

**John Maxwell Foyster 1941-2003**

**‘Wake up, you lot!’**



# Scratch Pad

## No. 53 August 2003

Based on \*brg\* No. 35, produced for ANZAPA  
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Cover photo of John Foyster at Monoclave, Monash University, 1977:

Mervyn Binns.

Other photos:

Helena Binns, pages 4, 5, 6 and 7

Dick Jenssen: p. 8

Elaine Cochrane: p. 9

Lee Harding: pages 8, 12 and 13

Gary Hoff: Back cover.

The list of lost good companions grows long. This issue pays tribute to perhaps the most interesting SF fan of them all: **John Maxwell Foyster**.

## CELEBRATING JOHN FOYSTER

John Foyster died from a brain tumour on 5 April 2003, just a few days short of his sixty-second birthday. It says much about him that so far it has taken three gatherings to farewell him: the funeral in Adelaide on 9 April, the celebration of his life at Linden in St Kilda on 11 May, and the tribute held during Continuum, this year's Melbourne SF convention, on 11 July.

I hope to publish a record of these events, based on Yvonne Rousseau's transcription of both the funeral and the celebration, but *right now* I also need to save my ANZAPA membership.

Linden is an old St Kilda mansion on the crest of the hill in Acland Street. Currently, it serves as an art gallery and social facility for the people of St Kilda. It was chosen for the Melbourne celebration of John Foyster's life by Miranda, his daughter, and she seems to have been the main organiser. Other people who were very involved in preparations included Yvonne Rousseau, Jenny Bryce, and Myfanwy and Tony Thomas.

Over a hundred people gathered at Linden on that Sunday morning. There was seating for only about three-quarters of them, but nobody seemed to mind standing. The celebration itself had to be kept to an hour's length, as the organisers wanted people to be able to mingle afterwards over coffee or tea and bagels from Glick's. (When John and Jenny lived in St Kilda, they breakfasted on bagels from Glick's on Sunday mornings.)

I'm not sure why I was chosen as the representative of fandom, but I suspect it was because I could be trusted to keep the length of my talk to ten minutes. Which I did, and everything would have worked perfectly, had it not been for Peter Nicholls.

The first speaker was John Schutz, John Foyster's PhD supervisor during the early seventies. John Foyster didn't finish his PhD, but he seems to have made quite a mark at Monash University. Bernie Rechter, John's boss at ACER from 1972 to 1976, spoke much about John's multitude of interests, as well as his ability as a mathematician. I then gave the talk reprinted on pages 7-10.

The MC was Race Mathews, founder member of the Melbourne SF Club. At the very last moment Peter Nicholls asked to be allowed to speak. Peter spoke fourth, recalling John's reputation as *the* Australian fan when Peter was living in Britain during the seventies. Race

# THE FOYSTER CELEBRATION AT LINDEN

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John Schutz.



Bernard Rechter.



John Bangsund (left) and Merv Binns (right).



(From left:) Lee Harding, Jennifer Bryce, Damien Broderick.

# Photos by Helena Binns

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Bruce Gillespie.



Miranda Foyster.



(From left:) Helena Binns, Miranda Foyster, Elizabeth Darling.



(From left:) Lyn Smith, Perry Middlemiss, Leigh Edmonds.



Gathering in the gardens of Linden (from left): Roman Orszanski, Irwin Hirsh, Lucy Sussex, Perry Middlemiss, John Bangsund, Leigh Edmonds. (Photo: Helena Binns.)

counted down his printed list, then called speaker 5, John's daughter Miranda. He inadvertently omitted the scheduled fourth speaker, Julian Fraillon, a former student of John Foyster's at Preshill School. Julian was sitting there waiting for his cue, but nobody had met him before. The moment for introducing him passed. Miranda spoke affectionately and amusingly about her father, proceedings finished, and we rose and mingled.

Over bagels and coffee, I did catch up with many of the ancient and glorious, including Leigh Edmonds, who had travelled down from Ballarat, Lee Harding, David and Sue Grigg, and Christine and Derrick Ashby. But I didn't see Lyn Smith, wife of Bob Smith, after the speeches, although I had said hello when I arrived. Both John Bangsund and Sally Yeoland were there. I spoke for a while to John Schutz and his wife, and to Damien Broderick, whom one doesn't see often in Melbourne social circles. Elaine and I went off to lunch with Perry, Irwin, Lucy and Julian, and we swapped some more Foyster stories.

As Yvonne had already transcribed the proceedings of the funeral, Sally Yeoland printed enough copies to give one to each person attending the celebration. She included in her publication two newspaper obituaries for John, John Baxter's in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Vivian Evers's in the *Adelaide Advertiser*. (Since then, Bill Hall's obituary has appeared in the *Melbourne Age*. Bill Hall was John's boss in Adelaide.)

Yvonne has also transcribed the proceedings of the celebration, but Julian Fraillon has not yet been able to send her a copy of the talk he would have given.

Bill Wright and I would like to publish all this material in one fanzine. John Bangsund is planning to publish everything on his Web site. Perry, Irwin, Damien Warman and I have plans for a *Best of John Foyster*, if we can track down even a small percentage of his lifetime's writings. I would like to republish everything John wrote for *SF Commentary*, but that would be a weighty tome. With our scanner, I should be able to reprint *SFC* 19 (the collected issues of *exploding madonna* and *The Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology*). Lee Harding discovered *Gryphon* 15, February 1965, probably the best single issue of a fanzine ever published in Australia. Foyster published it; Lee wrote it and illustrated it with his own photographs. I've scanned that already.

Good plans all, and maybe some will come to pass. Meanwhile, following my speech and Dick Jenssen's tribute, you will find a brief selection of Foyster writings.



The Melbourne SF Club reunion, FanHistoricon, organised by John Foyster as part of Aussiecon 3, 1999. From left: JF, Merv Barrett, Bill Wright, Cedric Rowley, Bruce Gillespie, John Straede, Tony Thomas, Cheryl Straede, Leigh Edmonds, Dick Jenssen, Robin Johnson, Ramon Mazurak, Helena Binns, Merv Binns. (Photo: Cath Ortlieb.)

## FOUR OR FIVE WAYS IN WHICH JOHN FOYSTER CHANGED MY LIFE

**Delivered to the John Foyster memorial service,  
Linden Art Gallery, Acland Street, St Kilda, 11 May 2003**

**by Bruce Gillespie**

I want to speak about four or five ways in which John Foyster changed my life.

