

Steam Engine Time



Issue 2

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The Future of the Genre?

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The Future of the Genre?

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AT LAST, *STEAM ENGINE TIME 2* ARRIVES. WE HOPE THAT THE GAP BETWEEN issues 2 and 3 will be shorter as we iron out the teething problems associated with three busy people running an inter-continental zine by email.

After we sent out the first *SET*, I wondered if we had misjudged the need for another magazine of critical discussion of sf... then the comments and reviews started coming in, and I realised that there was definitely room in the world for us. It's a feeling that has been reinforced over the last few months, as people have come up to us at various conventions, on two continents, asking when issue 2 would be out. (And I know the same has been happening to Bruce in Australia.) I hope your patience has been rewarded.

I'm sure I'm not the only sf reader who wonders if there's a future for the genre and its numerous literary outposts. Sf images are well and truly part of the common cultural currency nowadays, to the point where many people don't even realise that they are a part of a rich visual and literary heritage which extends back more than a hundred years before *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and their ilk. I'm glad that my literary dialect is accessible to all, after years of trying to explain my interest to the non-comprehending, but it doesn't make communication easier. I've lost count of the conversations that began promisingly with a shared enthusiasm for sf, only to stumble as soon as we establish that one of us is talking about blockbuster films, the other about books, or else that our perceptions of written science fiction are so far apart, we might as well be talking about completely different subjects.

Hardest of all is to explain to people that science fiction isn't necessarily about science or space; that it can be about a certain way of looking at the world. I confess, I don't really try to do it any more. It's in the nature of the genre that while the basic components are easily identified, the different ways of using them can vary so greatly that it obscures the discussion, rather than facilitating it, and that for many people, it just isn't that important, so long as there is more of what they like. Which is an attitude that saddens me but it is also a fact of human nature that while some question, many simply accept ... and the world continues merrily on its way.

Nevertheless, it's all too easy to believe that no one's really interested in books any more, until you go to a convention like Boskone, Potlatch or Wiscon, or to an event like the Science Fiction Foundation's recent Celebration of British SF, or else stumble across a strand of serious programming about books, such as the British Science Fiction Association regularly puts on at the British Eastercon. Paul and I, between us, have been present at all these events this year, and have been thrilled to discover that people still want to talk about science fiction and fantastic literature in *all* its variations, and with such *intensity* it's truly breathtaking. There are moments when the exchange of ideas is so intoxicating it's completely overwhelming, and yet you just have to get up next morning and go back for more.

My hope is that *Steam Engine Time*, alongside more venerable colleagues, such as *Foundation*, *New York Review of Science Fiction* and *Vector*, will help to keep the discussion going in between such memorable gatherings and help to celebrate the diversity of our remarkable genre. ◆

A Word Beginning

With 'D'

Claire Brialey

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A version of this article appeared in *Acnestis*, in August 1998.



I'M LOOKING FOR A WORD BEGINNING WITH 'D'. JOHN KESSEL'S *CORRUPTING DR Nice* (Gollancz, 1998) is either disappointing or deceptive. I thought it was a relatively enjoyable book, but it could have been more – or lighter, or funnier. Then again, it deals with some fairly weighty subjects: time travel, tampering with history – or, more to the point, with other people's present – time paradoxes and so on. I mean, it could be proper skiffy. Oh, and there's some stuff about love, deception and the power of populism too. But it does all this in a very frilly way that makes me wish that Kessel hadn't bothered.

I understand that it's meant to be a comedy: the BSFA's *Vector* carried a review from Joseph Nicholas that seemed to say it was the funniest book in the history of the world ever; the cover carries dazzling endorsements from Ursula Le Guin, Paul McAuley, Jonathan Lethem and Kim Stanley Robinson – who claims it is 'the best time-travel novel ever written'. Most importantly, nearly all the friends whose opinions about books I usually respect and which usually aren't wildly divergent from my own have clearly got something out of this which I haven't and agree that it is incontinence-inducingly amusing. I don't recall having had a sense-of-humour bypass, so I'm puzzled by the fact that (a) it isn't actually very funny and (b) the serious bits are more interesting, or at least they are if you think them through, which is something you're probably not meant to have time to do while you're rolling on the floor clutching your ribs.

Much of what I'm about to say, therefore, must miss the point, or at any rate not reflect what's in the book. I don't think it's at all a bad thing for a book to make you want to think more or know more about some of the main issues it covers; but it's probably not such a good thing when you end up more interested in all the stuff you can extrapolate than in what the author actually wanted to write about.

For instance, I liked Kessel's solution to one of the classic time-travel paradoxes of whether going back in time irrevocably changes the time you came from. No, he says firmly, it doesn't. Rather than a single time line, what you have is a series of time *moments* which you visit. You can change the moment while you're there, but you don't change the way that time originally was for you. More to the point, you don't change the time moment that comes next, which makes it a lot easier for different parties of gawping tourists to go to the same historical events. I'm not quite convinced that this works, but it's plausible if you don't think about it for too long and it doesn't make your brain leak out of your ears while you do think about it.

Take an example. In your history, there's a religion that believed that some character called something like Jesus Christ was the Son of God and was crucified and resurrected. You go back in time and find that he did exist, sort of, and he was crucified, but he *wasn't* resurrected. For reasons of your own which are never fully explained, you or some of your contemporaries go back in time again and spirit him away just before he got crucified, when he was just some Jewish bloke called Yeshu who'd attracted a respectable number of followers including some Zealots and some Essenes who you

always knew wouldn't agree when he'd gone. That version of history in the Middle East starts to turn out differently, and it becomes quite a popular time resort from which to jump to other events from your own existing history – like the Crucifixion, that favourite haunt of time travellers. Yeshu, meanwhile, goes into retreat in your own time; so to fill the public demand for Jesus (since a lot of people, even knowing that the literal resurrection did not happen at any point in anyone's history, still believe in their figure of Jesus; and even the people who don't actually *believe* are kind of interested) you or your contemporaries have to pop back to another bit of time and abduct him again, from a different point in his ministry. Several times. This time, at least so far, while he's still young, you get a person who's more than happy to appear on chat shows. And it seems that only you can really do it; historicals tend not to float around one another's time periods, and no one from the future comes back to do the same to anyone from your time. You also seem not to be able to visit the future, an issue which no one questions.

That's all just scene-setting. That sort of behaviour is almost accepted, at least by the people in your time; there are a few pressure groups like the Committee to Protect the Past, who really don't think this sort of thing should happen and who feel that visiting other time periods is Not Right. But the real opposition, unsurprisingly, comes from the time moments you've bugged about with. You might think you're bringing development and employment, but some of the people you've brought it to think you're bringing oppression and an alien culture. Of course, some of them are pretty keen on the alien culture, some can even make something new and good out of the whole experience. This would be a loss to any time – to all time, given how easy it is to get between times – if you hadn't started doing this. But what happens if the opposition start to fight back, using the weapons and techniques that you've introduced to them? Who is really culpable – and does it negate or confirm their moral arguments for not being interfered with? So, like most of the cultural and ethical questions about science and progress and development and equity which are familiar to the post-colonial generations, there are too many sides to the debate to be able to see all of them. Action once taken presents you with a situation far more complicated than the hypothetical arguments you should have had in advance.

One of the good things about this novel is that it does present some dilemmas to which the reader can relate, and the advantage of it being science fiction is that it can do this without choosing something that

parallels too exactly any situations we have now and thus avoid drawing too telling and irritating little morals about our world view. Some parts of the argument seem easier to deal with, but aren't really since you can never divorce one part of the issue from another: should interventionist tours – where, rather than being an (ideally) inconspicuous tourist, you can actually take a part in events and change the course of that history directly, often violently – be allowed? What if it's righting a historical injustice, or saving the good guys? What if you're genuinely putting yourself at risk rather than just taking part in a virtual experience? What if it's only a virtual experience and no one, including the historicals, really gets hurt (or at least that's what they tell you)? Should anyone be allowed to uproot living creatures from their own time, whether 'for their own good', to further scientific study, to use as a resource or just because they felt like it? Where do you draw the line?

It doesn't have comic timing and it doesn't create a warm glow of sympathy with the characters. Oh, and it didn't actually make me laugh.

The book raises all these issues, some explicitly and some when you begin to think it through. It doesn't preach at you; in fact there's no palpable authorial voice at all. That's another interesting thing: the narrative perspective changes, sometimes from one scene to the next.

There are several points where you get to see a scene played back from the perspective of another character, even to the point of using the same words to describe actions but filling in the viewpoint and perception for a different person. It's a nice touch, not overused, and one that demonstrates well how misunderstandings can arise from simple situations, but it makes some of the other sections where you're not getting any insight into any of the characters, including the one you're following around, rather less engaging.

And the characters themselves aren't that gripping, frankly. The heroine's relatively sympathetic, but not particularly comprehensible. She falls in love, gets hurt, plots revenge – a relatively convoluted revenge, too, which could have been done more simply or, if that's what she's trying to do, more effectively – gets it, realises it's not as good as she hoped, goes looking for her bloke again and, I suppose we are meant to assume, gets him on the sort of terms they've both realised they're happy with. And I'm still not sure he's worth it. He's OK, I suppose, although the epithet 'Dr Nice' is initially quite accurate (you know, sort of *nice*: averagely attractive, kind and well-meaning but not particularly sensitive, generally not very exciting) and, as you see him in the post-misunderstanding section, not really that appropriate at all, since he's baffled by the wider moral implications of his work and pretty easily seduced by some-

one who happens to *look* like the woman he thought he loved. He's meant to be a brilliant scientist, but she can run rings around him intellectually in almost every respect other than his specialism. And he's got an irritating and slightly unhinged bruiser of a bodyguard whom he can't shake off because unfortunately he's an AI implanted in Dr Nice's brain. Our hero does see a little of the error of his ways and try to help the cause of the historicals who would have preferred to stay that way, but he still doesn't seem to be able to appreciate the big picture and understand the big issues.

So, how is Dr Nice corrupted, exactly? Is it just because he falls in love with a woman who is not the pure soul he expected, thinks she's led him on and let him down and yet comes to realise that he loves her anyway? Or is it because he realises his own motives aren't so pure and that he is not above his own ethics about meddling in time?

Personally, I could do without the cute dinosaur and the possibly hilarious consequences, too. I realise this is meant to be an integral part of the comedy, but whilst it might work visually, the format just can't hack it: watching someone take a pie in the face will always be funnier than reading about it. And yet ... Dr Nice's parents are a bit flaky, but they're also too unpleasant to just be funny and too weird to just be unsympathetic. And it might be funny to go driving through the night in a truck looking for an escaped dinosaur and avoiding policemen – and if you're a fan of *Bringing Up Baby*, you may be in ecstasies over the homage at this point – but the way it's written here doesn't sparkle. It doesn't have comic timing and it doesn't create a warm glow of sympathy with the characters. Oh, and it didn't actually make me laugh.

But the stuff about *people* is interesting. A lot of the worst things about time tourism – crass interventionist tours, modern and thus entirely anachronistic hotels, the subversion of 'local' life into inappropriate kitschy activities and the local populace into a workforce for tourism – are driven by what people want (and this parallel with the non-science fictional late twentieth century is, unlike most of the ethical aspects of the book, all too distinct and direct). People are insensitive and stupid, we know that. And nowhere are they more insensitive and stupid than in making judgements about other people. Here and now (2063) they can even do it literally: 20 per cent of the weight of decision in a criminal law case is decided by the mood of the people, and counsel for both sides can see a constantly updated monitor of what that mood is, in reaction to different witness

statements. There's even a possible verdict of 'guilty but innocent': 'the defendant has been found guilty of the crime he is charged with, but ... due to extenuating circumstances, malfeasance by the arresting authorities, extreme popularity – whatever – his guilt doesn't matter.'

And you can change your personality if you'd rather be a stereotype than work on who you are; personality-enhancing drugs and software are almost the norm. People can express themselves as individuals, but the effects are more and more of the mass. Dr Nice's lifestyle is based on this system; his mother and father have become obscenely rich by seizing the right market opportunities and continuing the downward spiral of the selfish society.

Fortunately there is a contrast. Simon the Zealot, the former apostle turned historical freedom fighter, is more fully rounded than most characters here and

has a dead wife, a troubled son, and a cousin who was abducted by some meddlers from the future just when he was about to die for what he believed in. He's got some genuine problems to care about; quite apart from his personal life, to Simon time tourism is a real issue and not just an ethical think-piece.

Much of what I found most interesting about the society portrayed here and what this future could be

like underlies the book rather than being a part of it; it's more interesting, in many ways, than the plot that operates on the surface – which is why I don't know what this book is or whether it works. It's not a difficult book to read, and the various ethical points about time travel and about the influence of popular opinion are raised clearly as well as repaying further thought afterwards. The science strikes me as more dodgy; it can be a bit distracting if you start to think about it too hard while you're reading.

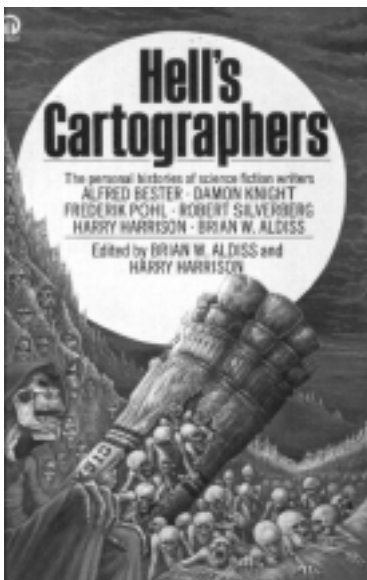
I think, on the whole, that *Corrupting Dr Nice* is both deceptive and disappointing; Le Guin offered 'dazzling', McAuley 'delightful' and 'dizzy', none of which sum it up for me at all. You don't have to be wisecracking and superficial to be funny, and you don't have to be solemn and stodgy to be serious, but I think John Kessel should have decided whether he wanted to be deep or frivolous here and when, or how, to mix the two. And if it is more important as a sf-nal homage to screwball comedy than as a science fiction story in its own right, then it loses out miserably to Connie Willis's 'Spice Pogrom' – and I think it's not a sub-genre that needs expansion. Especially not to novel length. ♦

People are insensitive and stupid, we know that. And nowhere are they more insensitive and stupid than in making judgements about other people.

The Pure Quill: SF Biographies and Autobiographies

Bruce Gillespie

BRUCE GILLESPIE originally delivered this paper as a talk to the Nova Mob in Melbourne on 3rd August 2000. Subsequent comments by Lucy Sussex and Alan Stewart are noted at the end, turning this into what Bruce now calls ‘an Article that Has Barely Begun’.



GO INTO ANY MAJOR BOOKSHOP, SUCH AS THE BRUNSWICK STREET BOOKSTORE or Reading's, and you will find large sections on biography and autobiography, many of them on and by professional writers.

Go into a science fiction bookshop and you find no such section. If Justin Ackroyd, for instance, set up an ‘Autobiography’ section at Slow Glass Books, he might be able to scrape up one shelf of books. If he set up a ‘Biography’ section, how many books would be on it? Two? three?

I looked in the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. There are no entries for ‘Autobiography’ or ‘Biography’, despite the *Encyclopedia's* propensity for theme articles.

Is it that science fiction writers do not lead eventful lives? Or are readers of sf uninterested in the lives of their favourite writers, unlike the readers of most other forms of fiction and non fiction? Or is there something very odd about science fiction, precluding biography and autobiography?

My own interest in the lives of writers goes back to childhood and to Enid Blyton. Enid Blyton was the most popular writer of children's fiction in Britain and throughout the British Commonwealth during the 1940s and 1950s, and still manages to sell a few million copies a year. People younger than me will not remember that Enid Blyton's career was carefully promoted by her publishers, including the publisher, during the 1950s, of the monthly *Enid Blyton's Magazine*, which was subtitled ‘The only magazine I write’. Until Blyton began to suffer from Alzheimer's disease in the late 1950s, she wrote a large number of books per year, as well as writing every word of her own magazine. She wrote a monthly editorial directed to her readers, which gave us glimpses of an English country paradise in which Enid Blyton and her family led blissfully happy lives and she wrote all those wonderful books for us, her adoring readers. (The truth was very different, as readers of Barbara Stoney's biography will find out.) Reading these magazines in the early 1950s gave me the notion – one that never occurs to many people – that books are actually produced by *people* called *writers*, and to earn my living as a writer when I grew up sounded much better than any of the alternatives.

Having learned this lesson from Enid Blyton, I wrote the odd bits of fiction when I was a child, until I realised I wasn't much good at it. In my early teens I received another surprise – I discovered that science fiction was *also* written by writers, real people sitting behind real typewriters. I had seen the writers' names in the magazines, mainly, to an Australian boy, very exotic names, such as Fritz Leiber, Kris Neville with a ‘K’, Cordwainer Smith, Roger Zelazny and Thomas Disch. But I had no clear idea of who these people could be, except that I thought they must be making heaps of money if their stories kept appearing in my favourite magazines.

Imagine my shock and disillusionment when in 1962 I began reading *Amazing*, and found a series of articles by Sam Moskowitz, each one of them a short biography of an sf writer. These essays were later collected in two volumes, *Explorers of the Infinite* and *Seekers of Tomorrow*. As far as I can discover, they were the first biographies of genre sf writers.

Moskowitz's most disillusioning revelation was that sf writing was

produced by people who didn't mind being paupers, if they were full-time writers, or didn't mind taking on boring mundane jobs, just like everybody else, if they wanted to eat.

Take Moskowitz's short biography of E. E. Smith. By the 1960s Smith was a legendary figure in the field. But Moskowitz told me, without irony, that for the sequel to *The Skylark of Space*, which had made Smith's name in science fiction, 'Amazing Stories' voluntarily paid him three-quarters of a cent a word for that second story, a quarter of a cent more per word that they had paid any author up to that time'. Moskowitz considered this a triumph. Even when I allowed for inflation rates since the early 1930s, I calculated that the only way an sf writer could make a living wage would be to type many thousands of words per day.

In Smith's case, the rates he was receiving for sf had nothing to do with earning a living. While churning out the novels that made him the hottest writer in the field during the 1930s, he earned his living as a doughnut specialist. At the same time as the serialisation of *The Skylark of Valeron* was making *Astounding* into the most successful SF magazine of the thirties, Smith:

shifted to Dawn Doughnut, Jackson, Michigan, in January 1936, on a salary plus share-of-the-profits arrangement. To get his new firm out of the red, he worked 18 hours a day, seven days a week, for almost a year, even designing new machinery to implement his plans. Once the company was over the hump, he sat down and wrote an 80-page outline for a 400,000-word novel divided into four segments: Galactic Patrol, The Grey Lensman, Second Stage Lensman and Children of the Lens.

Smith never could escape the doughnut business—until he retired.

