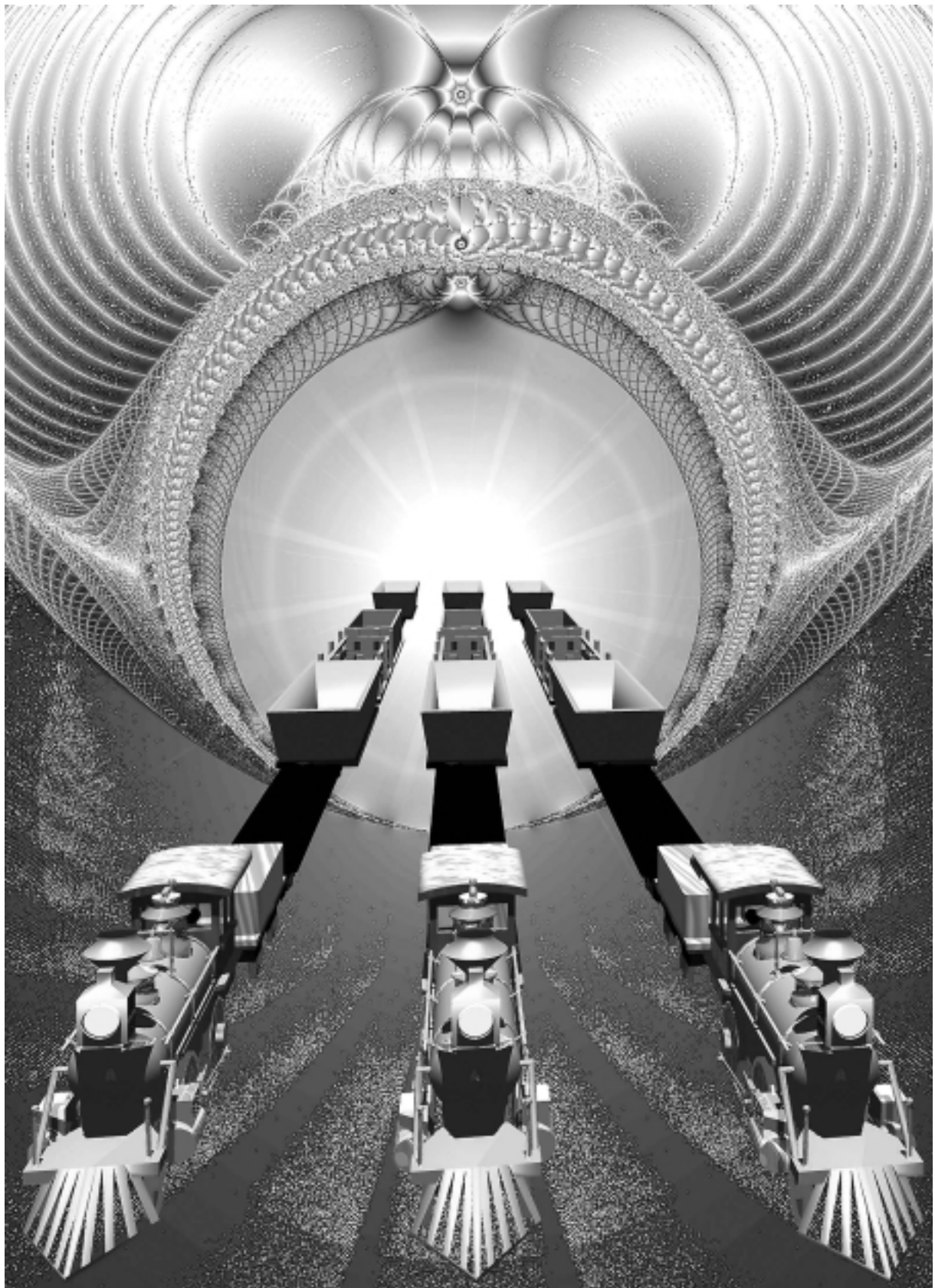


Steam Engine Time



Issue 3

December 2001

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Turn, Turn, Turn**

Paul Kincaid

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AS I WRITE THIS ON A COLD, GREY, DAMP MORNING IN LATE DECEMBER, WE ARE only days away from the end of a curious trilogy of science-fictional years. These are the years that have insinuated themselves into the titles of a host of science fiction works, from the ridiculous (Gerry Anderson's *Space 1999*) to the sublime (Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick's *2001, A Space Odyssey*) by way of a whole bunch of things like Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887*. Come Tuesday, we'll be in 2002, the sort of year that doesn't feature in the title of anything much, sublime or ridiculous.

It's easy to see why 1999, 2000 and 2001 have such iconic significance. They are transitional years, they mark the change as one century turns into another, as one millennium becomes another. We shall not see their like again. And because of that they become easy, effective and powerful icons for change. Put one of those dates in your title at any point during the Twentieth Century, or even the Nineteenth Century, and you are saying everything is different here.

2002 is not an icon. It is past the turning point, things have already changed. In 2002 you stop glorying in the moment of change, you stop focussing upon the axis where everything turns, the way that science fiction has mostly done. In 2002 you start getting down to the ordinary everyday business of living in the future. It is not a surprise any more, it is simply here, all around us, where we live every day. It is where science fiction stops being a flash special effect and becomes a matter of quotidian reality. It is going to be interesting to see what this new science fictional world is like.

And talking about getting down to the ordinary everyday business of living in the future, we rather hope that *Steam Engine Time* will settle down into the sort of regular routine we all envisaged when Bruce and Maureen and I first got together in Melbourne and started planning.

This particular issue comes rather more quickly on the heels of its predecessor than we had imagined. So quickly, in fact, that many of you will be receiving issues 2 and 3 together. Blame Dave Langford. He offered us a piece that we were delighted to seize for the magazine. Then he casually mentioned that it was going to be in his forthcoming collection from Cosmos Books, and would it be okay if he said 'first published in *Steam Engine Time*, 2001'. And we nodded before we thought of the consequences. I mean, we had the material we wanted for a good, meaty issue. It was just that the time scale suddenly became a bit daunting.

Still, Dave has done us a great favour, for it means that we have two issues out in a year – as was always the plan. Now all we have to do is make sure that we do the same in that nice, safe, ordinary year of 2002... and that we manage to space them out a little better from now on. ♦

SET Debate

Waiting for
Shakespeare?

Gregory Benford

GREGORY BENFORD is one of the most highly respected science fiction writers active today. His award-winning work includes *If the Stars Are Gods* (with Gordon Eklund), *Timescape* and the series begun with *In the Ocean of Night*. His most recent novel is *Eater*.

He is also Professor of Physics at the University of California at Irvine.



WHEN I BEGAN WRITING SCIENCE FICTION, AS A GRADUATE STUDENT IN 1964, IT was commonplace to regard the sf field as just entering its great phase. Of course there had been the Golden Age of 1939-45, and arguably a Silver Age of the early 1950s..but 1964 was rife with the hubbub of the early New Wave, remember, and promise seemed to brim everywhere.

An academic then referred to the field as 'waiting for its Shakespeare' – that is, for a towering figure who could take the form to its' heights, never to be equaled. The Bard came upon the Elizabethan stage and drama has never been the same since. Strikingly, he came early in the history of modern drama, though the Greeks had been staging great plays nearly two millennia before, and wrenched the form around until it accommodated the sensibilities of a quite different culture..

Other critics such as Brian Aldiss, particularly in his *Billion Year Spree* (later updated to *Trillion*), argued that H.G. Wells may have been the founder of modern sf and its Shakespeare all in one. Jules Verne came before, and in his attention to detail and plausibility may be said to be the founder of hard sf, but Verne mostly stuck to adventure stories, not heart-strumming dramas, 'real novels'. Verne was not broad enough.

Wells indeed did lay down many of the great idea-novels of the genre (though it wasn't a genre then), principally in his first decade: *The Time Machine*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*. When has any writer had such a run, such a gusher of creation? Of course there were antecedents to many of his ideas. But he brought them to full, heartfelt dimension with true dramatic clout – and often, in novels that we would term novellas today, marvels of compression.

This he had in common with Shakespeare, who came to the young English stage and made it grow up.

But the New Wave advocates felt that truly adult sf would come only after the methods and crafts of mainstream literary styles were imported to bring to fruition sf's themes. And Tom Disch did produce *Camp Concentration*, Joanna Russ *And Chaos Died*, Samuel Delany both *Nova* and *Dahlgren*, Roger Zelazny *This Immortal*, Harlan Ellison in groundbreaking short stories, while Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock and J.G. Ballard had their peaks as well. Sadly, most of these works are long out of print, perhaps to be revived in a zombie-like way by on-demand publishing, which will cater to small audiences wishing to catch up on some of the fine works of the last half century.

But Shakespeare? None of these authors became the commanding figure Wm. S. was in his age. (Or may have been. There is curiously little documentation of Shakespeare the man – no letters, occasional pieces, not a single original manuscript. This has led some to suppose that Edward Devere in fact wrote the works, with the actor Shakespeare as a useful front. This leads to a wholly different reading of the plays and sonnets – an intriguing possibility, reminding us that even great figures can carry with them an artful ambiguity, to this day.)

How come? Perhaps because no one can command the range of science,

fiction and worldly knowledge demanded of a great novelist now. That may be why we have no looming figures of Tolstoy's scale. Science fiction, which takes on the largest issues confronting the human heart and head, demands much more than a conventional novelist needs to muster.

Maybe it's *impossible* to become the Shakespeare of sf any longer?

Or...could we somehow have missed him? (Or her?!)

I've seen a heady rush sweep through the field as new, powerful writers arrived, at times greeted with hosannas that suggested the arrival of The Master. Ursula Le Guin's early Ace novels led to a remarkable string: *The Left Hand of Darkness*, *The Lathe of Heaven*, *The Dispossessed*, and on into some fine work. The first edition of the Nicholls & Clute *SF Encyclopedia* pronounced her the best living sf writer. But while her acceptance by the mainstream is unparalleled in sf by any other than Clarke, her highly successful career since has not been of Shakespearean dimension. Perhaps this will later seem just a change in fashion, for Le Guin wrote primarily 'social sf' that resonated with the questioning of fundamentals going on in the advanced nations in the 1960s and 1970s. When society reinspects itself again, her reputation may benefit. To me, *The Dispossessed* is the best consideration of the nature of utopia literature has yet produced – and it has a scientist as its central figure.

The second edition of the *SF Encyclopedia* made a case for Gene Wolfe as the greatest living sf author. Admittedly, their case seemed a bit half-hearted, and they made no such case for Le Guin (fickle critics!). I like his work, he may be our best stylist – but I doubt he's our Bard, for reaching a large audience is surely a signature, and Gene is a cultivated taste.

Similarly, we saw Dan Simmons heralded by some as a writer who knew his science (not from experience; he got it from reading, just as the Bard apparently got his knowledge of, say, Italy) and had a flair for novels. He found a large audience, too. Greg Bear fit that description as well, and has produced fine work. Joe Haldeman we greeted in the mid-1970s in the backwash of the New Wave, and for a while held the record for the highest advance paid for an sf

novel (\$50,000 – it seemed huge, then). Joe probably never thought of Shakespeare; Hemingway is his literary idol. William Gibson made a big splash in 1984 with a polished, insightful style that unhinged an aspect of techno-culture we had little glimpsed before. Further, he rode the wave created by the films *Blade Runner* (noir future) and *Tron* (virtual reality dramas, jacking in). But cyberpunk was, like social sf, a passing taste – still powerful, but not a revolution in the sense that John Campbell's first

team wrought one in that distant first Golden Age.

So it seems no recent arrival is the Bard in disguise.

Consider a smaller question, then: who is the reigning figure, still alive, in modern sf? My money would be on two old favorites, Arthur Clarke and Ray Bradbury. Clarke gave us 2001 and Bradbury *The Martian Chronicles*, works that will live a very long while indeed. Bradbury says he's not an sf writer, but he clearly came out of the magazines that termed themselves that.

