



Graphic by Elaine Cochrane using DJFractals

Scratch Pad 40

Based on *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* No. 25, 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 2000 mailing of Acnestis. Cover graphics: Elaine Cochrane, using DJFractals.

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In July, our friend Frances Wade (who recently joined the Secret Garden apa) rang to say that her husband Robin Wade had killed himself. Only a few weeks before, she had told us officially that they had separated, although my sister Jeanette, who saw Frances and Robin more often than we did, had told us of rumours of a split. We still do not know the story of the split, although we presume it had something to do with them both moving from Northcote, near us, out to the country town of Maldon. Frances must have felt rather isolated when Robin was commuting to Brisbane every week for work. After she moved out, Robin must also have felt very isolated.

We find it hard to believe in his death. Robin was one of the most resilient people we've ever met. At the extremely well-organised funeral in Castlemaine (the nearest country city, on the railway line from Melbourne) ('well organised', because its program was restricted to four eulogies and a harp solo by Robin's old friend Dave Rackham) people told of Robin's myriad accomplishments and abilities. The trouble was that when he had mastered one skill, he was always impatient to get on to the next challenge. He had earned his solo pilot's licence only a month before he died. He had been bankrupt at least once in his 44 years of life, and several times since we've known him he's bounced back from near bankruptcy. But even Robin had a non-bounce zone. A man who could be dazzling, and irritating, or both at the same time, so much missed.

Last week, Elaine and I were visiting Dick Jenssen. We had no sooner entered his flat than the phone rang. Dick returned, shaken and upset, from answering the phone. He said that John Straede, his friend and one-time student, had rung from Sydney to say that that afternoon John and his wife Cheryl had been involved in a head-on car crash, in which Cheryl had died. John and the two people in the other car had walked away without injury.

I'd first met Cheryl and John at my first convention, at Easter 1968. I can't say I knew them particularly well in those days. They turned up at every Melbourne convention until they moved to Sydney in the early seventies. I did not meet them again until a few years ago, when they were down from Sydney visiting Dick. They were both at Aussiecon 3. They

could tell good stories of Melbourne Science Fiction Club in its 1960s heyday. Although Elaine and I didn't know Cheryl well, that doesn't lessen the shock of this event.

If you can't count on the next minute of your life ('Don't count on the next minute of your life, Bruce!' I keep telling myself. 'Do something useful!'), you can't write off the rest of your life just because nothing much is happening at the moment. That's the message I take away from *Buena Vista Social Club*, the Wim Wenders film that I saw this afternoon. Very emotional stuff. All these old people, who had seen their musical livelihoods disappear during the 1960s, are suddenly given the chance to sing and play again, although many of them are in the seventies and eighties. A bloke from California arrives in Havana. He's Ry Cooder. We know him well; we revere him for his records of brilliant musicological inspiration, beginning with *Ry Cooder* in 1970. I've seen him three times in concert, most recently in 1979, when he seemed perpetually young, but suddenly he looks his age (53; he's a month younger than I am), and he's with his son Joachim, who's in his early twenties.

Nobody knows Ry in Havana. He has a tape featuring music by an unknown Havana musician. Ry visited Havana in the seventies, but couldn't trace the music. In the mid 1990s he returns, finds one of the old musicians, who directs him to the others, all of whom have stopped performing. The Buena Vista Social Club, where they once performed, is a vast empty shell of a building. The musicians still sing the traditional Cuban songs they learned when they were children. A band forms. Copyrights for the songs are found. A CD appears. Cuban music? Totally out of fashion! Yet *Buena Vista Social Club* and the offshoot CDs become the most successful enterprises in Cooder's untidy career.

That, at any rate, is the tale told by the film. After I had written the above paragraph, I read a quite different story in *The Weekend Australian Review*. In an article titled 'Havana, Will Travel', Iain Shedden interviews Juan de Marcos 'the man recognised as the instigator of a new brand of Cuban music, forged from the combination of some of the country's oldest and youngest star musicians. It was Marcos who, three years ago, went in search of Cuba's talents of the 1940s and

50s to restore some of the traditional music culture that had been lost to the island . . . That endeavour led to the recording of the three seminal albums in 1997 that transformed Cuban music into a highly marketable world commodity . . . “The idea of working with the old guys was mine,” Marcos, 56, says.’

In 1998, Wim Wenders accompanied Ry and his son Joachim back to Havana. The film shows the streets of Havana, the rehearsals for the tour, lots of footage of a concert in Amsterdam and a few items from the Carnegie Hall concert, plus some wonderful documentary material of the musicians walking around New York, staring in wonder at a city they never expected to see.

Although Juan de Marcos is very visible in the film as leader of the band, he is given only a brief interview, and no hint of his involvement in finding the members of the Buena Vista Social Club is offered.

Is the story of the members of the Buena Vista Social Club the story of falling from reality into a dream? Or is it a fable of awakening from a dream that we mistakenly call ‘ordinary reality’ and entering a heightened reality that has been mistakenly mislaid? That, to me, is what the film is asking, although it does not indulge in generalisations. The stuff of dreams is the music itself: music powerful enough to be inscribed in these musicians’ heads for seventy or eighty years, then recreated and appreciated by millions of people who had never heard it before.

No wonder I believe that the arts, at their best — and life at its best — tend towards the condition of music. I’m not sure that that makes sense, but I know what it feels like when I watch a film like *Buena Vista Social Club*.

I hadn’t had time to listen to much music until recently. Paying Work has been a time-soaking black globule in the middle of my head. During several days of unaccustomed freedom last week, I did not plunge back into fanac. I did almost nothing. It was so pleasant not to be beating my eyes against a computer screen.