In *Seekers of Tomorrow*, Moskowitz also tells the story of John W. Campbell, who during the 1930s was also selling a large number of stories, both under his own name and that of 'Don A. Stuart':

Campbell returned to his home state of New Jersey, in 1935, working at a variety of jobs: the research department of Mack Trucks in New Brunswick; Hoboken Pioneer Instruments; and finally Carleton Ellis, Montclair, in 1936 ... Campbell was able to tolerate only six months of writing and editing textbooks and technical literature for Ellis ...

By the end of the thirties, Campbell had solved the problem of earning his living by taking over the editorship of *Astounding* and making it into the most successful sf magazine ever. But he published no fiction after that, except 'Who Goes There?'

II

If sf writers did not write for money, why did they do it? Moskowitz has often been derided for his

enthusiastic, un-ironic approach to sf writers and their craft, but reading a fair number of sf autobiographies has convinced me that he came as close to the truth as anybody.

Of E. E. Smith's *Skylark Three*, Moskowitz writes:

Tremendous battles of conflicting forces with an assortment of offensive rays and defensive force screens were popularized by the new novel. Spaceships miles in length and a fabulous array of bizarre aliens which justified the novel's subtitle 'The tale of the galactic cruise which ushered in universal civilization', became standard science-fiction fare. Science-fiction writers would never again be bound to their solar system.

Damon Knight says it even better, in his book *The Futurians*, published in 1977. Teenage Damon has just discovered the science fiction magazines:

In one of his short stories, 'We Also Walk Dogs', Robert A. Heinlein says of a character's first experience of beauty: 'It shook him and hurt him, like the first trembling intensity of sex.'

Christ! Beauty was not in it, or sex either – I knew them both, and they were pitiful, pale things in comparison. Battleships hanging upside down over New York! Men in radio tubes being zapped by electricity! Robots carrying off pretty girls in Antarctica! Here was the pure quill, the essential jolt, so powerful that if my parents had understood what it was they would have stopped my allowance, painted my eyeglasses black to keep me from reading such stuff.

So what is it about 'the pure quill, the essential jolt' that inspires sf writers to lunatic efforts at insulting pay rates, but stops most of them from writing their autobiographies?

The most obvious answer is: those insulting pay rates. Moskowitz's books make it obvious that most sf writers of both the first two Golden Ages of sf, the early 1930s and the early 1940s, were too busy scratching a bare living to have time to produce personal or reflective writing. A few of them, such as Knight, wrote book reviews for a living, and some wrote more personal material for the fanzines. Others, such as Frederik Pohl, became editors of sf magazines until they felt financially secure enough to resume full-time writing. Most of them were young people who were constructing the genre and writing at manic speeds to pay the rent. They had little time to stop for reflection, and not yet enough memories to make a book.

Eight years after Moskowitz's collections, the next major attempt at documenting the people who write sf was *Hell's Cartographers*, edited by Brian Aldiss and Harry Harrison, in 1975. In his Introduction, Aldiss writes:

My thought was to invite the men [sic] who have been most successful in inventing such fictional scenarios to write a brief memoir of themselves. They were asked to be as frank as possible about their lives and to discuss their involvement in the world of science fiction.

The result is a book of unique significance. We have been the weather men flying above alien cities, and we have not delivered our reports before. When we began to write, it seemed as if we were doomed by our beliefs to work in obscurity. Yet ... what we had to say proved to be on a subject with which millions of people of our generation were concerned ... We are an entirely new sort of popular writer, the poor man's highbrows.

I find it startling to return to *Hell's Cartographers* 25 years after first reading it. Three of its authors have since written autobiographical books based on their 50-page essays in this book. They are Damon Knight, Frederik Pohl and Aldiss himself. In each case, the original short essay is more frank and gives more information to the sf reader than do the later books. Aldiss, in his essay 'Magic and Bare Boards', draws a clear map of how his career developed, a map that is obscured in *The Twinkling of an Eye*, his autobiography. Much the same could be said of Damon Knight, whose own story, told clearly in *Hell's Cartographers*, is more interesting than the stories of the people he describes in *The Futurians*.

The Futurians were the group of sf fans who gathered in New York in the 1930s, and later became some of the best-known sf writers and editors in America. They included Pohl, Knight, Don Wollheim, Judith Merril, Isaac Asimov, when he was very young; James Blish, Cyril Kornbluth, Virginia Kidd, Robert Lowndes and other people who are now nearly forgotten, such as John Michel. Pohl's *The Way the Future Was* and Knight's *The Futurians* are vivid autobiographies because their main characters are imbued with the two main characteristics of sf writers: they were willing to live on infinitesimal amounts of money for the sake of writing sf, and they showed a remarkable independence from — or indifference towards — the mainstream of ordinary American life of the thirties and forties.

In *Hell's Cartographers*, Knight writes of his first encounter with the Futurians:

[They] were an odd-looking group. Wollheim was the oldest and least beautiful (Kornbluth once introduced him as 'this gargoyle on my right') ... Lowndes was ungainly and flatfooted; he had buck teeth which made him lisp and sputter, and a hectic glare like a cockatoo's. Michel was slender and looked so much more normal than the rest that he seemed handsome by contrast, although he was pockmarked and balding. He had a high voice and stammered painfully. Cyril Kornbluth ...was plump, pale and sullen. He had narrow Tartar eyes and spoke in a rumbling monotone ... He liked to play the ogre ...

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From my first reading of Knight's article 25 years ago I remembered him as saying, 'The Futurians were the ugliest group of people I had ever met', but he doesn't actually say this. He only implies it. Nearly all of his new companions had serious health problems, although only Kornbluth died before he was forty. All had had dislocated childhoods. So had most of the writers described in Moskowitz's books.

Of course, dislocated and lonely childhoods do not guarantee that a person will grow up to become an sf writer. What it means is that when such a person has brilliant ideas, he or she won't feel that social constraints need stop him or her from leading a writer's lifestyle: hand to mouth, obscure, raffish, and fun. Knight writes about one of the Futurian apartments, the type of setup that fans would later call 'slan shacks':

[At the] Futurian Embassy ... Kornbluth stayed over on weekends; he lived with his parents, and so did Wollheim. None of us had any money; for amusement in the evenings, we played poker for stakes of 15¢ each, and drank California wine at 50¢ a gallon. Once or twice when Chet and I were sent out for wine, we bought the cheaper stuff at 35¢ and pocketed the difference.

The Futurians tells stories of drunken parties, near starvation, feuds between the Futurians and the rest of fandom — feuds that were never forgotten by Moskowitz, for one, since the only Futurian he profiles in his books is Asimov, who left the Futurians

when he was very young — and feuds between various factions of the Futurians, endless wanderings from one apartment to another as rent day approached, and a bewildering range of male-female relationships.

The mood and tone of the Futurian lifestyle can be found in my favourite two stories from the book:

[After one Futurians meeting] The 'Things to Come' suite and other recorded fantastic music was played for the edification of the members' aesthetic sides. Not scheduled were playing same pieces backwards & taking of Asimov on thrilling rocket-ride, blindfolded, with eggbeater, clanking spoons, spacial [sic] sound effects. Mr A. was also successfully levitated, after involved, highly complicated ritual.

The Futurians' method of levitating someone was to get him to lie down on a couch or floor, telling him that after a short time he would rise, 'untouched by human hands'. Then they just left him there; when he got tired of this he would get up, and the Futurians would say, 'See?'

The second story features James Blish, who had a peculiar place in the Futurians, since in the 1930s he

was just as loudly and theoretically pro-fascist as most of the rest were loudly and theoretically pro-communist, yet his aspirations and lifestyle were much the same as theirs:

[Blish] *was more than ordinarily fond of cats, and told many stories about them. Once, when a small kitten climbed up the inside of his trouser leg ... he discovered that the only way to get it out was to open his fly. In the midst of this operation, he glanced up and found himself being observed with fascination by a neighbor across the airshaft ... 'And when I met her on the stairs the next day, she muttered, "My God, ears!"'*

The Futurians engaged in musical beds with a guilt-free enthusiasm that people of the late sixties and early seventies thought they had invented. Judy Zissman, who became Judy Merrill, married two of them, and other female companions, such as Virginia Kidd, tried the range of these unprepossessing lads before settling down with one or other of them. All the Futurians married several times.

It occurs to me that these tales could not have been published in America until the 1970s. In the fanzines, yes, and probably were. But not in hardback books from respectable publishers. When I began buying sf magazines in the early 1960s, the mere existence of science fiction itself was somehow horrifying to my parents and people like them. At that time, because I insisted on reading on the school bus instead of joining in the general mayhem, I stickytaped a portable brown-paper cover which I used to cover my paperback books while I was reading them. Much better to do that than risk derision when people saw that I was reading an sf book. Think what it must have been like in the 1940s to be an sf writer or fan! The Futurians regarded themselves as radically left wing, but what really separated them from the surrounding society was their enthusiasm for science fiction. Add to that a sense of sexual freedom that would have been unthinkable to most Australians, even in the sixties, and you have people whose autobiographies were not likely to sell well.

III

Why autobiography or biography at all? In the last twenty years, autobiography and biography have developed into a highly successful publishing category. It's a category that can be easily derided, for instance, as novels for people who don't want to read fiction. The trouble is that most autobiographies are, not surprisingly, written by writers, and by necessity writers lead very boring lives. They sit and write. If they don't, they starve.

In *The Age*, 28 July 2000, Lucy Sussex writes: 'the test of a good biography is whether the sense of the subject as a person is conveyed'. Yes, I agree, but would point out that usually the person must be

already famous enough to be written about. It's very hard for an unknown writer to publish an autobiography merely because he or she has written a good book.

I would also say that, no matter how interesting the life being written about, we want from an autobiography something more than the life itself. My favourite biographies are David Marr's of Patrick White, Hazel Rowley's of Christina Stead, and Veronica Brady's of Judith Wright. All are powerful books because these people leap out of the page, because the biographers have created on the page the whole environment from which they can leap.

What do we find in science fiction? Very few biographies, for a start. There are Charles Platt's pen portraits in the two *Dream Makers* collections, Robert Crossley's superb biography of Olaf Stapledon and two biographies of Philip K. Dick, about which I've already talked at the Nova Mob, and ... what else? There is Ronald Miller's funny and horrifying *Barefaced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*, now nearly unobtainable because, I'm told, some years ago the Scientologists world wide sought out and destroyed every copy they could find. There are no biographies of sf's leading figures, such as Campbell, Heinlein, either Kuttner or Moore, Asimov, Sturgeon, Aldiss, Ballard, Le Guin, or Disch. Some of these people have produced autobiographies. There is Asimov's peculiar autobiography – very readable, but essentially a sort of long list of his triumphs in selling stories and books to various publishers. There are no biographies of women or autobiographies by them. I've heard rumours of a Merrill autobiography, which didn't appear before her death, and a Tiptree biography.

I know of one perfect autobiography in our field: Jack Williamson's *Wonder's Child*. Nobody ever praised Williamson's style when writing fiction, and nothing in Williamson's fiction could have prepared us for the clear prose and wise musings of his book. Williamson tells the story of how, at the time of his childhood, his parents found themselves in the most marginal farming land in New Mexico, how he grew up with no money and little schooling, how he failed to fit in to his rural society, so began reading and writing; how he was so shy that it took him until his late thirties to pop the question to the girl he should have married when he was young, how he spent all those years questioning himself, berating himself for loving sf and risking much to continue writing it, and eventually realising that he was going to go broke, how he picked up the bits of his life, and became a teacher, then one of the first sf academics, introducing courses in the subject long before other American colleges would do so. *Wonder's Child* is perhaps the sweetest, most modest and realistic book produced in our field. It's an extraordinary picture of America during the Depression. Perhaps only some of the great Depression novels or Woody Guthrie's

autobiography give the same sense of trying to survive in that society.

Nobody could ever accuse Brian Aldiss or George Turner of modesty. (Modesty is not a survival trait among sf authors.) For two people who disliked each other on sight, it's extraordinary the parallels between their attitudes and experiences. Aldiss's autobiography is *The Twinkling of an Eye* and George's is *In the Heart or in the Head*. What makes Aldiss and Turner different from most other people in the sf field is that their tastes were as much shaped by the wide world of English-language literature as by science fiction. Both would like to have been as well known in general literature as in science fiction, with the difference that Turner published mainstream novels before he began publishing science fiction novels, while Aldiss has alternated between sf and mainstream, or mixed them, probably in the long run doing his career in both fields more harm than good.

The other link between Turner and Aldiss is the overwhelming effect that World War II had on them. Turner wrote little about the war in his autobiographical work, but he wrote two novels directly based on his experience, and many of his characters in his sf novels are soldiers. Aldiss's description of his war experiences in *Twinkling* is the book's most vivid section. What is unexpected is the sheer exuberance with which Aldiss remembers India, Burma, Sumatra and the other places where he spent the war. The same can be found in his fiction that draws on those experiences. *Hothouse*, my own favourite, seems on rereading a metaphor for his war experiences: filled with a love of a sun-scorched, dangerous landscape (the giant jungle in *Hothouse*; Burma in real life) and a growing horror of approaching a safe, sun-starved landscape (the border with the dark side of the earth in *Hothouse*; the return to Britain after the war in real life). Turner's attitude to many things was indifference or grim stoicism, but as Judy Buckrich, his biographer, points out, *A Young Man of Talent*, his first novel, which is based on his war experience, is filled with a similar love of the ferocious beauty of the New Guinea landscape.

Aldiss and Turner are also alike in that they became hardworking and respected critics of the sf field as well as writers of fiction. In them we see the impulse to overcome and replace the naïve attitudes in sf that we find expressed most clearly in Moskowitz's work, but also feature in many of the other sf autobiographies. Aldiss and Turner want sf to be so much better than it is. Oddly, Aldiss's crusade for a better brand of sf is expressed much

more clearly in his piece in *Hell's Cartographers* than in *The Twinkling of an Eye*. In the latter book, I get the feeling that Aldiss has, somewhat ruefully, almost given up on the improbability of sf. Turner, on the other hand, as he became older became more concerned about the future and about sf's ability to deal with the age-old problems of humanity. Half his autobiography is about sf and its possibilities! We always come back to Damon Knight's 'the pure quill'—the quality of science fiction itself is what makes sf autobiography a unique genre.

Do we really need sf autobiographies or biographies?

Yes, we need sf biographies and autobiographies to gain a sense of the history of our own field. This was the strength of Moskowitz's pioneering efforts. The struggles of the writers mirror the struggles of the genre itself. Those early years were exhilarating

to their practitioners. They traded ideas with each other, and somehow remained alive, despite the insulting word rates they were offered, the essentially crummy nature of the pulp magazines in which they appeared, and the absolute contempt with which they were treated by the rest of society.

We also need sf biographies and autobiographies for the qualities that they haven't exhibited so far. For instance, few sf autobiographies give us much idea of what the writers find exciting in sf itself.

Asimov's autobiography is a faithful record of the growth of the sf industry. Pohl's and Knight's are more about the sf lifestyle than about the literature.

I would like sf autobiographers to stop being defensive about themselves and their craft. Most of them give the impression of leaving out any details that do not help their public image. Few of them, except Jack Williamson, attempt an in-depth exploration of what the author has found out about life. We certainly need some autobiographies by women sf writers, as we have none at the moment.

More importantly, we need what has been missing in sf, except in the case of George Turner: the biography that can be compared with the autobiography. Turner's is the only case since H. G. Wells of an sf writer who has written an autobiography and who has also been written about. This talk began with the aim of comparing the two books, but became sidetracked. Such a comparison would take another few thousand words.

I apologise for not having gone back to Crossley's biography of Stapledon, or Sutin's biography of Philip Dick, both of which showed me that even the most esoteric science fictional subject matter is based on the direct experience of the author. I haven't

We need sf biographies and autobiographies to gain a sense of the history of our own field. The struggles of the writers mirror the struggles of the genre itself

returned to Delany's autobiographical writings, which raise for me the question of whether the point of autobiography is not to reveal the truth about a writer but to conceal it. We await Alan Elms' long-promised biography of Cordwainer Smith and a

rumoured biography of James Tiptree Jr.

I don't think we can say the sf field has fully grown up until its practitioners routinely feel they should write autobiographies and biographies of each other. I look forward to them. ♦

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INSTANT UPDATES FOR AN ARTICLE THAT HAS BARELY BEGUN

Lucy Sussex tells me that the Merril biography is set for publication, and several other biographies of prominent women SF and fantasy writers should be released soon.

Alan Stewart makes a liar of me, in the nicest possible way, by turning up details of unofficial biographies of Isaac Asimov and Arthur Clarke. Which means that the George Turner is not the only contemporary SF writer to write an autobiography and be the subject of a biography. (This hardly spoils the point that there should be a vast number more of them.) Alan's additions to the Bibliography:

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The back flap of the Eshbach dust jacket mentions a work in preparation: Sam Moskowitz: *A. Merritt: Reflections in the Moon Pool*, which is to contain a biography by Moskowitz, as well as letters by Merritt, and essays about Merritt by others.

The Infrequency of Liberation: A Conversation with Steve Erickson

Ron Drummond

RON DRUMMOND is the person behind Incunabula Press, which has published books by John Crowley and Samuel R. Delany. He first wrote about Steve Erickson in *Science Fiction Eye* in 1993 in an article titled 'The Frequency of Liberation'. This interview forms a companion piece to that article.

STEVE ERICKSON'S WRITING CAREER BEGAN IN THE EARLY '80S WITH 'GUERRILLA Pop,' a weekly column in the *LA Reader*. His first novel, *Days Between Stations*, was published in 1985, followed by *Rubicon Beach* in '86. During the late 80s/early 90s, Erickson was a film reviewer and staff writer for the *L.A. Weekly*, long the home of another brilliant L.A. essayist and novelist, Michael Ventura (both men quit the paper in 1993, in protest over the firing of its editor in chief). Erickson's other books include *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989), considered by many to be his finest novel; *Leap Year* (1989), a surreal travelogue and exercise in political fabulation that proved a dry-run for his 1993 novel, *Arc d'X*; and *The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999), a novel.

On 8 June 1996, Steve Erickson and I met in the bar of the Madison Renaissance in downtown Seattle. Erickson was promoting his then-new novel, *Amnesiascope*. He was also in the middle of writing a book on the 1996 presidential campaign, *American Nomad*, later published by Henry Holt. In the Fall of '95, Erickson had been hired by *Rolling Stone* Magazine to cover the 1996 election, but was fired in Spring '96 after publishing only three articles. I began our conversation that June by asking him what happened.

RON DRUMMOND: Uppermost in my mind, what's the story with *Rolling Stone*?

STEVE ERICKSON: We were never really on the same wavelength. *Rolling Stone* approached me and basically said, 'We want a novelist who will cover the campaign like it's a novel.' I said, 'That sounds like it's kind of up my alley.' But I don't think it was a concept that Jann Wenner ever understood. I don't think he was ever clear in his own mind what he really wanted.

Everybody at the magazine seemed to like what I was doing a lot, except him. I don't know exactly what he didn't like except that I think he wanted something that was more straight reporting, and it was a battle from the very beginning. The first piece really came the closest to what I had conceived the assignment as being about. Then from that point on there was the sort of insidious pressure to become straighter and straighter, more and more conventional. And I bent about as far as I thought I could. I wound up writing five stories, of which he killed two.