Without meaning to, John Foyster changed my life by giving me the entire social world in which I have lived for the last thirty-six years. More than a year and a half before I met him, at Easter 1966, John Foyster organised a science fiction convention in Melbourne. It was the first SF convention held in Australia for eight years, and except for the Melbourne SF Club, which Merv Binns had kept going in Melbourne, and Graham Stone's Futurians in Sydney, it ended a dark period in the Australian science fiction world. During that 1966 convention John Foyster became part of a triumvirate that set out to produce an Australian magazine about science fiction. The editor was John Bangsund, the other member of the team was Lee Harding, and the magazine was *Australian Science Fiction Review*. I bought the second issue of that magazine in August 1966, and it changed my life. The first few issues of *ASFR* (as it was always known) were largely written by the three people who published it, both under their own names and under pseudonyms. John's pseudonyms included Dr K. U. F. Widdershins, DSC and Bar, who mounted spirited attacks on the major science fiction books of the day. Under his own name, John Foyster wrote reviews and long essays about writers such as J. G. Ballard and Cordwainer Smith. His special issue of *ASFR* about Cordwainer Smith was a wonderful treat, and included the story of John's pilgrimage to find out the real name of the author who wrote under that pseudonym. John finally made the discovery that Cordwainer Smith was really Dr Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger, but only in the week that Linebarger died and the whole SF world was let in on the secret.

John, his various pseudonyms, and the other *ASFR* writers, mounted a comprehensive



The *ASFR* team already assembled — in 1966, six months before the start of *ASFR* and several years before the growth of the Foyster and Bangsund beards: (left) Lee Harding and John Foyster (photo: Dick Jenssen); (right) John Foyster and John Bangsund (photo: Lee Harding).

attack on the low standards then prevailing in most published science fiction. If the authors winced, Foyster and co. just stomped a bit harder. Foyster wrote entertainingly, and he never apologised. Anything, it seemed, was possible. The authors wrote back, and seemed to enjoy being stomped on. People like Delany, Blish and Aldiss appreciated that somewhere in the world there was somebody who expected them to be real writers who didn't have to offer excuses for writing science fiction. The letter columns of *ASFR* were packed with famous names. I wanted to get involved in all this excitement, and in 1968 I did so.

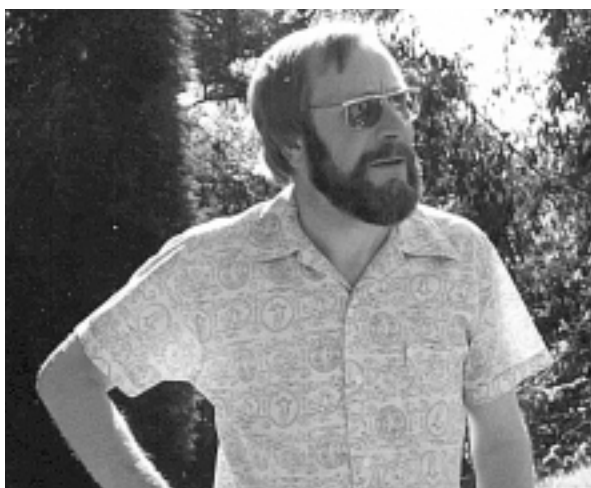
The second way in which John Foyster changed my life was by offering me some treasures that were the basis of my own small success. During 1968 and 1969, John edited a legendary fanzine that he first called *exploding madonna*, then *The Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* (or *JoE* for short). It was legendary because hardly anybody saw a copy, but eventually everybody heard about it. It won a Ditmar Award in 1970. In his magazine, John gathered together the fifteen best SF critics in the world, forced them to talk to each other, challenged them, goaded them, often laughed at them, and they came back for more. In one memorable headline, he wrote: 'Wake up, you lot!' Delany, Blish, Dahlskog, Aldiss, Turner, Knight, Rottensteiner and several others appeared in *JoE*, whose circulation never went over 20 copies. Franz Rottensteiner in Austria sent to John translations of lots of articles by Stanislaw Lem – the first appearance of Lem's work in the English-speaking world. When John shut down *JoE* in 1970, not only did he allow me to reprint the entire run of his magazine as an issue of *SF Commentary* but he handed me the rights to publish Lem's material, in the same month as *Solaris*, Lem's first novel translated into English, was published. The rest is, as they say, a footnote to history. If I never quite conquered the world, it wasn't for lack of help from John Foyster, who went on to guest-edit four more issues of *SF Commentary*.

The third way in which John Foyster changed my life was by forming teams to organise institutions and events that I and many other people still enjoy.

Not only did he organise conventions in the sixties and seventies, often as a team with Leigh Edmonds, but he revived *ASFR* in 1986, edited by a Collective that included, at various times, Jenny and Russell Blackford, Yvonne Rousseau, Janeen Webb and Lucy Sussex. This arrangement was successful for several years, and is credited by Dave Hartwell as being the inspiration for the team approach by which the *New York Review of Science Fiction* is currently produced.

In 1970, John Foyster picked a team who would bid for the right to hold a world SF convention in Melbourne. It's hard to emphasise how unlikely it was in 1970 that this bid could succeed. However, John encouraged every fanzine editor in the country to publish as much as possible during the early seventies and send their magazines overseas. No Internet





The same people in 1982, twelve years after the end of *ASFR* first series, and four years before *ASFR* second series: (Left) Lee Harding. (Right) John Bangsund and John Foyster. (Photos by Elaine Cochrane.)

in those days — publishing and letter writing were the only ways Australian SF fans could make our mark. In 1971, we Australian fanzine editors produced more than 100 different issues of our fanzines, an achievement never repeated. Australian fans also had to start running large conventions in hotels, so that we would be ready for 1975. In 1973, a large group of Australians travelled to Toronto for that year's world convention, and we won the right to hold Aussiecon I in 1975. John was also important in beginning the bid that led to holding another world convention in Melbourne in 1985, and he encouraged Perry Middlemiss and the team to win the bid for 1999. Being part of the world SF community was always a major concern of John's, and he travelled twice overseas to meet the people to whom he had been writing all his life.

John began the Nova Mob in August 1970. John was always concerned that people should talk about science fiction seriously, but they didn't have to be *too* serious. The idea of the Nova Mob is that each meeting would feature a speaker about some aspect of SF, but that the rest of the meeting, and indeed the meeting organisation itself, should be entirely informal. People should also meet for a meal before the meeting. Since I wasn't at the first meeting, I was dubbed in to speak at the second meeting. About 60 people gathered at John Bangsund's flat in St Kilda. Since the sixty people were split between two rooms, I had to speak to the lintel of the doorway between the two rooms. John liked to throw people in at the deep end. The Nova Mob foundered within its first year, so John revived it again a few years later. It failed again. Its weakness was that each meeting took place at the home of a different person, and people simply lost touch with where the next meeting would be. John revived the Nova Mob again in the early 1980s, when he and Jennifer moved into the huge house in Shakespeare Grove, St Kilda, that we remember so fondly, giving the Nova Mob a permanent home until John moved to Adelaide in 1987, where he started its double, Critical Mass. Since then the Nova Mob has moved to the home of Alan Stewart, and then to that of Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner, where its monthly meetings are so successful that often we don't have enough chairs for everybody to sit on.

A very specific way in which John Foyster and Jenny Bryce changed the lives of Elaine and me was by dragging us off to the old Bridport Cinema in Middle Park to see Ingmar Bergman's film of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in 1982. I had listened to few operas, never seen one on film or on stage, and had given up on Bergman films. Seeing this glorious film launched us into buying versions of *The Magic Flute* (at last count, we had owned 16 versions at some time or another), watching opera movies, such as Losey's *Don Giovanni*, or buying and listening to a wide range of other operas. Thanks, Jenny and John.