The other day I gave myself the ultimate luxury — several hours of uninterrupted music listening. I was rationalising my Vaughan Williams collection. We still have a wall of LP records — at least 1200. Reason tells Elaine and me that because we listen to LPs rarely, we should get rid of them all. But when we look at them, we find that most of them are wonderful recordings that we took the trouble to select at some time in the sixties, seventies or early eighties. Most of them have not been reissued on CD.

But some have. The 1960s Boulton recordings of the Vaughan Williams symphonies were remastered and reissued on CD in the late eighties. They are usually regarded as the benchmark performances — rich super-English modal chords that allow you to identify that a piece is by Vaughan Williams half a bar after beginning to listen.

The rise of the CD led to massive raiding of unknown vaults in the late eighties and early nineties. Polygram (now called Universal) is owner of the Decca back catalogue, including the first Boulton LP performances from the early 1950s. I don’t know whether Boulton was more brilliant then, or recording engineers more canny, or orchestras played better, but those early performances have a breathless energy and mystical shining quality that are missing in the later recordings. As with Sibelius and many other twentieth-century composers, Vaughan Williams must be played with an almost superhuman concentration on the underlying cross

rhythms. Without absolutely sharp rhythms, the harmonies and tunes can sound sludgy and strident — which is how I would describe some of the later Boulton performances. The 1950s versions were released on Belart, a super-cheap label, and might still be available.

Boulton did another set of Vaughan Williams, also in the early fifties, for the American Everest label. I’ve owned the Everest versions of the Symphony No. 9 and *Job: A Masque for Dancing* on worn-out LPs ever since I bought them in late 1968. Worn the records might be, but the performances are superhuman. The 9th, in particular, is one of the great recordings of the century, with its absolutely clear separation of the horns from the rest of the orchestra at the beginning of the first movement. In other versions I’ve heard, the horns at that point sink into a mishmash of loud sound. Two years ago, I obtained the Everest version of the 9th on CD, but have never been able to track down the Everest version of *Job* or the other symphonies. So I cannot throw out those LPs.

Some of the CDs and LPs proved to be duplications or duds. Out they went. An LP of Hickox’s 1960s performance of *Sancta Civitas*, with Heather Harper as one of the soloists, proved to be much more interesting than Hickox’ recent CD performance. The CD got the shove. In other cases, the recent Boulton versions are better than the Andre Previn versions, but Andre Previn’s version of the Symphony No. 7, *Sinfonia Antarctica*, with Ralph Richardson reciting the movement superscriptions, is an essential part of the collection. Gielgud reads the poems on the 1950s Boulton recording, which I’ve also kept. (Elaine and I had the same thought: had Olivier and Guinness recorded them as well?)

In listening to bits and pieces of Vaughan Williams, comparing movements here and there, I found a piece that hit me right between the ears — perhaps the greatest short orchestral composition of the twentieth century. No, not *The Lark Ascending* or *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, both by Vaughan Williams, which come in second and third. The piece I’m thinking of is the *Partita for Double String Orchestra*, composed very early in Vaughan Williams’ career. It’s a fugue as well as a partita, written for stereo nearly forty years before stereo was invented. Played properly, as on the Boulton 1956 version, it lets you eavesdrop on 20 minutes of uninterrupted ecstatic intercourse between parts of the two orchestras, conjoined by complex rhythms from the cellos and double basses. Music to make your toenails curl.

FRIENDS SITED

A highlight of the week was the following email from Dick Jenssen:

From: Dick Jenssen ditmar@mira.net
To: gandc@mira.net
Subject: I must be talking to my friends
Date: Thursday, 24 August 2000. 2:37 AM

Bruce,
To make your day. I hope.

PRIMARY SOURCE (I guess)

Old Woman. Sometimes my feet are tired and my hands are quiet, but there is no quiet in my heart. When the people see me quiet, they think old age has come on me and that all the stir has gone out of me. But when the trouble is on me I must be talking to my friends.

W. B. Yeats, 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' (1902)

FROM THE SITE:

<http://metalab.unc.edu/sally/yeats1.txt>

USED BY

MacLiammóir, Mícháel (1899–1978)

b. Cork, actor, writer, painter and theatre impresario. A child actor, became into a renowned painter and designer. Founded the Gate Theatre in Dublin with his lifelong partner Hilton Edwards. The theatre company capitalised on new Irish writing, drawing inspiration from and staging European drama, as well as the classics. Played Iago in Orson Welles' film of *Othello* (1949) and was the narrator in the film *Tom Jones* (1963). Also published fiction, plays and memoirs in both English and Irish. His one-man shows during the 1960s drew critical acclaim in Ireland and internationally.

Works include *The Importance of Being Oscar* (1960), *I Must Be Talking to My Friends* (1963) and *Mostly About Yeats* (1970)

FROM THE SITE

<http://www.local.ie/content/20972.shtml>

RECORDING:

I Must Be Talking To My Friends (Argo RG493) OC

I used Google, and searched on 'i must be talking to my friends'.

Simple.

Dick

See also

<http://metalab.unc.edu/sally/Cathleen.html>

<http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/y/yeats/cath.html>

http://www.gmu.edu/org/ireland32/houlihan_essay.html

(The search string on Google was 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan')

Now you're on your own...

Dick

ditmar@mira.net

Thanks, Dick. I searched for the phrase 'I must be talking to my friends' more than a year ago, using HotBot, but found nothing. Somebody (Robert Lichtman?) on Trufen recently mentioned the miraculous Google search engine, which I've used several times to find information that was unavailable elsewhere. I mentioned Google to Dick, who had the bright idea of looking for 'i must be talking to my friends'.