But is either our Shakespeare? Somehow I doubt that either has the range to deserve the label. Of the two, Clarke comes closest, for my money. His amusing essays and *Tales from the White Hart* show his comic side, while many stories and novels display his grasp of the largest scales available to the modern intellect.

It is worth pondering who we will have to fill their shoes. Among living American sf writers, Fred Pohl and Robert Silverberg probably have spanned the greatest range, summoned up deep emotions and plumbed the reaches of

many ideas. But neither of these fine gentlemen would pretend to be a Shakespeare comparable to Wells.

And maybe there's a reason for that.

Sf has become the preeminent genre, emerging from lowly pulp origins to rule the visual media. Alas, it is still a stepped-upon subsection of the lit'ry world, excluded from serious consideration, relegated to a box in the back at the *New York Times Book Review*.

But the written forms feed the visual ones, as many authors (like me) who have had their work purloined by screenwriters have woefully found. So we are influential, if not rich or famous. So here's an audacious thought: maybe our Shakespeare was



But Shakespeare? None of these authors became the commanding figure Wm. S. was in his age... Perhaps because no one can command the range of science, fiction and worldly knowledge demanded of a great novelist now.

Stanley Kubrick.

After all, in a stunning series he gave us in a mere few years *Dr. Strangelove*, 2001, *A Clockwork Orange* – all near-future works of genius, derived from novels, two of them acknowledged as sf. They showed us worlds nobody had yet visited, and made his name. When Kubrick died, he was going to resume work on a film about artificial intelligence, on which he had already lavished years of script labor, working in turn with Brian Aldiss, Bob Shaw and Ian Watson. There was a flurry of speculation that Stephen Spielberg was going to take up the project, and work proceeds apace.

It's startling to entertain the notion of Kubrick as our Shakespeare – but remember, the Bard primarily wrote for a visual medium, too. And in keeping with our station in life, nobody in the general culture thinks of Kubrick as a science fiction person at all..

Still..there is a deeper problem here, rummaging around for a science fictional Shakespeare. We are *the* genre, the inventor of fandom itself, fanzines, big fan conventions, a fount of cultural innovation. But rather than see ourselves as a partitioned piece of literature, better to say that we are a *continuing conversation*.

No other genre refers back so far and so often to its Golden Age (s), citing works and comparing writers – just as this article has done. In weeding out the new but derivative, by holding it up to the light of other days, we confer Grand Master status only upon those who truly extend our mental frontiers, and relegate those who merely rearrange conceptual deck chairs to the lesser ranks (where, these days, they get stuck writing

franchise fiction and work-for-hire media tie-ins, just to make ends meet.)

We inspect ideas anew in ways other genres do not. Where in mysteries, say, does one see a gang of young Turks write a three-novel sequence to reimagine a classic work? Yet that's what I did with Greg Bear and David Brin, when we wrote the Second Foundation Trilogy. Isaac Asimov's grand ideas rewarded revisiting, we thought, seen through the eyes of another generation. Of course, some Asimov fans

thought this was overtly a bad idea. We expected that, along with the hard core of fans who do not want their view of the sacred texts challenged. All this is part of the debate, too.

Most generally, our field comprises a way for the general culture to see itself in a fresh light. Science particularly has always used sf to think about the implications of its own work. That's why so many scientists have written sf (again, like me – a phenomenon you can study further in some essays at my website, available through authorcafe.com).

Rather than look upon our great works as resembling classical symphonies, to be played in grand halls to a passive audience, think of us as a jazz band – swinging down Basin Street in full voice, blaring our messages, running new riffs on old standards, fresh melodic lines, improvisation as the blood and rhythm of the enterprise itself. Our band's sign might well read,

JAZZ, THAT'S WHAT WE ARE

– because it's what we truly do well.

And New Orleans never needed a Shakespeare. ♦



Photo of Greg Benford © Dennis Silverman

In weeding out the new but derivative, by holding it up to the light of other days, we confer Grand Master status only upon those who truly extend our mental frontiers, and relegate those who merely rearrange conceptual deck chairs to the lesser ranks.

Shakespeare ... or not?

Does science fiction need a Shakespeare? Have we, indeed, already had one? And if so who? We're waiting for your contribution to the debate. Make your views known today, write to:

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Shakespeare, Science Fiction and all that Jazz

Russell Blackford

RUSSELL BLACKFORD is one of Australia's most respected critics. He is co-author, with Van Ikin and Sean McMullan, of *Strange Constellations*, a history of Australian science fiction.

In responding to Gregory Benford's article, he is entering into a debate on the nature of science fiction that we hope to continue in future issues.

Gregory Benford writes that science fiction is an improvisational artform which, like jazz, does not need a towering figure such as Shakespeare. I agree that sf is highly improvisational in the way that he describes – and, to that extent, the analogy to jazz seems right. As for his 'audacious thought' that Kubrick may be sf's Shakespeare, well I see the point – my only query is whether it's all that audacious. Before I reached this part of his essay, I was wondering if the towering works of the genre might not be prose narratives at all – novels and short stories – but certain films, especially *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

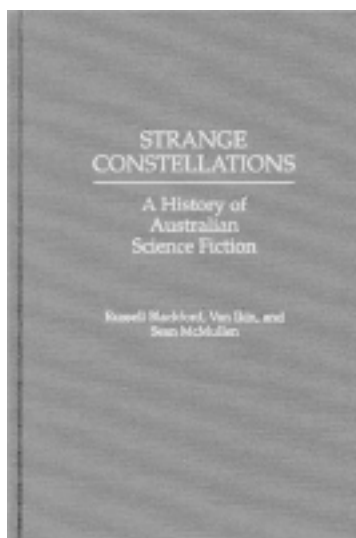
Those two thoughts, then, sf's improvisational nature and the importance of cinema, are plausible and consistent with each other. For all that, I think that the tone of Benford's article is a little too sanguine, a little complacent, about current sf and where the genre is heading.

Science fiction started out as a genre of prose fiction, but that soon changed in the age of radio and cinema. Narratives about rapid social change, the future, and the impact of science and technology can be told in any form that lends itself to narrative in general: epic recitation, live drama, prose fiction, comics, radio, cinema, television, or whatever the future has in store for us. And, while narrative is central to sf as an artform, sf-related ideas can be developed and debated in non-narrative ways, such as in lyric poetry and literary criticism. Science fiction motifs provide images for non-narrative visual art forms to an extent where sf illustrators often seem to be lionized more than the actual writers. At the same time, a parallel set of ideas infuses much modern philosophical writing.

Our culture provides vast scope for creative reactions to science, innovation and the future. Think of a great conversation spreading out from the science labs into every other place where we encounter thought and art, from technical philosophy to comic books and computer games. From the perspective of committed sf writers, fans and other dedicated sf readers, printed sf is at the center of this huge conversation. But at the same time, we have people 'doing sf' – creating narratives about innovation and the future – who have little connection with the fannish or professional sf communities.

An interesting publishing phenomenon in my country, Australia, has been the recent success of a book called *The Deep Field* by a young literary writer, James Bradley. This book is set in the future, is largely about the psychological impact of radical life extension, and uses other sf-style technologies such as full sensory-immersion virtual reality. It has been embraced by the literary mainstream because of its dense, often poetic, language and its commitment to in-depth portrayal of character. It is not marketed or discussed as an sf novel. As it happens, Bradley is well-versed in sf and has written for the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, but he has no connection to fandom and no one here (except me) would think of him as in any way an sf writer. I'm sure we could recall other works such as this, part of the cultural conversation that I've referred to, but not pigeon-holed as sf.

Although this larger conversation is going on, what happens in the fan-



nish and professional sf communities (as if these can be entirely separated) is an important part of it. It's not surprising that sf narratives by the committed professional writers should feed off each other and improvise with ideas – yes, much like jazz. At the same time, it's not surprising that a dominant entertainment medium such as the cinema should generate the most prominent individual narratives, as seen by society at large. It shouldn't even be surprising if some of the most important sf works of all were movies, such as Kubrick's *2001*, rather than stories told in printed prose.

This sort of reflection makes Benford's ideas seem very attractive, but it also exposes a problem. Consider how few towering works of sf ever came out of 20th century cinema. That leads me back to my point that Benford is a little too sanguine. For a start, it's not obvious that improvisational artforms and those which produce towering figures, reaching or approaching the heights of Shakespeare, are mutually exclusive categories.

Of course, it's difficult to compare artforms that emphasize real-time performances and those which leave behind *compositions* that can be preserved for posterity. Prior to modern forms of audio and visual recording, the work of actors and musical performers was essentially ephemeral, unlike that of playwrights or composers (though this, too, was often lost). A musical form emphasizing one-off improvisations might have towering geniuses, but their genius could not be preserved like the text (even if corrupt) of a play, or like an operatic score.

Some compositional artforms are, indeed, highly improvisational in the sense that Benford identifies. Science fiction is only one case in point. Although the emphasis is not on performances that might change every evening on a musician's whim or electric light of inspiration, there is a developing body of work that reacts to previous work, sometimes by way of irony, satire, inversion, parody or mockery, or simply by 'making it new' in keeping with the sensibilities and techniques of later times. This kind of self-reflection and improvisation is common to many artforms, not only jazz, with its radical emphasis on actual performance. Nor is it inconsistent with the presence of individual composers and works of genius.

Consider the tradition of English poetry. If we

observe its development from, say, Milton to Yeats, we see a process of conversation and improvisation going on, similar to that which Benford identifies in the sf field. We see this in both the overall contours of the form's history and in much of the detail. Pope and Dryden react against Milton in a particular way, Blake and Shelley in another (and the generations of Blake and Shelley react fiercely against Pope and Dryden!). As we work our way through Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Byron, Tennyson, Yeats – reach-

ing towards the present day – we can see the constant reworking of themes, ideas, even lines, from poet to poet. This has not prevented some individual works appearing sublime. If sf has failed to produce figures at least approaching the towering genius of Shakespeare – its Miltons and Shelleys – the improvisational nature of the genre is not an adequate reason.

Of course, it may simply be too early to make judgments about this. After all, are we convinced that mainstream contemporary literature has produced writers on a level with Milton or the great Romantic poets? No, but I'd be more confident of the place of Ted Hughes or Seamus Heaney, or of prose fiction writers such as Salman Rushdie, when judgments are made in two hundred years' time, than I would be about any current sf writer.

I do have concerns about the direction taken by mainstream literary writing during the 20th century, at the way some of the great Modernists – Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound – gave permission for those who followed to produce fragmented, obscure, essentially *private*

works in a manner almost unprecedented in the literary traditions that I know. This has opened a gulf of incomprehension between much serious literature and the general reading public. However, sf suffers different problems that are associated with its very popularity.

Perhaps Joyce and the others stretched the traditional forms as far as they could go, at least in certain respects to do with the intensity of language and the impression of psychological depth. That may be one reason, quite aside from sheer technological change, why it is timely that cinema and television have taken over as the popular narrative media. However, the technological and social circumstances we live in have further impacts.



If sf has failed to produce figures at least approaching the towering genius of Shakespeare – its Miltons and Shelleys – the improvisational nature of the genre is not an adequate reason.

For a start, cinema and television are essentially collaborative artforms. Notwithstanding the mystique of the director as *auteur*, it is not possible to speak of individuals working in cinema as equivalent to Shakespeare. If a comparison is made between Shakespeare and Kubrick, I want to ask, *Kubrick working with what scriptwriter? Kubrick working with what specific actors? Kubrick, even, with whose special effects?* Perhaps sf's Shakespeare is not Kubrick or any other individual, but just the free-floating world of modern cinema working at its best. In that case, we could look for a body of towering creative work coming out of Hollywood and other film capitals, without expecting one *auteur* to dominate.

However, what do we actually see? The dominant sf works in our culture are entertaining, in many ways dazzling, technical products, sometimes, as with the first two *Stars Wars* movies, given additional strength and resonance by their respectful treatment of mythic archetypes. But the most prominent sf is essentially a body of work aimed at children and teenagers. That, of course, is not a contemptible thing. The production of intelligent narrative for young people, in whatever medium, is an honorable and difficult occupation. All the same, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley and Yeats would not have produced such monumental works of literature if they were writing essentially for kids.