John Foyster picked up a few Ditmar Awards along the way. Here are the recipients from the Adelaide National Convention, 1985, but I don't know which of these people picked up a Ditmar for him or herself, or for somebody else. Very top: Leigh Edmonds. Second row: George Turner, Lee Harding, and unknown (representative of a media company). Third row: Jenny Blackford, John Foyster, and Merv Binns.



John Foyster and Yvonne Rousseau, 1997.

The central way in which John changed my life was by offering some basic rules for living. Courage, good humour, a contempt for authority and formal rules — well, I've never been much good at any of these, but John sort of showed me a few useful paths to take in life. The main thing that he showed me was to stop trying to emulate John Foyster, and to set off on my own path in life. Not that John ever generalised about life ideals or any of that stuff. He liked to do things, and he liked people to do things, not for themselves but for each other. It's as if we were all in a football team. When John threw the ball my way it usually flattened me, leaving me gasping on the ground. If I was able to catch the ball, I was expected to pass it on. John began a vast number of exciting magazines, ideas and events, then went on to something else when he was sure that his idea had caught on. If you were around at the time, you were supposed to get involved in the next convention, stay in contact with science fiction fans throughout Australia and the world, and above all, keep publishing your next article or fanzine and tell people what you discovered in life. Even after John knew he was dangerously ill, he still managed to publish fifteen bulky issues of his Internet fanzine *eFNAC* and write several of his best articles, including an amazing article about that trip to hospital in September and October 2001.

Why will we remember John? For his courage and good humour and immense ability in many fields, but also because, as a member of the worldwide science fiction world, he handed on to us events and institutions and fanzines and pieces of writing that will benefit us for as long as we live. There are few people you can say that about. Thanks, John.

**Bruce Gillespie, 10 May 2003**

# JOHN FOYSTER: A PERSONAL REMINISCENCE

by Dick Jenssen

I first knew John at the *Melbourne Science Fiction Club* in 1959 when he would have been a mere eighteen years old, but where he immediately impressed me as possessing a maturity much greater than my aged twenty-one years. He was also very smart, which was irksome to me, because then — and even now, I guess — I have a competitive, and sometimes combative, nature. Which in John's case as applied to me was all to the good, for he seemed to thrive on logical, rigorous arguments on all manner of subjects, and these spirited discussions forced me to clarify my thoughts in a wonderfully cleansing way. These interchanges of ideas (even if at times a trifle warm) made us friends, but I was, nonetheless, very surprised — and extremely flattered — when John asked me to be best man at his wedding to Elizabeth Pike.

In 1963 I left Australia for the USA to take up an Assistant Professorship at the University of Wisconsin's Meteorology Department and left the Science Fiction world temporarily. Or so I thought. I returned to Australia at the end of '65, but had been imbued, or brainwashed perhaps, by the US work ethic, and discovered that research and teaching became ever more important and satisfying — so much so that SF was marginalised to an extreme degree. I became increasingly out of touch with its world and its readers. And — I regret to say — with John Foyster. When I returned to the fold in 1992, upon my retirement, John had moved to Adelaide and I saw him only very rarely at the film nights at Race Mathews' home.

When John was diagnosed with a stroke eighteen months ago — September 2001 — that was shocking enough, but to later learn that this was a misdiagnosis, and that he actually was suffering from a brain tumour, was incredibly shattering. It was an incurable tumour, and all the doctors could do was to offer palliative treatment. My last contact with John was two months ago when he 'phoned Race Mathews on a film night, and several of us, myself included, spoke to him. Only a few of us had this privilege because he tired easily.

There are some people who cross our lives and leave them forever changed — and for me, John Foyster was one such, even if *how* he changed my life may have been but incidental to him and inadvertent. On the day before I left Sydney for the US in 1963, I had seen — for maybe the third time



John Foyster as he appeared on the cover of his fanzine *Satura* No. 7, May 1964.

(Photo: Lee Harding.)

— Resnais' film *Last Year at Marienbad*, and had written a two-line comment on it to John. Which he — quite correctly — tore to shreds with his 'acerbic wit', pointing out that what I had said, where it was not superficial, was incomprehensible. John's comments may have been like slashes of a razor across one's ego, but they were never malicious — and they were always valid. So I rewrote my comments and they became two pages. In the process I began to learn how to think critically and how to marshal arguments to support my claims. John Foyster had made me take my first *real* steps towards rigorous analysis. And those first steps are of a never-ending journey which I am still taking.

But, and to many this may seem trivial, a passing comment John made has enriched my life and continues to enrich it. I had known of a supposedly great novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust, which I thought I should read — but I had also heard that it was a 'difficult' novel, and being lazy, I could not bring myself to pick up the first volume. John, in one of his conversations, told me that he had just finished reading it, and I asked him what he thought of it. His reply was 'I would like to read it every year'. Which was enough for me — I knew I *had* to read it. Which I did — not every year, but five times so far. Just as John had done for me, this book made me think deeply about things which I had avoided. Other people, their behaviour, what determined their motives . . . The novel also is full of humour, compassion, empathy and understanding, and forces open one's eyes and heart.

For having been my friend, for showing me how to think critically about Literature and Film, for Proust, and for the joy which these have brought me, I thank John Foyster.

— **Ditmar (Dick Jenssen), April 2003**



(From left:) Dick Jenssen, John Foyster, John Bangsund, 1966.  
(Photo: Lee Harding.)

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# John Foyster's greatest hits, Part 1

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I've just spent a week trying to write a concise article explaining just what John Foyster achieved in his SF criticism, and so far I've failed. After writing about 5000 words, I found that I had covered only some of Foyster's writing for *Australian Science Fiction Review* (ASFR), first series, and some of his material for *exploding madonna*/*Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* (JOE). I hadn't even reached his best work — his material on Cordwainer Smith and his Ballard articles — or his writing for the second series of ASFR, let alone his writing for other magazines. Foyster is hard to pin down, so I'll have another go at the article. Until then, here are some of John's greatest hits/knockout punches.

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## Wake up, you lot!

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Here are some of Foyster's editorial contributions to the fanzine that started life as *exploding madonna* in April 1968, was renamed *Journal of Omphalistic Epistemology* in July 1969, and appeared to bite the dust in January 1970. (Several more issues appeared as Foyster-guest-edited issues of *SF Commentary* throughout the early 1970s.) In January 1969 (*em* 4), he wrote to the recipients of *exploding madonna*:

**Wake up you lot! Here I am with my critical faculties hanging out in the cold and I haven't interested a single soul in talking about the way stf should be approached. Not one. Probably no one cares: it certainly looks that way.**

In fact, Foyster's small circle of readers had been trying to work out how best to reply to the editorial challenge issued in the first issue of *exploding madonna*:

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'If you are going to waste time discussing science fiction, then you should at least discuss it seriously' (K. U. F. Widdershins, Melbourne SF Conference, April 1968).

### No, this is not . . .

a fanzine to be devoted to discussion of images in the works of J. G. Ballard. In fact, you are reading this precisely because you will have recognised (my fingers are crossed at this point) that Dali's 'exploding madonnas' mean a great deal, and J. G. Ballard's are, to a considerable extent, only borrowings, and misunderstood borrowings at that.