Why the search? Warning: long tedious explanation follows.

I've mentioned before that in the early 1990s, at the instigation of Brian Aldiss, Liverpool University Press gave me the opportunity to put together a 'Best of *SF Commentary*'. They didn't want to use any of the personal material from the magazine (the main reason why people liked it in the 1970s), which mainly appeared in my column 'I Must Be

Talking to My Friends'. LUP has shown no interest for five years in continuing the 'BoSFC' project, partly because Franz Rottensteiner's dustup with Stanislaw Lem has meant that I can no longer reprint about six Lem articles that I was going to feature in the book. Therefore I would like to do, in fanzine format, a Lem-less 'BoSFC', including the best of the personal material, called, naturally enough, *I Must Be Talking to My Friends: A Selection from SF Commentary*.

But where did the phrase come from? I heard it first over the radio while sitting in my flat in Ararat in late 1969 or early 1970. It was the title of a monologue by Mícháel MacLiammóir. It had begun as a stage show, and was later recorded on LP. The ABC played the LP. A few years later I bought it. Meanwhile I had used the phrase as the title of a new personal/news/opinion column in *SF Commentary*, based on the format of Bill Bowers' new fanzine *Outworlds*. In the monologue, MacLiammóir does not say where the phrase comes from, merely that it was first said by Ireland's greatest poet'. I assumed he was referring to W. B. Yeats.

When last year I was discussing all this with Yvonne Rousseau, she consulted a concordance of Yeats' poetry, but could not find 'I Must Be Talking to My Friends' anywhere. The answer, as Dick Jenssen and Google have discovered, is that the phrase is from a Yeats play, not a poem.

End of Tedious Explanation Alert. Now that I've mentioned Yvonne Rousseau, who is, with Jilly Reed and Jane Carnall, the most-missed ex-member of Acnestis:

KING, HALSEY, REED AND ROUSSEAU

A letter from Yvonne Rousseau

PO Box 3086

Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000

26 April 2000

With this letter you will find a (presentation) copy of Florence King's *When Sisterhood Was in Flower* (1982).

I first learnt of Florence King's existence from Jilly Reed, whose *A Bend or Two, but Nothing of Consequence* (in *Acnestis* 29, May 1995) included a section headed 'All the new Books and States of the Nation . . .', which contained the following entry:

With Malice Toward Some — Florence King. Just as much pleasure re-reading this as on first encountering it. It's an extended essay on misanthropy, of which she thoroughly approves, and the effect on people with a low opinion of human nature of living in the Republic of Nice (America). As funny and acerbic as you'd expect from the author of one of my favourite books, *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. ('No matter which sex I went to bed with, I never smoked on the street.')

To this recommendation, I responded in *Pursued by Oysters, Armed with Oyster Knives* 6 (for *Acnestis* 30, June 1995):

As for Florence King's *With Malice Toward Some* — I thought at first that I'd enjoyed an extract ('The Sherry Party') in an Everyman humour anthology: but no, the title was an 's' different: *With Malice Towards Some*, by Margaret Halsey.

Next month, in *Pursued by Oysters, Armed with Oyster Knives* 7 (for *Acnestis* 31, July 1995), I reported back to Jilly:

Meanwhile, I've not succeeded in finding any works by Florence King (or by Caroline Stevermer or Eva Ibbotson) but I bought (secondhand) Margaret Halsey's *With Malice Toward Some* (1938). The Everyman humour anthology was wrong: Halsey's title is exactly the same as King's — although King may not have written (as the US visitor Halsey does) that Englishwomen are 'trained to be as much as possible like perambulating salads' and that '[w]hatever the rest of the world thinks of the English gentleman, the English lady regards him apprehensively as something between God and a goat, and equally formidable on both scores'.

In *Pursued by Oysters, Armed with Oyster Knives* 9 (for *Acnestis* 33, September 1995), I took up the Florence-King topic with Bruce Gillespie himself:

— Yes! Florence King has indeed 'darkened an Australian book shelf: I discovered her 1977 collection *Wasp, Where Is Thy Sting?* in the Mitcham lending library. Transworld published the edition, under the Black Swan imprint, and it claims four other titles, including *Reflections in a Jaundiced Eye* — which inspired Jane (in the 32nd mailing) to describe King as 'the weirdest lesbian-feminist Southerner I ever read. Hysterical at first reading, funny enough on re-reading.' Myself, I found King almost as fascinating and sympathy-expanding as M[ary] F[rances] K[ennedy] Fisher (whose *Sister Age* and *Among Friends* I'm particularly fond of). The Author's Note to *Wasp, Where Is Thy Sting?* includes: 'Stereotyping, better known as "perceptive pointing-up", is an ancient and honorable ingredient of the humorous literary genre. Betty MacDonald pointed up rural people in *The Egg and I*. Margaret Halsey pointed up the British in *With Malice Toward Some*. Cornelia Otis Skinner and Emily Kimborough pointed up both the French and the innocent Americans abroad in *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*. Gail Parent points up Jews in *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York*. (Having enjoyed the first three, I'm now planning to track down *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York* . . .) Meanwhile, the Protestant subject matter of *Wasp, Where Is Thy Sting?* ought to appeal to a Church-of-Christ-bred person like yourself (or like Church-of-Christ-Atheist John Bangsund) — just as it does to a Low-Church-Anglican Atheist like me.

