Guy Browning takes the photos that are combined into a distinguished little book. *Chocky's Coming Home* traces two interlinked stories from the not-too-far future of a dishevelled, broken-down America. In a deadpan not-quite-Ballardian style, Weissenborn slowly reveals the story of the friendship between the main character and an 'alien boy' who, as the title shows, is based on the Chocky from John Wyndham's early novel. Nothing very surpris-

ing happens, but the book is full of sharp, unexpected insights.

** **THE DRAGON MAN** by Garry Disher

(Allen & Unwin 1-86508-046-2; 1999; 239 pp.)

Garry Disher has temporarily abandoned Wyatt, his tougher-than-tough guy of five novels, in favour of 'the Dragon Man', Hal Challis, the country policeman who is just as laconic and businesslike as Wyatt. He roams the Mornington Peninsula, which Disher knows well, observing carefully, nattering to the locals, and carrying out his duty until a host of small, unrelated crimes interconnect. Disher is Australia's best crime novelist; it's a pity that the rest of the world hasn't discovered him yet.

** **THE ART OF ARROW CUTTING** by Stephen Dedman (Tor 0-312-86320-9; 1997; 285 pp.)

An industry of Aussie-boosting has grown up within Australian science fiction circles, but not many books or stories justify the excitement or put-about sense that 'Australian SF is getting better all the time'. One Australian novel that is totally self-assured is Stephen Dedman's *The Art of Arrow Cutting*, a strange mixture of horror novel and mystery, with much of the feeling of good SF. Its characters hurtle across the American landscape, one of them pursued for a black-magical secret she has stolen in Japan, the other not quite sure why he is helping her, and only slowly realising how dangerous it is to be around her. He's a wanderer; he goes along for the ride. *The Art of Arrow Cutting* has little depth of feeling, but it is a satisfying thriller that depends on the sparse grace and energy of Dedman's prose.

* **DOWN THERE IN DARKNESS** by George Turner (Tor 0-312-86829-4; 1999; 352 pp.)

Paul Kincaid's review of this book in the most recent Acnestis mailing is perhaps the review I might have written if I were not so close to the book and its author. Although I enjoyed it a great deal more in book form than when I read it in manuscript, I can never forget that George Turner did not want to write this book, wrote it on assignment, then was left with it as his only unpublished novel when he died. The bitterness of the experience of writing it spills over into the bitterness of the book itself. Read it for interest, but read *Genetic Soldier* first.

* **THE CENTURION'S EMPIRE** by Sean McMullen (Tor 0-312-86131-6; 1998; 383 pp.)

This novel starts out so promisingly that it's hard to forgive the rather pointless bits of business that occupy its last third. McMullen begins with a promising premise: a group of people from the early years of the Roman republic discover a way to cold-preserve themselves. They disappear from the world for centuries, then wake for short periods, enjoying a limited form of 'immortality'. The first half of the book tells the stories of crises of the group at various times in history, when the leaders must be woken. Unfortunately, McMullen includes little material from 'The Deciad', his award-winning short story from 1985 that was the seed for the novel. When the survivors reach the twenty-first century, McMullen turns the novel into a rather

confusing thriller, full of endless betrayals and surprises. This gives a strange pointlessness to the narrative. A pity, since he would have done better to preserve in the second half the first half's quiet tone of unfolding of historical processes and the main characters' motives.

** **INFINITE CITY: 100 SONNETINAS**

by Alex Skovron

(Five Islands Press 0-86418-576-6; 1999; 103 pp.)

I knew Alex Skovron as a friend and work colleague before I became aware of his status as one of Australia's best-regarded poets. During the last fifteen years he has produced several fine books of poetry. His latest, *Infinite City*, maintains the standard of excellence. Each poem is ten lines long, one verse of six lines plus one of four. Only one poem is eleven lines long. Within this severely limited structure, Skovron covers a fair range of modern experience, from the domestic to the national, from the particular to the sublime. Some poems owe much to the sensibility of Italo Calvino, as the book's title suggests, while others are more like the poems Cheever might have written if he had not been a writer of short stories. There is nothing over-exuberant or flashy here; instead, Skovron gives pleasure from placing every word in exactly the right place.

** **THE SILENT** by Jack Dann

(Bantam 0-553-09716-4; 1998; 286 pp.)