However, as an aside, I might remark that you are also receiving this fanzine because, unwittingly and perhaps unwillingly, you have given me the impression, to quote Widdershins [a pseudonym of John Foyster], that you discuss science fiction seriously. I may be wrong, of course, and please don't hesitate to tell me so if that is the case. There is very little you can do about an impression you have created, but you may, with the greatest of ease, dissuade me from annoying you with little pieces of coloured paper. I can take a hint at least as well as the next person, and if I receive no response from you, or only a piece of white paper with a black spot in the centre, why, I won't trouble you further.

Going even further, I might look with favour upon such a response. In purely financial terms each copy of this will cost me about ten cents. If no one wants to read this, I save a couple of dollars: if the number of readers drops, then I save at least some money. I am not in receipt of an income ('out of a job') at the moment, and this is being financed by the sale of SF magazines at the recent Melbourne Conference: when that money runs out — *finis*.

But if a couple of you are interested, let us stagger into the darkness together. You are, by the way, Mr Brian Aldiss, Mr James Blish, Mr Red Boggs, Mr Algis Budrys, Mr Sten Dahlskog, Mr Samuel Delany, Mr Damon Knight, Mr Franz Rottensteiner and Mr Harry Warner . . .

### Some necessary and sufficient reasons

It is extremely easy to be dissatisfied with the kind of criticism or review handed out to SF books or magazines. It is by no means easy to do anything about it. My impression is that Milford has done something about it, yet the few snippets I have heard have indicated that a fair bit of back-slapping also goes on. This has its place, but I do not agree with Mr Warner entirely when he writes: 'A writer is a delicate organism; equally automatically, a reader may be as neurotic as a writer; his criticism, though merely personal fads, may harm the delicate mechanism' (*Horizons* 113, page 2204) . . .

Writers are not *really* delicate organisms, in general. Jack Wodhams (apparently now grinding the Campbell axe) has been very firm with me on this point: he claims that he has never learned a thing from a reader's praise. This may not be universally true, but, faced with adverse criticism, a writer can really do two things: he can ignore the criticism, as being a 'mere personal fad', or he can try to learn something from it. I don't think he could really get hung up on the choice.

A recent writer of note *is* a delicate organism, and another cause of my ire is that it *was* the comment of a neurotic reader (or a series of comments) that has given him a hell of a time. I refer to J. G. Ballard, and the villain of the piece is Moorcock, or perhaps the school of thought

which Moorcock represents. Moorcock did not damn, but over-praised. Certainly Ballard has talent — considerable talent in the field of science fiction. But he did not have the talent Moorcock claimed for him (in particular, the ideas that Moorcock claimed in his editorial in *New Worlds* 167): he (Ballard) seems to have come to believe Moorcock's propaganda. The result, from where I sit, seems to have been disastrous. Ballard has turned completely away from SF itself (which is disappointing) to another field, that of the small magazine. To my mind this is out of his league. I must admit that I haven't seen *ambit* (Customs regs., you know), but Ballard's weaknesses are of *some* fair size.

Disturbed at the thought that Ballard, who has obviously been teetering on the brink of neuroticism ever since he started writing SF (long before Moorcock got at him, too), might take all that Moorcock said seriously, instead of recognising it as editorial puff by a chap who was trying to save his magazine (and I would be the last to claim that Moorcock was a bad editor), I tried to demolish some of these false notions of Ballard's abilities in two articles in *ASFR* in 1967. Regrettably I have not been able to complete the third article, dealing with Ballard's claims to greatness in science fiction. If you recall that Ballard has published about 75 short stories, then you may realise why this is so. I have notes on half a dozen of them, running to about 4000 words. One day I may complete this project, but it will be quite some time in the future and, more importantly, *too late*. The whole project was ill conceived: who will believe that he is Gabriel when he has already been assured by a close friend that he is Ghod?

Whether or not I am wrong in my assessment of Ballard, I am certain that there is a need to offset irresponsible criticism of science fiction, both favourable and otherwise. Since there is little severe criticism of SF today (thanks to the abdication (?) of Messrs Blish and Knight) the most serious problem is that of irresponsible praise. Of course, there will be all sorts of other troubles into which stf can fall, and maybe some brave knights can get to work on those too, but right now I worry more about Moorcock and Ellison getting Hugos or Nebulas or whatever than about Campbell's idiosyncrasies.

Let's be specific: there is a young and talented SF writer in the field who could very easily be influenced by Unsuitable Friends — *quis custodiet?*

There are undoubtedly many readers of stf who have the impression that Keith Laumer is the greatest stylist to come down the pole since . . . aw, hell . . . Bradbury?

What can be done about it?

### But why so secret?

Some of what I have already said, it must be admitted, is best kept private. Clearly *ASFR* is an unsuitable platform. But as a matter of fact this can get nastier. If I had to write about John Baxter and his critical articles, then I *must* be able to say that Baxter's entire knowledge of poetry results from reading Babette Deutsch's li'l intro. Good luck to him if he fools others — but let's play the cards fairly . . .

So what do I want? OK, let's have some

### Aims

- 1 SF can be discussed seriously. It isn't. Can *exploding madonna* be such a place?
- 2 Can SF be discussed seriously without some jerk butting

in? No. But it should be possible to screen out some jerks, some of the time. It is quite unpleasant to have to stop in mid stride to explain just *why* Van Vogt is actually not as good a writer as Tolstoy.

- 3 Can SF be discussed seriously without that jerk Foyster butting in? Certainly. I read very little SF: checking through issues of *ASFR* should tell you exactly what I have read in recent years. Count also my pseudonyms (Widdershins (!Aldiss and Blish!), Maxwell and Escot, amongst others).
- 4 I get censored. My review of Joseph's *The Whole in the Zero* was not printed because Bangsund liked the book. I thought it an unbelievable botch — I know at least BWA disagrees. Furthermore, and I have something in common with Mr Knight here, a review I once wrote of Merrill's *The Tomorrow People* was also tossed aside by another fan-ed. I didn't like it, either.

### Well

Have I bugged it again? Certainly I'm not going to have much room to talk about Brunner ('it took me *five* months to write *Stand on Zanzibar*'). Took Dos Passos rather more than twelve times as long to write *USA*. If I haven't bugged it, and if you are interested in writing seriously about SF, send me something. If not, up yours (politely, of course). I hope to publish another issue in July, in which I may explain why science fiction actually started with *Amazing Stories*, April 1926.

— *exploding madonna* 1, April 1968

### In a few words

I favour the retention of capital punishment as protection for the community as a whole. As matters now stand, say in a country like Australia, the blood lust of politicians may be vented occasionally on those citizens who have, to a greater or lesser degree of certainty, indulged their own uncontrollable hates. If capital punishment were abolished, would not those who have political power become frustrated, and lash out even more madly and erratically than is now the case, killing and injuring those who have done nothing to deserve it, except put up with their leaders? If government ever reaches that stage at which power no longer corrupts, then it might be possible to dispense with capital punishment. Of course, this wouldn't be any worry at all if my other solution were adopted: the ritual execution of political leaders at the end of each calendar year, with possible remissions in the event of popular acclaim (vivify de Gaulle?)