(Skipping ahead: in the November mailing, I responded to Jane Carnall: 'I'm grateful for your warning that Gail Parent's *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York* will not be precisely a barrel of laughs (just as, last December, I was grateful for Dave's warning that Fran Lebowitz's *Metropolitan Life* (1974–78) was unlikely to fulfil the expectations aroused in me by her *Paris Review* interview and her quoted remark: "Success hasn't spoiled me — I've always been insufferable".')

The topic of Florence King emerged again in *Pursued by Oysters, Armed with Oyster Knives* 10 (for *Acnestis* 34, October 1995), when I responded to Dave Langford's enquiry, whether it was Australian etiquette to distribute plastic spacemen around a host's house (and more particularly in a

room where it is specified that nobody except Hazel Langford may enter without invitation):

My own revulsion from poking about in other people's private rooms is, however, doubtless partly in tune with Oscar Wilde's observation: 'The reason we like to think so well of others is that we are all afraid for ourselves. The basis of our optimism is sheer terror.' Thus, because I would never dream of opening someone else's shut door and peering in, I can hope (trembling) that others will refrain from opening mine . . . Where Hazel is motivated by her value for privacy, however, I am motivated by my inability to control the fanzine-fannish kind of muddle that mysteriously resembles (in effect, although not in rationale) the 'aristocratic' Southern squalor that Florence King describes so well in (for example) *Wasp, Where Is Thy Sting?*: 'that Southern version of *Schlamperei* which is summed up in the old saying, "Too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash". A *carte blanche* for elegant enervation, it means, "Let it rot so people will know how rich we *used* to be". Housekeepers who subscribe to this view believe that grubbiness is the patina of grandeur, and so they tend to look down on the woman whose house is excessively neat and clean. Her everlasting scrubbing and polishing are petty bourgeois habits that bar her from membership in Southern gentility. Soon all the ladies are talking about her, and before she knows it her reputation is ruined.' Conversely, Carol Shields always fills me with wonder when her female characters not only clean their house because they love to, but also live in dwellings that it would be possible to make Perfectly Clean. Perhaps they resemble the Indiana Baptodisterian of whom King writes: 'As for keeping house, Mrs Bailey was the pride of Waspville, famed far and wide as "a real scrubber, that woman".' (King is enigmatic to me here: can she be unaware of the derogatory meaning of 'scrubber' in British and Australian slang?) Perhaps we should identify a fannish sf elite, matching King's criteria: 'her slut's wool was coming along nicely and her window ledges contained that undisturbed layer of aristocracy to which I was accustomed. There were books everywhere, in and out of bookcases . . .'

Bruce and Jilly: of Florence King's books, I not only have borrowed (from Adelaide's Mitcham and Unley libraries) but also have read *Wasp, Where Is Thy Sting?* (1977), *Reflections in a Jaundiced Eye* (1989) and (not always precisely suitable for reading on public transport) *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* (1985) (which is available in an Adelaide bookshop, in a St Martin's Press paperback edition). In addition, I purchased secondhand (in a Community-Aid-Abroad charity shop) *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* (1975), which I have not yet finished reading: I'm fascinated by the contrast between King's stock-Cockney image of her father in this book ("I'm sick of 'earing about yer bloody blood!") and his dignified presence in *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady* (where I adore the story of little Florence's birthday gift of a laboriously knitted multicoloured scarf which her father accepted and wore with such tact and sensitivity that his good character as the 'scarf man' was thereafter firmly established with his family's cleaning lady Jensy Curtis, and thus throughout Washington's black community.

Next month, in *A Bend or Two, but Nothing of Consequence* (for *Acnestis* 35, November 1995), Jilly Reed responded:

Yvonne — Oh, dear, I've written all over your contrib. again! So glad you liked the Florence King books. One reason I find them so endearing is that they echo, strangely clearly, my own upbringing in a clannish, rambling, inward-looking family; we too know our fourth cousins, have family ailments (I have the Williams' women's shoulder) and gossip madly about each other. I once met the most charming Southern gentleman (from S'ath Cahlina) at a lawyer's convention in San Diego, whither I'd gone as the prop and helpmeet of my Paper-giving husband. He and I had a wonderful private party in the interstices of the gathering, swapping horror stories of no-neck cousins and sympathising with each other's hereditary weaknesses. We got roaring drunk and shocked the East-Coasters and he ended up loudly proclaiming me '... the flow-ah of English womanhood!' while I smiled benignly upon the assembled company. It was simultaneously the most unlikely and the most entrancing remark anyone's ever made of me.

In my final official *Acnestis* contribution, *Pursued by Oysters, Armed with Oyster Knives* 12 (for *Acnestis* 36, December 1995), I thanked her for this:

Jilly: I'm sorry that you suffer from 'the Williams' women's shoulder' (though it's mercifully Higher-Up than Florence King's typical Southern family female ailments ...) — and I adored your description of the 'S'ath Cahlina' gentleman who shocked East-Coasters at San

Diego by loudly proclaiming you 'the flow-ah of English womanhood!'

It remains mysterious whether Florence King ever called one of her own books *With Malice Toward Some* or whether Jilly inadvertently substituted Margaret Halsey's title when she actually meant either *Wasp, Where Is They Sting?* (in which King recommends Halsey's book) or *Reflections in a Jaundiced Eye*. Halsey's *With Malice Toward Some* is extremely enjoyable — and led (at a secondhand sale this March) to buying a Halsey novel, *Some of My Best Friends...* (1944) ... [Here follows several thousand words of extensive quotation from this novel. I trust Yvonne will forgive me for not including this material, but I need to finish this issue of *Cosmic Donut* today, so that it can fly off to Folkestone within the next few days.] This is an intensely didactic novel ... Despite its didacticism, however, it's a very agreeable novel, and I'm somewhat surprised that Margaret Halsey wasn't thought to merit an entry in either the *Feminist Companion to Literature in English* or the *Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*.