At one point he flatly ordered me to cut something from one of the pieces that ran, and I just as flatly refused to do it. And it wound up running the way I wrote it, but I'm sure that that took a toll on our relationship. It was a battle, really, from the beginning, and they fired me. I probably thought, several times, during the month or two leading up to that point, about quitting. But it wasn't my style to quit. I'd been hired for the job, and I wanted to try to see the job through, if I could. But Wenner did not feel the same way.

Which article was it that he flatly demanded that you cut and you refused?

It was the piece I wrote about the Christian Right. The part where Alan Keyes - who was this black, conservative talk-show host - is addressing this convention of white Christian conservatives in Florida. It comes toward the end of the piece, the point where the piece stops being theoretical, and stops



being a collection of interviews, and takes shape in the form of some kind of scene, some kind of human drama, and I just thought he was wrong. He never gave me a reason for cutting it – he just said, ‘Cut it.’

Did you ask him why?

Sure. But I was informed that, ‘Jann does not give reasons.’ Maybe he had a very good reason. I somehow doubt it, but it’s possible.

So I wouldn’t cut that, and I think they probably had no choice but to run it at that point, because the magazine was about to go to press. Now I’m writing a book instead, I do have a contract from Holt to write a book that is – I’m reluctant to call it a campaign book – it’s part memoir and part travelogue through the year in which the country is having the last election of the millennium, and in the process there are these meditations about the meaning of America, sometimes as viewed through the context of pop culture, so the book will go off into discussions about Frank Sinatra or Oliver Stone or Bruce Springsteen. And, you know, this book will be the one that I wanted to write for *Rolling Stone*, essentially.

And you’re probably gonna deal with the whole trip with *Rolling Stone* as well?

Yeah. It’s part of the story.

So, it was more Wenner’s head trip, as opposed to his corporate masters putting pressure on him or anything like that?

No, this was Wenner. In fact, I think Wenner was getting pretty good feedback. He got a letter from, I think, Stephanopoulos at the White House saying he really liked the coverage, and that probably saved my job for a couple months. But he didn’t know what to make of it, and without getting into a long, protracted psychological analysis of Jann Wenner, I get the feeling he’s the kind of person who doesn’t feel in control of things he doesn’t understand.

The second article, the one that was rejected, did that change the nature of the third article?

Sure. The third piece – which wound up being the second piece that ran – was the piece about the Dole campaign in New Hampshire. They had killed the second piece, which was about the Republican straw poll in Orlando, and the convention that was held there, and the ways in which Orlando’s both a very strange and very appropriate metaphor for American politics in general right now. It was flatly killed, and they had a hole in the magazine, and I sat down on a Friday night and, between seven and midnight,

knocked out that Bob Dole piece, and sent it in the next day. And that too probably saved my job for a couple months, in fact I know it did.

With *Arc d’X*, your *L.A. Weekly* gig ended three or four months after it was published; your *Rolling Stone* gig ended a couple of weeks before *Amnesiascope* came out. Doesn’t it say you’re covering the campaign for –

Yeah, the jacket had already gone to press. I actually told the publicity people, ‘Don’t go to press with this *Esquire* thing yet.’ After *Rolling Stone* fired me, *Esquire* put out the feelers, and said they’d like me to cover the campaign for them. And then that wound up falling through – I think in that case for reasons that had nothing to do with me, or *Esquire*, but for reasons that had to do with the campaign – the way the primary part of the campaign was over before it began.

What was originally fascinating about the campaign was that it looked like it might reflect the way the country was fracturing, that you might actually have a campaign that had four or five major candidates. Clinton and Dole and Powell and Perot and Buchanan, maybe. That is not going to come to pass, at least not on that scale. It’s not as interesting or as cataclysmic as it looked like it might be.

It must be a little frustrating for you, because you were kind of bankrolled by *Rolling Stone*,

weren’t you? They were flying you all over the country, you had the credentials, you could get to interview these guys, and then suddenly your economy of scale has shrunk considerably, I’m sure.

Well, it shrank, and a certain credibility is gone. I’ll tell you this, and it’s between you and me until this thing runs: My idea for this book, the working title for which is *American Nomad*, is to continue to pass myself off as a *Rolling Stone* writer. I’ve got the *Rolling Stone* business cards, I’ve got the *Rolling Stone* stationery, and since *Rolling Stone*, in a story that’s too petty to get into, basically cheated me out of twenty-five hundred dollars, I figure they owe me twenty-five hundred dollars worth of credibility.

But you’ve got to wonder, though: couldn’t they sue your ass?

I don’t know, I suppose if I’m not careful, it’s possible. On what grounds would they do it, though?

I don’t know – misrepresenting yourself?

The way I’ve been presenting myself is, ‘Hi, I’m Steve Erickson, and I’ve been covering the campaign for

Rolling Stone. Not 'I am covering the campaign for *Rolling Stone.*' So there's a little legalistic loophole that Bill or Hilary Clinton would appreciate, and I figure I'll wiggle through that. And besides, it'll make for a good story in the book.

Well, it sounds like you've thought it through rather carefully; obviously, you wouldn't even be doing it if you hadn't.

Maybe not as carefully as I should. But there is a way in which both the entrée not to say the money were big losses when I left the *Rolling Stone* job. Now, with the book contract I wound up getting with Holt, I'm actually making more money out of the whole deal than I would have just with the *Rolling Stone* job.

Okay, here we have *Amnesiascope*. It's a memoir, essentially.

Right.

I mean, it's autobiography. But it is a novel, it's abundantly obvious within the first couple of sentences that technically, by-definition, it's a novel. Which strikes me as probably the most honest way to write an autobiography, just let's call this a novel up front.

At the same time, anything you write is a matter of making choices about what to include and what to leave out, and you always leave out far more than you include. On that basis I consider all language, whether spoken or written, to be fiction. I feel that when you start calling something non-fiction, it starts becoming dangerous in a negative way. I think the greatest monsters of history have been people who said, 'I know the truth, and I alone am able to speak it.' When they believe that, it can suddenly start justifying all sorts of atrocities. So calling something a work of fiction up front - which isn't quite the same as calling it a pack of lies - frees discourse on some level to express truth in a way that something that claims a certain authority to itself cannot.

The running cliché among writers is that 'I'm a paid liar.' Which I wonder about, because one of the things I was realizing is that part of the definition of a lie has to do with how it is presented. A lie is a non-truth that's being passed off as a truth. So what's a non-truth that's being passed off as a non-truth? Well, I guess it's fiction.

Well, this book is certainly a novel. There's an imaginary context in which I can address certain things that seemed important. I'm probably getting further and further to the point where the novels each seem less like distinct entities to me, and more like an ongoing, continuing story, and each novel now winds up addressing something that was unfinished in the previous novel. As you know, two-thirds, three-quarters of the way through *Arc d'X*, there was sud-

denly a character named Erickson, who appeared quite to my surprise, I hadn't planned on him presenting himself, and a few pages later, the book killed him off, also quite to my surprise. It wasn't I who killed him off, it was the book who killed him off. And that seemed interesting to me, and I realized after a year or two that that was where the next chapter of the story was going to pick up for me, with that character, that character who was at a certain emotional and psychological ground zero, and even a certain ground zero of the imagination. I was suddenly less concerned with a lot of the things that earlier books had been concerned with, the construction and the shifts in time and space, and I wanted to talk about this person who was in the middle of basically a crisis of faith in his own vision, if that's not too crammed a word. And who's basically existing, at least for the time being, by his sensuality and nothing else. And doing so on a landscape that really reflects that. A landscape where all of the semblances of order have just fallen to the wayside - there's nothing resembling authority to be seen anywhere. And it's a highly eroticized landscape.

At the outset, I was *sure* this was going to be my longest novel. It took me longer to write this, or it took me nearly as long to write this, as it took to write *Arc d'X* and *Tours of the Black Clock* combined.

So, what, pushing two years?

No, but a year and a half. As I went along I started calling it *The Incredible Shrinking Novel*, because the more I wrote, the shorter it got, because I kept cutting stuff. And it seemed to me that this book in particular could especially ill afford anything that approached becoming too self-indulgent. It's so self-absorbed in places that I was making it tighter and tighter and tighter and condensing it more and more and more and more. And I worried about that, you know, I worried that the book was too short, but I guess I worried about that just a little bit less than I was worried it was gonna be too long, that people would not be willing to put up with a book of this nature for four hundred pages, that this particularly was a book where I had to say my piece, and get out.

But it's not a calculated thing, at this point. I don't know that it -

What do you mean, 'at this point'? You mean, the novel is not a calculated thing, or what you're doing with your life or with your writing?

All of that. I don't know that it ever was. But it's more and more instinctive, it's less and less a matter of me making a decision to write *this* kind of novel instead of *that* kind of novel. The only thing about this book that was probably calculated was the humor, because I knew the book was gonna get so personal in so many ways, I knew that it had to be funny, at least, to balance that out, or people would

lose patience with it.

How can you describe your relationship with the narrator of the book?

The narrator of the book is a guy who is a lot like I have been at various points in the last five years. And he's probably less like I am right now than I was a couple years ago, and even a couple years ago when I started writing the book, he was not as much like me as I had been a couple years before that. So it is a memoir in that sense.

So it's a memoir of who you were as opposed to who you are, quote-unquote, when you were sitting there writing.

Right. But of course it's a memoir of a guy who does not want to remember – hence the title. And a guy, a memoirist, trying to free himself of his memories so he can survive, instead of being swallowed up in pain or guilt or fear or whatever.

In *Amnesiascope*, and then the Erickson sections of *Arc d'X*, did it have a healing aspect?

I think it did. The only thing that obstructed the healing was that I was riddled with doubt about this book from the minute I began writing it. Half way through it, I said to myself, 'Oh good, I'm writing a book that not only will sell badly, but that the critics will hate on top of it.' And yet this was the book that I had to write. You know, aside from the question of whether it's a good book or a bad book or my best book or my worst book, it was the book that I had to write. And I'm finally starting to make my peace with that. But, for instance, I have told my publisher and my agent, I've told all my friends, I am *not* reading reviews of this book, I don't want to hear about them. I've taken myself out of that part of the process completely.

How are people reacting to *Amnesiascope*? I mean, like the home-town boys – for instance, here's Michael Ventura as a fictional character in your new novel.

Well, the truth is, in terms of 'man on the street' reaction, in some ways I'm getting the best initial response to this book, that I've gotten. I think for a lot of people, it's the most accessible book. It pulls them in. I worried at first that I was just getting that response from people who knew me, and therefore would be taking an interest that most people wouldn't take. But that doesn't seem to be the case – I'm meeting people who don't really know me very well at all, who really respond to the book. I think that for people who are not long-time readers of my work,

this book is an easier entrée than a lot of my books usually are. I mean, I think they found *Arc d'X* generally difficult. You know, I never set out to make the books difficult, I never set out to be arcane. I wanna be as readable as I can be. But these things dictate themselves, you know. And so the more populist reaction to the book has been good, and that's probably why, like I say, I'm starting to finally make my peace with all the doubts that I had about the book, in large part because the book is too subjective for me to objectively assess.

Is that still true, I mean, have you re-read it since it?

No, I try not to spend too much time re-reading the stuff that I write. Obviously, on the tour I wind up reading from the book. When I finished the book, I had it in my head that there was something missing, and I set it aside for three months before I sent it in to

the publisher. And even after I sent it in to the publisher, I told the publisher, 'I feel like there's something missing.' And the publisher said, 'Well, I don't know what.' And as time has gone by, there are still times I feel that way, but I don't know what it is, and I'm coming to the conclusion that because the book is as personal as it is, there is always going to be something missing for *me* from this book, that somebody else wouldn't necessarily notice. I mean, I think it's true of

all my books – all my books try to get at something that they never get at.

Is that a failure?

Well, yeah. But it may be that it's an inevitable failure. And I know I'm not the first writer to feel it. Where you start out with this thing in your head, and it's not completely formed – but you've got this *really big* thing in your head, and then a year later that's what comes out and it seems *much* smaller than what you had in your head.

It's more like a flavor or something.

Yeah. A flavor or a smell or some scent of something that, um – [*resignedly*] yeah.

But as a fan of all kinds of things – other artists, singers, whatever – I'm constantly struck by that dichotomy. Growing up, as a teenager, certain things blew me away, I was just like, 'Oh my God, this is gonna change my life.' And of course it doesn't. And then down the line, as I get older, they don't have the same impact that they used to.

And not only the new things don't, but if you go back and read the books that blew you away – books that are considered great books ... This will probably

I never set out to make the books difficult, I never set out to be arcane. I wanna be as readable as I can be. But these things dictate themselves

sound like an incredibly presumptuous thing to say, but I hope it's taken in the right spirit: I can read Faulkner, and I see all the flaws now. I can see all the places where the young Faulkner was overwriting, or didn't really carry this off. And it doesn't change for two seconds that he's a great writer, and ten times the writer that I would like to be. But he's not a god, he was just a guy, working. And so, yeah, I think we lose our sense of wonder. And that may be a process of getting older, it may be a function of the fact that a lot of the things that make a great impact are done by younger people, younger artists, younger writers, younger filmmakers, and you start to get too old for them. I mean, at the age of 46, how many Nirvanas are there going to be, how many young rock 'n' roll bands are going to come along and make that kind of impact on you, that they did when you were that age? Fewer and fewer. Because a lot of times they're dealing with concerns that you've outgrown. That sounds incredibly patronizing, but that's not the way I mean it to sound.

It may very well be that your best work is already behind you. I don't know, but even if so, it doesn't really matter, that fact would not necessarily diminish the quality of the work you're doing now, or of the work that you have yet to do - it's still worth doing. But what I am finding is an appreciation of the humanity of it, flaws and all. There's something warm and simply, nakedly, real in it.

Exactly. And I find myself caught up with the artists who were coming of age when I was coming of age, and now growing old with them. Okay, Bob Dylan's new album is not great, and it's not the album he made when he made *Blonde on Blonde*, but I'm growing up with the guy, and it becomes fascinating to watch him follow this road to the end, wherever the end is. Or whether it's Lou Reed or Neil Young or -

You sort of sidestepped my question: how did Michael Ventura respond to your new novel?

Ventura liked the novel. I gave it to him and I said, 'I won't change anything, or cut anything, with one exception: if you want me to change your name, I will change your name'. But he didn't.

Has *LA Weekly* reviewed the book yet?

Not that I know of. I know that they're not happy with it.

You heard this through the grapevine, your old friends from the paper?

Yeah.

So is it the people that you still feel close to at the paper that aren't happy with it?

I don't know. I was sure that the publisher wouldn't be happy with it. I don't know if the other people are

people that I knew or not. I have to assume they are, I assume it's people who were there when I was there, and that they seem more inclined than I would have necessarily expected them to, to assume that the shoe fits their particular foot. Since with only a couple exceptions I didn't speak in terms of specifics - it was just sort of this general characterization of the paper, which I didn't think was really any more or less harsh than the rest of the book.

Did you ever find yourself feeling gleeful, like, 'This is a novel, so I can tell the truth'?

With the exception of the portrait of the publisher, I wasn't settling any scores.

But with the portrait of the publisher, you were?

Well, I don't even know that I would put it in terms of settling a score - it was part of the story. My leaving the *Weekly* coincided with a time, much like in the novel, when a lot of things were coming crashing down. So that had to be part of the story, and if that was part of the story, then everything that preceded it had to be part of the story. If it's part of the story that the narrator quits his job at this newspaper, then I had to kind of fill in the details of that.

There's been a lot of curiosity about what happened there, and why.

I guess I just assumed that, outside of a small circle of people, nobody really gives a fuck. And so from that standpoint, you can't write it like it's nonfiction, you have to make it serve the story. You've gotta make it matter in terms of the story to people who don't know anything about the *LA Weekly*.

I was wondering if you could define hysterical cinema for me.

Well, the idea was, a cinema that was beyond rationality, that was ur-rational, as opposed to irrational. I think the line in the book is, 'These are movies that make no sense at all, and yet we understand them completely.' And, movies seemed appropriate for the time and place of the book, for the landscape of the book. Films that, on a literal level, make no sense at all, and yet we instinctively understand them.

I mean, you don't need me to expand on the cinema of hysteria, if you go out tonight, after the reading, and rent *Vertigo*. That will sum it up. And films like *Vertigo*, or *In a Lonely Place*, or *Shanghai Gesture*, or *One-Eyed Jacks* - if you start to think about them at all from the standpoint of what happens in the film, they're patently absurd movies, and yet there is an essential truth about them. They get at something in the subconscious that we understand, and for which we are willing to suspend rationality.

Did Orson Welles know that *Touch of Evil* was as weird as it turned out to be? He probably knew that it was kind of a strange film, but he probably thought

he was making a pulp film. Have you seen it? These are great movies. Not all of the films I cited are great films. In fact most are not. But *Vertigo* and *Touch of Evil* are. And they're films that will define what I'm talking about probably better than I can.

Are there any recent examples, that you would call Hysteria?

Maybe *Last Temptation of Christ*. Maybe *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me*, a film that got totally ripped. I think I am probably the only critic in the country that championed that film, and I did it with great indignation, because I had planned to write a feature on it. All the critical word came over that it was a turkey. I cancelled the feature. I went to see it just to write one of the little blurbs that the paper runs. For the first twenty minutes, it's David Lynch's worst movie, and then, forty-five minutes into it you realize that something's going on here, and that the party line among the film critics missed it. Everybody fell into lock-step to dismiss the film in ways it did not deserve. It's a pretty good example of Cinema of Hysteria.

It was funny, because I wrote this thing, thinking, 'Well, I'm really going to be a fool.' But then I started to hear from people who had had the same reaction, and, when I got a card from Greil Marcus telling me that I had gotten it, I realized that maybe it wasn't just me.

It seems like that's part of the risk of what you're doing, is just being willing to look like a fool.

I talk about that in the book - I found myself becoming the champion of films that completely embarrass themselves. And that became a basis for the Cinema of Hysteria.

Part of what threw me was just your use of the word 'hysteria'. I almost wish ... is there another word?

I like 'hysteria', actually. That's the word, because it's a hysterical word, you know? It's over the top, it's out of control, it's shrill, it's messy, it's -

Human.

- it's irritating. And that was *exactly* the word I wanted to use.

When Krzysztof Kieslowski died recently, *The New York Times'* obituary said: 'In 1994, Kieslowski announced his retirement from filmmaking because, he said, he believed that literature could achieve what cinema couldn't. But Zbigniew Preisner, who wrote the music for most of his films, said the director was planning future projects at the time of his death. Mr. Kieslowski did, however, take a cautious pride in *Red*. "I think we have shown a way of

thinking a little bit different than film normally does," he said. "In film, every moment is clear, but in literature, everything becomes clear when you finish the book."