If it is true that politicians are as mad as this, then is it not also reasonable that wars should be conducted? How else can politicians exert their loathsome influence on masses of the public? However, Mr Anthony Burgess had the solution to this problem in his novel *The Wanting Seed*. He suggests that armies of the same government should exterminate each other, the results being canned and given to the poor and hungry of the world. My only variation would be to restrict army service to volunteers. Thus two purposes would be served: the desires for power and killing in politicians would be satisfied at minimum cost to the community as a whole, and the hungry of the world would be helped. What is more, many potential politicians would be eliminated . . .

It all sounds rather wonderful, but if Dean Swift couldn't pull it off, how can I?

As for the other matter, my observations in Australia suggest that most, if not all, of the problems of the race are xenophobic, an outgrowth of that hesitance with strangers with which children are instilled (usually for very good reasons). Foyster's patent solution: since psychologists and psychiatrists have been with us for about a century, and have achieved nothing positive, surely this is a project worthy of study. How can xenophobia be cured? Solves a few other problems on the way, of course. It seems certain to me that somehow the human race must learn to conquer this (admittedly fairly rational) fear of others and otherness. That, Mr Aldiss, is what science fiction writers must try to do.

### Writers of the purple page

Montaigne warns us, in his essay on the art of conversation, never to describe too exactly what it is we like about a particular author. It may simply show, he says, the flaws in our own thought processes, apart from any flaws in the quoted work. I agree wholeheartedly, but maintain that nothing gets as quickly to the crux of the matter as this kind of technique. Consequently, in discussing Cordwainer Smith last year I said, in effect, that because Cordwainer Smith wrote a particular sentence in 'The Burning of the Brain', he was a great writer: shoot me if you will.

On the other hand, Montaigne also recommends as a technique in arguing with someone who deprecates all of his work, as soon as it is mentioned, that we should reply by asking: well, if all of this is so bad, can you show me something which is really you, which you think represents what you really think? This, too, can be a good thing, though I would hesitate to nail any of you on this one (and I hope you would hesitate to reply).

What I'm getting around to, incredibly slowly, is that someone else has gone out on a limb, and the author in question is the late, great John Russell Fearn. Phil Harbottle has put out a beautiful little booklet, which I happen to know is selling like the Edsel, in which he gives opinions of John Russell Fearn (*The Multi-Man*) which are *somewhat* different from my own. It's a labour of love, and largely unrewarded, apparently. Of course, it is just possible that there are writers more deserving of this kind of attention, so that maybe Phil's knuckles should be rapped for choosing so, ah, *unskilled* a writer.

This is where the story really starts. On page 30, Phil says that Fearn (as 'John Slate', on this occasion) produced such great writing as

'I mean, lady, is he on the level, the up and come? I wanta know what you think about him. Don't you get it?' Pulp implored. 'Or don't newspapers mean nothin' to you? You must know that a guy named Pollitt has been bumped off, that a Vincent Grey and a Tom Clayton is mixed up in it. I'm engaged on the American end of the case. See?'

in a novel titled *Thy Arm Alone*. I submit that the word 'engaged' is entirely out of place, apart from any other weaknesses the piece may have.

As it happens, I've tried the same form of criticism on Heinlein and Sturgeon, with similar results, but then no one would claim 'The Roads Must Roll' or 'Thunder and Roses' as great pieces of stfnal writing, would they? Next time I decide to write a ten-line filler, I won't!

### Short subjects

Although some of the following probably merit lengthier discussion, I'll try to boil the next three subjects down to one page.

### The Nebula Awards, 1967

Some aspects of the results announced recently disturb me. Since I haven't read much of last year's output, I guess I should just shut up, but some people never learn. I don't have much objection to the Novel: *An Age* was better, I thought, but *The Einstein Intersection* pretty good. Moorcock's 'Behold the Man' is (a) unbelievably bad and (b) in the past (?). It was published in 1966, just about one year before the runner-up, Anne McCaffrey's 'Weyr Search'. But 'Weyr Search' is much worse, so perhaps 1967 was a bad year for novellae. But a couple of the *If* serials (Farmer, Blish) were better, surely. I dunno about the rest, but generally felt that the whole result was a letdown after seeing the choice of 'Call Him Lord' the previous year.

### Fahrenheit 451

I recently saw this movie, in the 16 mm version. What struck me was the fire engine. I've not seen any mention of the fire engine anywhere before, yet the fire engine was the most important thing in the film. It is extremely easy to say, as so many do, that burning books is bad and awful . . . *ad nauseam*. But, dammit, if I could ride on that fire engine I'd burn any book you named and enjoy it. It was so shiny, so red, so beautiful, humming through the countryside, bell clanging, that I just couldn't resist it. I'm told that in addition the firemen sing a song, which was cut from the 16 mm version. This is just as well, because, had it been included when I saw *Fahrenheit 451* (in the clubrooms of the Melbourne SF Club), I'd have turned around and set fire to the club library.

### 1984

Though I could write with pleasure about Orwell's novel, about which I've recently been hit with a largish chunk of insight, I'm actually going to babble about a survey conducted by *New Scientist* in 1964, in which assorted persons were asked to describe aspects of the world in 1984. You may have seen this either in the magazine or in the Pelican paperback. I direct your attention to the words of Sir Herbert Read, who wrote about the future of the arts:

Already in 1964 few people read books for pleasure; they 'use' them, or even 'view' them (books will have more and more pictures and less and less text). Poetry, already an arcane activity, will have totally disappeared. Fiction, even now a dwindling form of entertainment, will fade out and the only writers will be script-writers for television . . . Composers like Beethoven, Wagner and Stravinsky will be forgotten.

### Punch up

Damien Broderick and myself . . . are normally on the same side, but a recent visit to the Melbourne SF Club almost led to a break.

Poor Damien had read my review of *Faust Aleph-Null*, and found himself to be in complete agreement. Imagine his chagrin at the discovery, via Mr Blish's letter to *ASFR*, that *Faust Aleph-Null* was not cut to ribbons.

He claimed that had I not written my review there would have been no occasion for Mr Blish to shatter his illusion.

Well, we put our heads together and agreed that even if Mr Blish had not written it, we were entitled to the belief that *Faust Aleph-Null* was the bones of a great SF novel. Then we got around to the names. Damien claimed that 'Baines' need not have anything to do with LBJ, as Mr Blish claimed in his letter. I asked Damien how he would feel about a book in which a character named 'Damien' appeared as an evil, sadistic murderer, say. How would he feel about the author's defence that he didn't mean Damien Broderick at all, if Damien were well known to the author, and the author had included the names of other people he knew in the same novel? He conceded the point.