In the garden at Klemzig, our camellia tree is flowering, we are still eating the last of our watermelons and butternut squashes, we have ripe strawberries and well-grown beans, our Meyer lemon tree is unbelievably overladen with ripe delicious lemons, and our grass is as high as a Rottweiler's eye (especially near the gully trip where our new lizard likes to bask).

All best!
Yvonne

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Books read since 15 February 2000

Some *Acnestis* include lists of Books Acquired. If I did this, it would give a better idea of the Crisis In My Room than any listing of Books Read. Despite the non-appearance of *SF Commentary* and the lengthening gaps between issues of *The Metaphysical Review*, the publishers keep sending me review copies, not all of which are putrid doorstop six-parters in dire need of instant return to a paper-recycling plant. The books that really should be reviewed mount up on my table, which is likely to collapse some time during the next few months. Some of them are reviewed, and some sent out to reviewers, but the rest need noticing. I won't do that here, because I don't have time or space, but I'm thinking lunatic thoughts: how can I publish a mini-review magazine without allowing it to turn into the usual 100-page Gillespie monster magazine?

I haven't solved the problem, but I'll use this column to put in another word of praise (as I did in *Steam Engine Time* 1) for the reprint series of books that Gollancz Millennium sends me. What a great service to SF these books provide, especially as they prove that the current crop of multi-volume

doorstoppers are entirely redundant. After all, Jack-Vance-of-the-1950s in 100 pages can fit in more material than you'll find in the collected works of Robert Jordan and Stephen Goodkind. And Jack Vance can write English prose.

Of books recently received, a few of those Noted and Recommended are:

- James Morrow: *This Is the Way the World Ends* (Gollancz 0-575-07101-X; originally published 1986; 319 pp.)
- Fritz Leiber: *The Wanderer* (Gollancz 0-575-07112-5; 1964; 346 pp.)
- John Sladek: *The Reproductive System* (Gollancz 0-575-07116-8; 1968; 192 pp.)
- Isaac Asimov: *The End of Eternity* (Gollancz 0-575-07118-4; 1955; 189 pp.)
- Walter M. Miller Jr: *The Best of Walter M. Miller Jr* (Gollancz 0-575-07119-2; 1980; 472 pp.)
- Olaf Stapledon: *Sirius: A Story of Love and Discord* (Gollancz 0-575-07057-9; 1944; 200 pp.)
- Arkady & Boris Strugatsky: *Roadside Picnic* (Gollancz 0-575-07053-6; 1977; 145 pp.)

- John Brunner: *The Jagged Orbit* (Gollancz 0-575-07052-8; 1969; 395 pp.)
- Jack Vance: *Tales of the Dying Earth* (Millennium Fantasy Masterworks 1-85798-994-5; 2000; 741 pp.: contains *The Dying Earth* (1950); *The Eyes of the Overworld* (1966); *Cugel's Saga* (1983); and *Rhialto the Marvellous* (1984).

And they're just the ones that I can see on the table; many others are buried, perhaps forever. Some exciting reprint items are promised by Gollancz Millennium, including the first reprint for some time of Aldiss's *Non-stop* and the first appearance for more than a decade of Jonathan Carroll's *The Land of Laughs*. Until they arrive, here's the usual little list:

Ratings:

- ** Books highly recommended.
- * Books recommended.
- ☞ Books about which I have severe doubts.

* DARK KNIGHTS AND HOLY FOOLS:

THE ART AND FILMS OF TERRY GILLIAM

by Bob McCabe (1999; Orion 0-72281-827-9; 192 pp.)

Thanks to Alan Stewart for giving me this to review for *Thyme*, but I'm not sure I'll be able to write much more for him than I'm writing here. The stills are wonderful, and much of the information useful (especially details of Gilliam films that were never made, such as *A Scanner Darkly* and *Gormenghast*). Although it relies on long interviews with Gilliam, this book doesn't tell me more about the heart of his art than I can work out by watching the films. I liked hearing about the problems Gilliam faced when working with the rest of the *Monty Python* crew, but I gained no new insights into *Twelve Monkeys*.

- ** DAVID BENNETT: A MEMOIR by Race Mathews (1985; Australian Fabian Society Pamphlet No. 44; 0-909953-25-2; 58 pp.)

I would not have known about this booklet had not Race sent it to me, but it might still be available from the Australian Fabian Society. David Bennett was Race Mathews' best friend until he died of cancer in 1984. He was also a powerful figure in the Australian Labor Party, the Fabian Society, and Australian education. Race Mathews sent me the pamphlet because for nearly thirty years I have been interested in the ERA School, of which Bennett was the principal during its difficult first year and a half. Mathews skilfully recalls the various political turmoils through which Bennett lived, worked and fought, especially the hopes and fears engendered by the alternative education movement in the early 1970s. Mathews is honest enough about the brutal day-to-day business of politics to make me glad that I never entered the field.

- ☞ FOREVER PEACE by Joe Haldeman (First published 1997; Edition read: Millennium 1-85798-899-X; 351 pp.)

It shows what a sheltered literary life I lead when I can say that *Forever Peace* is the most disappointing novel I've read for a long time. It starts well enough, with two story strands seemingly connected: the continuing role of the special types of soldiers we met in Haldeman's *The Forever War*; and a nanotech society that had developed on earth while *FW*'s soldiers were fighting their

way from planet to planet. But all ideas are thrown away by page 100. The main characters find themselves — surprise! — Saving the Universe. To do this, they traipse around the North American continent, dogged by spies in their midst, until eventually . . . Um, I can't remember what happened at the end. By then, I didn't care at all.