Paul Kincaid has already reviewed *The Silent* in Acnestis. Paul knows a lot about the events of the American Civil War, and I don't. This might explain why I, with no preconceptions, was more impressed than he was. Mundy McDowell tells his own story of the period from when his parents were killed and their farm destroyed during the war until he is rediscovered by relatives after wandering through the Northern Virginia backwoods, usually hungry and often in great danger, for more than a year. Mundy is affected so strongly by the horrors of the book's first pages that he can no longer speak. His quick thinking gets him through a large number of encounters that would have finished off most people. He feels protected by several spirits of the dead, including a ghost dog, as he walks the line that separates death from life. This feeling of being alive and ghostly at the same time gives the book its power. All the detail, related in Mundy's mock-naïve style, is realistic; but the meaning is mysterious. While watching humanity at its worst, Mundy passes beyond humanity. This is the best novel of the year so far.

* **THE MARRIAGE OF STICKS** by Jonathan Carroll (Victor Gollancz 0-575-06615-6; 1999; 282 pp.)

Quite a few Carroll fans hoped that *The Game of Sticks* would be the 'come-back' novel after *Kissing the Beehive*, which many of us must have felt was Carroll's least interesting book. *The Game of Sticks* is certainly much more sinuous and complicated than *Kissing the Beehive*, but a month or two after reading it, I feel that it has made little impact on me. Every other Carroll novel has a razor-bright feeling shining from it, a sense that everything is at

stake but likely to vanish at any moment. In *The Game of Sticks*, the magic circle of events is designed to teach the main character some essential truth about herself, and I don't believe this ever happens. If she had become a changed person, as the end of the book asserts, she could never have written the rest of the narrative in the way she has. Her basic characteristic is her inability to register others' pain, but the book itself also shows that failure of feeling. The truth is that Carroll enjoys writing about his main character as we find her at the beginning of the book; like her, he can't change his temperament because of some Damascus experience. Something is missing in Carroll's writing since *From the Teeth of Angels*, which reads like the last will and testament of a writer about to fall silent. Perhaps, in his heart of hearts, Carroll has done just that.

** **TRACES** by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-649814-0; 1998; 359 pp.)

** **VOYAGE** by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-648037-3; 1996; 595 pp.)

I should have read these books in reverse order, and both of them before reading *Titan*. But *Titan* made me into a fan of Stephen Baxter's work, so now I'm catching up. I'm still not sure why I'm a Baxter fan, since his writing style is threadbare at best, not a lot better than that of Larry Niven, whose work I can't read. But Baxter has much more interesting ideas than Niven; he takes nothing for granted, even while he seems to be the advocate for heroic science. *Voyage* is as absorbing as *The Right Stuff*, which obviously inspired it, but while reading *Voyage* I had the fun of realising that all this detail is both minutely accurate and extravagantly fictional. Even Baxter realises that going to Mars in the eighties would have deprived NASA of many of the projects that have been much more fascinating, such as the Hubble telescope and the Outer Planets Fly-by. The real strength of *Voyage*, however, is the skill with which Baxter writes about his main characters. He slowly lets us get to know these people, without 'doing characterisation', as many 'hard SF' writers do. Therefore when he sets off the book's emotional time bomb in the novel's last line, the placement is just right. The short-story collection *Traces* shows many of the same skills, but only a few of the stories, such as 'Moon Six', have the power of Baxter's best novels. I enjoyed this mixture of standard SF, semi-fantasy, and alternative-worlds stories. Beside 'Moon Six', my favourites were 'No Longer Touch the Earth', 'Mittelwelt' and 'Downstream'.

☞ **CHARLES FORT NEVER MENTIONED WOM-BATS** by Gene DeWeese and Robert Coulson
(Doubleday 0-385-12111-3; 1977; 173 pp.)

I'm glad I wasn't lent this book (thanks, Alan) before Buck Coulson died, as I would have had to say the same thing as I'm saying now: that this is the worst novel I've attempted to read in many years. I had heard that part of the action takes place at

Aussiecon I, Melbourne, 1975. However, the only fannish references occur early in the book, while the main characters travel on the same plane as the Americans who came out to Aussiecon together. This section is not very well done. There's a bit of palaver in Sydney, then the main characters travel to the Australian countryside. Nobody reaches Aussiecon! The action and jokes are unbelievably trivial. Do not under any circumstances read this book.