And tackled me about Harlan Ellison and *Dangerous Visions*. I had made some snide remark about having seen the collection, I think, and perhaps I had suggested that it had a cheapish look about it. The gist of his argument was

that my feelings about what I had read of Ellison would obscure my vision to the extent that I would not be able to see the virtues in an Ellison story. I was inclined to agree, but doubted the existence of the supposed virtues. Who, I asked, apart from Ellison, has claimed that Ellison is any good? Dorothy Parker, in her dotage, and Theodore Sturgeon . . . Hmm. I thought that perhaps any violence and sadism in Ellison's work would appeal to Sturgeon, and that this was not my cup of tea. We scratched around for others who thought Ellison might be better than Sydney J. Bounds, but could find none.

Anyway, Damien said, I think Ellison's nothing too, but I thought that your opinions might obscure your vision. Up yours, I said, and we parted cordially.

— *exploding madonna* 2, July 1968

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Which illustrates the cheerful knockabout atmosphere of *exploding madonna*, but hardly explains why Foyster's agonised 'critical faculties' were 'hanging out in the cold' by *em* 4. Perhaps it's because in issue 4 he finds himself still writing most of the magazine, with only four quotable correspondents. He also appears to answer an unquoted letter from Aldiss. So his response rate was about 50 per cent, about what I receive for *The Metaphysical Review*, and a lot higher than that for most fanzines.

Did Foyster's readers eventually leap into into action, or did he keep adding readers and dropping others until the magazine started firing? He added Richard E. Geis, who later reprinted, in *Science Fiction Review*, the long Delany letter that fills *em* 5 (January 1969); and me. I had begged a copy from Foyster after seeing a copy at Lee Harding's. (Lee and John Bangsund were also now receiving copies.)

In *em* 6 (April 1969), Franz Rottensteiner contributes his long article 'Mr Budrys and the Active Life'. Budrys must have been dropped from the mailing list by this time, since he did not respond to Rottensteiner's savage article.

With *JOE* 1 (July 1969) came a feeling that the scope and readership of the magazine were expanding. Lots of interested people now seemed to be reading the magazine, even if they hadn't been sent copies. Franz Rottensteiner's major attack on Heinlein (through an analysis of Panshin's book about Heinlein) appears as 'Chewing Gum for the Vulgar'. Geis also reprinted that one in *SFR*.

Franz Rottensteiner had the bright idea of promoting his hot new client, Poland's Stanislaw Lem, by translating Lem's articles about science fiction (mainly excerpts from his giant book *Fantasy and Futurology*, which has still not been translated into English). Suddenly *JOE*, with a mailing list that was probably still under thirty, was a much-sought-after fanzine. The fact that Foyster closed the magazine and at the end of 1970 handed me this legacy (and in 1971 and 1972 Rottensteiner kept sending me translations of Lem articles) is one of those strokes of luck that I could fumble or run with. I ran with it. I published Lem and Rottensteiner, while John Foyster turned to other, more fannish concerns (*Boys' Own Fanzine* and *Norstrilian News* with Leigh Edmonds; articles for John Bangsund's new fanzine *Scythrop*; and the campaign to secure Melbourne's bid for the 1975 world convention).

During this period, John was attempting to finish his PhD and teach school, and had become involved in a number of other non-fannish pursuits — but you'd never realise this from reading his fanzines.

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**At the same time as Foyster was telling his critical brethren to 'wake up!', he published this article in Ron Clarke's *The Mentor*, a Sydney fanzine with a reasonably large circulation among SF fans:**

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## Science fiction versus life

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The label 'escape fiction' has probably been applied more often to science fiction than to any other literary form. The reason for this label has recently been put rather strongly by Andrew Sarris in reviewing *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Sarris says: 'People who read and write science fiction have always struck me as a bit creepy for expending so much emotional and intellectual energy to cop out on the human situation. I think you have to be somewhat alienated from human life to sit down to consider its extraterrestrial alternatives.'

At the risk of over-interpreting Sarris, who can manage quite well by himself, I suggest that Sarris is referring to

science fiction, and science fiction readers and writers *as a whole*. He does not claim that every person who reads or writes science fiction has this rather fearful failing. However, it has also been put to me rather strongly that possibly no person can be a complete human being unless he or she has, at one time or another, copped out on the human situation and come back again. But this is an aside.

Perhaps the easy line of defence to this attack might be to question whether writers and readers in general do not suffer from this same alienation: one might even go on to ask the same about film producers and film critics. But this



is to ignore the last phrase of Sarris' argument, for he seems to see the extraterrestrial factor as the decisive one. Here, at last, is the opening we have been looking for, for 'extraterrestrial alternatives'. Perhaps we should divert towards this aspect of science fiction — or is this just a semantic trap? Does not, in fact, Sarris mean by this phrase 'extraterrestrial alternatives' just *alternatives*? Alternatives, that is, to our present world and its problems. If so, and I am sure that this is what Sarris intended (or else it is about the strongest argument along this line), then it is at *this* point that science fiction must be defended — or discarded.

The claim is that science fiction rejects the present world and its horrible realities for a dream world: a world in which terrors may exist without involving the reader. The dream world may even hold no horrors, but merely be a pleasant exercise: yet even then the horrors of our own world, which seep over into the most innocuous piece of non-sf, are barred from the reader's experience.

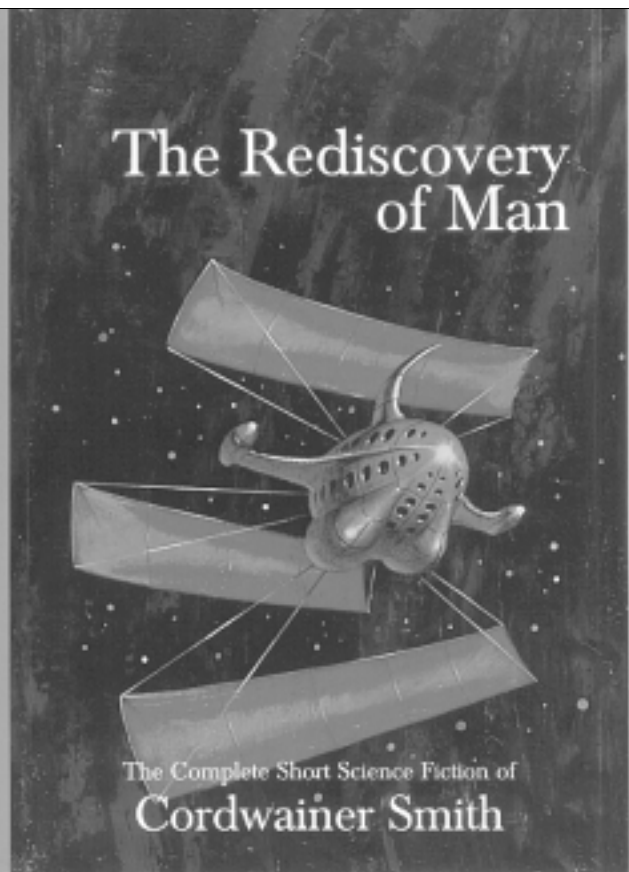
It must be admitted, I suspect, that much of science fiction does fit into just the mould which Sarris has cast: much of it does amount to an escape from this earth of ours on the part of the writer. And even more accurately, it all too often represents a means of escape for the reader. It is not the case that to momentarily forget this world is necessarily to 'cop out', but rather that if all that one does is directed away from the real world, then this

is not just 'a bit creepy', but thoroughly unpleasant.