- ** EDWIN MULLHOUSE: THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN AMERICAN WRITER 1943–1954 BY JEFFREY CARTWRIGHT

by Steven Millhauser

(1972; Penguin 0-1400-7782-0; 305 pp.)

Paul Kincaid has extolled the virtues of Millhauser so effectively that I can only thank him for putting me onto this book (Millhauser's first novel) and endorse his remarks. When I began reading *Edwin Mullhouse*, I thought that its approach was just a bit too twee and self-congratulatory. Edwin Mullhouse dies at the age of nine. The putative author, Jeffrey Cartwright, extols his virtues and vows to tell us of a remarkable life. But Cartwright, still not a teenager when he is supposed to have written this book, is the genius of the pair, but has such low self-esteem that he makes a vast epic out of the short life of his friend, an ordinary American boy who happened to write a fair bit. Millhauser gives life to this awkward apparatus by showing us Mullhouse's true genius, which was for obsession. His mighty obsessions, so typical of an eight-year-old, but so rarely remembered by adults or written about, remind me painfully of my own obsessions at the same age. The best writing here marks Millhauser as today's true successor to Henry James.

- * ALL OUR YESTERDAYS by Robert B. Parker (1994; Dell 0-440-22146-3; 466 pp.)

In this non-Spenser novel, Robert B. Parker tells of three generations of Irish-descended policemen in Boston. Events in the 1920s have repercussions for the next seventy years. The story is told from the viewpoint of the last in the line, allowing the author to fudge the point of the novel: that he is the criminal in this story, and the reader's task is to solve the crime without quite knowing, until the end of the novel, what the crime is. Clever stuff, spoiled by over-slick, unmemorable prose, seemingly designed to be transcribed into a film script.

- ** A LONG WAY FROM VERONA by Jane Gardam (1971; Abacus 0-349-11405-6; 190 pp.)

While reading *A Long Way from Verona*, I felt that I was reading brilliant prose, but perhaps the story was just a bit too clever for me. This is the story of the teenage flowering of a girl who is regarded as rather dotty by family and friends because she wants to write, and in some ways she *is* rather dotty. Hectic, perhaps, to judge from the prose. Events seem clear, but not their significance. The reader is supposed to feel that all is settled by the end of the novel, but I was still scratching my head. Not the author's fault, I suspect.

- * BLUE GENES by Val McDermid (1996; HarperCollins 0-00-649831-0; 237 pp.)

Val McDermid is one of the most interesting mystery writers at the moment, but this book, and its solution, was too neatly worked out compared with *The Mermaids Singing* and *The Wire in the Blood*, later novels that heave

uneasily in the mind long after they've been read.

- ** **THE LATE MR SHAKESPEARE** by Robert Nye (1998; Arcade 1-55970-469-1; 400 pp.)

Thanks to Dick Jenssen for lending me this book, which made not much of a splash otherwise. Perhaps there are too many books written about fictional versions of William Shakespeare — and that's part of the point of this novel. It's not the story of Shakespeare, but of the impression he might have made on one of his players, the boy who played many of the female roles in the comedies. In old age, the actor, alone and destitute, recalls his heyday, remembering a heroic picture of Shakespeare, full of contradictions and unassessable uncertainties. He also recalls a fine time in British cultural history, heroic in achievements and freedom in using the resources of the English language. Not until the 1960s and 1970s would writers again become as free to use all the language, including the rude words. Shakespeare's era was followed by Cromwell's and, we assume, poverty for all British actors. Again, we feel the modernity of Shakespeare, his generosity of spirit, the way his work sustains.

- ** **THE KNIFE THROWER AND OTHER STORIES** by Steven Millhauser (1999; Phoenix 0-75380-821-8; 200 pp.)

After having read *Edwin Mullhouse*, I was a bit disappointed by this collection of short stories. They are more formal than that novel, a little dry, a little too worked out and worked up. But the best of these pieces, especially 'Flying Carpets', 'The Dream of the Consortium' and 'Paradise Park', glow in the mind, strange tours of magical hells.

- ** **HAPPENSTANCE** by Carol Shields (1980/1982/1990; Fourth Estate 1-872180-08-6; 193 + 197 pp.)

Happenstance is a marketing brainwave, rather than a novel. It's two novels, one much better than the other — *Happenstance* (1980), which now becomes 'The Husband's Story', and *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (1982), which now becomes 'The Wife's Story', printed upside down (or right side up). You've probably heard about the gimmick: while *she* is away at a quilters' convention, *he* is left at home for the first time for years. Both find their lives extended and enlivened unexpectedly during one weekend, but Shields is more interested in the husband's story, which finishes with his wonderful walk home through the snow, than in the wife's story, which runs pretty much as you expect when you begin reading. Shields has that light and urbane, yet domestic and clenched-detailed, style that I think of as specially Canadian, because Alice Munro's style closely resembles Shield's (and her viewpoint reminds me of Lyn Johnston's).

- ** **CONVERSATIONS WITH WILDER** by Cameron Crowe

(1999; Alfred A. Knopf 0-375-40660-3; 376 pp.)

This is the funniest book of the year, because Billy Wilder says lots of funny things. At the book's beginning, Cameron Crowe tells an affecting tale of how he made friends with Wilder, although he was sure he probably wouldn't gain an interview, then finds himself overwhelmed with more material than he can use in what was originally designed as a movie stills book. I

can't quote anything from it, because I gave it back to Dick Jenssen, from whom I borrowed it. I ordered it immediately from Reading's, who were told by the local distributor, Penguin, that stock would arrive in two months' time. That was in May. If I had simply ordered the hardback through amazon.com, I would have my copy now. Penguin will probably import only the paperback edition. Is it any wonder Australian book buyers are deserting retailers and buying via the Internet? (The movie stills, and snaps of Wilder, his wife and colleagues since the 1920s, are magnificent.)