We have reached a situation where the cultural dominance of sf is closely associated with the marketing of our most popular works of narrative art (not to mention music) for a young audience. The dominance of sf in cinema has been achieved overwhelmingly by works aimed for this market. Meanwhile, our culture's truly sophisticated art, aimed at well-informed adults, has become inaccessible to the general population in a way that would have puzzled Shakespeare.

In that perspective, the dominance of sf in the form of *Stars Wars* movies and similar is not such a cause for rejoicing. I enjoy these movies and would defend them in some contexts, but they appeal mainly to the kid in me, not the adult. By contrast, Shakespeare appealed to all classes and degrees of education, and to *adults* across the full range of sophistication, in a way that popular narrative art seldom does today, and the most popular sf even more seldom. Perhaps *2001: A Space Odyssey* is an excep-

tion, a work that can genuinely be compared to a Shakespeare play, but how many sf movies made since then have appealed to the emotions and intellects of experienced, well-educated adults? By contrast, how many have been downright insulting to our emotions and our intelligence? Too many.

I hasten to interpolate that some very interesting and intelligent prose sf is being produced by such writers as Greg Egan, Greg Bear and Gregory Benford, by Melissa Scott, Ursula Le Guin, Samuel R.

Delany, Thomas M. Disch, Iain Banks, Gene Wolfe, Jamil Nasir, William Gibson. . . The list goes on and on; I could name many others. But these are not figures on a par with Shakespeare or Milton, Shelley or Yeats – or, if any of them are, it is not yet obvious. Sure, their work is sufficiently valuable to justify our advocacy of it to the literary mainstream. Again, some of the blockbuster movies (*Blade Runner* is a personal favorite) do have much to recommend them. And I've mentioned that some writers who essentially work outside the genre produce impressive one-off sf works that are worth hunting down.

But we've reached a situation where sophisticated audiences, mainstream writers, most literary critics and (I suspect) the Hollywood hacks who buy sf ideas and popularize the genre all view 'science fiction' as essentially a lurid variety of children's entertainment. This is not, as I once thought, a product of ignorance and prejudice; it is quite understandable. The

genre has come a long way in its public prominence, but its image has not improved in the process. Prose sf is now dominated, in market terms, by media tie-ins that lack even the knowingness and high production values of the movies and television series on which they are based. If we expect sf to be a literature of ideas, a conversation about science, innovation and the future, we are justified in feeling disappointed. Science fiction may have become a dominant narrative genre but only at the price (all too often) of giving up its heart. ♦

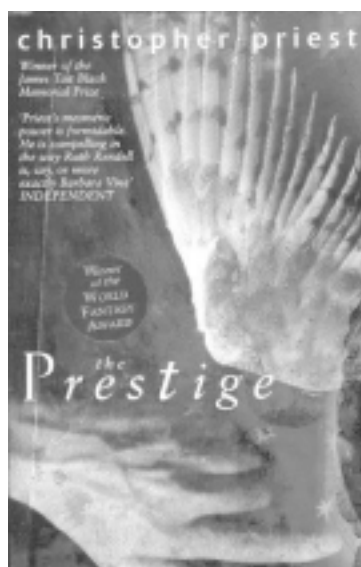


But these are not figures on a par with Shakespeare or Milton, Shelley or Yeats – or, if any of them are, it is not yet obvious.

Yes ... or then again, No

Christopher Priest

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST has won the prestigious James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the World Fantasy Award, the British Science Fiction Association Award, and a host of European awards, most recently the French Utopia Prize and the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire. The piece reproduced here was his Guest of Honour speech at Novacon, November 2000.



It's exactly twenty-one years since the last time I was sitting up here at a Novacon, in this hotel function room ... or at least one very like it. It was 1979, and a few weeks earlier there had been a worldcon in Brighton. It was the first time I had been a guest anywhere, so because of a general nervousness of that, and also of crowds, I was relieved to discover that because of the worldcon the numbers attending Novacon were lower than usual.

At that con in 1979, thinking nervously ahead to my Guest of Honour speech, I had been remembering the way that Brian Aldiss, a few years earlier, had managed to escape from the world's most boring Guest of Honour speech. Driven mad by Larry Niven's inaudible mumbling, Aldiss had simulated a nosebleed, as many people will remember. He dashed out of the room, handkerchief clasped over his nose, clambering noisily over the furniture. We all thought it was great fun ... although it meant that no one *else* could use that method to escape. Larry Niven, meanwhile, continued with his speech and did so for what felt like several more hours. Anyway, I had mentioned this amusing incident to a few people. It was therefore my own fault that when I sat down here, twenty-one years ago, I saw that all the people in the first three rows were waiting with handkerchiefs at the ready.

So what has been happening during those twenty-one years? In some ways it feels like only yesterday. Remembering what was going on here until late last night, I'm beginning to wonder if it might actually have been yesterday after all.

In some ways it doesn't feel all that long ago, but when I force myself to think back I realize that I've spent the last twenty-one years doing something I'm not much good at and haven't enjoyed at all. The fact that most of my friends have been doing it too hasn't made it any easier. The fact that most of you have been at it too is also not much of a comfort. I've tried and tried to give it up. All to no avail. I'm talking, of course, of getting older. I sit before you, twenty-one years older than I was last time.

At this point I was going to reflect on the friends and colleagues who had found the only way to beat the ageing process, but once I started remembering their names I realized that the list was going to be depressingly long. It's surprising to me to realize how many famous science fiction writers, now dead, were still alive in 1979: Asimov, Heinlein, Herbert, Brunner, Simak, Sturgeon, Dick. Many good friends, some of whom were regular attendees at Novacons, have also died. I need perhaps only mention Jim White and Bob Shaw, whom we all miss not only as great writers but as close personal friends.

Apart from the loss of so many friends and writers we have of course gained several new ones. It might surprise you to hear some of them described as new. Terry Pratchett, for instance. None of Terry's Discworld novels had been published by 1979, although Terry had actually started publishing a few years before. Few of us had heard of Iain Banks in 1979, or of Peter Hamilton, Paul McAuley, Richard Calder or Steve Baxter, all of whose successes lay in what was then the unimagined future. Chris Evans's first novel was yet to appear. Rob Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*, the book that pitched him

into the front rank of serious fantasy writers, was five years away.

It has come to a point where I feel the first tendrils of genuine old fartdom reaching out to claim me. For instance, if I look at the line-up of writers' names in any current science fiction magazine, I hardly recognize any of them. I have always tried to *keep up*, to stay interested in what new and young writers are doing, but I have to say that I'm now starting to lose that grip. It's impossible to stay abreast of everything.

The process of change is also going on abroad. I came back a couple of weeks ago from a convention in France, which had attracted science fiction writers from all over the world. As it happens, Andy Sawyer and I were the only people from the UK, but there were several writers from the USA, and many from most of the major European countries, including three writers from Russia.

The English-speaking countries often have a narrow view of what is going on in the rest of the world. Maybe this is more true of America than here. Certain bodies of opinion in the American sf establishment, such as SFWA, seem to think nothing is of any importance until it happens in the USA. It must bring such people up short to realize that science fiction is being actively written and published almost everywhere in the world. There are dynamic science fiction publishers in all these countries, and dominance by US and British writers is no longer true. In 1979 the picture was the reverse: almost all the science fiction published in European countries was translated from English. Now it is the other way around. It comes as a surprise to learn that practically none of these writers is being published in the English language. They therefore remain unknown to the largest science fiction audiences. For example, at the moment the biggest name in German science fiction is a young writer called Andreas Eschbach, who is sweeping all before him. He is winning awards and critical acclaim, and even seeing his most recent sf novel enter the German bestseller lists. Another young and serious German writer, Marcus Hammerschmitt, is widely regarded in Europe as a sort of post-cyberpunk prophet. Hammerschmitt is experimenting in interesting ways on the edges of the science fiction category. Yet because of the conservatism of English-language publishing, there is a widespread reluctance by British and American publishers to commission translations. It's apparently much safer to publish yet another hack novel based on a Star Trek universe than to take the trouble over something you're not entirely sure of, simply because it's in a foreign language. For this reason, both of

There is no such thing as science fiction: there are only books and writers published under that label.

these interesting young writers are likely to remain unknown to you.

The same could be said of most of the other writers I met in France, including and perhaps especially the French writers, some of whom have published many novels and are big and famous names in their own country.

So the sf world is a different place from the one it was in 1979. It's larger than it was in the 1970s, more diverse, much more dependent on the visual media – TV, films, comics and games. Who would have thought, back in 1979, that there would be a TV cable channel devoted exclusively to sci-fi programmes? We have been seeing this process develop at cons, of course. For some years now the fans who are concerned with science fiction as literature have been seen to be just another small, special interest group within the larger phenomenon.

As I have said, I do now find it difficult keeping on top of all this, and like many people, I suspect, I simply focus on what I know best.

In my own case, this means concentrating on my own books. It means trying to think about them and write them without attempting to place them mentally in a larger picture.

For years I have found it easier to write when I don't have preconceptions about what I'm writing. Or what I should be writing. This state of innocence is not always easy to maintain. For instance, the question I am still most often asked, when interviewed by someone from outside the field, is why do I write science fiction.

I've been writing science fiction, or something like it, for about 35 years, but I still haven't thought up a good answer to that one! It's one of those damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't questions. Give an answer in either direction and you're immediately heading into unknown territory. The problem is that the interviewer will have his or her own agenda on what they think sf might be, good or bad. At one time it was relatively easy to work out what this might be, because most sf was found in books. But now if someone has a prejudice about sf it is just as likely to be based on *Babylon 5*, *Robot Wars*, *Thunderbirds*, *Galaxy Quest* or *Tomb Raider* as it might be on the books of Anne McCaffrey, L. Ron Hubbard or J.G. Ballard.

I often think that writers outside the sf field (or outside any of the other commercial categories) are lucky not to have to bother about this question. If you're not in a genre, interviewers feel they have to read your books before they start asking questions.

This is why science fiction writers so often find themselves having to define the work as part of something else. In other words they are perceived to

be published as science fiction. We've all tried to deal with this, including me. It's an impossible position to maintain. To explain science fiction as a general idea you usually wind up defending a lot of stuff that you don't think much of. Every time you hear an sf writer generalizing about sf, you should remember he would be much happier talking about his own work. He would also make more sense. There is no such thing as science fiction: there are only books and writers published under that label.

OK, then. I am a writer whose books have been published under that label.

In 1979, unbeknown to everyone at Novacon, I was working on a novel that came out a couple of years later under the title *The Affirmation*. This was the first of my novels to be given a title made up from the definite article *The* and followed by an abstract or slightly obscure noun. *The Glamour*, *The Prestige* and *The Extremes* all followed. I'm presently working on a book that I think will be called *The Separation*.

I think of these as my *The* titles.

These titles came about because of a chance comment I heard on a Radio 4 arts programme, years ago. Someone was reviewing a novel which apparently described the long illness and agonizing death of the central character. It sounded pretty depressing to me. The reviewer thought so too. 'Have you ever noticed,' he said, 'that whenever publishers bring out something they think the readers might find depressing, they write a blurb which calls the book an affirmation of life?'

Actually, I had noticed something like that. I thought it was an amusing comment to make. I also thought it sounded like a good title for a book. In the 1970s my stuff was generally thought of as being a bit gloomy, especially in the USA. I was always being told to lighten up. It struck me that I might be able to go on writing what I wanted to write if I could only think of more positive or upbeat titles. I liked the sound of *The Affirmation*. What could be more upbeat than a title that seemed determined to agree with you?

I used the title, firstly as the title of an imaginary novel written by someone else, which was in a short story, then as the title of my own next book.