During 1966, the British science fiction magazine *New Worlds* published a series of four stories by J. G. Ballard, a name possibly known to the thronging millions of Melbourne from the publication in the Herald some years ago of his rather poor novel *The Burning World/The Drought*. Ballard took what he considered to be some of the major myths of our time and threw them together into a hotchpotch in which, so he claims, 'Images and events became isolated, defining their own boundaries'. Not only that, but 'the elements of sequential narrative have been . . . eliminated.' Unpleasant as this may sound, it nevertheless must have been slightly successful, for early in 1967 *Encounter*, then in the throes of self-examination (from a safe distance), printed the last in the series, 'The Atrocity Exhibition'. Undoubtedly the story was used solely on account of its relevance to today's world and use of today's images: it had very few other merits, if any. But it did, to some degree, deal with the world in which you and I and Andrew Sarris live. It is beside the point to recall that Mr Ballard's best fiction has dealt with worlds of fantasy.

Mr Ballard has now ceased to write science fiction, and has been adopted by *ambit*, a small magazine in which he runs competitions of doubtful value. He has, as it were, copped out elsewhere.

Sometimes science fiction writers may try to write of the world in which they live in a very different way. Last year a novel by James Blish told of a hero named Baines who set



out to destroy the world: it should be remarked that Blish denies all connection between his fictional character and the present president of the USA.

Of course, these are rather trivial cases: neither of them exhibit anything more than a trifling concern, on the part of the author, for the world in which he lives. Blish himself has done much better, and in his *A Case of Conscience* (1953, 1958) he deals with a matter of some relevance — alien gods. And there are several other authors who have ventured into reality. Gordon R. Dickson, for example, is now slowly starting to examine the differences in human beings (by extrapolating from humans to aliens, admittedly), and Brian Aldiss' latest novel, *An Age*, although superficially a time travel yarn, is essentially concerned with the evil of our pasts. A notable exception to this list is Theodore Sturgeon, whose writing fits Sarris' comment completely. The fact that Sturgeon is so popular is evidence that science fiction readers do turn their backs to the world.

But there are, or have been, two science fiction writers whose whole output is the result of, and to some extent reflects, a complete acceptance of physical reality. 'Cordwainer Smith' is now dead, but his short stories and novels, all written with one master plan, are wholly based on our present world or on those ideas which have grown out of it. Smith has inserted contemporary references into some of his stories, but these little word games are all but indecipherable, since they are only a joke on Smith's part. But Smith has built into his fiction the occurrences of his everyday life — cats, children — and some of the important

events (?) of his time — the Egyptian revolution. His 'Lords of the Instrumentality' is simply the gov't of the USA, and in writing of Norstrilia he expresses in direct language his liking for Australia and his reasons for so doing. His stories can be read as complete fantasy, but only, I suspect, by those readers to whom Sarris' statement applies.

Samuel R. Delany is still living and still writing. He has cast into science fiction parts of his own life, generally distorting the patterns just enough to give the plot an appearance of fiction. His two most recent novels, *Babel-17* and *The Einstein Intersection*, have been exceptionally well received by science fiction readers, winning three or four awards between them. Both are shorter novels, but Delany is now writing longer pieces, with *Nova* (in press) being about the size of an ordinary novel, and the novel he is at present writing (working title *Prism, Mirror, Lens*) will be over 200,000 words. It is not necessarily easy to see present life reflected in Delany's novels, because of the distortion

mentioned above, and because Delany writes with extreme care (which makes him unusual, as science fiction writers go). Delany is, however, the only presently active science fiction writer who faces the world in which he lives squarely and writes about it. Perhaps Brian Aldiss and some others should be included, but if so, then this is not so plainly revealed in what they write.

Andrew Sarris is certainly correct in that many readers and writers fit this description. But their numbers are decreasing, and it is possible that at some time in the future it will *not* be true of the majority. Until then, writers like Delany, Aldiss, Blish and others will probably continue to make inroads on the world of science fiction slowly: but when the time is ripe, they may be recognised as major commentators on their times.

— John Foyster, *The Mentor* 13, January 1969

## BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Books read since April 2003

### Ratings

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

\*\* **GATHERING THE BONES** edited by Jack Dann, Ramsey Campbell and Dennis Etchison (2003; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-7024-3; 463 pp.; \$A29.95)

It's not too clear what went wrong with the marketing of this book in Australia. Copies lie unbought on bookshop shelves, or you cannot find copies at all. Instead of the rave reviews I expected, in the general press as well as the SF press, there has been silence. *Gathering the Bones* is by far the most intelligent horror/dark fantasy collection published in this country, with major stories from most of the top people in the field. Perhaps that's the trouble — newspaper arts editors associate horror with Anne Rice and crap movies, don't know the names here, and don't even know to whom they should send the review copies. To people in the SF community, the names Jack Dann, Ramsey Campbell and Dennis Etchison guarantee the quality of the product. It's hard to pick favourites from among the treasures here, but my own picks are 'The Dove Game' (Isabelle Carmody), 'The Bone Ship' (Terry Dowling), 'Mother's Milk' (by Adam L. G. Nevill — weird, weird, weird), Chris Lawson and Simon Brown's 'No Man's Land' and 'Memento Mori' (Ray Bradbury showing he's still one of the best in the biz). This is a book you must buy.

\* **NOT THE END OF THE WORLD** by Christopher Brookmyre (1998; Warner 0-7515-3184-7; 503 pp.; £6.99/\$A19.95)

When I think how good Brookmyre can be, and how good he has been (especially in his first two novels and *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*), it

seems a pity to watch him throwing away most of the good ideas in this book. There's a nice science-fiction-disaster idea at the centre of the action, and lots of scattergun ideas zipping around the edges, but the ideas never quite connect. The characters aren't as interesting as in most Brookmyre novels, and he's writing about California, which he doesn't much like. At 503 pages, the book is at least 200 pages too long. (Aren't they all these days?) I'll keep hoping that Brookmyre returns to form with the *next* book.

\*\* **AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT: MY LIFE — A LIKELY STORY** by Robyn Williams (1995; Viking 0-670-85521-9; 327 pp.; \$A22.95)

Not many science broadcasters write their autobiographies before turning fifty, but then, there are very few science broadcasters in the world, let alone people like Robyn Williams. With his cut-glass English accent and John Cleesian mixture of charm, pomposity and absurdity, Williams has done the impossible — keeping the hour-long *Science Show* going since 1972, through endless budget cutbacks and changes of government, often with no staff or only one producer, yet creating, week after week, year after year, seemingly out of thin air, the ABC's highest-rating and most entertaining radio show. Further inducing envy, the man writes superbly. This book is one of the few well-written Australian books of the last decade: not a word too many, it's full of funny and fantastic stories, and Williams overflows with a sense of the breathless enjoyment of living that left me wanting a much longer book than this one. I hope that Robyn Williams, like Barry Humphries, writes a second autobiography when he's old enough.