- ** **WASP** by Eric Frank Russell (1957; Victor Gollancz 0-575-07095-1; 175 pp.)

There *is* a 'perfect science fiction style'. It was developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s under the influence of editors such as John Campbell, H. L. Gold and Sam Merwin. It combines a maximum of brevity with a minimum of flourish, plus the right mixture of wit and adventure. If I hadn't read a few other candidates from the same period, I would say that Eric Frank Russell's *Wasp* is the exemplar of perfect science fiction style. Not, I add, the perfect science fiction novel. I want a whole lot more than mere perfection of style in a great novel, but I'll settle for what *Wasp* offers. Thanks very much to Gollancz Millennium for reviving it in their new series of trade paperback 'yellow jackets', the Gollancz SF Collectors' Edition. Dave Langford has written that this is a reprint of the first American edition, which has deleted some of the best lines of the first British edition. Oh well. It's still tasty stuff, with its tale of the intensively trained soldier who lands on an enemy planet to take the role of a 'wasp': a buzzing insect of a fighter who, with small actions, upsets an entire monolithic system. There is a fair bit of satire here, since the 'enemy' state resembles either the USSR or USA (whichever you wish), but it's the funny adventures that make this a delicious romp.

- * **THE LADY OF SITUATIONS** by Stephen Dedman (1999; Ticonderoga 0-9586856-5-7; 222 pp.)

- * **FOREIGN BODIES** by Stephen Dedman (1999; Tor 0-312-86864-2; 286 pp.)

I'm supposed to review these books for Lawrence Person, editor of *Nova Express*, and I don't know what to say about them. I can't dismiss them, since Dedman can write a good sentence and dramatise a scene convincingly. But I can't go overboard about them, although Stephen Dedman is one of Australia's hottest young writers, because he doesn't know what to do with his material. Only a few of the short stories in the collection *The Lady of Situations* have that sense of piercing revelation that one finds in a great story, yet I could not say any them are incompetent. They are fussy, overfilled with extraneous detail, like much of the second half of the novel *Foreign Bodies*. 'The Lady of Situations', 'Never Seen by Waking Eyes' and 'The Vision of a Vanished Good' are the most interesting stories in *The Lady of Situations*. In *Foreign Bodies*, the most impressive section is the first long section, which plunges the reader into a near-future society in which private companies police entire cities and run them at a profit, and criminals from the future are trying to take over. I felt part of this society, but realised that Dedman was merely writing an adventure story, not a novel that

revealed much about his near future. Dedman is on the brink of a brilliant career, but hasn't stepped off the cliff yet. (Is this enough to send to Lawrence Person? Probably not, but it'll have to do.)

* **SUN MUSIC** by Peter Sculthorpe
(1999; ABC Books 0-7333-0798-1; 334 pp.)

I wasn't considering the 'SF Biographies and Autobiographies' essay when I bought Peter Sculthorpe's autobiography, *Sun Music*, but reading it gave me a fairly clear idea of what I dislike in autobiography. Sculthorpe writes 'beautifully' (snort of derision) and even says a bit about the origins of several of his most famous pieces of music. But he fails to tell us anything about himself! Can any life have ever been lived so smoothly, so wrapped around a musical silver spoon? We know that Sculthorpe is a great Australian composer, and he seems to agree with us — so how did he get that way? Whatever the troubles and difficulties that might have shaped his talent, they don't appear in this book. Sculthorpe's eventual biographer will have fun digging up the real story.

** **TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS** by M. John Harrison
(2000; Gollancz 0-57506-832-9; 262 pp.)

Take one national image — Britain as rainy and gloomy — personify the image in one writer, and you have M. John Harrison. Perhaps British readers don't realise how heartwarmingly miserable he seems to the happy little Australian or American reader. The best stories in this collection tell of the ghosts of miseries and betrayals past (especially 'Old Women' and 'Small Heirlooms', the first two stories in the book), vague shapes seen along rancid alleyways or rainsoaked valleys, and at least two mad mountaineers ('Suicide Coast'). About halfway through the book, I came to realise that Harrison relishes his own special Britain; it's not the country he observes, but the one he builds lovingly in his mind. My favourite stories from *Travel Arrangements* include 'Empty' (a terrifying lost-souls story), 'Seven Guesses of the Heart' (which owes more than a bit to Le Guin's 'Earthsea', plus British angst) and 'The East' (more angst). The pain! the pleasure!

** **WHEN THE FEAST IS FINISHED** by Brian Aldiss
(1999; Little, Brown 0-316-64835-3; 230 pp.)

Real angst this time; not misery contemplated carefully, but the slicing away of certainties. Margaret Aldiss took only four months to die after she was diagnosed with liver cancer. There had been some warnings, but not many. She died at what would have been a sunny, fulfilled and fulfilling period in her life and Brian's. Other people stand around numbly when the axe falls, but both Brian and Margaret kept journals during the period, Margaret's significantly less unhappy than Brian's. It's the tiny details that make *When the Feast is Finished* memorable, unguarded details of ordinary life disintegrating, compared with the carefully shaped narrative of *The Twinkling of an Eye*. *Twinkling* was substantially finished before Margaret became ill, and both books are Brian Aldiss's love letters to Margaret. It's also his thank-you note to the hospice movement, and the help given by the rest of his family.