** **TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, or HOW WE FOUND THE BISHOP'S BIRD STUMP** by Connie Willis (Bantam 0-553-09995-7; 1998; 434 pp.)

You've all read it, so I don't need to talk much about it. Elaine enjoyed it more than I did. I thought it could have been at least 150 pages shorter. I did get very sick of the 'bishop's bird stump' of the title, as well as many other elements that are repeated throughout like incantations. I enjoyed living in this sunny world, and almost worked out the time-travel complexities at the end. But not quite; I fear that the poor reader is not meant to tie together all the ends.

* **DISTANT SIGNALS AND OTHER STORIES** by Andrew Weiner
(Porcépic Books 0-88878-284-5; 1989; 236 pp.)

** **THIS IS THE YEAR 2000** by Andrew Weiner
(Pottersfield Press 1-895900-14-X; 1998; 192 pp.)

Andrew Weiner sent me both these books (which I suspect have never been exported from Canada to Britain or Australia) out of friendship, and like a rotten friend, I haven't got around to reading *Distant Signals and Other Stories* until now. If I had read the book in 1989 when it appeared, I would not have had the satisfying experience of making a direct comparison between Weiner's early stories and his work from the 1990s (*This is the Year 2000*). His stories have improved rapidly during the decade. In his early stories, Weiner shows much feeling for language and a clear perception of some really interesting byways of science fiction. Comparisons to Kafka and Ballard come to mind, but not too insistently. In his early stories, Weiner shows only one consistent failure: an inability to bring together all the elements of his story into a satisfying conclusion. After reading many of the early stories, I felt 'Is that all there is?' In *This is the Year 2000*, Andrew Weiner becomes a much more powerful voice. The best way of describing his stories is to say they would be urban fantasies if they weren't also SF. He plays with fantasy and horror elements as well as fairly standard SF ideas, but the cumulative effect is to reveal urban life as seen by a total outsider. Everything is made strange and interesting, although on the surface Weiner is usually not writing about spectacular subject matter. Where aliens appear, they are familiar figures; only the humans are odd. My favourite story is 'The Map', with its familiar idea (the little antique shop that disappears the next time you go looking for it) and a surprise twist on the alternative worlds idea (what would really happen if you slipped unexpectedly between alternative worlds?). There are many

other quiet, fine stories, such as 'On Becoming an Alien', 'The Disappearance Artist' (which could be expanded into a novel) and 'Going to Meet the

Alien'. Andrew Weiner's stories appear regularly in the American magazines; it seems a pity that these two collections are also not widely available.

'Judge! Judge! Don't Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair!'

Much talk in Acnestis about minac requirements makes me nervous. Not that I don't deserve to be made nervous. May was the last time I contributed to Acnestis. Sorry. Had no idea it was so long ago.

But how do you do it? How do you people work *and* write vast contributions to Acnestis (the June mailing is 158 pages!) *and* contribute to and/or produce *Vector* and other BSFA publications *and* contribute to and/or produce *Banana Wings* and other British fanzines *and* keep up with email and written correspondence *and* go to concerts and films *and* read vast numbers of books *and* serve on judging panels for awards such as the Arthur C. Clarke *and* socialise with other Acnestids . . . ?

I can't, that's all. I'm made of weaker stuff. Must be all this enervating Aussie sunshine (especially this winter, our third drought winter in a row).

Take the last seven months, for instance. After being led to believe that I was about to go into involuntary retirement/bankruptcy at the end of November, things picked up. Exhaustingly. I've received a string of editing assignments that could have kept me working every day since 1 December if I had not simply flopped occasionally. Great for the exchequer (if I were not so brilliant at spending money). Rotten for everything else. I managed to snatch a few days in March, and typed 60,000 words of the Turner Issue (the Thirtieth Anniversary Issue of *SF Commentary*, otherwise titled *The Unrelenting Gaze: The Best of George Turner's Non-Fiction*, which was supposed to appear a year and a half ago). The work

drizzle resumed, and I've only just been able to get back to the Turner Issue. Will it appear before the Worldcon or not? I suspect not.

Meanwhile . . . I have to write two speeches before the Worldcon, now only three weeks away. I know more or less what I'm going to say, but I don't know when I'll write the actual words.