Which I thought struck up a strong contrast not only with your comments but with the comments of a few other people, about film being *the* art form of the twentieth century. I'm not sure I agree with what he says.

Film just seems the natural culmination of all the other arts, because all the other arts are at play in some form or another in film. There's no doubt that fiction can do certain things that film can't, the sound and the fury can go certain places that the movie version doesn't go. And I think there are chords of memory or emotion that music can strike - so the comparisons are probably less qualitative than quantitative. It's because film winds up employing so many

of the other arts in creating the whole world that it creates that I made that statement. Which is not to say that it is the best art form, but it is probably the most relevant - at this point in time.

Each of the forms can do things that the others can't. And the usual trope about film, *vis à vis* novels, is that you've only got one

film up on the screen, but with a novel you've all these different films running in our heads, but that's a twentieth century metaphor. That's a film-based metaphor.

Film by its nature has a certain literalness, fiction is not bound. That's what I mean when I say there are interior landscapes that fiction can get at that film cannot without externalizing the internal landscape.

Which is interesting, because to a certain extent that's what you do in your novels - externalise the internal landscape - and yet your novels strike me as eminently unfilmable.

Yeah, I feel the same way.

I'm curious about the impact not only of film but of photography on the human imagination and on memory itself, because to a certain extent, it's a voyeuristic medium. You're sitting there in a darkened theater and you've got this gigantic twenty-foot high face filling a screen. And it's an unimpeded gaze, you can gaze at a lovely face without feeling self-conscious or embarrassed or whatever, and savor it. And I think about how my own memory works - often in snapshots. And I'm wondering: did somebody a hundred and fifty years ago remember in snapshots? Or are we trained to it?

Yeah. And we now have more of a collective memory, because of film, than we used to. I mean, we all

I found myself becoming the champion of films that completely embarrass themselves.

have - or, at least, I think we all have - distinct memories of the '30s and '40s, thanks to the movies. I have a very strong sense of what the '30s and '40s were like, not just visually, but psychically. I can almost at times feel it, like I was reincarnated from it, but I think that that's the effect of film, is creating that collective memory. More than oral history used to do, or folk tales, or wandering minstrels.

There's this furious stasis that we're reaching now. I mean, the whole trip of television eliminating history which you've talked about at length. But despite the fact that we can see these movies, I wonder how accurate it is. We're remembering a 1930s that never existed.

Well yeah, right.

I'm sure you've had the experience of talking to somebody who's 22 years old, and you're going, 'I'm not even in the same universe as this kid.'

They don't have the same reference points at all.

And the sets of reference points are changing much more rapidly.

Right. And in the process, history is being lost, and the collective memory we're talking about gets more and more distorted. I'm not sure our memory of things was ever especially accurate, and so the way that film has made our memories inaccurate is probably not that much different from the way collective memory always used to be, with the exception that our collective memory has become stylised in a certain way, that it didn't used to be.

Or just from an imagistic standpoint. We share it from the standpoint of seeing the same images, having access to the same images over and over again.

Right.

One of the things that happened, when I was drafting 'The Frequency of Liberation', my article for *Science Fiction Eye* on your work, was that I wrote a lot of the sections of it from memory. I'm really glad, because that ended up being the key of the piece. I pretty quickly realized, as soon as I started following up on the passages from your books that I had written about purely from memory, that I'd gotten them wrong. And in about half the cases I decided to rewrite them and get them right, and in about half the cases I went, 'No, no, this says more about it wrong than it does just to get it clinically correct.' And that just evolved or emerged out of it. So much of your work is about distortion, that the better way to honor it is to distort it.

Or it's about the secret truth that kind of lurks beneath, as you put it, the clinical truth.

Exactly. And I felt, or hoped, that to a certain extent my distortions were doing that. The one that

bugged me the most, that I really wrestled with, wrote and rewrote and endlessly rewrote before finally going back to the original version, was the paragraph about the Big Man, Blaine, who chose between letting Jainlight go or capturing him on the docks in New York. And Blaine winds up dreaming, out on the platform over the nameless river, about the two different worlds that arose from him choosing to let Jainlight go and from him choosing to keep him. That whole thing, I wrote from memory [see sidebar]. And when I started zeroing in on the passage - part of the whole thing is that question of men dying when they're watching her as opposed to when she's dancing - and, what I realised, looking at that, was the reason why. Why is it that men are dying when they're watching as opposed to her dancing? And when I looked at the answer, I realised that I had gotten it wrong in my description, that there *weren't* two different realities where in one Blaine lets him go, and in the other, Blaine says, 'No, you're mine, and we're taking you in.' I got that wrong. In *every* reality, Blaine would have made the same decision, in every reality Blaine would let Jainlight get on that ship - his decision would *not* change. Whereas, a lot of these other people, they would have gone ahead -

There were forks, yeah.

- and made the opposite and mutually exclusive decisions. So of all these people, only Blaine was pure of choice, whether or not he was pure in any other way. Only Blaine would have made the same choice every single time. And so I kept trying to rewrite my description, but the words didn't want to be changed, they kept fighting back. Finally I realized, 'Wait a minute - he's dreaming. And of course, there's nothing in *Tours of the Black Clock* about Blaine dreaming on the platform, before that platform's torched. So this is him dreaming about What If - what if I had made a different choice?'

That was your dream about his dream, you know? That was your interpretation of his interpretation, and it seems completely valid. And, I would probably leave it at that.

Writing that article was very weird for me, there were times where I thought, there's stuff in this that only you will get.

I liked it a lot, because it was a more impressionistic piece at times than an analytical piece, or it was analysis on such a subterranean level as to resemble impression. And it seemed really appropriate.

And so I had a feeling of recognition reading Ventura and Hillman's book, *We've had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, because Hillman talks about seeing your life from the end backwards. You know, Einstein was

such a genius that at first it could only silence him, and hence he didn't start speaking until he was five years old. He was totally mute till he was five, and when he started finally speaking, he spoke in complete sentences. That kind of thing. And I feel like, I can do this, you can do this, you can have the future that you want. And I'm just wondering, has that had any relevance in your own thinking? Cause I almost see Erickson in Berlin in 1999 being ... you're exorcising the future that's not gonna happen.

Right. I think that with this book, I got to a point where I needed to try and live as much in the present moment as possible, that I was getting tangled up on the past and the future, and choosing my past – which couldn't be chosen, because it was done – and, because I was tangled up in the past, I was having a hard time choosing my future. And so I was in this place where I had to live in the present moment. The paradox, of course, is that the present moment I chose, in this book, is not our present moment. I don't know if it's the future, or what, but it doesn't really resemble our present moment. For me to address the things that I needed to address in the present, I still had to move the character to a present of the imagination, an imagined present rather than a 'real' one. And of course the process you're talking about, where you're struggling with a thing for a long time, and suddenly it's just sort of there, because you make some choice, or you make some leap of faith, and the past and future and present all kind of flow into the same moment – that's a big part of what writing's about. And keeping, maintaining, sustaining the creative energy for that to happen is difficult. I find it harder and harder as time goes by. Which is why the span between books gets longer and longer.

Going back a little bit, you were talking about being in a place where what you needed to do, was to

focus on the present – but, in the novel, the present of the imagination. But I'm wondering how – you know, I assume that that's hooked to where you were at as a human being.

Sure.

The Big Man's Dream

This passage is reproduced from my critical fiction, 'The Frequency of Liberation,' *Science Fiction Eye* #12, Summer 1993, pp 69-73. Blaine's dream emerges from a riff on Erickson's symbolic use of knives in his fiction. In *Tours Of The Black Clock*, that knife is an island:

stiletto-long and stiletto-sharp, that slices the river of the twentieth century in twain. And where again the two shall meet, falling beyond the island's southern point, a drop of blood in the form of a shack built on stilts over the water. In the shack a big man sleeps, and dreams that no knife-blade of choice ever descended upon him at a moment when he held another man's life in his hands, that the choice – to let the man escape, or to draw the net closed and end all possibility of escape – had never been his to make. But it is in the way of dreams to turn masks inside out, to bring pink inwardness face to face with more abysmal possibilities. The big man, dreaming, discovers that the knife cut his life in half, that he in fact made both choices, has lived two lives in the lengthening shadows of mutually exclusive and irrevocable acts. Two lives that have now come round again; whole once more, the big man sleeps, while outside someone in a boat douses the pilings with gasoline and lights a match. In the doubled darkness where one man's two shadows meet, history collapses into the black hole of the human heart.

Were you going through a period of stripping away all the accumulated habits?

Sure. The guy is at ground zero, he's at ground zero of his memories, and his psyche, and so a lot of –

Steve, where were you?

I was in a place just a little farther down the road from where the character is, at a place where my father had died, and I hadn't quite come to terms with that, and a very important relationship had ended, and I hadn't quite come to terms with that. A marriage had ended, and there was all that back there. And a job ends, and also the realisation that I'm never going to be a hugely famous author. And trying to accept that in as existential a term as possible, even though my whole life has been defined by that dream, and *that* chosen future. And coming to terms with the fact that sometimes the biggest future of all which you've chosen is not going to be the one that life presents you.

Right: there's limits to that idea of falling into the gravity ... And at the same time, though, I'm sure a lot of your illusions about what it would mean to be a big famous author were shattered too.

Right. Exactly. I'm finally old enough to realize how ephemeral and transitory all of that is. What does it mean to be a hugely famous author, that I get

a good review from *The New York Times*?

Or to have nubile young women recognise you on the street.

Yeah, right. I think that illusion, especially, passed early on. Or the importance of that, passed early on.

Do you actually get laid as often as your doppelganger on the printed page?

No. I am settled in a relationship going on four years.

Is that the relationship that the relationship with Viv is based on?

Yes. But there was this period where I was sort of sexually bouncin' around, you know. And not doing it nearly as well as he does it – and he doesn't do it that well. You know, half way through the book, all his sexual fantasies start pulling the rug out from beneath him. You know, he's gonna make this porn movie, and be surrounded by all these naked women, and he winds up the only naked person in

the movie, you know? He fantasizes about the teenage hooker standing on the corner, she winds up taking over his apartment, and he's too guilt-stricken to even take advantage of it.

In the years since my conversation with Erickson, I have at long last seen Vertigo and Touch of Evil, in their respective big-screen restorations. I found they silenced the inner monologue better than most films; if that's hysteria, I'm all for it.

As for the recent U.S. presidential election, I can only note that Steve Erickson has been predicting this election for at least 12 years, an election that may yet stand as an epitaph for America, if not the United States. Or blame it on Coyote, who once upon a time sprayed his rankly-hopeful spoor in Theresa Lapore's dreams. – R.D. ♦

'Call me Dumbo, but...'

'Mistah Kurtz, He Dead' is excellent, but I take issue with the claim that the Seventies were 'a pretty dismal decade for British science fiction'. Priest, Cowper and Roberts were Seventies writers, even if they did start writing in the previous decade. We don't describe Ballard, Aldiss and Moorcock as Fifties writers.

And what about Bob Shaw? When I started reading sf in the boring old Seventies, Shaw was there to usher me into the whole confusing business, in his avuncular way. Surely he represents the perfect synthesis of old-style Brit-sf (global disaster, quaint settings) and American pulp sensawunda. My first encounter with Shavian sf came when an unimaginative uncle, desperate to find me a birthday present, seized on my interest in all things spacey. He assumed that I would be interested in sf but, not having a clue what young folk were reading, bought me books. One was *Tomorrow Lies in Ambush* by Bob Shaw. It remains one of my all-time favourite short story collections, in any genre.

The first story is a textbook example of old hard core sf and new wave paranoid nastiness in perfect harmony. 'Call Me Dumbo' is, at least to begin with, the sort of thing Eric Frank Russell might have produced in the late-40s. (Russell, like Shaw, was a Brit who adopted the conventions of American sf and added his own brand of intelligent, skewed humour.) The eponymous heroine believes herself to be the loving wife of a brusque husband, to whom she has born three lovely boys. But why does her country cottage with a rose garden suddenly transmute itself into a metal shed in an alien landscape? Yes, it's all to do with Dumbo's medicine, which one of her kids has naughtily de-natured by boiling the container.

So far, so conventional. A touch of the Twilight Zone and a comment on sexism, perhaps. Except that we find the crashed spaceship that brought Dumbo and Carl to this planet was a medical transport with a cargo of well-preserved human organs. And a crew

of two. Both male. And no, I haven't given away the ending. A story so shockingly clever as 'Call Me Dumbo' could not have been written if Shaw had not taken the broad, explicit and human-centred concerns of the New Wave and welded them to the American pulp tradition.

Most stories in *Tomorrow Lies in Ambush* show a willingness to combine supposedly rival traditions to produce what the 90s would see as conventional sf. There are nods to Ray Bradbury in two fine stories. In 'The Happiest Day of Your Life' the children of the rich can take the Royal Road to educational excellence. The story works as a persuasive 'dangerous vision' of how education may develop into an exact science, and as a metaphor for the way modern culture seeks to rob children of their childhood.

Even better is 'Invasion of Privacy', whose central theme recalls Richard Matheson and Philip K. Dick as well as Bradbury's homespun horrors. A timid, family guy discovers a strange conspiracy in small town America. Citizens who die under the care of the friendly local doctor are replaced by aliens in manufactured human bodies. The narrator's young son falls ill. The body floating in a tank at alien HQ had familiar features, but was it disintegrating or being formed? There is, as with so many of the best short stories, a sense of closure but no neat ending. Our hero is a good man confronted by an impossible moral dilemma. Like New Wave protagonists and unlike the tediously competent heroes of hard core sf – he can do nothing but watch his son grow to be (possibly) a man. Again, from an entertaining pulp premise the story expands to become a meditation on our inescapable limitations as human beings.

All very Seventies, really. ♦

David Longhorn

The Problem Club

Ron Bennett

IT WAS A BRIGHT, SUNNY INDIAN SUMMER'S MORNING and out on the school playing fields the Upper VI Science mob were enjoying a riotous lineout during a games period denied the Upper VI Arts by a quirk of timetabling until later in the week, probably when, as everyone knew from experience, the sun would have said its farewell for the year and torrential rain would doubtless persuade the games master that he stood less chance of catching pneumonia if his charges stayed indoors and he had one of the Upper VI Arts girls make him a cup of tea.

While the Upper VI Science were practising their silky rugby skills, kicking the bejabbers out of one another, the badly-done-to Upper VI Arts were being provided with their set books for their examinations, happily way off in the distant future of the following July: *Hamlet*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Trumpet Major*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (in your dreams, matey), *The Collected Poems of Robert Browning*.

All good solid stuff which had stood the test of time, and for all I know, may be doing so still to this day. All calculated to warm the cockles of the heart with the thought of those inevitable weekends spent scrawling deathless prose on topics such as *Was Hamlet Mad?* Why hadn't anyone thought of that before?

But wait! What's this? The English tutor was handing out a small, thin, green volume. Not *another* to weigh our innocent, naive, uncomplicated little brains with eye-popping wonders like *How They Brought the Good News to Hamelin's Rathaus?*

No. This latest addition to our growing, groaning (in more senses than one) pile was a collection of *Modern Short Stories*.

'This one is simply for pleasure,' intoned the tutor, wickedly revealing that he knew exactly what Upper VI Arts thought of the other tomes.

As one, we cautiously opened our copies of the slim green volume, turning its flaps with suspicion, as though the book might shoot an array of plastic snakes in our faces. Ah, we held our English tutor in high regard and great trust. But, lo! the first story looked not only innocuous, but with its title, 'The Giraffe Problem', decidedly promising.

It was my introduction to the works of Barry Pain. Those who are already familiar with this once popular, prolific and vastly underrated writer will already

have recognised Pain as having been the author of a number of supernatural stories in collections such as *Stories in the Dark* and *Stories and Interludes*.

'The Giraffe Problem', however, was written in a much lighter vein, which should come as no surprise when we learn that Pain, a regular contributor to *Punch*, was one of the leading humorists of his day.

Here the members of a gentleman's club have met to discuss their attempts to solve a problem set them at their previous meeting. The members have had to attempt to manoeuvre a conversation with a woman so that she says to the would-be manoeuvrer, 'You ought to have been a giraffe.'

And so, the Club's twelve members tell of adventures and mishaps in their attempts to work their different conversations towards the desired reply.

In his particular attempt, Major Byles has prepared the ground by talking incessantly over the breakfast table about giraffes and how easily they can pull down fruit from high branches. Later, in the garden, he has mentioned that he wishes he could reach some ripe cherries, but instead of taking the bait, his wife absently remarks that the gardener will get some for him and his housekeeper observes that 'He ought...' Yes, yes? '...to be able to reach the lower branches without climbing.'

The Reverend Septimus Cunliffe has had disappointing results, but nothing worthy of reporting. This, of course, is a pleasant little strategy of Pain's to pad out the story and also to keep the reader drooling for more accounts of failure, leading up to a possible successful resolution to the problem. This is true, also, of the embellishments regarding members' requests for further refreshment, these also adding to the general relaxed ambience.

Mr Matthews has discussed the pleasure of drink with a Lady Amelia and has explained that the enjoyment is not only in the palate but continues in the throat. He wishes, he has said, that he had a longer throat. But the chance goes begging and he, too, has failed.

Eventually, the Hon. James Feldane claims to be a winner, but unfortunately the desired words have been spoken by his brother-in-law, who has butted in to the situation carefully set up for the benefit of James's sister.

Finally, Mr Pusely-Smythe offers a solution which depends upon a devious little piece of syntax.

Remarkable, really, that the solution hadn't been forthcoming from the first club member to tell of his adventures! Had Mr Pusely-Smythe been a little more forthcoming, the chapter could have been concluded in half a page.

My next encounter with Barry Pain's rich vein of work was in the June 1951 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, which reprinted 'The Glass of Supreme Moments', one of the stories from Pain's 1893 collection, *Stories and Interludes*.

Here, a young man falls in love with a beautiful woman, not realising that she is Death in human guise. He leans forward in order to kiss her. 'Stay,' she says. 'If you kiss me you will die.' Comes his wonderfully gallant reply: 'But, I shall die kissing you.' Magnificent! Simply a magnificent line!

Not too many months after my introduction to Pain I found, on the cheap shelf outside a local book-seller's, a somewhat beaten red cloth book called *The Problem Club*. Could it be...? Yes, the author was Barry Pain. 'The Giraffe Problem' was no single child of the author's imagination. I eagerly bought the book and equally as eagerly read it at a single sitting.

'The Giraffe Problem' is the opening chapter, followed by 'The Kiss Problem', 'The Free Meal Problem', 'The Win-and-Lose Problem', 'The Handkerchief Problem', 'The Identity Problem', 'The Shakespearean Problem', 'The Impersonation Problem', 'The Alibi Problem', 'The Threepenny Problem', 'The Q-Loan Problem' and finally, 'The Pig-Keeper's Problem', each depending upon an ingenious solution

which is kept well hidden from the reader. Pain's craftsmanship is also evident in the manner he imbues each of his club members with individual backgrounds, mannerisms and speech patterns.