* **HARM DONE** by Ruth Rendell
(1999; Hutchison 0-09-180080-3; 394 pp.)

Even a disappointing Wexford novel — a puzzlingly

bad one — is more memorable than most other writers' good books. This book includes a mystery that is solved halfway through, another one whose solution is so obvious that we cannot work out why Rendell thought we would be puzzled, and a vivid episode of suburban street terror that would become fact a few months later, all over Britain, because of the British press's campaign against paedophiles. Rendell seems to have almost lost interest in Wexford or the detective novel, but she constantly sharpens her sense of Britain Now.

* **BIO OF AN OGRE** by Piers Anthony
(1988; Ace 0-441-06224-5; 297 pp.)

Justin Ackroyd, of Slow Glass Books, recommended this book as an example of how peculiar an SF autobiography might be. It's true that Anthony's attitudes towards his enemies, real and imagined, are odd, but the terrifying intricacies of Anthony's hate affairs with his 'enemies' (almost everybody in American SF) only become unreadable (I skipped those bits) towards the end of the book. For most of *Bio of an Ogre*, he sounds just like the other SF writers whose biographies or autobiographies I read or reread during June and July — a man at odds with the world, but not taking himself completely seriously, and certainly someone who can learn from his mistakes. For nearly forty years now he's been able to survive on the strength of his talents. Many of Piers Anthony Jacob's attitudes are commendable, but his lack of humour and propensity for taking offence must make him difficult to live with.

** **WHAT YOU MAKE IT: A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES** by Michael Marshall Smith
(1999; HarperCollins 0-00-651007-8; 400 pp.)

I bought this book (and, for friends who were having trouble finding it, the two other copies in Brunswick Street Bookstore) because Kirsten McDermott, during her talk for the July Nova Mob, inspired us all to read any Michael Marshall Smith we could find. I wish I could share Kirsten's enthusiasm. I can see why she thinks Smith is a fair shake better than most other horror writers, but at heart he *is* a writer of genre horror. The object of most of these stories is to pull the rug from under the reader's feet. He does that well, but he doesn't often enough do more than that. If he would stretch his talent, if he were not so intent on the Big Surprise Effect of each story, he would be much more interesting. He's an American who lives in Britain, and makes much of the alien viewpoint. He knows his people — under forty, well off, rootless, full of life but not sure of life. But he doesn't trust his craft. I like writers who bang readers over the head — Jonathan Carroll is the closest to Smith in tone — but somehow he never quite inspires self-recognition in the reader. By far the best story is a supernatural end-of-the-world story, 'Hell Hath Enlarged Herself'. Other fine stories include 'Foreign Bodies', 'The Man Who Drew Cats', 'When God Lived in Kentish Town' (which shows that Smith might yet become a subtle writer) and 'Always'.

** **GRASSHOPPER** by Barbara Vine
(2000; Viking 0-670-89175-4; 406 pp.)

Has Ruth Rendell (Barbara Vine) lost it? I was disappointed by the ending of this novel, which is predictable. Until the end, when we find out what the crime will be (at which stage it becomes obvious what the outcome



will be), this is a magical story of London seen from a unique viewpoint — that of people who climb over its roofs for pleasure. These people meet each other by accident, and in many ways remind me of the characters of Vine's early novel *The House of Stairs*. What makes the novel constantly exciting is the sense of London itself. I wanted Vine to stay up on its roofs and resolve nothing.

* **BAD MEDICINE** by Jack Dann
(2000; Flamingo 0-7322-5954-1; 305 pp.)

A disappointing novel compared to Dann's previous two novels, *The Memory Cathedral* and *The Silent*. He puts together two elements, the road novel (two characters who escape from home in several stolen cars) and the Native American supernatural novel. The result might have been more powerful if Jack Dann had brought to the material the intensity that he brought to *The Silent*. In that novel, his main character simultaneously inhabits the real world and the supernatural edge of the deathworld, and he does it because Dann's language allows him to do so. In *Bad Medicine* the language ranges from the lyrical to the pedestrian, but is somehow never adequate for his ideas or characters. The characters are interesting, the world of Indian magic is interesting, and Dann's locales are interesting. But they are not gripping, which is a pity.

** **BIG PLANET** by Jack Vance
(1952/1978; Gollancz 0-575-07117-6; 218 pp.)

This is a Jack Vance literary persona I've never encoun-

tered before. The style in *Big Planet* is so taut and unadorned that I can't help wondering if its best touches were not provided by the ruthless editing of Sam Merwin, its original publisher. This is real Golden Age SF — no waste words, no false sentiment, just a cruel view of the world and a powerful imagination describing a magnificent place, the Big Planet of the title. The style is so dazzling that not until I finished *Big Planet* did I realise that its plot makes little sense: the characters wander over the surface of this planet purely to satisfy the author's need to have them meet treacherous rulers and fierce warriors. I don't mind at all; this book alone makes all the current multi-volume epics redundant.

There's a gap there in July, during which I reread Aldiss's *Hothouse*, for an essay Damien Broderick commissioned. (Despite its knowing tributes to Wells, Stapledon and — I realise now — Jack Vance, *Hothouse* remains for me the best SF novel.) I also reread Aldiss's *The Twinkling of an Eye* (much more enjoyable the second time), Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* and Damon Knight's *The Futurians* (ditto; both are books SF is lucky to have), and selections from Moskowitz's *Seekers of Tomorrow* and Aldiss and Harrison's *Hell's Cartographers*. It's an odd experience rereading books. I don't do it often enough. Must get back to Musil and Flaubert sometime. And Proust, if I live long enough.

— Bruce Gillespie, 3 September 2000