\* **THE TREE OF HANDS** by Ruth Rendell (1985; Arrow 0-09-943470-9; 269 pp.; £5.99/\$A17.90)

## A modern genre

Reviewed:

Sean McMullen: *Eyes of the Calculator*

Tor, \$63hb, 589pp, 0 312 87736 6

Matthew Richardson (ed.):

*The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*

Halstead Classics, \$22.95pb, 192pp, 1 875684 64 6

The last instalment of Melbourne writer Sean McMullen's 'Great-winter Trilogy', *Eyes of the Calculator*, has recently arrived from Tor Books in New York. *Souls in the Great Machine* (1999), the first book in the series, is based on two novels, *Voices in the Light* (1994) and *Mirrorsun Rising* (1995), first published by Aphelion Books, the enterprising Adelaide small publisher. *The Miocene Arrow*, the second in the series, appeared in 2000.

McMullen depicts a future alternative Australia, an inland civilisation whose people may venture no closer than two hundred kilometres from the coast. As in the first two books, humanity has been attacked by the creatures it took for granted: the highly intelligent cetazoids (whales, dolphins and cephalopods). Having been hunted and polluted, they unite in order to initiate the Call, a telepathic impulse that drives most human beings to hurl themselves into the sea. In the year 3900, only a few areas of the world, including the inland plains of Australia and a mountainous part of North America, are free from the influence of the Call.

Human activity is doubly limited. Before the Call, space-faring humans built the Mirrorsun, a vast ring around the sun to monitor humanity's more dangerous impulses. Two thousand years before the events described in *Souls in the Great Machine*, the Mirrorsun stopped the operation on Earth of electrical machines and all other power sources dependent on non-renewable energy.

McMullen's future Australia is a complex place of make-do technology and intricate responses to difficult limitations. The inland towns have become thriving centres of new states: Southmoor, Central Confederation, the Kalgoorlie Empire and the Alspring Ghans. It's not clear whether these states, separated by competing religions, reflect twenty-first-century social and racial groupings in Australia. They are linked, both internally and across the continent, by a network of 'beamflash towers', which transfer messages by mirror semaphores, and 'paralines', trains that are powered by passengers pedalling as fast as they can. These states are controlled by their Overmayors (politicians) and the Librarians, the top technocrats, operators of gigantic 'calculors', which are computers powered by enslaved computing humans.

In *Eyes of the Calculator*, many of this world's limitations are changing rapidly. Twelve years before, *Mirrorsun*, quite arbitrarily, allowed humans to build electrical machines. At the beginning of *Eyes*, this limitation has been reapplied. Large numbers of mathematically literate humans are herded back into the calculors. At the same time, the Call has abruptly ceased, for reasons that were, I assume, made clear in *The Miocene Arrow*. The empty world is now open to marauding humans, but some areas have meanwhile been occupied by 'aviads', mutant humans who are trying to create their own civilisation.

This a world ripe for vast conflict, but McMullen avoids epic battles. He tells his story entirely through the eyes of small groups of characters, each of which can see only one part of

the picture at a time. In a series of short episodes, he gathers his characters in Rochester, which is now the major city on the Australian continent. Some characters are hired as spies of the ruling Highliber (Chief Librarian), while others are playing games of their own. Samondel is an American who has managed to fly her enormous plane from North America to Rochester, only to have it shot down. The aviads are trying to smuggle as many of their kind as possible off the mainland, to settle in Tasmania. No motive or action is ever as direct as it seems.

McMullen knows his world well, but does not yield to the impulse to lapse into Cook's-tour descriptions. We feel we've lived there, yet we still know little about this civilisation's more mundane aspects. Instead, *Eyes of the Calculator* gains most of its energy from the vibrancy and humour of its characters. They never give in to the overwhelming limitations of their world, but are constantly inventing new ways to survive and understand it. However, they are not reflective characters. Given to the quick fix, brisk fight or emergency solution rather than to deep thought, by the end of the book they are no closer to solving the ultimate problems of their civilisation than they are at the beginning. The novel's tone reminded me constantly of Alexandre Dumas's romances, complete with political intrigue, duels, sword fights, rescues and miraculous escapes. *Eyes of the Calculator* is six hundred pages long, but engaging enough to lead you back to the first two books in the series.

After romping through *Eyes of the Calculator*, which plays with all sorts of ideas about the future, I found it something of a shock to encounter *The Halstead Treasury of Ancient Science Fiction*, whose editor, Matthew Richardson, appears to know nothing about science fiction. Why was the book commissioned? For whom was it intended? I still don't know the answers to these questions.

The Halstead Treasury contains a number of extracts from ancient (pre-1200) texts that might fit into some broad category such as 'wonder stories', as well as pieces that don't fit any category.

The ancient wonder stories include already much-reprinted pieces such as Lucian of Samosata's 'True Story' (second century AD), and 'The Ebony Horse' from *The Thousand Nights and One Night* (1200 AD). 'The Old Bamboo Cutter's Daughter', a Japanese story from AD 900, is perhaps less well known.

Each of these stories recounts wonderful journeys experienced by fundamentally innocent characters. Neither in tone nor content do these pieces have anything to do with science fiction, which is an entirely modern literary form. Science fiction is not, as Richardson claims in his 'General Explanation' at the end of the book, a 'literary tradition', but a response to rapid change in technologically and sociologically evolving societies during the last two hundred years. If Richardson had been able to find a story in which an ancient philosopher speculated on the future history of Athens or Rome, he might have been able to justify the title of his book.

Matthew Richardson knows and loves these works, and has put a lot into re-translating them (sometimes replacing older terms with ludicrous modernisms) and providing detailed commentaries. Ignore the title of this book, and you might enjoy this odd, often entertaining set of classical documents.

— *Australian Book Review*, No. 239, March 2002, pp. 52–3.

A Ruth Rendell book published before I discovered her novels. These days I'm only too familiar with the theme of *The Tree of Hands* — baby snatching. Rendell has used this theme a few too many times in the last decade or so, most memorably in the 'Barbara Vine' novels *A Fatal Inversion* and *Grasshopper*. There's only one twist on the theme in this book, so I won't tell you what it is. This book is well enough written, but offers little to anybody but the Ruth Rendell completist.

\* **THE SILVER DOVE (SEREBRYANYI GOLUB)**

by Andrey Biely; translated by George Reavey

(1909 (this edition 1974);

Evergreen 0-394-17859-9; 419 pp.; \$US3.95)

If you think the Russian novel, as exemplified in some of Dostoyevsky's lesser known works, is a peculiar creature, try this book. See how peculiar a novel can be. On the surface, the prose seems realistic, yet the author expects the reader to laugh at absurd pratfalls whose meaning stays hidden from all but his Russian readers. The main character is an odd failure, his motives tantalisingly incomprehensible. Perhaps the problem is in George Reavey's translation. The writer of the back-cover blurb compares *The Silver Dove* with *Ulysses*, yet what we read here reminds us only of *Love and Death*, Woody Allen's parody of Russian fiction. I didn't get past page 189, despite enjoying the rich prose describing the Russian countryside of the early 1900s.

— Bruce Gillespie, 10 July 2003