There might, of course, be the odd eyebrow raised at the intrinsic artificiality of a gentleman's club, so decidedly 'upper class', engaging in such frivolity. But, what the...! It's all great fun.

I was so taken with the whole idea that I even borrowed the characters and wrote my own additional chapter, 'The Flat Earth Problem'. Wonder what ever became of it?

Over the years I've bought and given a decent home to other Barry Pain books but none has given me as much pleasure as *The Problem Club*. It's not the best book ever written. It's not the best book I've ever read. But at sixpence, it's definitely the best value-for-money book I've ever bought. ♦

Barry Eric Odell Pain was born in Cambridge in 1864. He died in 1928.

The Problem Club was published in 1919 by Wm Collins & Sons.

I am indebted for the background material in this article to Mr. Hugh Lamb, the editor of *Stories in the Dark - Tales of Terror by Jerome K. Jerome, Robert Barr and Barry Pain* (Thorson, 1988).

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The North-South Continuum: Alternate Civil Wars

Paul Kincaid

When he is not co-editing *Steam Engine Time*, PAUL KINCAID is also an American Civil War buff. In this article he combines his two interests to see how the Civil War has fared at the hands of science fiction.

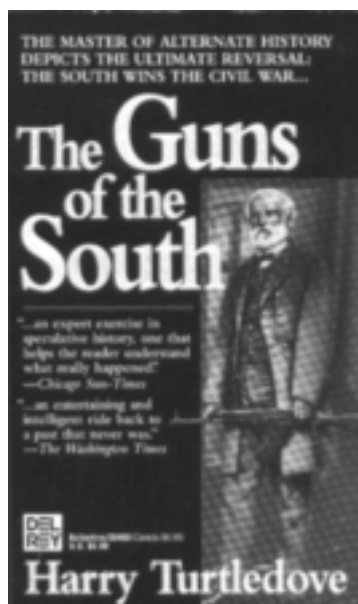
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HISTORY CHANGES IN THOUSANDS OF WAYS EVERY MOMENT OF EVERY DAY. Most changes are small, but occasionally we can see one moment around which the whole fate of the world has hinged. Some chance has briefly interfered with the vast agenda of history, some decision was not made, some unlikely action was taken, and as a result things are perhaps better than they might have been, perhaps worse, but clearly different.

Writers are fascinated by such turning points, and so are historians (especially military historians, since the unpredictable confusions of battle provide a perfect arena for such workings of chance and human error). They return to them constantly, exploring the might-have-beens that such changes expose. It is an endeavour that brings together science fiction writers and historians, though their efforts may not be quite as similar as they appear on the surface.

The terms 'alternate history' and 'counterfactual' have tended to be used indiscriminately, but in this article I intend to use them to signify two very different types of work. Novelists are primarily interested in exploring the *consequences* of change. They want a reasonably realistic turning point from which they can construct a new history, then set their 'alternate histories' some way after the moment at which history diverged from the path we are familiar with. Thus, in one admittedly extreme example of the sub-genre, *Pavane*, Keith Roberts might take as his turning point a Spanish victory in the Armada of 1588, but his novel explores the consequent world in the 1960s. Historians, however, tend to be primarily interested in the *process* of change. They want to examine in detail how and why history took the path it did and how easily it might have been deflected. Such counterfactuals are almost invariably set around the moment of change, employ no character who was not in the historical record, and refer to the consequential history that flows from this moment of change, if at all, as an afterthought.

Nevertheless, novelists and historians alike tend to turn again and again to the same few hinge moments. The First World War, for example, devastating as it was for the history of the twentieth century, has attracted very few counterfactual examinations. For the historian, after the first few weeks it offered little in the way of decisive moments that might have radically affected the outcome; for the novelist, it offers no realistic turning point from which to build a dramatically different history. The result of the Second World War, in contrast, hung in dramatic balance on many an occasion and might easily have gone either way, giving historians considerable ground for investigation; while the adversaries had such different aims in fighting the war, and the world resulting from it might have been so different, that it has sparked a whole library of alternate histories. After the Second World War, the event that has generated most alternate histories and counterfactuals has been the American Civil War. There are many reasons for this. The workings of chance seem to have played a major rôle in the outcome of an inordinate number of battles; the war produced an extraordinary number of romantic or tragic heroes, such as Robert E. Lee and Abraham Lincoln, who inevitably attract the attention of novelists; and the issue of slavery made



that war instrumental in establishing the moral shape of the post-war world. In this essay I want to look at what both these forms of imaginative literature, the alternate history and the counterfactual, tell us about what happened and what might have been.

Of course, the most radical alternative history of the Civil War is to imagine that it never took place.

II

In the early hours of 4th July 1859 a tall, white-haired man as old as the century rode into the small Virginia town of Harpers Ferry with 19 companions, including several of his sons and a 39-year-old black woman who had once been a slave in Maryland. The old man was John Brown, a charismatic figure with a bloody history who believed he had a divine mission to bring God's righteous wrath upon the perpetrators of the sin of slavery. The black woman was Harriet Tubman, who had helped mastermind the underground railways that spirited hundreds of escaped slaves to the safety of Canada, and who provided the strategic genius that John Brown lacked. Their target in Harpers Ferry was the Federal arsenal, and capturing it easily they had the arms they needed to foment a slave rebellion and establish a new land for escaped slaves in the mountains of Virginia and Maryland.

That, at least, was John Brown's plan, and in *Fire on the Mountain*, Terry Bisson imagines that it all worked out this way. From such beginnings a very different history develops, for there is no Civil War and in place of the putative Confederacy a Black Utopia is created in the Southern States. The story of Brown's successful raid, told through the memoirs of Dr Abraham, who was at the time a young slave caught up in the rebellion, forms only one strand of Bisson's novel. The most dramatic strand, certainly, but not really the most interesting. That honour lies with the story of Yasmin Martin Odinga, Abraham's great-granddaughter, and her daughter Harriet, as they cross this new land to donate Abraham's memoirs to the Harpers Ferry museum while at the same time coming to terms with the death of Yasmin's husband on the Pan-African space expedition to Mars. This gives us a fascinating glimpse of a rich, peaceful nation that has risen to become a leading force in a new world grouping of black nations – the contrast with Churchill's English-speaking Union (which we'll come to later) is worth noting: the victor in whatever mid-century conflict actually occurs is clearly destined to be a leading world player in the next century.

Not that it happened like this. Tubman was ill and could not accompany Brown, the raid was postponed repeatedly and did not happen until 16th October. Brown and his companions quickly seized the arsenal and took around 60 hostages, including the grandson of George Washington. But the raid ran out of steam.

No slaves rose in revolt. Local militia surrounded the defensive positions Brown had taken up, and the next day were reinforced by a company of US Marines led by Colonel Robert E. Lee. (Surprisingly, perhaps, no-one has contemplated what might have happened if Lee had been killed at Harpers Ferry, though a Civil War without the iconic figure of Lee might have been less fascinating.) In the end, Brown surrendered and, after a peremptory trial, was executed on 2nd December 1859.

Clearly, the Black Utopia and the contrast it presents to what actually happened is what really interests Bisson. But attractive as such an outcome might be, it's not very likely that Brown's raid would have succeeded under any circumstances. Nearly 30 years earlier, in August 1831, a black slave named Nat Turner led the bloodiest slave revolt in American history (in the same year that *Fire on the Mountain* came out, Bisson published a biography of Turner). Turner was eventually defeated and hanged, but Southern whites were left with the conviction that their slaves might at any moment rise up against them. The same conviction must have held sway among abolitionists, for Brown seems to have fondly imagined that simply turning up in Harpers Ferry would be sufficient to light the fire of rebellion. He seems to have done nothing to prepare the slaves for this uprising. Even the redoubtable Harriet Tubman is unlikely to have compensated for Brown's lack of any leadership qualities, especially since the army (officered mostly by Southerners and under a lacklustre but pro-Southern administration) would inevitably have been called on to quash what would at best have been an ill-disciplined, ill-armed and ill-led army.

Attractive as Bisson's optimistic vision might be, therefore, it is probable that Brown's raid could have had no other outcome than to increase the distrust between North and South that would, a year later, see the Democratic Party hopelessly split and Lincoln elected president. A growing number of Southern states chose to secede, then, during the dying days of Buchanan's indolent presidency, a crisis was manufactured at Fort Sumter in the harbour at Charleston, South Carolina. No alternate historian has imagined a different spark to light the fire of Civil War, perhaps because the occasion itself made no difference: if it had not been Sumter there were tinderboxes aplenty lying around.

III

In the tenth anniversary issue of *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History*, historians were asked for the most important might-have-beens of military history, and their answers have been expanded into the volume *What If?* This collection of counterfactuals considers a number of turning points during the Civil War, examined by two of the finest of contemporary

Civil War historians, Stephen W. Sears and James M. McPherson. The earliest, suggested by Sears in 'A Confederate Cannae and Other Scenarios', happened in the first major battle of the war, Manassas. Troops on both sides were untried, the Union had the better of things at first and either side might have broken, but at a crucial point Confederate General Thomas Jackson held his Virginians, earning his nickname, 'Stonewall', and ensuring that the South won. But what might have happened if the bullet that nicked Jackson during this battle had actually killed him? Where the demoralised Union troops had the formidable defences of Washington to retreat behind, the Confederates had no such defensive positions in their rear. Had they been the ones to break and run, the rout would probably have been far more cataclysmic. For a start, since Jefferson Davies had ridden out the day before to observe the battle, there is a good chance that he would have been captured. The North seems to have been in a far better position to withstand a defeat at this stage in the War than the South, and the likelihood is that a defeat at Bull Run would have impelled the Confederacy to seek terms, leaving Lincoln with practically a full presidential term in which to find a solution to the slavery problem from a far stronger position than the North had ever enjoyed before.

IV

Alas, things did not turn out this way, and the War settled down to curious stalemate for the rest of the year. Towards the end of the year, two Confederate agents, Mason and Slidell, bound respectively for England and France, slipped out of the country past the Federal blockade. In Havana, on Friday 8th November, they boarded the British mail ship *Trent*, but later that day the *Trent* was stopped by the Union ship *San Jacinto* in the Bahamas Passage and the two Confederate agents were illegally taken as prisoners. Thus began the gravest international incident faced by Lincoln. Britain came within an ace of declaring war, and actually sent 11,000 troops to reinforce the existing garrison in Canada. Eleven thousand troops would have made little difference against the hundreds of thousands already engaged in the Civil War, but a second front coupled with the international recognition and arming of the Confederacy that would have inevitably resulted would have presented the Union with a major and possibly insoluble problem.

Strangely, only Harry Harrison has explored the alternate history possibilities offered by this incident, in *Stars and Stripes Forever* and its sequel *Stars and Stripes in Peril*, and he has chosen to ignore the realis-

tic prospects of the Union fighting two enemies. Instead, refusing the obvious course of a joint operation by Britain and the Confederacy, he has Britain launch an ill-judged attack against what turns out to be a Confederate position, and rather than have them admit the error (for such things do indeed happen in war), Harrison assumes that the British would unilaterally declare war on the Confederacy instead. Out of this farrago of nonsense, the possibilities of the scenario are thrown away in favour of an instant rapprochement between Union and Confederacy in which historical likelihood is ignored and the silliness escalates until by the second volume the re-United States invades Ireland.

What actually happened was that Lincoln quietly released Mason and Slidell and apologised to Britain, and the War went on much as before.

V

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As the winter of 1861–62 came to an end, McClellan's Army of the Potomac had been vastly reinforced, resupplied, trained and disciplined. In the spring, McClellan sailed his entire army down to the point of the James peninsula and – after a delay during which Confederate General Magruder marched his tiny force in a huge circle in and out of woodland so that the Feder-

als became convinced they were opposed by a far larger force than they actually were – set out to march towards Richmond, actually coming within the sound of Richmond's church bells. At Fair Oaks, on the last day of May, the Confederate commander, Joseph E. Johnston, was wounded and command passed to Robert E. Lee. (An interesting counterfactual proposition: what if Johnston had not been wounded? Could McClellan have won?) Lee's record to this date had not been distinguished, but he quickly proved his worth in late June when he faced McClellan in a series of battles known as the Seven Days. Strictly speaking, McClellan won most of these battles, but he was nevertheless forced to withdraw steadily. On the sixth day, at White Oak Swamp, Confederates under General James Longstreet came within an ace of splitting the Union army, and would have done so had Stonewall Jackson pressed an attack upon the Union rear guard. Instead Jackson, exhausted after his brilliant campaign in the Shenandoah Valley, had fallen asleep under a tree and the attack was not pressed. McClellan withdrew his forces intact to Malvern Hill and lived to fight another day.

Sears imagines what might have happened if Jackson had done the sensible thing the day before to ensure that he was mentally and physically fit for the

battle at White Oak Swamp. Assuming McClellan's army had indeed been split in two and destroyed piecemeal, it would have been devastating for the Union cause. Nothing but an inadequate force under John Pope stood between Lee and Washington. The result would almost certainly have been a Confederate victory. Unfortunately, the day before had been a Sunday and Jackson was a religious fanatic who followed a very strict regime every Sunday of his life; the sleep he needed would have meant abandoning that habit, and Jackson was never going to do that. So McClellan kept his army intact, and though Lee was able to achieve a stunning victory over Pope at the Second Battle of Manassas, there was still a viable Union army to take into account when Lee decided that now was the time to carry the war to the North.

VI

Now occurs one of the most intriguing incidents in the whole war, and a gift to every alternate historian. On the morning of 13th September an Indiana corporal, Barton W. Mitchell, discovered a bulky package lying in a field of clover. The package contained three cigars which were wrapped in a copy of Lee's Special Order No. 191, which detailed his strategic plans for the coming campaign, including the fact that he was going to split his forces. The Orders made their way up the Union chain of command (the cigars disappeared from history) and if the Union commander had been anyone other than McClellan they would have presented a unique opportunity to destroy the Confederate army. McClellan, however, hesitated, and when the Battle of Antietam was finally joined, Lee was in a position to concentrate most of his forces for what would be the bloodiest day in American history. Even though he handled the battle with an ineptitude that was unusual even for him, McClellan still had the edge and was able to claim victory.

But for those lost orders, it might all have been so different. James M. McPherson presents a very cogent counterfactual analysis in 'If the Lost Order hadn't been Lost'. Interestingly, he sees Lee reuniting his army and continuing north, shadowed by McClellan, who is reluctant to bring on a battle, until the two armies finally come together in a place where hills and ridges give Lee the perfect ground to concentrate his forces, Gettysburg. The resultant battle, a mirror image of the one that would actually be fought there a year later, results in the destruction of McClellan's army. McPherson imagines McClellan himself being killed in a last ditch effort to rally his troops. Northern congressional elections that November sweep the Peace Democrats into office, and Britain (where William Gladstone declared that the South 'have made an army; they are making, it appears, a navy; and they have made what is more than either, they have made a nation') not only recognises the Confederacy

but also forces the North to the negotiating table.

Harry Turtledove, in *How Few Remain*, has an alternate historical take on much the same scenario (except for the nicety of the final battle being fought at Gettysburg). In this scenario, the post-War division of the country is unsatisfactory on both sides, finally prompting a second Civil War in the 1880s, with a young Theodore Roosevelt leading troops as pugnaciously as he did in real life and an old Abraham Lincoln touring the country to lecture on what seems suspiciously close to socialism. That Turtledove has extrapolated from Lincoln's stated views and come so convincingly to this position is one of the most interesting things about a book that is, in the end, unsatisfactory. The second Civil War is inconclusive, and the novel as a whole seems to exist mostly to act as a curtain-raiser for his alternate version of the First World War begun with *American Front* (1998).

The lost orders alone were not the only significant counterfactual aspect of Antietam. McClellan's slender victory was enough for Lincoln to issue, on 22nd September 1862, the Emancipation Proclamation, which dramatically changed the nature of the War. Despite the limitations of the Proclamation - it applied only to slaves in those territories where Lincoln's writ did not actually reach - the Civil War was transformed, at a stroke, into a war to free the slaves. Lee had begun the Antietam campaign in the confident and probably correct belief that one more victory would be enough to win recognition from Britain and France. Now, it would be morally and politically impossible for Britain or France to come out in support of a slaveholding power against a nation striving to free the slaves. Outright military victory was now the only option open to the South.

VII

Not that military victory seemed out of the question. Despite a succession of generals replacing the hopeless McClellan, Lincoln was unable to find any who might achieve victory against the magical Lee. The closest came, as Sears suggests, at Chancellorsville in early May 1863. A new Union commander, 'Fighting' Joe Hooker, had tricked the Confederates with a feint at Fredericksburg, then had brought his army across the Rappahannock and was threatening Lee's flank. Lee did what he always did in such circumstances: he split his force, sending Jackson on a wide flanking manoeuvre. Jackson's advance was seen by Union pickets, and Sears imagines that Union communications behaved as they were meant to, that General O. O. Howard acted with unusual attention to detail, that General John Reynolds received the order which anchored his Corps on the right flank of the army. Had all happened as Hooker indeed expected, Chancellorsville could easily have turned into a Union victory. After this, Sears imagines Hooker sending Lee's

broken army reeling back to a series of bitter engagements all the way from Fredericksburg to Richmond, a sequence of events uncannily like those followed by Grant just a year later (while Grant himself performs the Sherman rôle out in the West), but with Hooker emerging as the national hero and future president, the War shortened by twelve months, a few hundred thousand men avoiding an untimely death, and the course of history not really all that much different.

But Hooker was never that lucky. Instead Howard was unprepared, there were gaps in the Union line, and Hooker himself was dazed when a cannonball struck his headquarters and was not in effective command for much of the battle. Only one thing spoiled the victory for Lee: Stonewall Jackson was killed by his own men after riding ahead of his lines during the night. This precipitated a reorganisation in the Army of Northern Virginia and the elevation of new generals who would be uncertain in their new commands when facing their greatest test barely two months later. For Chancellorsville didn't just prompt Lincoln to put yet another general in command, this time the doughty George Meade, it also persuaded Lee that the time was ripe for another invasion of the North. The two armies shadowed each other on either side of the Blue Ridge Mountains (where John Brown had once dreamed of establishing his kingdom of freed slaves) until they emerged, almost by accident, to face each other at Gettysburg.

VIII

Spread across the first three days of July, Gettysburg was the greatest battle of the Civil War. It was here that the Confederate dream died, and the Lost Cause was born. Yet it was an accidental battle, unplanned by the generals on either side; and throughout the three days there were so many incidents that seemed to owe more to chance than anything else, so many occasions where a minute either side might have changed the outcome, so many opportunities seized or thrown away by an instant's decision or indecision. What if J.E.B. Stuart had brought his cavalry and his intelligence to Lee a day earlier? What if Ewell had seized Culp's Hill when Lee wanted? What if Lee had listened to Longstreet's suggestion that they move between Meade and Washington? What if Warren hadn't noticed that Little Round Top was undefended, or Chamberlain hadn't ordered his unlikely bayonet charge when his men were out of

ammunition? What if Ulric Dahlgren hadn't seized those Confederate papers that told Meade exactly what he was facing? Above all, what if Pickett's Charge had consolidated its breakthrough and the iconic 'high water mark of the Confederacy' hadn't been repulsed? Gettysburg is a battle that inevitably raises all of these and many other questions, which is why it has proved such a magnet to alternate historians and counterfactualists: there is so much ammunition for them here.