The short story, incidentally, was called 'The Ne-

gation'. Before anyone points out that a negation is about as downbeat as you can get ... I chose it as the opposite of an affirmation. It was a deliberate reversal of the same general principle. The story is one in which the central character took a positive step towards his own freedom, an affirmation of his own life. So, naturally, it needed a gloomy title. Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Anyway, I decided to call my next book *The Affirmation*. All went well. The title even seemed to fit the story. I sent the book in, and after the usual wait of several months I was told it had been accepted. It was accepted too by my publishers in the USA.

But then, a few weeks later, a problem emerged in the USA. It concerned the title. Didn't I think it sounded, well, a little vague? Rather obscure? Even, perhaps, a little gloomy?

I was in fact ready for this. A routine had already emerged in which my American publishers changed or simplified the titles of my novels for the American market. I have sounded off about this before. Many editors in New York see themselves as broad-minded and cosmopolitan – as indeed most of them are. They pride themselves on being able to understand the subtleties and cunning references that we tend to like in Europe. But they are equally certain that the great American public can't cope with European subtlety. Or as they put it, British smartasses. This is how the process of dumbing down begins.

I had already had the title of my novel *Fugue for a Darkening Island* dumbed down in America. There it became a rather plain and insipid *Darkening Island*. The title of my next novel, *Inverted World* was similarly dumbed down. By some reason-

ing I never got the hang of, it became the more American-friendly title, *The Inverted World*. Then came *A Dream of Wessex*, an innocuous and simple title, you'd think. For the allegedly unintelligent American public this had to become *The Perfect Lover*.

In a sense you don't really mind this happening. The people it most affects are bibliographers. They do matter, but they're not going to find out about the book until long after it's published. You tell yourself that the title is part of the marketing process and that these people, the American publishers, must know



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their own markets better than you do. So you put up with it. But it is an awful nuisance to have to think about these things. Especially as all this usually happens several months after you thought you'd finished with the book for good.

So in one sense I was prepared for problems of this sort with the people in New York, but when it came down to it I was completely unable to suggest anything else. I had been thinking of the book as *The Affirmation* for so long that it was like trying to get a parent to rename one of his children. And there was a practical objection, too. What on earth would actually be a dumbed-down version of an 'affirmation'?

'I agree'?

'The go-ahead'?

After a couple of weeks of half-hearted suggestions like these going to and fro across the Atlantic, I found myself getting bored and irritated. This usually gets me into trouble. I finally said, 'Well, if you want a simpler version of the title, how about calling it *Yes*'?

That at least silenced them for a while. I suppose they went into creative meetings, hired consultants, ran focus groups, carried out telephone polls. Finally they came back to me.

'Chris,' they said, 'the word "yes" does not work as the title of a novel.'

'OK,' I said, having suspected that this might be their response. 'What about calling it *No*, then?'

'But that wouldn't mean "yes" any more.' They thought for a moment, then they added, 'Or would it?'

So, we declared a truce. *The Affirmation* it remained.

From this experience I drew strength. Since then, I have almost always stuck to simple 'The' titles, and I have not been troubled on the subject. The straightforward declarative title, it seems, has enough authority to steer clear of trouble. Even, as I found out, if you spell the word 'glamour' with the eccentric British 'u'. The Americans accepted that, almost without a murmur. I felt I had started to learn how the system worked, and was able to beat it.

Now you know why most of my books have been given that sort of title.

I seem to have sidetracked myself here. Being sidetracked, though, is something that happens all the time to writers. Before I began writing for a living I naïvely imagined that writers were somehow left alone to write. They worked in Olympian isolation, free from the usual aggravations of life. A third of a century later I can safely report that this is not in the least true. All books are written in the real world.

Every novel you have ever read, by me or anyone else, has been continually interrupted. There have been phonecalls, family arguments, the post arriving, there have been bills that needed paying, blocked drains that needed unblocking, noisy neighbours who had to be ignored, cars that needed to be serviced, children who had to be taken to school, and everything else.

It took me a long time to realize that this is in fact a good thing. Books are read in the real world, with all its distractions, so books are probably best written in the same place.

Publishers provide the richest source of additional distractions, as any writer will tell you. We can't live without our publishers and they provide us with our living, but no one knows how to distract a writer better than a publisher does. They pay you late, they send you incomprehensible royalty state-

ments, they do dodgy book club sales, they make crooked remainder deals, they lose your file, they muddle up the date of publication with other books or writers, they give you terrible covers ... all these are commonplace, and they routinely waste hours of a writer's time.

I particularly remember one junior editor who started to work at Faber, while I was still being published there. She was in what can only be described as demented careerist mode.

Everything in her life seemed dedicated either to making tiny financial savings for Faber, or to causing me to give up writing in despair. Most of the time, she did both at once.

Like Mrs Thatcher, who was then the Leader of the Opposition, she was obsessed with detail. Also, like Thatcher, she tried to get her way by being bossy and nagging. And once she was obsessed with something she wouldn't let go of it.

For instance, this editor convinced herself that my novel *The Space Machine* was too long. She devoted several weeks to trying to make me reduce it by a quarter: a matter of some 30,000 words. This would have involved me in several more weeks of work, without payment. She nagged me endlessly, aggravatingly, trying every argument she could think of. I resisted them all, more or less on principle. The one argument she didn't think of, incidentally, was the one that could have interested me. If she had said that the book would be better for a bit of cutting I might have listened. In fact, she kept insisting that the opposite was true: that the book was fine exactly as it was, but that the economics of publishing were so difficult that Faber were forced to cut corners. I understood this to mean that she wanted me to spoil

If she had said that the book would be better for a bit of cutting I might have listened. In fact, she kept insisting that the opposite was true: that the book was fine exactly as it was

the book to save them a bit of money. I dug my heels in and kept them there.

This bloody woman would phone me twice or three times a week, trying to make me see sense. On one memorable occasion she phoned to tell me that the price of the glue used by printers to bind books had just gone up by 10%. While I digested this fascinating gobblet of information, she moved in for the kill. She had worked out that each copy of *The Space Machine* was therefore going to cost Faber an extra half penny. Now would I see sense and cut the book?

She plagued me with such things all through publication of the book. Just before the manuscript was finally sent to the printer, when I didn't think there was anything left to argue about, she phoned me yet again.

'I've just noticed your dedication,' she said.

'My dedication?'

If there's one bit of any book which is the author's own, it's the dedication page. It's where the author can write a personal note, make private thanks, whisper an intimate comment. In the case of *The Space Machine*, because of the use I had made of his material, I had felt I should dedicate it to H.G. Wells.

'My dedication?' I said. 'What the hell's wrong with that?'

'It says "To H.G. Wells". Didn't you realize that Wells was dead?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I had heard.'

'Then you'll have to change it. When making a dedication to someone dead you have to say "to the memory of".'

'But I don't remember Wells,' I said. 'We never met. He died when I was only three years old.'

'Yes, but you can't dedicate a book to him as if he's still alive. That's extremely confusing. I'm going to have to change this. It will say "to the memory of".'

I took a deep breath. 'Look,' I said, 'H.G. Wells might be dead in the ordinary sense. But to people like me, he is still very much alive. His spirit is immortal.'

She too took a deep breath. I moved the telephone receiver away from my ear. Just in time.

'You haven't listened to a word I've said!' she screeched. 'Can't you understand English? H.G. Wells is dead!'

The way this dispute was settled may be found on the dedication page of the current edition of *The Space Machine*. You might like to know that this demented no-hoper went on to become famous and influential in publishing, and extremely rich too. You can draw whatever moral you like.

Anyway, to return to *The Affirmation*. That book, with the one that immediately preceded it, *A Dream of Wessex*, is for me a transitional work.

Once I had written them, it seemed to me that both books were commenting on science fiction, while still being a fairly pure kind of sf in themselves. *Wessex* was intended as a satire on the sort of sf where you extrapolate a few social trends to depict a possible future society. At the same time, the plot dealt in a straightforward way with a group of people doing exactly that.

The Affirmation started life as a meditation on the familiar science fiction idea of human immortality. Once I started to write it, though, I found that the only way I could approach the idea was through a complicated plot and an extended metaphor. By the time it was finished it was still essentially about a man who became immortal, but I had written it my

way. My metaphor let me make a series of what I felt were critical comments about the way literature in general and sf in particular had treated the subject in the past.

This showed me a way of thinking about science fiction ideas that I have used ever since.

All my novels since *The Affirmation* have started from a similar premise: to take a familiar, over-worked or perhaps even corny science fiction theme, then look at it from a fresh point of view, to try to find a new way of writing about it. So, in *The Glamour*, the novel that came next, the subject is human invisibility. In *The Quiet Woman* I took political satire as my theme,

taking what small revenge I could on the other bloody woman in my life, Mrs Thatcher. *The Prestige* began, perhaps surprisingly, with an idea that goes back to the pulp roots of science fiction: matter transmission, or matter duplication. *The Extremes* tries to take a fresh look at virtual reality. *The Separation*, the book I'm writing now, is an attempt to write a novel of alternate history in a new kind of way.

I believe this approach puts all my novels firmly into the category of science fiction, at least in intention. How they look when they're finished is another matter, and has caused confusion all over the place. As you no doubt know, I have mixed feelings about the commercial benefits of the SF label on the front of a book. I prefer to make my own way and take the consequences. I never want people to know what I'm going to write next. The thought of having to write a trilogy or a sequel or a series fills me with nameless dread. I start and finish stories in what a lot of people think are the wrong places. I constantly question what I think of as the orthodox view of science fic-

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tion. I think these problems have caused my intentions to be blurred and misunderstood. I can't pretend this doesn't bother me, because it does. All writers want to be understood.

But here today I can at least make my intentions clear about what I think I am writing. I believe in fantastic literature. I think it's worth writing.

A few years ago I put forward a new definition of science fiction. It was instantly adopted by readers and critics, and so fell almost at once into the vocabulary of the genre. It is now widely quoted and applied everywhere. I can see that almost everyone here remembers it exactly.

For those few of you who have temporarily forgotten what it was, let me remind you. I pointed out that all previous definitions of sf were descriptive. That is, they looked at the genre as they saw or perceived it and attempted to sum it up, define it, in a few pithy phrases. My definition is different, because it is *prescriptive*. It tells you what I think science fiction should be. In other words it's a manifesto. Here it is.

Science fiction is the literature of visionary realism.

The prescription is contained in the last two words.

'Visionary' because it encourages the mind to be set free. It calls for the unbridled, unfettered use of the imagination, vision without limit, ideas without confines. Visionaries are obsessives: we should be obsessive about the use of the imagination. We should challenge the reader with shocking or surprising or uncomfortable ideas.

But 'realism' too. The form the work takes should

be real, or real-seeming, so that the excesses of the imagination are channelled into a comprehensible format. The fiction should be literate, controlled, well-written. It should be neither obscure nor facile. It should embrace the joys of a well-told story, the intrigue of a sophisticated plot, the texture of rich description, the humanity of plausible characters.

If you think about it, this prescription works in both a reactive and proactive way. It does indeed describe some of the sf that already exists, but that's not the point. All the great and good works of science fiction will anyway conform to this definition. It aims high. The definition has other advantages too, because it effectively screens out all the junk and the marginal stuff. Out go all the soft-brained TV series, the spoofs, the send-ups, the rip-offs, the novelizations, most of fantasy, everything that is called sci-fi. It's extremely useful to have a definition that excludes the irritating hinterland!

But it remains first and foremost a manifesto. It is a call to other writers, to discriminating readers. It says that the visionary novel, speculative fiction, science fiction, is not only worth writing but it is worth writing well. It implies a commitment to literature, even if it is not, in George Orwell's memorable phrase, the literature of pedants, clergymen and golfers. It places the use of the imagination as an imperative. It demands the best.

There you have it. That is what I stand for. I'm dead serious about this stuff and I want you to be too.

Thank you. ♦

Coming soon ...