Meanwhile . . . people probably expect to receive issues of *The Metaphysical Review*, especially as they sent many letters of comment to the last two issues. When? When?

Meanwhile . . . I face the prospect of being flung out of Acnestis. No! No! Spare me! There is nothing like Acnestis. Nobody talks in depth about books on the Internet. The number of intelligent fanzines has dropped alarmingly, so that only *Vector*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction* and a few others provide anything like the quality of writing that appears here. You could produce a brilliant new British SF genzine by gathering the best book reviews and articles from each Acnestis mailing and publishing them every month.

Meanwhile . . . another vast dollop of putrid book-editing work is going arrive on the door step on Monday morning, but this contribution needs to leave here by 8 August, and it's now 1 August, and the Turner Issue isn't finished, and neither are those speeches, and it's only me screaming! (Elaine is almost used to the sound effects by now.)

CDs bought during 1998

Popular

- Various: *Paint It Blue: Songs of the Rolling Stones*
- Keith Richards: *Wingless Angels*
- Kimmie Rhodes: *Jackaloupes, Moons and Angels: Collection 1985-1990*
- Harry Nilsson: *Harry*
- Nils Lofgren: *Acoustic Live*
- Katy Moffat: *Angel Town*
- Robbie Fulks: *South Mouth*
- Nick Lowe: *Dig My Mood*
- Fred Eaglesmith: *Lipstick Lies and Gasoline*
- Jo Jo Zep & the Falcons: *The Shape I'm In* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Cover You: A Tribute to the Rolling Stones*
- Victoria Williams: *Musings of a Creek Dipper*
- Levon Helm
- Ani Di Franco: *Little Plastic Castle*

- Chris Wilson: *The Long Weekend* (2 CDs)
- Bobby Charles: *Secrets of the Heart*
- Damon Davies: *Serious Man*
- Fred Eaglesmith: *Drive-in Movie*
- Dirty Three: *Ocean Stories* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Where Have All the Flowers Gone: The Songs of Pete Seeger* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Hound Dog Taylor: A Tribute*
- The Hollisters: *The Land of Rhythm and Pleasure*
- Soundtrack: *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*
- Marc Cohn: *Burning the Daze*
- Ramblin' Jack Elliott: *Friends of Mine*
- Lou Reed: *Perfect Night: Live in London*
- Jason & the Scorchers: *Midnight Roads and Stages Seen* (2 CDs)
- Ray Davies: *The Storyteller*

- Bill Frisell: *Gone, Just Like a Train*
- Paul Kelly: *Words and Music*
- Joe Ely: *Twistin' in the Wind*
- Bonnie Raitt: *Fundamental*
- Kate Campbell: *Vision of Plenty*
- The Dead Reckoners: *A Night of Reckoning*
- Soundtrack: *The Horse Whisperer*
- Jim White: *Wrong-Eyed Jesus*
- Roy Rogers: *Pleasure and Pain*
- Sandy Denny: *Gold Dust*
- The Black Sorrows: *The Chosen Ones*
- Waylon Jennings: *Closing in on the Fire*
- Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson: *VH1 Storytellers*
- John Fogerty: *Premonition*
- Rufus Wainwright
- Rod Stewart: *When We Were the New Boys*
- Dave Bromberg: *The Player: A Retrospective*
- Lucinda Williams: *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*
- Billy Bragg and Wilco: *Mermaid Avenue*
- Little Feat: *Under the Radar*
- Counting Crows: *Across a Wire: Live in New York City* (2 CDs)
- Laurie Lewis: *Seeing Things*
- Nanci Griffith: *Other Voices, Too*
- Gillian Welch: *Hell among the Yearlings*
- Jimi Hendrix: *BBC Sessions* (2 CDs)
- Ronnie Lane & Slim Chance: *You Never Can Tell: BBC Sessions* (2 CDs)
- Mark O'Connor: *Midnight on the Water*
- Emmylou Harris: *Spyboy*
- The Cruel Sea: *This Is Not the Way Home*
- Buddy Guy: *Heavy Love*
- Dave Alvin: *Blackjack David*
- Jerry Garcia and David Grisman: *So What*
- Todd Snider: *Viva Satellite*
- Mick Ronson: *Main Man* (2 CDs)
- Christine Lavin: *One Wild Night*
- Mike Bloomfield: *Live at the Old Waldorf*
- Willie Nelson: *Teatro*
- Dory Previn: *Mythical Kings and Iguanas/Reflections in a Mud Puddle*
- Dory Previn: *Live at Carnegie Hall*
- Gene Clark: *Flying High* (2 CDs)
- Various: *Not So Dusty: A Tribute to Slim Dusty*
- Lyle Lovett: *Step Inside this House* (2 CDs)
- The Black Sorrows: *The Beat Club*
- Kate & Anna McGarrigle, Loudon, Rufus and Martha Wainwright, Chaim Tannenbaum, etc.: *The McGarrigle Hour*
- The Band: *Jubilation*
- The Long Ryders: *Anthology* (2 CDs)
- Joni Mitchell: *Taming the Tiger*
- Robert Earl Keen: *Walking Distance*
- Goanna: *The Spirit Returns*
- Bob Dylan: *Live 1966: Bootleg Vol. 4*
- Aretha Franklin: *The Delta Meets Detroit: Aretha's Blues*
- Greg Trooper: *Popular Demons*
- Frida Boccaro
- Doc and Merle Watson: *Home Sweet Home*
- The Rolling Stones: *No Security*
- Tiny Town
- Joe Cocker & the Grease Band: *On Air*