Peter G. Tsouras provides a counterfactual examination of all these questions and more in his book-length study *Gettysburg: An Alternate History*. Strangely, those changes that happen early in the battle – Stuart's arrival, Ewell's assault on Culp's Hill which is first delayed then repulsed, Longstreet's march around the Round Tops, which becomes bogged down when part of his force is withdrawn to

deal with Sickles's advance into the Devil's Den – result in little overall difference in the character of the battle. One cannot help but question whether such major changes would have had such little result, or whether the alternate history has not been subtly massaged to allow all the counterfactual possibilities from the entire three days of the battle to be brought into one consistent account. Certainly, all is still in place to permit the romantic and iconic climax of Pickett's Charge. The result, strangely, is a Union victory still. Though Tsouras mauls the Union army badly and brings it close to defeat several times, he

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seems to be suggesting that nothing Lee or Longstreet might have done could have affected the eventual outcome. It is said that in military colleges around the world, whenever the Battle of Waterloo is replayed, it invariably results in a victory for Napoleon. For most alternate historians, Gettysburg is a similar instance: all the opportunities missed were missed by Lee and his underlings; all the opportunities seized were seized by the Union. If there is to be any change in the roll of the dice, therefore, it is going to come out favouring the Confederacy – why undertake the exercise of changing history if you are not actually going to change history (a question we might well ask of George Alec Effinger shortly)? And just as, in our world, Gettysburg was a decisive victory that virtually guaranteed an eventual Union win, so, for everyone except Tsouras, a counterfactual Gettysburg remains equally decisive and results in the Confederates winning the war.

Of course, few alternate historians, or even other

counterfactualists, deem it necessary to throw in quite so many turning points. Sir Winston Churchill's curious essay-story, 'If Lee had not Won the Battle of Gettysburg', seems to occupy ground midway between counterfactual and alternate history. Here, briefly, we learn that Warren failed to reinforce the Round Tops in time, fatally weakening the Union line so that Pickett's Charge was effectively unopposed. The battle itself, however, is over in moments in Churchill's account, though he spends a little bit more time on the peace. Churchill shrewdly presents a Lee who is, through circumstance, in a far more powerful position than any Confederate politician, and uses that position to unilaterally end slavery. This is shrewd for two reasons: in person, Lee was at best ambivalent about slavery and in the last months of the war outraged his political masters by proposing that slaves should be freed in order to recruit blacks into the Confederate army, so this is indeed the sort of thing he might do (we'll see shortly that Harry Turtledove follows the same sort of logic in *The Guns of the South*); and, in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation, some such gesture would have been necessary if the Confederacy was not to have been considered a pariah among nations. Nevertheless, it is unlikely to have worked, because many of the most powerful Southern politicians were so adamant in their opposition to abolition that certain states actually came close to seceding from the Confederacy late in the war because Jefferson Davis was making half-hearted comments about compromise, and they would easily have been able to overturn Lee's declaration. Still, if we allow this conceit, we find that Churchill's work is actually very little about the effects of these events upon America, but rather how they changed British political history: the great Tory Prime Minister Disraeli becomes a leader of the radicals, the great radical Gladstone becomes the leader of the Conservatives.

On the whole, Churchill is comfortable with the idea of a Southern victory. He imagines that with two roughly equal powers in America neither would assume the economic dominance that the USA achieved during the latter part of the nineteenth century, so Britain remains top dog. Alternate historians on the whole, however, tend not to be so optimistic. One otherwise fairly insignificant story, 'A Place to Stand' by William H. Keith, Jr., will serve as an exemplar. A traveller from the future persuades his younger self, a frightened new recruit to an Alabama regiment, that he has a chance to change the course of the battle and guarantee a Confederate victory by shooting the commander of the 20th Maine, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, at a vital moment during the assault on Little Round Top, and by so doing prevent all the wrongs of Reconstruction. The youth does so, the battle is won, and the time traveller returns to reveal that the consequences of changing history are

far, far worse than Reconstruction, for it sets the scene for other secessions until the former USA is thoroughly Balkanised '... and mankind will stand at the dizzying precipice of century upon century of unrelenting, unforgiving war, a new Dark Age of death and blood and utter barbarism'. (p51).

Few would go that far, but in general alternate historians see a Southern victory as undoubtedly a bad thing, as it is, for instance, in the finest of all alternate history novels, Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*. Moore begins as Churchill did by plunging us straight into a world in which the Confederacy had won at Gettysburg, but the rough parity between the new nations that seems to lie behind Churchill's vision is not present here. On the model of Germany after the First World War, the North has been saddled with crippling reparations, which have ruined the economy. Moreover, a whistlestop tour of the North's post-war political history demonstrates how this bleak economic situation might have been further exacerbated:

The postwar inflation entered the galloping stage during the Vallandigham Administration, became dizzying in the time of President Seymour and precipitated the food riots of 1873 and '74. It was only after the election of President Butler ... that money and property became stable. (p14)

Vallandigham was Clement L. Vallandigham, a Northern Democrat devoted to the Southern cause, who was briefly imprisoned, then exiled for his activities among what were called the Copperheads, those who worked underground in the North to engineer a Southern victory at any cost. Seymour was Horatio Seymour, the Democrat Governor of New York, who supported the war but opposed most of the measures Lincoln introduced in order to pursue it, such as the draft and the Emancipation Proclamation. Butler was General Benjamin Butler, a Democrat politician who supported the war and became an incompetent general; after Lincoln, he was probably the most hated man in the South following his role as military governor in New Orleans. In a defeated North, these are not only probable presidents, but by what they represent they provide a telling portrait of the country, moving from initial slavish submission to the South to a wily independence.

Political and economic decline have been matched by a social collapse. In the 1930s and 40s, when the novel is set, life in the USA is portrayed as largely rural, with isolated communities and a dependence still on the horse and the blacksmith. The common attitudes are a reflection of the perceived values of the dominant South, with an antipathy towards blacks and abolitionists that matches that expressed during the New York City draft riots of mid-July 1863, and in many Northern industrial centres after emancipation. It is notable, for instance, that the only significant black character in the book is Rene Enfantin, the Consul for Haiti, indicating that any

measure of racial equality can exist only outside the Americas. The first part of the novel tells of the odyssey of Hodgins Backmaker (who does, indeed, make the world back to what it should have been) through the underworld of the North, allowing him to meet Confederate agents, underground agitators, foreign observers and those who are quite content with their lot. The kaleidoscopic impressions they convey tell us a lot about the world, though Moore tells us most through subtle remarks that mean more the more we know about American politics during the early years of the century:

From the first it was apparent the unpredictable electorate preferred Dewey to Lewis. State after state, hitherto staunchly Populist, turned to the Whigs for the first time since William Hale Thompson defeated President Thomas R. Marshall back in 1920 and again Alfred E. Smith in 1924. (p57)

But the novel is also a quest: Hodge's quest for education in a world without the resources or the interest to provide it for any other than the rich. As an autodidact, he is eventually taken up by a curious establishment that seems to be part college, part commune, and here by chance a time machine is invented. Hodge, the historian, of course travels back to witness the key moment in the War of Southron Independence – and finds himself accidentally delaying by a few precious moments the Southern advance upon Little Round Top. The rest was our history.

IX

In his alternate history travesty, *Stars and Stripes Forever*, Harry Harrison has P.T. Beauregard and William Tecumseh Sherman agreeing to reunite the Confederate and Union armies against the common enemy at Shiloh. With that slight exception, all the alternate histories and counterfactuals examined so far have taken the Eastern Theatre as their stage. While all these twists and turns in history were taking place, Ulysses S. Grant was winning a series of solid victories at Forts Henry and Donaldson, at Shiloh, and most spectacularly at Vicksburg (whose Confederate defenders surrendered the day after the victory at Gettysburg); Nathan Bedford Forrest was causing havoc in the rear of Union lines and earning a reputation as perhaps the most brilliant of all cavalry commanders in the war; Admiral David Glasgow Farragut was damning the torpedoes at Mobile Bay as the Union navy took a stranglehold on the Confederacy. All of this was dramatic enough, but there was a sense that events moved by forces other than mere chance. Grant and his successor in the West,

Sherman, may have made the eventual Union victory inevitable, but in the main the turning points of the war just did not happen here.

Sears examines one possible turning point in the West. In August 1863, as his battered army was recovering from the mauling it had received at Gettysburg, Lee was offered command of the Army of Tennessee. In a brilliant campaign, Federal General Rosecrans had manoeuvred the Confederates out of Tennessee and on to Chattanooga without once having to fight a major battle. Lee would have replaced Confederate General Bragg, but he refused, and instead Longstreet was despatched West in a subsidiary role to Bragg. Longstreet arrived just in time to play a major part in the spectacular Confederate victory at Chickamauga (the only significant Confederate victory in the West), but Bragg didn't follow up his victory. Grant replaced Rosecrans, broke the siege of Chattanooga, then defeated Bragg's

army in a battle noted for the spontaneous and overwhelmingly successful Union advance up Missionary Ridge.

What, Sears asks, if Lee had agreed to go West? Lee would not have failed to follow up the victory at Chickamauga, so Chattanooga would have quickly fallen and the Confederacy would have extended into strategically and politically important Tennessee once more.

But Lee would not have been allowed to stay long in the West, he was too important in the East, and Grant would have been quickly able to recover any Confederate gains. The net result, therefore, would have been no real difference, which seems to be a common feature of any Western counterfactual (see George Alec Effinger's *Look Away*), which probably explains why so many alternate historians have concentrated on the East.

X

After Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*, the finest Civil War alternate history is undoubtedly Harry Turtledove's *The Guns of the South*, and like its predecessor it combines alternate history with time travel. By this point – May 1864 – Grant has been promoted to the newly re-created rank of Lieutenant General and has been placed in command of all the Union armies. Lee knows that, while he might delay Grant, he has little real hope now of winning. Into this milieu arrive a group of time-travelling white South Africans bearing AK-47s as a gift for the Confederate Army. They have chosen this late point in the war as one that will give them the greatest leverage in achieving their aims: the establishment of a powerful slave-owning state. Neither Lee nor the Confederate Army is in a

All of this was dramatic enough, but there was a sense that events moved by forces other than mere chance.

position to look a gift horse in the mouth, and when Grant finally does march his army across the Rappahannock and into the Wilderness he finds an enemy with an unbeatable advantage. (Almost incidentally, the AK-47s rid the Civil War of one of its most terrible moments: the Battle of the Wilderness was fought in dense woodland that was bone dry, and sparks from the muskets used by both sides set the undergrowth alight. Hundreds of wounded caught between the lines burned to death that night.)

As in most alternate histories, the real interest in *The Guns of the South* lies in what happens after the Union and Confederacy have agreed peace terms, but in this instance, unusually, the concentration is upon the victorious South rather than the defeated North. In one aspect, Turtledove's vision is close to Ward Moore's, for in the Northern election of November 1864 he has Lincoln defeated by Horatio Seymour, with Clement Vallandigham as his Vice President. In the main, however, Turtledove's view of the post-war world is much closer to Churchill's (if we omit Churchill's concentration on the details of British politics). Although we only see the North obliquely, we do know that, unlike Ward Moore, Turtledove has not assumed that the North is saddled with crippling reparations. Hence, despite a pro-South government, there is no reason to suggest that the North's industrial capacity would be damaged and we end up with the suggestion, much like Churchill's and unlike Turtledove's own later notions in *How Few Remain*, of two powers of roughly equal status. Moreover, Turtledove's reading of Lee's character is much like Churchill's: a clear-headed, practical man who saw the ending of slavery as the only way forward for his country. When Lee is elected President after Davis (and if the South really had won, it is difficult to imagine any circumstances in which this might not have happened, unless Lee's health got in the way - he had a couple of heart attacks during the War, one in the lead-up to Gettysburg, and died in 1870), this inevitably brings him into conflict with the South Africans (who are backed by Nathan Bedford Forest, and, since Forest was the founder and first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, this is a very likely pairing). The advantage of *The Guns of the South* being a time travel story rather than a pure alternate history is not just that it initiates the change, but it allows Lee to discover what really happened, allowing histories to be compared within the novel and also teaching Lee about the Crater, which gives him the idea for one of the tactics he employs in his war to recover his country.

Turtledove's reading of Lee's character is much like Churchill's: a clear-headed, practical man who saw the ending of slavery as the only way forward for his country.

XI

At such a late stage in the war, only the *deus ex machina* of ahistorical weapons such as the AK-47s allows Turtledove to change history enough for the South to win. By now, though it still has nearly a year to run, the course of the war is clear and it would take something drastic to shift it from its inevitable end. If the great turning-point battles of Antietam and Gettysburg have attracted most alternate histories and counterfactuals, the brutal blood-letting of Grant's Virginia Campaign doesn't seem to offer any other outcome. In a curious novella, *Look Away*, George Alec Effinger presents one of the very rare alternate histories set in the Western Theatre. In this world the European Powers have united to create a peacekeeping force on the model of the United Nations, and we see their blue-topped wagons in action

at Sherman's siege of Atlanta, but as with their present-day equivalents, these peacekeepers are helpless, Atlanta falls, Sherman marches to the sea, and nothing changes. It is virtually unheard of for an alternate history to change nothing, but it is perhaps a tacit admission by Effinger that at this late stage and in that theatre nothing could change.

There is, too, a last counterfactual flourish from Sears, who wonders if Lincoln might have lost the November 1864 election. In choosing George McClellan as their candidate, the Democrats had given themselves a good chance, which they immediately threw away with an anti-war platform that even McClellan could not support. Nevertheless, only a string of Union victories, most notably Sherman's capture of Atlanta, threw things decisively Lincoln's way. If, however, the Democrats had adopted a moderate pro-war platform, Sears suggests, they might well have carried the day, even after Sherman's victory. But if McClellan did find himself in the White House come March 1865, with the pro-war policy that took him there he would have done no different from Lincoln, and the war would have ended much as it indeed did.

And so, whether Lincoln or McClellan held the reins of power, Sherman would complete his march through Georgia, then cut a destructive swathe through the Carolinas. Grant, meanwhile, would quietly force Lee to keep spreading his ever-depleting forces along ever-longer lines around Petersburg. Something had to give, on 1st April, 1865 Lee's flank finally collapsed, on 3rd April Richmond was abandoned, and Grant set out in pursuit of the remnants of Lee's army. On Saturday 8th April, Grant had a

dreadful headache when a messenger arrived under a flag of truce bearing Lee's offer to surrender. The headache disappeared instantly. The two generals met the next day in the parlour of Wilbur MacLean, who had moved to the little town of Appomattox Court House in 1861 to escape the war, after the battle of Bull Run had been fought, as he put it, in his back yard.

However, the war cannot be allowed to end without one final alternate historical delight. James Thurber wrote 'If Grant had been Drinking at Appomattox' as a direct response to Churchill's piece. In this

brief but typically hilarious tale he imagines that Grant, a notorious hard drinker, was rather the worse for wear when he met Lee at Appomattox Court House. After a rambling discussion, during which Grant mistakes Lee for the poet Robert Browning, he is finally reminded of the surrender:

'Oh sure, sure,' said Grant. He took another drink. 'All right,' he said 'Here we go.' Slowly, sadly, he unbuckled his sword. Then he handed it to the astonished Lee. 'There you are, General,' said Grant. 'We dam' near licked you. If I'd been feeling better we would of licked you.' (p173) ♦

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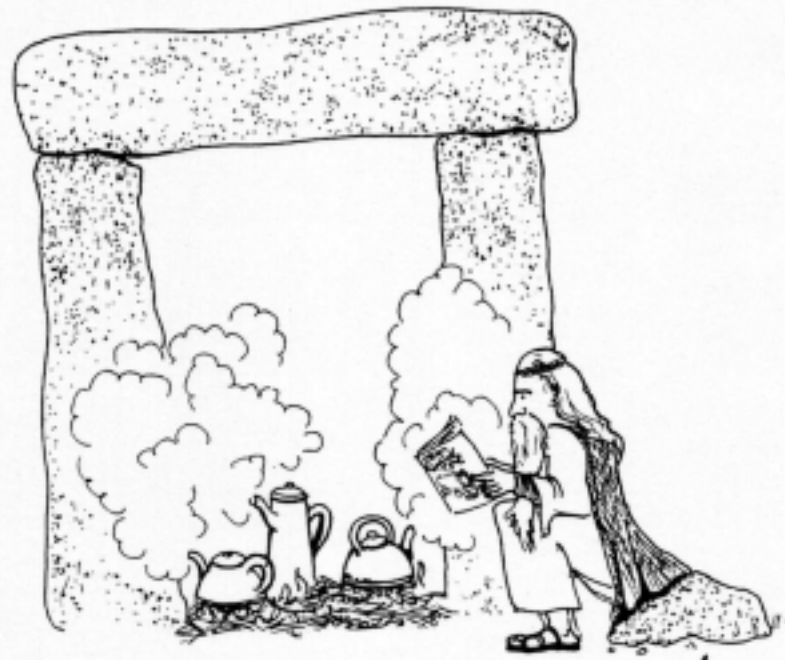
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Henge-Steaming Time

Gail-Nina Anderson
 K.V. Bailey
 William Breiding
 Ned Brooks
 Cy Chauvin
 Lindsay Crawford
 George Flynn
 John Howard

Jerry Kaufman
 Rick Kennett
 Marc Ortlieb
 Christopher Priest
 Steve Sneyd
 Gene Stewart
 Sue Thomason
 Mark Valentine

Letters of Comment

William Breiding

You probably haven't the faintest inkling how pleasant it was for me to so unexpectedly receive *Steam Engine Time* a few days ago. Like sudden manna from heaven. I've always been a closet sercon fan. I love to read criticism of sf, yet have little of the facility to write it, which bugs me to no end. So I make do with scrambling about for old books and fanzines.

Bruce, I've always like your brand of criticism, both in the long form and in the overview, both of which I've been treated to in this first issue of *Steam Engine Time*. Your piece on Stapledon, like Paul's overview, will probably result in a reading project in the future.

Not too long ago, I was the recipient of a gift from Patty Peters, via Bill Bowers' auction series, of an issue of *SF Commentary*, which I read and enjoyed with great relish. One comment I chuckled over in that issue was one after having read Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*. You called Card a fascist and vowed to never any more of his works. Did you really keep to that vow? And did anyone ever try to change your mind about Card's stance? Just curious.

BRG – *I haven't read any Card since, but I did obtain a copy of the giant volume of his short stories. It's buried at the bottom of a box, like many books at our house.*

John Howard

I was very impressed – it was, as stated, full of excellent, accessible writing about sf that is refreshingly empty of scholarly jargon

and posturing, but is also rigorous and a cut above 'fannish' style so-called criticism. The main point is that it made me want to go back and read (or re-read) the texts themselves. Thus getting priorities correct.