In the next few issues of *Steam Engine Time* we've got some exciting articles promised, including

Gwyneth Jones reprising her Novacon Guest of Honour speech

Ken MacLeod on politics and sf

China Mieville on politics and fantasy

Maureen Kincaid Speller on Patricia Anthony

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The best way to make sure you see *Steam Engine Time* is to contribute. We're looking for articles, discoveries, polemics, contributions to the debate, and of course letters. Write to:

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Discoveries

Chrysalid:

Growing up with John Wyndham

Kev McVeigh

KEV McVEIGH is a former editor of *Vector*, the Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association, and is still a frequent contributor to that journal.

This article, which continues our 'Discoveries' series exploring the ways people have encountered science fiction, first appeared in *Acnestis* in May 2001.

When I was quite small I would sometimes dream of a city – which was strange because it began before I even knew what a city was.¹

WHEN I WAS QUITE SMALL I WOULD OFTEN DREAM OF LABRADOR, BEFORE I knew where Labrador was. It wasn't the real Labrador, of course, but that of John Wyndham's 1955 novel, *The Chrysalids*, and even that was tempered by my own experience around the village in which I grew up. I suspect that *The Chrysalids* may have been the most influential piece of fiction that I have ever read.

I had been ill. I spent about three months in hospital aged 4-5 with tuberculosis, and some more time convalescing afterwards. As a result of this I was a little behind the other kids in terms of physical development, and didn't join in the playground games of soccer and catch so much. On the other hand, I was taught to read in hospital, and was quickly ahead of my peers in that respect. And I was hooked. I exhausted the Milnthorpe Primary School library's selections at around one a day. The names I'm sure will be familiar to any of that generation: not just the Enid Blyton's and her ilk, but Henry Treece, Ian Serrallier, Andre Norton, etc. Then there was Narnia, that magical land that was probably my earliest taste of fantasy. (I remember the dying world of *The Magician's Nephew* frightened me, and I don't think I ever re-read that volume as I did the others.)

At home I began to search my father's bookshelf, which to this day is an eclectic mix of Jack Higgins and Henry Williamson, Agatha Christie and John Steinbeck. And there I found a small handful of books I could read even at age 7 or 8. *The Chrysalids* was one, another was Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, and something called *Romany's Caravan Returns*. Each was devoured as quickly as the rest. Unlike the others though, I returned to Wyndham, perhaps because it was at home and hence always available.

I think there were stronger reasons, however. The cover, Brian Kneale's simple, effective six-fingered inky hand print, purple against the orange Penguin livery, was a part of it. The times I was reprimanded by my mother for trying to replicate that! And those dreams were important, too.

I had made a friend, Timothy Leighton², who shared my new love of sf. This was the era of classic TV sf like *UFO*, *The Tomorrow People* and Jon Pertwee's *Dr Who*; and British Marvel comics featuring Spiderman, The Avengers and The Fantastic Four. Tim and I roamed the fields and woods around Milnthorpe walking his dog, Paddy, and playing games. His elder brother had a fair collection of sf, and the mobile library came each week, so I was not stuck for material. For a month or more we were Lensmen, later X-Men, and so on. At night I would fall asleep reading, and in the morning half-wake to a dream of what I had left off the night before, only with me involved somehow.



¹ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, 1955 (all page references are to the Penguin 1958 edition).

² Now Professor of Underwater Acoustics, University of Southampton. Still searching for Atlantis?

Perhaps because of that opening line, quoted above, this seemed to work even more with *The Chrysalids*. Perhaps I felt an affinity with David Storm through that common dreaming of wondrous faraway places. It was also easy to visualise the places David explored, they were similar to the places Tim and I played. There is an old railway embankment which runs by the village, half-wooded and overgrown now. I always assumed that the high bank that David plays on when he first meets Sophie must have been some kind of old road or railway too. Like Waknuk, Milnthorpe is a centre for a community of farms, broken up by streams and woodland. It was easy to pretend that Hazelslack woods were Labrador when I was a child, and the limestone bluffs beyond were Wild Country.

The Chrysalids, then, was a romantic adventure: a bunch of slightly different kids escaping the restrictions of home life. And in my dreams I joined them; helping Sophie flee through the Fringes, travelling back with Michael to rescue Rachel, or other such scenarios. Later, I learned the term 'cosy catastrophe' and began to view things differently.

When I was 15 my O-Level English class was set *The Chrysalids* as our text for the exam. At first I was thrilled, I already knew the book well though I probably hadn't re-read it in a couple of years at that point. It may well have been that familiarity which helped me scrape a pass in that exam, because my English teacher³ and I did not get on. I recall him stressing that Wyndham had written 'an allegory' with the implication that that raised it above 'sci-fi' somehow. The accepted reading, and this extends beyond my English class, is that *The Chrysalids* is Wyndham's response to post-war conservatism and the fear of new ideas, and that it is, in part, balanced by his succeeding novel, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, wherein the new breed are a threat. I believed that.

In a letter to *Vector* 211, I argued that *The Chrysalids* was a socialist novel of its time, and specifically placed him in a tradition that included H.G. Wells and Ken MacLeod. I stated that whilst the scenario was 'cosy' it was also more than that. In response, a letter from Cy Chauvin pointed out some

not-so-cosy elements of the book. Although not stated, hindsight tells me I was thinking of cosiness in terms of a sense of complacency in the views of Waknuk's society, and that this was a target of Wyndham's allegory.

Chauvin also commented that 'the evocative dreams of New Zealand and the coming rescue had an equally strong appeal when I was a boy', which brings me back to that romantic adventure story again. This, clearly, was important to Cy Chauvin and to myself.

The Chrysalids is an allegory on intolerance; it is a 'cosy' catastrophe, albeit with dark moments – although the collective mind of the chrysalids is generally a tolerant, open and democratic viewpoint when contrasted with the brutal, totalitarian collective of *The Midwich Cuckoos*, there is a disturbingly fascist overtone to Michael's comment after Anne's death: 'One of us has been found not strong enough.' (p103) Equally dark, though in a different way, is the passage where Sally describes Katherine's torture, and the line: 'Her feet, Michael – oh, her poor, poor feet..' (p131) remains for me one of the most moving, sad and unforgettable passages in sf. Its lasting influence on readers such as myself lie there, in part, but mainly in this: *The Chrysalids* is a classic tale of growing up, a coming-of-age story.

All the elements are there: the span of the novel takes David from 9 years old to about twenty,

through a series of archetypal events that shape him, with guidance from his worldly-wise uncle Axel. David's relationship with Sophie is a kind of puppy love until the encounter with Alan Ervin when Sophie's secret is discovered. Consider this exchange:

'Ho!' said Alan, and there was a gleam in his eye that I did not like. 'Who is she?' he demanded again.

'She's a friend of mine,' I told him.

'What's her name?'

I did not answer that.

'Huh, I'll soon find out, anyway,' he said with a grin. (p44)

Could that not easily be the initial sparrings of two boys with an eye for the same girl? David is protective of Sophie because he cares for her; to him, the



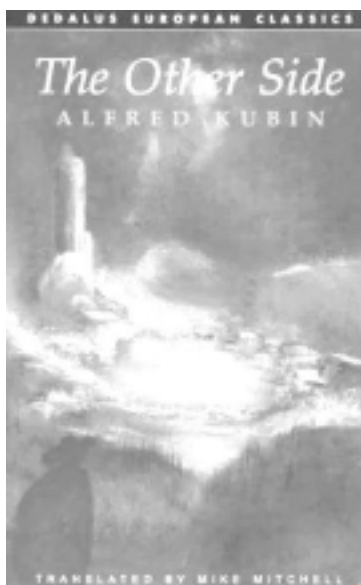
I recall him stressing that Wyndham had written 'an allegory' with the implication that that raised it above 'sci-fi' somehow.

³ Still Head of English at Dallam School, and author of *Thomas Hardy's Wessex*, a slim text accompanying a pictorial view of the basis for Casterbridge, etc.

The Other Side

Dave Langford

DAVE LANGFORD has probably won more Hugo Awards than anyone else. Most recently he won the Hugo for his short story 'Different Kinds of Darkness', making him the first Briton to win a short fiction Hugo since Brian Aldiss in 1962. That award goes alongside his 15 Hugos for Best Fan Writer.



DEDALUS IS A SMALL, CLASSY UK PUBLISHER WHOSE FIRST NOTABLE SUCCESS was *The Arabian Nightmare* by Robert Irwin -- one of its directors -- and which has since developed an interesting European Classics list featuring offbeat and fantastical authors like Gustav Meyrink of *The Golem* fame. *The Other Side*, dating from 1908, is the only novel by the German graphic artist Alfred Kubin (1877-1959), who illustrated Balzac, Hoffman, Meyrink, Poe and indeed his own book. Dedalus jacket copy is generous with little factlets like these, to help reviewers seem more knowledgeable.

Kubin's first-person narrator, a freelance artist and illustrator in his thirties at the time of the novel's action, is surely based on the author himself. A mysterious messenger informs him that his old school pal, Claus Patera, has become immensely rich in the Far East and has used his wealth to create a walled-off Dream Realm (*Traumreich*) somewhere in or near China, 'a sanctuary for all those who are unhappy with modern civilization.' The narrator is invited to join the elite in Patera's ideal city of Pearl, and provided with generous funds to make the immense journey. Despite his wife's prophetic reluctance, he accepts this fateful invitation.

Inevitably Pearl proves to be a weird place, but its weirdness doesn't take the expected form of grandiose extravagance and luxury. Although there's a substantial palace in which the reclusive Patera is presumed to lurk, the predominant architecture is one of drably European town houses and shops. In fact many of the buildings have been transported from Europe and re-erected at colossal expense. 'Quite often I could have sworn I saw houses I knew.' Old-fashioned clothing must be worn, and only used goods may be taken into Pearl, whose entrance is a horrific and doom-laden tunnel. Owing to permanent cloud cover, the sun never shines on this dreaming city; daylight at its brightest is no more than, well, pearly. The place has its own characteristic smell, 'something like a mixture of flour and dried cod. I never found out where it came from.'

Life in Pearl is initially fairly conventional, with our man first finding lodgings for self and wife and then securing a lucrative job as illustrator to the newspaper *Dream Mirror*. But the local economics has a dreamlike quality, with wildly fluctuating prices and incomes, and spurious creditors who appear out of the blue -- with witnesses in tow -- to quell anyone trying to stay out of the game by hoarding funds. One superbly skilled barber's assistant is in fact a monkey called Giovanni Battisti, whose sole flaw in the eyes of his employer is a lack of interest in philosophy. ("You're a Stoic!" the barber would shout after giving him a long lecture.) The Archive, centre of local bureaucracy, anticipates Kafka with its manufacture of endless obstacles and delays when the narrator applies for an audience with his old friend Patera.

Quite early on it becomes evident that Claus Patera is playing elaborate godgames with the inhabitants of Pearl. His Dream Realm's recruitment policy favours eccentrics, grotesques, criminals, people with small monomanias or uncontrollable emotions, even interesting deformities. 'That explains the many kingsize goitres, overgrown bulbous noses and gigantic hunchbacks,'

muses the narrator while carefully not considering which of all these categories of citizenship he himself might fall into. There are suggestions that Patera is a shapeshifter who wanders his realm in many guises like Haroun al Raschid, savouring the little psychodramas he has cultivated, and being detectable -- even in female form -- by distinctively dreadful eyes.

Indeed the citizens sense that some potent dramaturgy is at work (like the legendary Company of Borges's 'The Lottery in Babylon') even when events seem most capricious. 'But in the midst of all this confusion, you still felt the presence of a *strong hand*. You could sense its power behind apparently incomprehensible situations. [...] If anyone was in despair and didn't know where to turn, that was where they directed their prayers.'

Prayers? Religion is not spoken of in Pearl, as the protagonist discovers by making a terrific social gaffe. We can infer that these immigrants from Christian lands don't care to dwell on the blasphemy of their subjection to the significantly named god-king Patera, to whom they find themselves praying through such compulsive, addictive rituals as the Great Clock Spell -- which consists simply of entering a clock tower and saying to the bare wall inside, '*Here I stand before thee.*' When the hero casually repeats this phrase very soon after its first appearance, it has somehow become prefixed with a vocative '*Lord*'.