- Loudon Wainwright III: *BBC Sessions*
- Randy Newman: *Guilty: 30 Years* (4 CDs)
- Bruce Springsteen: *Tracks* (4 CDs)
- Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings: *Any Way the Wind Blows*
- Ray Charles: *The Complete Country & Western Recordings 1959-1986* (4 CDs)
- Grateful Dead: *Dick's Picks: Vol. 2, Vol. 3* (2 CDs), *Vol. 4* (3 CDs), *Vol. 5* (3 CDs), *vol. 6* (3 CDs)
- The Bottle Rockets: *Leftovers*
- Mike Henderson & the Bluebloods: *Thicker than Water*
- Various: *Rare on Air, Vol. 4*
- Golden Smog: *Weird Tales*
- Cliff Richard: *The Rock and Roll Years 1958-1963* (4 CDs)
- Miles Davis: *The Complete Bitches Brew Sessions* (4 CDs)
- Bap Kennedy: *Domestic Blues*
- Taj Mahal: *In Progress and In Motion* (3 CDs)
- Doc Watson, Del McCoury & Mac Wiseman: *Mac Doc and Del*

The best of the year? Paul Kincaid won't forgive me for putting Bob Dylan second, but my pick is *The McGarrigle Hour*.

Classical

- Alfred Brendel: Beethoven: *Variations and Vignettes for Piano* (3 CDs)
- Leonard Bernstein cond. New York Philharmonic: Copland: *Appalachian Spring/Rodeo/Billy the Kid/Fanfare for the Common Man*
- Hagen Quartet: Haydn: *Quartets*
- Serkin: Beethoven: *Piano Sonatas Nos. 8 ('Pathétique') and 29 ('Hammerklavier')*; *Fantasy in G Minor*
- Kevin Hunt Plays J. S. Bach
- Boult/Arnold/LPO: Vaughan Williams: *Symphony No. 9/Arnold: Symphony No. 3*
- Kronos Quartet: Schnittke: *Complete String Quartets* (2 CDs)
- Boult/LPO: Vaughan Williams: *Job/The Wasps*; Arnold: *Four Scottish Dances*
- Julius Katchen: Brahms: *Works for Solo Piano* (6 CDs)
- Richard Hickox/BBC National Orchestra of Wales: Rubbra: *Symphonies 3 and 7*
- Fabio Biondi/Europa Galante: Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons/Concerti RV 171/163*
- Lydia Mordkovitch/Gerhard Opitz: Brahms: *Three Sonatas for Violin and Piano*
- Sakari/Iceland SO: Sibelius: *Symphonies 1 and 3*
- Eder Quartet: Shostakovich: *String Quartets Nos. 2, 3, 5, 10, 11, 12 and 13* (3 CDs)
- Nicholas Lens: *The Five Requiems*
- Klaus Tennstedt/LPO: Mahler: *Complete Symphonies* (11 CDs)

Very difficult to pick a winner here. Because I know how much better they are than other versions of the same works, I'll pick Lydia Mordkovitch and Gerhard Opitz's recording of the Brahms Violin Sonatas and Europa Galante's version of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*.