Gene Stewart

SET is the best-written and best-produced zine I've seen in ages, and you're dead on target in reviving the review article. Charles Fort had it right; when it's time for something, it arises.

Cordwainer Smith

George Flynn

I think this may be the first review that comments at any length on *Norstrilia's* appendix with the variant texts (which I compiled and wrote the bridging comments for; basically, I couldn't stand the idea of any of that prose not being preserved).

A couple of quibbles: in glossing 'Kermesse Dorgueil', I think David Seed has focused on *kermes* the dyestuff and missed the more relevant (and unrelated) *kermesse* 'fair or carnival'. (An enormous amount of detail on this sort of thing can be found in Tony Lewis's *Concordance to Cordwainer Smith*, also available from NESFA Press.) And the process in 'Scanners Live in Vain' is of course *cranching*, not *craching*.

Marc Ortlieb

I was a trifle disappointed in your lead article. Given the special place that Cordwainer Smith occupies in Australia, I felt that

David Seed's article didn't really do Smith's opus justice. He starts supposedly reviewing *The Rediscovery of Man*, looking at the stories in chronological order but the article then fragments, as though Seed isn't really sure what he's trying to do. At one point he's acting as cryptographer for some of Smith's notorious word plays and at another he's delving into the psychological and religious impetus behind various stories. He seems determined to prove his erudition by dragging in references to such luminaries as Kornbluth, Karp, Dick and Bester, but doesn't really make all that much of his references, other than to say 'I've read this.'

Sentences such as 'Typically, Smith's stories carry a referential margin which is never closed off.' suggest that Seed has been spending a little too much time in the Liverpool University English Department Staff Room and not enough in the bar with real science fiction fans. From the remainder of the paragraph, I think that Seed is trying to explain the way that Smith's stories maintain an air of mystery because he deliberately leaves things unexplained, but I'm not sure. Perhaps we could have an annotated version of the article for them of us what sometimes forget to take the dishes out of the kitchen sink before pissing in it.

Some of Seed's statements are so general as to be meaningless. His claim that Smith anticipates some of the themes of cyberpunk by showing a synergy between mind and machine in stories such

as 'Scanners Live in Vain' is all well and good, provided that you'll give the same licence to every sf writer who suggested there might be a link between humans and their technology. Should we start with Mary Shelley? I agree that 'Nancy' which, apart from one reference to the Up-and-Out, does not fit into the future histories at all, comes close to anticipating some form of virtual reality, but no more so than any of the other stories from the fifties that look at how scientific advances might make hallucinations more palpable.

Seed also accepts at face value the chronology imposed by Mann and the NESFA Press people, and does not begin to question it, a rather superficial way to treat the stories. He doesn't take into account the fact that Smith deliberately muddies any possible attempt to construct a Heinleinistic History of the Future from his stories. My favourite example of this is the way in which 'The Colonel Came Back from Nothing-at-All' and 'Drunkboat' are essentially the same story but are put 7000 years apart in the standard Pierce chronology. He also accepts 'Queen of the Afternoon' into the chronology, despite the evidence that it is largely a reconstruction by Genevieve Linebarger which contains features that are anachronistic even within the very elastic boundaries of Smith's future history.

While I'm glad to see another piece about Cordwainer Smith, an author who has been neglected recently, I didn't find Seed's piece a particularly useful addition to the body of criticism.

Rick Kennett

I approached David Seed's piece on Cordwainer Smith with some trepidation. The only other article I've read on Smith was one by Terry Dowling some years ago in *Science Fiction* which left me as much in the dark about Smith and his writing as before I read it.

I might get that issue out again and see if I still feel the same. Perhaps the only time I read something that gave me an insight into Smith and his stories was, strangely enough, the introduction to 'Scanners Live in Vain' in Robert Silverberg's *Worlds of Wonder*.

Cy Chauvin

David Seed's article on Cordwainer Smith suffers too much from being a survey article, and I've read all the items mentioned and don't think I've gained a sliver of new insight. Perhaps there is nothing new to be said of Cordwainer Smith and survey articles are needed to interest new readers in him.

Essentials

Ned Brooks

Amazing how few of the supposedly essential documents of the last 20 years I have read! *Engine Summer* and *Satanic Verses* is about it, though I tried to read *Tours Of The Black Clock*. I might have read *Dæmonomania* if I had known about it. I'll have to look for a copy. I'm not sure I believe in 'essential documents' - especially from the last 20 years, when I haven't caught up with the 20th century yet.

Mark Valentine

Paul's pensive overview of the condition of British sf was thrown into stark relief by the 'essentials' selections, in which (apart from his own) virtually all those chosen were not British, and reasonably so, it would appear. I agree, however, with his selection of Alasdair Gray, Philip Pullman, M. John Harrison. Not Iain Sinclair though? Lots of people went for John Crowley. Very sweet, very folksy, but completely derivative, and a dead end.

Polemic

Gene Stewart

Paul Kincaid's Polemic is a

needed warning. If science fiction goes elliptical or becomes just another moebius strip of strange loops, with referents swallowed whole like daily vitamins, who'll care? Self-referential closed sets belong more to Hollywood's narcissistic navel-gazing than to the one genre once proud of looking forward and outward, to the one genre with a clear-eyed appreciation of science, technology and their intertwined, permeating influences.

Finding a way to engage Now in a meaningful dialogue with Soon is the only way science fiction can break free of the all-consuming black hole it seems to have swallowed. Tautologically, it's now swallowing science fiction in turn, from the inside.

Flying cars and other toys are no longer enough and never really were. We need to find concrete correlatives that speak to us, that enliven our writing and, more importantly, fire our imaginations again. Like the planet's population, sense of wonder seems to be approaching capacity, and that marks science fiction as moribund unless we find new wonders that mean something to us. Not dazzlements, diversions or even entertainments, but genuine wonders.

PK - 'Finding a way to engage Now in a meaningful dialogue with Soon' is one of the best brief descriptions of the enterprise of science fiction I think I have ever come across. Thank you.

Marc Ortlieb

Paul's polemic certainly had a point. I've recently worked my way through the double issue of *Eidolon* (29/30) and, of the fifteen stories in the issue, only three qualify as future stories. Russell Blackford's 'Two Thousand Years', set in 2033, sits firmly in the cyberpunk domain; Stephen Dedman's 'The Devotee' is very near future stuff; Sean Williams's 'The Land Itself' is set 30,000 odd years in the future. The other

twelve stories are either fantasy, set in the past or deal with aspects of the present. I still haven't worked out why the opening story, Cecily Scutt's 'Indicator Species', is in a science fiction and fantasy magazine.

The first two of the future stories could be considered cautionary stories, extrapolating cultural and scientific trends, but using retro settings. Blackford's piece extrapolates the arguments between today's punks and goths and an interesting fusion of skinheads and fundamentalist Christians, at the same time echoing the debate between those who accept genetic engineering and those who see it as ungodly. Dedman melds hard-boiled detective and a Nivenesque world of wire-headers and organ-leggers (pun intended, for those who've read the story). In it he looks at the way that new technology always benefits the bosses to the detriment of the lower classes. The third, Williams' piece, takes a strangely twisted look at current Australia, at its political position on the republican issue and land rights and at its environmental record. The futuristic devices in the story are convenient methods to get the central character from one place to the other and his own nature puts a futuristic edge on the treatment of contemporary Australian issues.

So the sort of stuff about the future, the extrapolations of which George Turner was fond, is still there, and I suspect that it will last. It's a handy way of conjuring up a distorting mirror for the present. But it hasn't the selling power of epic fantasy or cute books about young magicians and so I suspect that it'll be the province of the persistent few.

Sue Thomason

I have been worried for quite some time that there doesn't seem to be sf being written about a number of pretty crucial current issues. Climate change has been

very badly addressed, and what's going to happen to medicine in the short-to-medium term future is pretty much neglected. Perhaps now that the future no longer looks unreservedly golden, we don't want disturbing fiction about it - we want 'comfort books' instead that reassure us that everything is going to be, if not okay, then at least enjoyably new and (not too) challenging. In some ways I think Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red/Green/Blue Mars* books do this, presenting us with a vision of a wonderfully changed-for-the-better Mars, the new Promised Land/New World. But the truth is that we can't even terraform the Earth in any very positive or productive way yet ... let alone construct an interlocking web of ecosystems from scratch. If only - it's an environmentalist's wish-fulfilment fantasy. And although Robinson's vision is moving, I still can't help wondering where the hell all the money to do the initial equipment dump for the First Hundred came from...

Ghosts

Mark Valentine

I concur with your analysis of the failure of mainstream writers to use the ghost story form effectively. I could not believe how hackneyed was the Pat Barker attempt you describe. When any of them match the peculiar brilliance of de la Mare or Aickman, then I shall take notice!

Gail-Nina Anderson

I agreed with all you said about *Another World*. I did an on-stage interview with Pat Barker when the film of *Regeneration* was shown locally: a very thoughtful, considered author, with a stronger sense of this world than of the next, I feel.

Sue Thomason

The cultural success or failure (or impact, at least) of 'traditional' ghost stories depends a good deal

on whether the audience actually really do believe in ghosts. This is not a new problem. Rory and me have an ongoing discussion/argument/agreement that what is actually going on in *Hamlet* depends entirely on how you treat/stage the Ghost. Our conclusion about what Shakespeare intended is that the Ghost's first speech makes it clear that the Ghost is not actually the ghost of Hamlet's father, but an evil spirit/damned soul from Hell who has been given leave to tempt Hamlet into mortal sin ... which he successfully does. Ghost stories must have a different impact in a culture that actually believes in life after death, and in ghosts, than in a profoundly atheist/materialist culture like most of our own. I think 'ghost stories' are actually quite comforting to modern audiences - they provide disturbing images in a safely self-contained and 'unrealistic' world - mostly we do not believe that something 'like that' could *really* happen, so we can play at being frightened without having to take any notice of any genuinely serious consequences ... we think.

Stapledon

K.V. Bailey

The very welcome first issue of *SET*, with its complementing Dittmar front and back covers, offers so many good things begging for comment that it's with restraint I pick out just one - Bruce Gillespie's perceptive and provocative piece on Olaf Stapledon, and in particular what he has to say about *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*. Leslie Fiedler, in subtitled his Stapledon book *A Man Divided* (one of Stapledon's own titles), signals the dichotomy that he will stress throughout; Bruce, on the other hand, rather emphasises the personal frustrations and 'muddled' philosophy he sees reflected in Stapledon's works. I would like to identify one or two areas where such apparent short-

comings might be reexamined.

First, there is the leaving of the Earth at the beginning of *LaFM*. Bruce describes it as a reader-putting-off 'unexplained fantasy', adding, a shade ironically, that 'as a method of transport it certainly beats the faster-than-light spaceship'. So it does; but surely it would be wearisome to explain a fantasy which to readers of his time, as to those of today, is recognisable as metaphoric of an imaginative flight of the spirit. Its genesis being given a local habitation does not detract from that. It is in the visionary vein of Thomas Traherne, writing in one of his 'Centuries': 'Som time I should Soar abov the Stars and Enquire how the Heavens Ended, and what was Beyond them.' Stapledon is consciously placing his book within a literary and poetic tradition of 'spiritual transportation'. We do not receive, or expect, an explanation from Dante of how he came to find himself in that mysterious dark wood into which Virgil came to guide him on his infernal/celestial journey. All he is able to tell us is that he just doesn't know how he got there: 'I' *non so ben redir com' io v'entraì.*

Secondly, there is Bruce's conclusion that Stapledon as a thinker was 'muddled' and 'bound by his time' when 'unfortunately religion raises its ugly head'. He was so bound less than one might think. An important typescript which exists in Liverpool University's Stapledon archive was reproduced in booklet form by Harvey Satty (1986) and is incorporated in the Gollancz Masterworks edition of *Star Maker* (1999). This is Stapledon's *Glossary to Star Maker*. In it he shows how certain terms have variant meanings, and discusses their contexts in his novel. 'Religion' is one such term. He makes a distinction between its Marxist connotation - 'a particular sort of capitalist dope' - and an attitude, which he associates

with Spinoza, of 'a piety towards fate, or the whole of being, or some inconceivable deity'. OS was, indeed, oriented strongly to the Left, as were many poets and intellectuals of the '30s, and this to the extent that in introducing his entry on 'Worship' (a culminating term and attitude in the theophanic fifteenth chapter of *SM*) he half-apologetically realises that he may be 'raising thunder on the Left'. But in his defining of it he shows himself transcendent of attitudes either religiously conventional or politically ostracising, more in line with Leibnitz's, and after him Aldous Huxley's 'perennial philosophy', when he writes: 'Perhaps the activity which I am calling "worship" is an appreciation ... of an attribute or essence that is experienced as characteristic of all particular existents. Metaphorically this essence might be called "the spirit of the whole".'

Thus, far from being time-bound, a distinctive timelessness characterises Stapledon's philosophy. He appears agnostic as to whether in cosmic terms 'Mind' ('any self-contained system of experience') can transcend/survive 'the static and eternal end'; yet he infuses that agnosticism with an intuition that fulfilment must predominate over non-fulfilment, beauty over blemish, concord and harmony over fragmentation. Consciousness of those antinomies in the microcosm of himself, and of his society, may mark him as a man divided, but not necessarily as a man ultimately frustrated. The heating of divisions he sees to depend on achieving what in *SM* he calls 'a more awakened state'. He there projects this on to Echinoderm and Nautiloid worlds and their post-disaster destinies, having first identified himself (the observer) empathically with those alien beings. Professor Stephen Clark has seen Stapledon's philosophy as being in the tradition of that of Plotinus (the

third century Neoplatonist, described by Bertrand Russell as a 'melancholy optimist') who taught of an awakening from ordinary self concerns to participation in 'the living unity in diversity of Intellect', imaged as 'the interpenetration of a community of living minds' (Clark: *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 18/2). The core of Stapledon's philosophy, expressed at length in *Philosophy and Living* and *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, is contained succinctly in his *Glossary* definition of 'Community': 'The pattern of community is the small group in personal contact. Each individual must realise the underlying concord and the unique idiosyncrasy of the others. [...] In larger groups personal contact obviously cannot hold; hut the individuals may generalise from personal experience, and act on the principle that all individuals, known or unknown, should be treated [not as mere means, but] as ends.' It is to pursue universally the potential for community, through even to metaphysical speculation, that OS writes what are virtually vast sustained metaphors and are also something in the nature of thought experiments - e.g. what would it be like to be a Nautiloid (cf Bruce's quoted description from *Star Maker*). It is, I believe, the combination of an ideational grounding and a projective synaesthesia that has gone to make Stapledon's works so strong an influence in the development of a mature science fiction.

BRG - *I couldn't even begin to argue with Mr Bailey, who has obviously thought long about the works of Stapledon - probably lived with them for many years - whereas in my article I was trying to give some overview of the Crossley biography and a huge amount of Stapledon's work that I read rapidly for the first time in the mid-1990s. More interesting than any opinion of mine is Stanislaw Lem's view of Stapledon, to be found in Earth is But a Star, edited by Damien Broderick*

(University of Western Australia Press, April 2001).

Steve Sneyd

The statement 'Port Said, in Egypt, where he and his family were the only permanent white residents' sounds so wildly unlikely that it casts a shadow of doubt over the whole of a fascinating article. The 1929 Britannica notes 150,000 foreign residents in Egypt, 'the majority Greeks', but also Italians, Armenians, etc. Port Said, as the entry to the Canal, surely offered major commercial possibilities. Is it really true that *no* other foreigners of European origin lived there to take advantage of them?

BRG – *I'm just reporting the impression given by Crossley – that Stapledon and his family knew almost no other English people while living in Port Said.*

John Howard

I've been reading Stephen Baxter's *Time* and *Space* and, inevitably, Stapledon is one of the great looming presences behind the texts. I would tend to agree with Bruce's comments on the readability of Stapledon's novels, but I've never regretted trying and trying again, especially with *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker*. There was once a sixteen-year-old lad who started to read *Last and First Men* one November afternoon on the train home from London. As the murky autumn evening advanced, and the inner London suburbs fell behind, this somewhat older lad has never forgotten the horizons and vistas opened in that book.

Bruce's final paragraphs about Stapledon seem fair. Stapledon's posthumously published 'spiritual' book, *The Opening of the Eyes*, leads me to the same conclusions. It's a relief to find that Sam Moskowitz's conclusion that Stapledon had found God is thought of by others as being in error. Or, at least, being found on Stapledon's terms and within his terms

of reference, rather than 'God's'.

Gene Stewart

Stapledon's imagination needed room, vastness being adequate and infinity all the better. This is true of his style as well, alas. However, this search for reasons to remember and reread Stapledon's work reminds us that perhaps 'literary' better suits the work as an adjective and as an explanation. He bridged the starry void between those other visionaries, Wells and Clarke. For that alone Stapledon deserves some effort from us spoiled though we are by reporters' brevity and TV-style phrasings.

This odd dichotomy between style and content underscores a vital truth about science fiction: it honours ideas most of all and tolerates writing styles that at times crumble into inability. Perhaps it's science fiction's adolescence that accounts for its tin ear for style. This also moves such stuff as Stapledon, interestingly, into the scholarly realm, where those sufficiently determined can wrestle wonders, or at least a thesis or dissertation, from even antiquated verbosity.

If Stapledon wrote as a bricklayer builds a wall, he used imagination as cement to hold his sentences together, imagination that shamed even the likes of Blake or Kierkegaard. A visionary, he rode his inner glimpses of vast time and space with only Wells, whose work he didn't really apply, as an example; his balance proved astounding. And his hints of epiphany tell us that research was not his main working method. Like Einstein he saw things first, then set out methodically to prove them real, or to realise them.

Gillespie's observations that Stapledon was a frustrated monk with libertine leanings, a believer in huge forces rather than in anthropomorphised gods, resonates once more with the life of William Blake. In many ways Stapledon

was a visionary poet too, if one lacking in art or soaring language. Each apparently glimpsed a New Jerusalem, each made a personal testament in the face of appalling humanity's typical debacle, and each is misunderstood.

Jerry Kaufman

In Bruce's otherwise exemplary description of Olaf Stapledon's work, he stumbles on Jack Speer and Robert Silverberg's historical framework for fandom. It wasn't 'Eight Stages of Fandom' that they created, but 'Numbered Fandoms'. The last one designated by Silverberg was Sixth Fandom; Harlan Ellison then described his friends as Seventh Fandom. 'The Seven Stages of Fandom' was a humorous essay by Robert Bloch, which was then collected in a book of his fannish pieces entitled *The Eighth Stage of Fandom*.