The city of Pearl is closely attuned to its lord and suffers not only his whims and visitations but his sickness, referred to as the Brainstorm. At one point our narrator has a traumatically bad time with the literalized nightmare of being pursued through dark and claustrophobic underground passages by a terrifying, emaciated horse. Safe above ground again, he learns that everyone else has been meanwhile suffering their own versions of the Brainstorm, later tentatively identified as epileptic seizures accompanying Patera's decline.

Everything is going bad. The hero's wife becomes increasingly unwell, being of 'that healthy, down-to-earth disposition which could never take root in this spectral realm.' Another classic dream of fear and humiliation is actualized when for no very good reason the narrator is pursued naked through the streets by an angry mob. We learn that 'children born in the Dream Realm lacked the top section of the left thumb.' There is, at last, a surreal and disturbing encounter with Patera himself, seen as wielding the power of -- or being the trapped victim of -- repeated metamorphoses.

Doppelgangers, insects, carrion birds and exotic animals in general -- those trusty symbols of undisciplined impulses from the brain's lower strata -- appear from nowhere in increasing and oppressive numbers.

In the novel's final section, 'Decline and Fall', the city lord has clearly lost his grip. Doppelgangers, insects, carrion birds and exotic animals in general -- those trusty symbols of undisciplined impulses from the brain's lower strata -- appear from nowhere in increasing and oppressive numbers. 'Inside an overturned carriage I saw a litter of dead pangolins.' Incidental humour grows blacker, as with the aged chessplayers in the hero's favourite café who are too perpetually engrossed in their game to deal with insect infestation, and so 'it became the custom for us regulars to give the two gentleman a quick scratch as we came or left.'

The last straw is the recently arrived Hercules Bell, a stereotypically rich and thrusting American who refuses to have any truck with mysticism, rebels against the rule of the *strong hand* and seems to be a stalwart focus of opposition. However, although

other passages cast doubt on this interpretation, the visions of Patera and his 'double nature' during the city's prolonged death throes present Bell as another aspect of Patera: the long-suppressed rational portion of the city lord's mind, a literal Other Side now at war with the addicted godgamer who needs his fix of worship. Ultimately two titanic forms overshadow Pearl as they struggle: 'Patera and the American grappled each other, forming a shapeless hulk, the American completely fused with Patera.'

All ends confusedly and apocalyptically. Hubris clobbered by Nemesis, as Brian Aldiss would say, but with the modern sensibility that Nemesis isn't so much an external agent of retribution as a built-in bug or feature of the hubris package.

The Other Side is a strange, disorienting novel with, as expected from an artist, a mass of creepily memorable imagery. Although the pacing of Pearl's descent into final chaos has a slightly arbitrary or ad-hoc feel -- as perhaps to be expected from an inexperienced novelist -- the nightmare sticks in the mind, and so do Kubin's own crepuscular ink drawings.

According to Dedalus, 'it was greeted with wild enthusiasm by the artists and writers of the Expressionist generation.' Mike Mitchell's new translation conveys the story's pervading oddness in colloquial English with a breezy timelessness, not specifically 1908 in flavour but pre-1940. I'm not competent to judge its faithfulness to the original German, but it reads pretty well.

The great problem of a story that eventually toples into the abyss of nightmare is how to pull a satis-

factory ending out of chaos. Variations on the banal 'And then I woke up' worked for Lewis Carroll, but he was writing for children. Another well-known 1908 fantasy whose subtitle is 'A Nightmare', G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, skipped over the cliché with a last disconcerting transition into ongoing normal reality, awakening into mid-conversation outdoors.

Kubin has two stabs at his ending. A chapter of returning sanity after the shock of devastation concludes by undermining one major figure's quasi-

allegorical status with the effective tagline 'The American is still living. Everyone still knows him.' Then follows an Epilogue which waxes romantic about Death (and eventually Life) in tones reminiscent of Poe at his wooziest. *Liebestod*, as these Germans say. I liked the first ending better. ♦

The Other Side (Die andere Seite) by Alfred Kubin, translated by Mike Mitchell
Dedalus, 2000: 248pp, £9.99, ISBN 1 873982 69 0

Chrysalid: Growing up with John Wyndham

By Kev McVeigh

.../continued from page 17

extra toe is a detail rather than the whole.

Subsequent chapters see repeated lectures from Uncle Axel to David which, in several cases, I have considered to be direct lectures from Wyndham to the reader. In particular a long passage quoting an explorer, Marther, in Chapter 6, is concluded by Axel asking 'Do you understand why I'm telling you this?' more than once. It is clearly the reader who is targeted. At the same time, this occurs when David is around 12 years old, early puberty, and one of the questions Axel asks is 'What do you think it is that makes a man a man?' (p79) and although Axel is talking in terms of the mind, this is effectively a 'facts of life' talk.

David goes on to learn about death (his mother's sister's suicide); family secrets (his father's mutant brother); sex and forbidden love (with Rosalind); and collective responsibility (when Anne marries). Finally, when their secrecy is broken, he has to escape, leave the family home and enter the world.

Although the events leading up to the chrysalids' flight from Waknuk and arrival in the Fringes take up over two-thirds of the novel, it may be that one event which happens there holds the key. After capture by the people of the Fringes, David comes face to face with his first love, Sophie. It is a scene which Wyndham uses to make several points explicit. Sophie's man, coincidentally the mutant brother of David's father, wants Rosalind because she is not sterile. Sophie is jealous, but there also remains a bond between her and David. A few pages earlier (pp149-150) David had expounded lyrically on his love for Rosalind, and on how she has hidden her real self behind an armour of aloof practicality that only he has seen beneath. Now, that love faces its first real challenge. Sophie now is an adult, and one less restricted by upbringing than Rosalind. Her clothing does not bear the stitched cross that all the other women David has known have borne; she is, in

that respect, a 'loose' woman. In another scene she casually undresses in front of David and Rosalind to bathe. This alien attitude shocks David, but he still has feelings for the little girl he knew, and he is forced to reconsider.

As she explains about Gordon to David, Sophie says, 'You've got to have as little as I have to know what that means.' (p167) She is referring to emotions, but later David recalls these words in the light of Sophie's material poverty (p169), allowing Wyndham to make explicit the existence of a secondary meaning in some of his speeches and lectures. And in recognising this, David is recognising a new view of the world, an adult world outside the emotional cocoon of Waknuk.

So for the adolescent I was, *The Chrysalids* is a useful guide to growing up; a credible adventure and a lesson told with subtle skill. In that letter to Vector I made a further point:

Wyndham goes to great lengths in the early chapters to identify the Storm family with society as a whole. Their village grew around their house, both are named Waknuk; Joseph Storm is not just David's father, he is the magistrate, preacher and major landowner, and explicitly the most powerful man around. Defying him is defying society. (V213, p3)

The obvious corollary to this is that if *The Chrysalids* is the story of David's coming-of-age, and David, as scion of the Storm family, is representative of society's future, then the novel itself is a story of societal maturing. Joseph's hidebound views are rejected, literally destroyed in the end, in order that the new tolerant, loving generation may flourish. The UK title, Wyndham's preferred version, is clear on this: rather than the *Re-Birth* of the US edition, the chrysalid is the next stage of a life-form, a progression all must go through. And perhaps, for the ugly duckling teenager, that too was a part of the appeal, and a part of the dream. ♦

Future Historical: The Fiction of Keith Roberts

Paul Kincaid

PAUL KINCAID, co-editor of *Steam Engine Time*, has been writing about Keith Roberts since 1980. Most recently there are articles forthcoming in the proceedings of 2001, *A Celebration of British Science Fiction*, and in *What It Is We Do When We Read Science Fiction*, a collection of his essays and reviews that will be published by Cosmos Books. This essay began as a talk at Novacon, November 2001, to commemorate the anniversary of Roberts's death.

Self portrait by Keith Roberts



I AM TAKING AS MY TITLE, AND MY STARTING POINT, A LINE THAT BRIAN ALDISS used in *Trillion Year Spree* when he compared Richard Cowper to Keith Roberts: 'Like Roberts, he aspires towards that conservative tense, future historic.'¹ I've always had lots of arguments with Aldiss's version of the history of science fiction, but I do like that particular perception, it seems to sum up neatly most of the characteristics I identify and enjoy in Roberts's work.

Let me deal firstly with the 'conservative'. With a small 'c', please note, though Roz Kaveney referred to him as 'neo-conservative', in the political sense, in her summation of sf in the 1970s². Kaveney's view can be easily supported by the silliness of stories like 'The Shack at Great Cross Halt' where we have a couple of jobs calling out: "'Reach, by Huskalon!" "Reach, by Mikalfot!"' (p83) (Hugh Scanlon was a union leader, Michael Foot a left-wing Labour politician, eventual leader of the opposition and even biographer of H.G. Wells; both were excoriated by the Tory press in the 1970s as being bent upon the destruction of civilized values). Despite that, I don't think Roberts was Conservative, in the political sense. What he was, however, was libertarian, at least in the sense that time and again, from Becky in 'The White Boat' to *Molly Zero*, his stories are about the individual up against (and usually crushed by) some monumental establishment, though whether of the left or the right is irrelevant and usually unspecified. We make up our own minds about the big engines ranged against us, but we are made to share the pain and the hopelessness of the individual caught up in that machine. So no, I don't think Roberts was necessarily a Conservative with a large 'C', but he was certainly conservative with a small 'c'.

His father was a cinema projectionist – a profession that crops up in quite a number of his stories, and in his *roman-à-clef*, *Gráinne*. But as you read those stories, you get a strange impression of the young Keith visiting his father while he worked and being entranced not by the glamorous fantasies projected on the screen, but by the clanking, whirring machine his father operated. I also have a vision of Roberts *père* or *fils*, or both, peering under the bonnet of a car. There are lots of stories he wrote, particularly early in his career, that feature haunted cars ('The Scarlet Lady') or cars souped up by alien devices ('Breakdown'), or in which a car plays a significant role. Think of the amount of time Potts spends describing his car in the early chapters of *The Chalk Giants*. Introducing 'The Scarlet Lady' in *Winterwood and Other Hauntings*, Roberts makes a very significant remark: 'There was a time when cars had faces. Now they're just tin boxes. Or maybe that's the child in me, remembering heightened favours'³. The accessible machinery of the car, the character it assumes, represent the past, and even in stories that are not set in our immediately familiar world, Roberts spends an inordinate amount of time on small, everyday mechanical objects: the steam engines in *Pavane*, the lifting gear in *Kiteworld*, the ships' engines in *Drek Yarman*. I would be hard

¹ Aldiss, Brian W. with David Wingrove. *Trillion Year Spree*. (1986). London: Paladin, 1988, p479.

² Kaveney, Roz. 'Science Fiction in the 1970s' *Foundation*, no. 22 (1981), p24.

³ Roberts, Keith *Winterwood and Other Hauntings*. (1989). Scotforth: Morigan, p24

put to name any fiction by Keith Roberts which featured the sort of big, weird, wonderful device we're supposed to expect of science fiction. I suppose, at a pinch, I might list 'The Grain Kings', 'The Deepes', 'The Big Fans', though even these have a curiously domestic feel about them. And in the end the Big Fans, for instance, lie broken and our narrator leaves England: 'There's no place in it now... for people like me.'⁴ For Roberts, as deeply and intrinsically attached to the landscape as he is, the notion of leaving England has a cataclysmic finality to it. In contrast, I would be hard put to name any fiction by Keith Roberts which did not feature some small, everyday, mechanical device, usually an old, battered engine that has been going for years, takes a lot of care and attention, but which is essentially reliable. That is certainly one aspect of his conservatism: the notion that the proper survival of the world depends upon the sorts of motors which can be repaired by an averagely skilled man with grease under his fingernails.