BRG – *The Seven Stages of Fandom had already been well established before I joined fandom, and nobody ever published an article explaining the origin of the concepts. No wonder I didn't realise the precise nature of the joke of the title of Eighth Stage of Fandom, though I enjoyed much in the book.*

British SF

Christopher Priest

I usually gain insights from reading Paul's critical work and this was no exception. It was interesting to see Conrad brought into the game. I'm less happy with his discourse on Shelley and Wells, because I think he's too generous to our American ancestors. Let's talk about Mary Shelley first, though, since Paul says, 'If we agree with Brian Aldiss that the very first science fiction novel was ...' Having pondered Aldiss's thesis about Mary Shelley off and on for twenty-odd years (more off than on, I might add) I've come to the same conclusion other people came to in its day, that in *Billion Year Spree* Aldiss was making special pleading about Franken-

stein. The argument Aldiss made was an odd one, coming from him. He's such a genre supporter and to claim *Frankenstein* as the first sf novel, Aldiss should be able to show that there was actually some kind of linking influence going on between it and the present day; ie, more people than Brian Aldiss had to have noticed, and not a century and a half after the event. You can make that sort of link with Wells, but not with Mary Shelley. Although you can see that *Frankenstein* fits the paradigm of modern sf - it's about science not fantasy, the science has a singular impact and the book is about the responsibility of the scientist for that impact, all of which fit the definition of twentieth-century sf - in fact the book is a one-off in the sense that Aldiss himself usually argues for the genre, in that it had no generic effect. Another blind alley, in practice. In its day people mistook *Frankenstein* for another ghost story, because that was the genre it seemed most closely to resemble. I suspect a more accurate analogy with Mary Shelley lies with those modern mainstream novelists who write one-off sf novels. They come to a speculative subject with no preconceptions about sf (antipathy in many such cases, if only it were known) and somehow manage to convince their publisher that they've done something new and the publisher is ill-equipped to argue. (Otherwise, how else can you explain the complete surrender of editorial faculties?) Recent examples are Paul Theroux's *The 0-Zone* and P.D. James's novel, whose title I've forgotten but which went over ground already well tilled by Aldiss himself in his *Greybeard*, all those years ago.

For generic influence you have to move forward some hundred years beyond Mary Shelley to H. G. Wells and his effect on the American pulps of the 1920s. Wells was in those days the brand leader, and it was Wells the pulp

writers had to imitate. Later, another lot imitated the imitators. Later still, yet another lot came along and imitated the other lot. This is how generic fiction works. It would be wrong and demonstrably wrong to say (for example) that the work of Robert Heinlein was directly influenced by Wells, but you certainly can say that the market that supported Heinlein when he came along was created by the energy that had grown from the generic activity traceable back to Wells. Perfectly good and interesting writers can emerge from genres, starting their careers by working within genre expectations. Thus we get great generic writers like Raymond Chandler, J.G. Ballard, M.R. James. But until the influence of the science fiction magazine editors started to fade away (roughly from the 1960s on, as the original paperback began to take the high generic ground and when the editors necessarily came from a broader commercial background) those writers were essentially locked in genre expectations and critical judgements. Things are as a result different now, thank God.

I agreed with Paul about the pomposity of David Hartwell's comment on the primacy of American sf. It's an authentic attitude that runs through a lot of American thinking about sf (there's similar pomposity over here, of course, but on different subjects). It's fairly unusual to see it expressed in print. People like David Hartwell are usually more careful not to let it slip! Paul's right: we have to throw off nationalism and think globally, in sf as in everything else. I would merely comment anecdotally that I am far from being alone in this country in having had my work criticized or (more often) rejected in the USA, with the comment or unstated sentiment: 'It's *too British* to be any good.' I used to believe it, and would get depressed when I thought about it. Then one

day I woke up to the fact that my books were being cheerfully translated in languages all over the world, with nary a mutter about any of them being 'too British', these being the selfsame books that otherwise intelligent editors in New York were spurning because they happened to be set in London, rather than, for instance, Baltimore or Los Angeles. I now see 'too British' as being an essentially New York problem, not a British one.

Finally, let me put in a plea for original thinking and writing in *SET*, since your intentions are so good. It seems to me that the world of science fiction comment or criticism has accepted a number of shibboleths, which in many cases started out as novelty phrases or off-hand remarks, but which are now in constant use as critical shorthand. Using them tends to legitimize them and although some of them are not entirely without merit I don't think they should be used so freely or so often. Paul uses two of them in his essay (both by Brian Aldiss), and it got me thinking about them and trying to remember the others. I could think of four; maybe some of your readers can think of others?

The first of the four is the famous 'Sturgeon's Law', for which I wish I'd been given a tenner for every time I've heard it quoted (and sometimes misquoted). The contention in support of sf that 'ninety per cent of everything is rubbish' is such a negative and discouraging one that it always depresses me when it is said. Ninety per cent of *everything*? Of Mozart? Of Shakespeare? Of Vermeer? Of sunsets? Of chemical elements? Of children? This particular catch phrase has done more to lower the critical temperature, more to create a tolerating climate for poor writing, than anything else I can think of.

The other three I can think of were coined by Brian Aldiss and it's fair to say have slightly more

critical acumen than Sturgeon's dismal offering: 'cosy catastrophe', 'widescreen baroque' and 'hubris clobbered by nemesis' (not quoted by Paul). These Aldissisms do come up again and again, not just in *SET*. In the two latter cases you can sense what they mean and like a lot of aphoristic phrases they are quite good, in a dinner-party sort of way, at catching a synoptic meaning. But for use in serious criticism they should properly be deployed in inverted commas and footnoted back to source. 'Cosy catastrophe' is different, though. This one is now accepted and in frequent use by many different commentators as critical shorthand to sum up (tacitly assuming consent through familiarity) a certain kind of British sf novel.

'Cosy catastrophe' as critical jargon has two things seriously wrong with it. Firstly, it betrays a misreading by Aldiss of the books he was using it against: in *Billion/Trillion Year Spree* he names one novel by R.C. Sherriff, most of the novels by John Wyndham, John Christopher and those of a few other lesser British sf writers of the 1950s. The tone of these writers is deceptive, and it's the tone of which Aldiss is dismissive: he mocks Sherriff for his remarks about china ornaments and whistling milkmen. Aldiss defined the cosy catastrophe thus: 'The hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off.' Wyndham is of course the prime exponent: his narrative voice is middle class (is this, revealingly, what Aldiss finds cosy?), but if you look twice at Wyndham's novels you realize that there's not only a sharp satirical line going on, but that the narrator is almost invariably not the principal character. For example, in *The Midwich Cuckoos* it emerges that the teacher Gordon Zellaby is the protagonist, not the writer Richard Gayford who tells the story;

ditto Coker as against Bill Masen, in *Triffids*. I re-read much of Wyndham recently and I thought his books were actually improving with age, gaining a distinct satirical edge that transcended the period tone.

The other complaint against the 'cosy catastrophe' line is that John Wyndham, John Christopher, etc., were the generation of writers that immediately preceded the young turks of the late 1950s, who included John Brunner, J.G. Ballard and of course Brian Aldiss. They were the establishment of the day, if you like. We all know how new writers like to treat their elders and betters and it seems to me that this phrasemaking is a kind of rite of passage for Aldiss, almost a settling of an old score.

Anyway, my point is that using other writers' jargon in criticism always leads to trouble. You'll see...

PK – *I don't agree with Aldiss about Frankenstein. He finagled his definition of sf by including the reference to the 'Gothic mode', so that Frankenstein has to be the starting point of the genre. I think More's Utopia makes a far better starting point for the genre, though you are right that Wells is clearly the springboard for most of what we think of as 20th Century sf.*

As to your plea for original thinking: you are right that 'Sturgeon's Law' is fatuous. Of the various coinages from Aldiss: I dislike 'hubris clobbered by nemesis' intensely and never use the phrase; 'widescreen baroque' I will use ironically but not seriously. Alas we are stuck with 'cosy catastrophe', because the catastrophe as a theme in British sf is so instantly recognisable, but despite Aldiss practically none of it is 'cosy', which was one of the points I was trying to make in my essay.

William Breiding

Paul Kincaid's overview of British sf (and it's split with America) told me things I didn't know, but

had one minor flaw, which I would like corrected. Paul very strongly stated that the split between the two countries during the New Wave period of the sixties was the difference between literary technique/avant-garde subject matters (British) and the more straight-ahead approach of shattering taboos and deconstructing icons (America); he cited specific authors and works on the British side, yet neglected to do so with the American writers. It would help me considerably when I get around to researching that period to know who Paul thought were the import American New Wave writers that he was thinking about when he wrote that statement. I can see a reading jag coming up, and I'll need some advise.

PK – *Probably the best list of American New Wave writers is on the contents page of Harlan Ellison's Dangerous Visions. This was the most representative statement of the American New Wave, though you will find echoes of it in a lot of other anthologies that came out in the late 60s and early 70s, I am thinking particularly of books like Protostars and Alternities edited by David Gerrold and Stephen Goldin.*

Gene Stewart

Paul Kincaid's linking of J.G. Ballard to Joseph Conrad is trenchant, revealing much of the distinction between USA's and UK's science fiction. And bravo for pointing out the ethnocentrism of believing American as opposed to English Language science fiction dominates. As a member of the online group Rede Global Paraliteraria – founded by Bruce Sterling and Brazilian Roberto de Sousa Causo to promote a more inclusive sf truly reflective of the world's rich cultural diversity – I applaud this distinction.

And yes, Wyndham's 'cosy catastrophe' flowed directly to Ballard's *Crystal World* and so on. The diversity of early British

magazine content allowed for more cross-pollinating, even as it blurred sub-genres more clearly defined elsewhere. Wells practically covered all of science fiction's sub-genres single-handedly anyway, so of course there was mixing going on afterwards.

US literary or 'serious' writers simply dare not commit the *faux pas*/thought crime of science fiction, whereas in the UK writers of any background – literary, cultural or ethnic – are allowed to have a bash at science fiction or other genres without at once risking careers and critical acclaim. Anthony Burgess did it brilliantly throughout his career, from *A Clockwork Orange* to *The End of the World News*. The British approach has been consistently more conducive to keeping literary genres fresh and alive by allowing healthy mixing and avoiding inbreeding. No snide remarks about the monarchy, please.

I'm persuaded by the cogent argument that all this and more stems from *Heart of Darkness*, but does that make Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* sf? Maybe it's easier to view things that way, after all.

PK – *I think a number of British writers might balk at your claim that it's easier over here to move between the genres. Generally mainstream writers can move into sf so long as they do not call it 'science fiction' (Doris Lessing called her sf 'space fiction') or announce that what they are doing is clearly better (as P.D. James did). It is considerably less easy for sf writers to move into the mainstream and receive critical respect (ask Christopher Priest). Nevertheless, I can think of many more British mainstream writers who have tried their hand at sf (even if unsuccessfully) than I can Americans. So maybe you have a point. I trust I speak for my fellow editors when I say that we have no interest in sticking to an Anglocentric view of sf in SET, and we welcome articles about non-English Language writers and literatures.*

Marc Ortlieb

I enjoyed Paul's article on British sf even though, in skipping straight from Wyndham and Christopher's disaster novels to the New Wave, it totally ignores Ted Carnell's *New Worlds* and *New Writings in SF*, which contained some of my favourite British science fiction authors, Colin Kapp and James White, *et al.*, along with guest appearances from such colonials as Lee Harding, Bert Chandler and John Baxter. Carnell gave the British New Wave somewhere to practise before Moorcock took over *New Worlds* and they sprang their new style onto the literary community.

BRG – *I agree about Carnell's contribution to English sf. When I first began to buy the magazines, the only ones I could afford were Carnell's New Worlds and Science Fiction Adventures. That's how I first realised that sf writers actually existed in Australia, since Carnell used to give people like Harding, Wynne Whiteford and 'David Rome' (David Boutland) spots for guest editorials. SFA had the original novella version of Ballard's 'The Drowned World', and the first NWS I read were serialising Phil Dick's Time Out of Joint. So my mind was destroyed from the very beginning.*

Banks

Mark Valentine

I have never understood the acclaim for *The Wasp Factory* and some of Maureen's puzzlement, evident at the beginning of her article, chimed with me. It still seems to me, after pondering the points you make, that the book is neither one thing nor another. It is too ludicrous to be a brutally realistic work, yet too flat and crude to be a fantasy. Not odd enough to rate as surreal, not normal enough to be noir. I suspect you may give it more attention than it deserves – surely it was a piece of attention-seeking juvenilia? Where's the depth?

Steve Sneyd

Would the political sensibility of Banks's 'Culture' novels really stick in quite so many US craws? I find the politics of his series, at one level Eloi-benevolent Morlocks (the ships, in a sense, keeping the humanoids as pets), but at the level at which the humanoids see themselves as operating, I would've thought it would fit reasonably well with the libertarian anarchism of the Heinlein strand in US sf (though he would probably think the 'Culture' humanoids have it too easy, and TANSTAAFL will catch up sooner or later – when the ships get fed up of their pets, perhaps?)

Lafferty

Lindsay Crawford

When my cousin gave me a few dozen sf paperbacks in 1972, Lafferty's *900 Grandmothers* was one which particularly intrigued me and I was forever a fan after reading those stories.

I guess I have not read much Lafferty in the past decade. Pity. There is a reason why I had considered reading sf to be superior to any other form of entertainment, and the unique (to say the least) delight of exposure to Lafferty's perspective is high on the list. Though he can be sometimes dark and somber the thrill to the imagination is not something to be missed, once you have a taste. I can't claim I've learned how to solve life's troubles from what I've read, but I've gained something precious, I'd wager.

Jerry Kaufman

I have fond memories of R.A. Lafferty's work, which Elaine brings to mind. However, I suspect that attempting to recapture the memories by direct application to the texts will be a failure. I've just read 'Boomer Flats', which I found in an anthology of 'Ecotopian' fiction edited by Kim Stanley Robinson, and found it interesting but not so flavourful

as I had remembered his work. Could this simply have been a minor example?

Cy Chauvin

My favourite article so far is Elaine's. I like it because she gives wonderful excerpts from R.A. Lafferty stories I have not only never read but have never heard of. She also does a wonderful job of explaining why I have not been able to read any of his novels. I do hope she does do a list of her favourite Lafferty stories because it would be so interesting to compare lists and find what we are missing. My favourites are 'Continued on Next Rock—', 'All the Pieces of a River Shore', 'Interurban Queen' and the first story I ever read by Lafferty, 'This Grand Carcass'. He does seem to have become one of the living sf writers who is most neglected. I wonder what Lafferty will make of this article? Perhaps Elaine should be warned, I remember that the last woman who wrote such a highly favourable article about Lafferty, Sheryl Smith in the late fanzine *Gorbett*, received an offer of marriage in reply...

Gene Stewart

Elaine Cochrane's celebration of Lafferty is welcome and delightful. Lafferty's work has been a favourite for years, and his brilliant, charming, devastating work deserves as wide a readership as Vonnegut or Heinlein or even Philip K. Dick ever got. I read *900 Grandmothers* itself quite a while back but always recommend 'Narrow Valley' for those new to Lafferty's work. That and 'Slow Tuesday'. His sparkling surfaces and Irish word-drunkness often mask a serious, sharp mind dealing with big, deep questions. And the notion that such an individual writer is probably unpublished these days only condemns these days as unworthy of such genius. The final paragraph of this article should be clipped and stapled to every publisher's

forehead, as well as stuck strategically above one's own desk.

George Flynn

Elaine Cochrane writes that she doesn't 'know enough about Catholicism to pick up [Lafferty's] references'. This is a pity, since as I recall it Lafferty's work is full of allusions that are probably incomprehensible to anyone without a Catholic background.

In answer to the question at the end, I believe Lafferty is no longer writing. But as for his being 'unpublishable', at least there are a couple of small presses that go on publishing his work.

We Also Heard From...

James Allen, Pamela Boal, Syd Bounds, Damien Broderick, Molly Brown, Simon Brown, Jeremy G. Byrne, Marty Cantor, Sir Arthur C. Clarke: 'Paul Kincaid's remarks about loss of empire remind me of Belloc's lines about the fate of younger sons of the aristocracy: "When all else fails, Go off and govern New South Wales".' **Jan Cregan, Benedict Cullum, David Curl, Gary S. Dalkin, Paul Di-Filippo:** 'Since the death of *SF Eye*, there's been a huge gap crying out for just such a zine. What a splendid cast of contributors and subjects! *Cordwainer Smith* and *Olaf Stapledon*: now there's a winning ticket I'd like to vote for!' **Steve Duffy, Iain Emsley:** 'Great to see themed review articles.' **Ahrvid Engholm, Nic Farey, Julian Friedin, Janice Gelb:** 'What a gorgeous, gorgeous fanzine!' **Steve Green, Terence M. Green, Arthur Hlavaty** (who sent his own list of 20 essential sf and fantasy works from the last 20 years, which we hope to publish in a future issue), **Anders Holmstrom:** 'Truly cool stuff and amazingly *Sercon*. Not even any frivolous illos to take the edge off. Still not the least bit dry but rather enticing when it comes to rereading. Searching out old gems and giving them a whole new luster.' **Ben Indick, Maxim Jakubowski, Terry Jeeves:** 'I go along with Paul's theory on sf and toys. I

feel sf has just about reached its limit other than mining the old areas of time and space travel, robots and alien conflict. As far as science goes, few authors are well versed enough in modern developments and probably even fewer readers are up to following yarns based on it. This is probably why fantasy is proliferating.' **Steve Jeffery, David King, Robert Lichtman, John Litchen, Rosaleen Love, Keira McKenzie, Robert Mapson:** 'Stapledon manages to dash off (and then discard) ideas in a couple of sentences that later writers would use (often far less successfully) as the basis of whole books.' **António Monteiro, Stan Nicholls:** 'It looks meaty enough that we're going to be neglecting work for a few hours today...' **Lance Olsen, Lloyd Penney, Lawrence Person, Curt Phillips, Derek Pickles, Dave Piper, David Pringle, David Redd:** 'Nice of you to complete *Speculation's* *Cordwainer Smith* coverage.' **Katherine Roberts, Justina Robson, David Rowlands, Andy Sawyer:** 'The piece by Elaine Cochrane on Lafferty was good - it's frightening how swiftly writers have become "forgotten".' **Michael Shannon, D.M. Sherwood:** 'Didn't like the Paul Kincaid articles. Lot of good material but face it the guy can't write.' **Bob Smith, Brian Stovold, Jonathan Strahan, Amy Thomson, Dr Michael J. Tolley, Bob Tucker, E.D. Webber, David Seth Weingart:** 'I've particularly enjoyed the article on *Cordwainer Smith*, my all-time favourite sf writer by far. The NESFA collection of his sf is a joy to read and own, and I highly recommend it.' **John Whitbourn:** 'It's good to have some intelligent reading. I'd somehow overlooked R.A. Lafferty, so he's joined the formidable list of "things to read".' **Gene Wolfe:** 'Thank you for *Steam Engine Time*, which I'm only just now getting around to reading. (I wouldn't have waited so long if I'd known how good it was.)' ♦