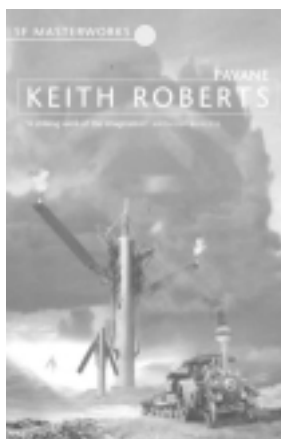
The futures he envisaged – and most of his fictions are set in the future even if they don't necessarily feel as if they are, which is the point of Aldiss's 'future historic' tense – are indistinguishable in this respect from the present in which he wrote them. This again is an inherently conservative view of the world. In his two most sweeping fictions, *Pavane* and *The Chalk Giants*, he presents futures which roll around in great circles to, at best, the same point. (Did the young Keith, visiting his father's projection booth, seeing the reels being rewound and the same story being projected once more, find a metaphor he would henceforth apply to history?) Neither gives any sense of progress beyond the point of writing before history switches back to some earlier point in the circle. In fact, for a science fiction writer he seems extraordinarily wary of the future; it contains only the nuclear apocalypse of *The Furies* or *The Chalk Giants* or *Kite-world*, or the ill-defined but still apocalyptic threat of 'The Comfort Station'. Even in 1992, when the Cold War was already ending and the nuclear threat was supposedly over, it was the shadows of the victims of Hiroshima that provided the haunting central image of 'Kaeti and the Shadows': "'Do not be distressed,'" said the Shadows. "You are not to blame, for us..." "I

am, I am," sobbed Kaeti. "We all are..."⁵ That sense of horror and moral responsibility is something I will be coming back to. In *Gráinne*, the novel that so precisely maps the mind of Keith Roberts, the great conspiracy of women that builds throughout the background of the book is finally revealed to be a way of escaping tomorrow. He was, I think, always afraid of what tomorrow might bring, and most of his fictions can be read as attempts to confront, or find a way around, that fear.

Even if ill-health (and the increasing estrangement of the publishing establishment) had not silenced him during the last years of his life, I suspect that our clean, new, cybernetic take on the future might have stopped him writing anyway. If he could not get grease under his fingernails, if he could not manipulate familiar engines, how could he turn the world away from what he feared in tomorrow? When, in 'Idiot's Lantern', a television intrudes on the world of Anita, a world of bucolic whimsy which is an extension of the rural past he normally extols, it must be destroyed. This is not technology as Roberts might understand and control it. I don't think he ever wrote about computers, and the only story of his that I recall featuring a robot was 'Synth', in which a robot is cited in a divorce case: it is really about becoming human, rather than being machine. If we make human machines, then they just become human and

we must consider the same questions of love and identity and loneliness that all humans face. In which respect, the protagonist of 'Synth' belongs less with Isaac Asimov's robots or William Gibson's AIs than with Becky or Richenda or Molly Zero, who are concerned with how to be themselves in their society.

Time and again that question – how to be a small, lonely individual in a big, impersonal world – surfaces in Roberts's work. Sometimes the answer is to be horrified by how much we might become a part of that cruel world – or even, remembering Kaeti's response to the Shadows, to recognize that simply by being alive we are not only a part of that cruel world but must also take responsibility for it. I am not sure that Roberts ever felt up to the weight of that responsibility. Brother John, in *Pavane*, is, like many Roberts heroes, an artist. Roberts had an ambiguous attitude



Time and again that question – how to be a small, lonely individual in a big, impersonal world – surfaces in Roberts's work.

⁴ Roberts, Keith. 'The Big Fans' (1977) in *Ladies from Hell*, London: Gollancz, 1979, p171.

⁵ Roberts, Keith. 'Kaeti and the Shadows' (1992) in *Kaeti on Tour*, Feltham: The Sirius Book Company, 1992, p40.

towards artists – he went to art school (an experience you'll find described in a number of stories, notably *Gráinne*) and earned a living as a commercial artist. He clearly loved the tools of the craft while abhorring the role of artist as unemotional observer of rather than participant in the world. Brother John encapsulates that ambiguity perfectly. We are treated to a detailed, sensual account of the tools of his trade, and, when he is commissioned by the Inquisition to record their tortures, the account of his work is almost sexual in its intensity:

It seemed John's hands worked of their own, tearing the pages aside, grabbing for inks and washes while the drawings grew in depth and vividness. The brilliant side lighting; film of sweat on bodies that distended and heaved in ecstasies of pain; arms disjointed by the weights and pulleys, stomachs exploded by the rack, bright tree shapes of new blood running to the floor.

It seemed the limner tried to force the stench, the squalor, even at last the noise down onto paper; Brother Sebastian, impressed in spite of himself, had finally dragged John away by force, but he couldn't stop him working.⁶

Then, later, the horror of the experience is presented not as might normally be the case by detestation, but by delight: "I enjoyed it, Brother," he whispered. "God and the Saints preserve me, I enjoyed my work ..."⁷.

Just as Kaeti sees Hiroshima in herself, so John sees the Inquisition in himself, and the only possible response is to become a rebel, a voice crying in the wilderness, a wandering preacher leaving the enormity of the Church for the loneliness of the outcast.

It's a moral choice that others must make in Roberts's fiction, and none of them willingly choose establishment over individuality. Take, for example, Mainwaring in what is, I believe, Roberts's finest story, 'Weihnachtsabend'. Although this is often presented as a 'Nazis win the Second World War' story, it is much subtler than that. Britain and Germany have not fought a war, the British upper class recognized a kindred spirit in the Nazis and the takeover has been altogether more peaceful, a matter of mutual consent. There are those who oppose the Nazis, of course, and presumably those like Brother John who are not prepared to look upon the fascist in themselves; but most people are just getting on with life. Mainwaring is like any civil servant, concerned

with his career, ambitious, leaving the moral choices to others but determined, once the choice has been made, to put it into effect as efficiently as possible. Then, one Christmas, he is invited to the country house of his Minister, and there is confronted with a series of moral choices. His Nazi masters imagine that by manipulating him, by forcing him to make one choice over another, they control him. But Roberts argues that having to make the moral choices at all is what turns Mainwaring into a moral being, and it is that which will eventually control his choices.

At the country house, Mainwaring witnesses a bizarre custom in which terrified children are led through the darkened house:

'They lie in darkness, waiting,' said the Minister softly. 'Their nurses have left them. If they cry out, there is none to hear. So they do not cry out ... Here, where we sit, is warmth. Here is safety. Their

gifts are waiting; to reach them they must run the gauntlet of the dark.' ... The Minister said evenly, *'The Aryan child must know, from earliest years, the darkness that surrounds him. He must learn to fear, and to overcome that fear.'*⁸

I don't know, but I suspect that such a custom never really existed, at least in that form. Nevertheless it is the sort of invention that takes your breath away, for it provides a haunting image that informs the whole story, while at the same time expressing so directly the fear and the response to fear that

seems to have driven so much of Roberts's work.

This ritual is the starting point for the series of tests that Mainwaring finds himself facing. His girlfriend disappears, and he is told she was never there in the first place. He finds a proscribed book in his room and reads it, ripping out the pages and burning them as he goes along. Finally, having confronted the darkness that surrounds him, the next morning Mainwaring takes his gun and goes to kill the Minister. And it would be so easy to end the story at this point, with Mainwaring seizing control of his destiny. But that is too facile a conclusion for Roberts. The Minister talks him out of it. In a scene reminiscent of the ordeal of the children, he explains:

*'I want men near me, serving me. Now more than ever. Real men, not afraid to die. Give me a dozen ... but you know the rest. I could rule the world. But first ... I must rule them. My men.'*⁹

The story has shifted. It has stopped being a melodramatic tale of revenge, a familiar tale of the Nazis

⁶ Roberts, Keith. *Pavane*. (1968). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, pp98/99.

⁷ *ibid.* p99.

⁸ Roberts, Keith. 'Weihnachtsabend' (1972) in *The Grain Kings*, Newton Abbot: Readers Union, 1977, p19.

⁹ *ibid.* p44.

in control, it has become something altogether more subtle: an examination of the nature of power, of the challenge faced by a lone moral being up against a monolithic and immoral state. Though he never overtly states this as his theme, it is what makes 'Weihnachtsabend' the archetype for all of Roberts's fiction.

Assuming he has controlled Mainwaring's moral choices, the Minister reveals his own lack of moral depth when he oversteps the mark. He reveals that Mainwaring's girlfriend was seized because she was an agent for the anti-Nazi underground. 'I could have fifty blonde women if I chose. A hundred. Why should I want yours?'¹⁰ In saying this the Minister expresses not only the arrogance of power, but also a chink in his armour: he has failed to comprehend Mainwaring's feelings for her. At that point, like Brother John in *Pavane*, Mainwaring realises how close he has come to being one with the oppressor. It is the moment of moral choice that occurs so often in Roberts's work, the recognition that we are the Inquisition torturers, the Nazi oppressors, and we must choose how far we want to follow that path. Mainwaring shoots the Minister and flees to face his doom out in the cold. He chooses death as an individual rather than existence as part of the machine. It is an extreme but powerful version of the choice that Molly Zero makes, that Drek Yarm makes, that Kaeti makes repeatedly, and that Becky makes in 'The White Boat'.

'The White Boat' is a pendant to the *Pavane* stories written, on Michael Moorcock's insistence, some six months after Roberts had finished the rest of the sequence. Where the first five stories had appeared in *SF Impulse* (the re-named *Science Fantasy* magazine that Roberts found himself editing in his one abortive foray into the publishing world), 'The White Boat' appeared first in *New Worlds*. It was excluded from the early editions of *Pavane*, and even when it has been added to the novel it is usually placed out of sequence (for the record, it belongs directly after 'Brother John' and before 'Lords and Ladies'). *Pavane* is made up of stories written at a pivotal point in Roberts's career; you can see him learning his craft — the subtleties of character, of plot, of language — as he is writing the stories. But since the stories, as gathered in the novel, are not in the sequence in which

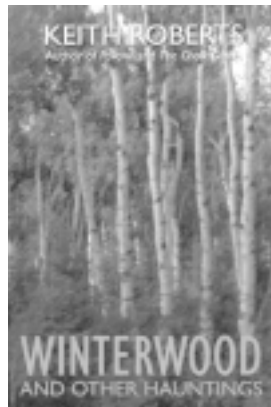
they were written ('Lords and Ladies' and 'Corfe Gate' were written before the rest) you can get a very strange sense of a writer unlearning his skill as the book goes on. Allowing for that, and for the fact that 'The Signaller' and 'Brother John' in particular are remarkably delicate and effective stories, 'The White Boat' as a piece of literature still seems to have progressed so far beyond the rest of the sequence that one can sympathise with the publishers who initially kept it out of the volume.

Even so, in many ways its symbolism seems crude. Becky lives in a coastal village built upon black rock, and that rock has physically darkened every aspect of the life she knows. Then she sees a white yacht out at sea and becomes enamoured of it. The black-white split is as blatant as that. Of course, it doesn't turn out as simple as that: the white boat is not her escape from the black village. It is, in fact, engaged in smuggling; she betrays it to the authorities, then at the last minute springs the trap so the white boat can sail away. In springing the trap she has made the same moral choice as Mainwaring and Brother John. Physically, she has not escaped the black rock that has ground down her parents and everyone else in the village, but the boat has given her a dream of freedom, of being an individual away from the uniformity of village life, and that is enough.

One more example: *Molly Zero*.

This is the curious novel that was written entirely in second-person singular. It began life as a commissioned television treatment that was eventually rejected, and the treatment then surfaced, more or less as it stood, in Robert Silverberg's anthology *Triax*, and it was from this that the novel grew. I suspect that Roberts, who can't have been that familiar with writing for television, used the second person as a way of suggesting the camera eye. Whatever the cause, it resulted in his most formally experimental piece of writing.

The setting is a near-future Britain after some sort of unspecified social collapse. The country has been Balkanised, broken into a number of semi-autonomous regions. Roberts was always doing this. I am convinced he loved the country; certainly he wrote about it, particularly about the area around Corfe Castle, with an eloquence, a poetry, which suggests a deep and passionate commitment to the land. Yet he was forever tearing it apart. In *The Furies*: 'the Great Glen was convulsed along its entire course



what makes the pain and mutilation that Brother John witnesses truly shocking is not that it is hated, but that it is loved

¹⁰ *ibid.* p45.

from Inverness to Fort William, Loch Lomond vanished overnight, and most of Herefordshire became an inland sea.¹¹ In *The Chalk Giants*, Monkey discovers a great sea where his maps told him the land continued. In *Molly Zero* the division is political, cut by barbed wire and command posts, but no less sharp and cruel. John Clute, writing about Roberts in the first edition of the *Encyclopedia* (though the remark was missing from Clute's article in the second edition), said that 'a clear hatred of violence and savagery sometimes emerges uncomfortably in images of pain and mutilation.'¹² But what makes the pain and mutilation that Brother John witnesses truly shocking is not that it is hated, but that it is loved, that Brother John is attracted to it. I think the same holds true of these mutilations of the country: Roberts is drawn to them. Certainly, in *The Chalk Giants*, for example, he seems to be as attracted to the rural idyll around Corfe as he is repelled by the war that leads to it. These mutilations represent, as violence does through most of his work, that which is feared, the future he is drawn towards but shies away from, the aspects of himself that impel the moral choices he must make. Thus when Monkey discovers the landscape no longer matches his maps, it is personal control that he loses: 'His bright new world was shattered. He felt himself losing control. His hands and limbs, wobbly at the best, refused to obey him.'¹³

(Parenthetically, I am struck by the fact that the protagonist who is closest to Roberts himself, Alistair Bevan in *Grainne*, is a man who makes few choices, who avoids them. One wonders if the fears confronted so often within the books require choices that Roberts felt himself incapable of making?)

Going back to *Molly Zero*, she begins the novel in a paternalistic, prison-like school. Again we are presented with the individual confronting the monolith, and Molly makes her moral choice early in the book when she declares: 'I just want something of my own!'¹⁴ She rebels against the institutionalism, the attempts to control her, by escaping. It is notably that in asserting her individuality, Molly also aggressively asserts her femininity. There is a moment early in her escape when she proclaims her period like a

badge of honour: 'You say with monstrous precision, "I'm shedding my womb lining. It happens now and then."¹⁵ In this she is like every Roberts heroine — Anita, the multi-girl in *The Chalk Giants*, Richenda, Grainne, Kaeti (and it is important to note how many female characters are also title characters) — young, sassy, jean-clad, knowing, sexually confident and above all sexy. They are all avatars of the same figure, what Roberts would call the 'Primitive Heroine' or 'PH', and there is a sense in which they are all variations on the same object of desire. (The multi-girl is based on a barmaid he met in the West Country, and in his fiction he seems to have been lusting after her ever since.) But more than just a sexual object, the PH also seems to be the one figure in Roberts's personal mythology able to maintain her individuality in an institutionalised world. Comparing the confidence of Grainne with the inadequacy of

Bevan might help to account for this.

Upon her escape, Molly embarks on a strange odyssey. Beginning in Seatown, which encapsulates the mores and austerities of the fifties, she joins up with a band of free-roaming gypsies who mirror the freedoms of the sixties, ending up with a group of hippy-type malcontents who turn to terrorism. In other words, her odyssey is a recapitulation, on a personal level, of the social movements that led up to the collapse. Once

again we see Roberts's belief in the cyclic nature of history, and once again we see that the moment to be feared, the catastrophic instant when time flips back into the past, is only a heartbeat into the future.

What I am suggesting is that the moral choices at the heart of Roberts's fictions — and I could point to many more examples than I have done so far: the multi-girl and Mark in *The Chalk Giants*, Libby Maynard (whose life story echoes that of Bevan in *Grainne*) in *The Inner Wheel*, *Drek Yarman* — is intimately connected to the 'future historical' tense that Brian Aldiss identifies in his work. And this future historical tense, this clothing of tomorrow in the apparel of yesterday, is a direct response to the fear of the future that echoes throughout Keith Roberts's fiction. ♦

¹¹ Roberts, Keith. *The Furies*. (1966). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p5.

¹² Nicholls, Peter, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. 1st ed. London: Granada, 1979, p500.

¹³ Roberts, Keith. *The Chalk Giants*. (1974). London: Hutchinson, p245.

¹⁴ Roberts, Keith. *Molly Zero*. (1980). London: Gollancz, p49.

¹⁵ *ibid*. p59.

Arslan's

Hope

Bruce Gillespie

BRUCE GILLESPIE is not only one of the co-editors of *Steam Engine Time* but also the editor of *SF Commentary*, which makes him one of the most active people in fandom at the moment. He first wrote about M.J. Engh's *Arslan* in 1981, here he reassesses the novel in the light of 11 September 2001.

THE UNEXPECTEDLY MOMENTOUS YEAR OF 2001 SAW THE REPUBLICATION OF M. J. Engh's *Arslan*, a novel whose near future has become increasingly urgent and interesting since 1976, when it was first published. In 1976, the events described in *Arslan* could not happen; in 2001, they have become possible.

In 1981, when I wrote the first version of this article, there was still a severe risk of nuclear war between the blocs of nations led by the USA and the USSR. I wrote then that writers of the future had two choices of subject matter: between very bad futures and very very bad futures. Of the two, the very very bad future was probably preferable: nuclear war that would obliterate us, saving us the despair of trying to survive in an insufferable world. The very bad future (the 'boiling the frog' future) is the one in which global natural systems gradually collapse under the strain of adjusting to human waste products, making our existence increasingly difficult and exasperating. Although nuclear war seems to have been averted (despite the fact that in 2001 America's and Russia's nuclear missile systems are still on hair-trigger alert and pointing at each other), M. J. Engh's complex fable has gained greatly in meaning since its first publication.

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I discovered *Arslan* by accident. Engh's 'The Oracle' is the best story in the 1980 collection *Edges*, edited by Ursula K. Le Guin and Virginia Kidd. In the introduction to that story, the editors mention '1976's stunning novel of world conquest, *Arslan*', of which I had not heard. However, Justin Ackroyd, Melbourne bookseller, found me a copy. If 'science fiction' is just an awkward name for 'future fiction', *Arslan* proves to be the most interesting sf novel of the last thirty years.

Arslan's future is our near future, given a sufficient spin to make us consider what we're doing about today's world. Engh describes a rather unlikely method of preventing the very very bad future in which the two major power blocs conduct nuclear war. If in 1976 the author had thought of the actual solution — that one of those blocs would collapse without war being waged — she would not have used the solution for fear of being laughed at.

The future introduced at the beginning of *Arslan* is the one most Americans in 1976 would have considered impossible — the armed takeover of the country by an invading army. After the world events of 2001, we now have glimpses of unexpected methods of destroying the superstructure of the USA without deploying the large land army shown in *Arslan*.

The novel begins as Arslan himself, new ruler of the world, leads his army into Kraftsville, Ohio. This small rural community becomes the military operations capital of the world — for a few years. Watching this takeover is Franklin Bond, principal of the local high school.

The reader spends much of the book trying to work out how Arslan took over the world. Arslan started out as a troublemaker from Turkistan. His plan, or good fortune, was to be in Moscow at the moment when the USSR



developed a laser weapons system that, it believed, would make it impregnable to US guided missiles. The USA surrenders to the USSR at the precise moment when Arslan forces the Soviet government to surrender to *him*. I didn't believe it then, but the twenty-four years since have made Engh's proposition seem more likely. Her point, in 1976, was that the nuclear weapons systems have always been unwieldy. If someone could grab their levers, that person might persuade most of the world to surrender at one go. When we meet Arslan, he has control of all the world's armies. Stationed in Kraftsville, Ohio, he begins to execute his plan.

On his first day in town, Arslan goes straight to the local school, lines up all the children, rapes three of them, including one boy, Hunt Morgan, and holds the rest of the children hostage. His men are bivouacked in the homes of the citizens of Kraftsville. The death of any soldier will lead to the deaths of all the people of the house in which he was staying. The death of General Arslan will lead to the deaths of every person in the county.

The processes of power, as described by Franklin Bond, take up most of the first section of the novel. Bond tells his tale matter-of-factly, giving veracity to the uncomfortable events that afflict the townspeople. Bond is conscripted to convey Arslan's orders to the community and make sure they are obeyed. He is no collaborator. He is the organiser of the covert operations of the Franklin County Reserve, a group of citizens who are certain they can lead a rebellion against Arslan. Franklin and his wife Luella must play host to Arslan, some of his most trusted soldiers, and Hunt Morgan. Arslan keeps Hunt a prisoner, not only for sexual exercise but also as a companion, substitute son, and *alter ego*. Power over the world is necessary to carry out Arslan's plan; complete power over one boy is his pleasure and, finally, his undoing.

The first section of *Arslan* answers many of the more superficial puzzles that Engh sets up in the first few pages. She shows how Bond tilts all the levers he can grab in order to stop Arslan's power from crushing Kraftsville's citizens. The image of Arslan hangs in front of Franklin's eyes every waking minute; the author's real concern, however, is with Franklin Bond and Hunt Morgan. Franklin and Hunt are real, complex characters. Arslan is complex, but his powers are magical, slightly unreal, spread throughout the world; we can never catch more than a glimpse of his activities. Arslan seems to know everything, is able to do anything, yet he is crushed when (later) his

wife is killed in Kraftsville. He underestimates badly the person he created, Hunt Morgan, the ferociously over-educated boy. Arslan succeeds by setting people against themselves; such is his vanity and strength that he never realises his strength might be used against him.

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For many readers, the prose of Part 2 of Arslan might strike them as an unpleasant surprise. This is the first section to be related by Hunt Morgan, who writes not as a gormless youth, but as a meticulously educated, somewhat romantic poet-turned-novelist. Engh is showing off, I suspect: she shows that Franklin Bond's plain-speaking style of Part 1 is not her style, but merely one of the many ways in which this story might be told. Franklin has only one, necessarily limited story; Hunt has quite another.

Hunt's story is not that of a buggered little boy; it is essential to Engh's craft that she seems to submerge the theme of homosexuality beneath the other themes of the novel. Arslan is omniseual, world-grasping, world-devouring. The only exception is Hunt, who is not devoured, but educated in how to become a demon. 'Arslan was not a genteel modern homosexual,' reflects Hunt. 'He was outlandish, archaic, indifferently male.' Sexual congress with Arslan gives Hunt no pleasure, so he does not remember the occasions. Instead he remembers being held prisoner, educated by his master: 'my single, ludi-

crous, several-times-daily act: to catch the book that sprang from the flashing bow of his arm' and read some more to Arslan.

The prose that Engh writes for Hunt is often clotted, rhetorical, mock-poetical, the prose of a youth who has imbibed too many exciting words too fast. Yet Arslan relishes this sensitivity in Hunt, for he reveals to him many of the policies and plans he would not bother to discuss with Franklin Bond. It is to Hunt, not Franklin, that Arslan reveals how he persuaded the Russians to hand over their armed forces. Hunt, not Franklin, learns how Arslan sees the citizens of Kraftsville, still sunk in sanctimoniousness, despite losing their nation. After all, it's Hunt who has been persecuted for being made the lover of Arslan:

What citizen of Kraftsville could have questioned that Kraftsville citizens are nice people, and that nice people were good? . . . exactly the good people, it was especially the better people, who were the loathsome hypocrites . . . It was Arslan who

'What citizen of Kraftsville could have questioned that Kraftsville citizens are nice people, and that nice people were good? . . . exactly the good people, it was especially the better people, who were the loathsome hypocrites . . .'

showed me the possibility of living honestly. Even his deceptions were straightforward – tools as simple in purpose and exquisite in design as the guns he equally loved. He lied; but he did not pretend.

What does Hunt actually learn from Arslan? The answer is never quite disclosed to the reader. When Hunt returns to Kraftsville after a long stay in Arslan's capital in Turkistan, he finds himself staying with Franklin Bond again – for his own protection. The people of Kraftsville have disowned him, and Hunt finds himself left in the shade of Arslan's wife and son. Arslan's wife, Rusudan, is killed, seemingly by four men of the Kraftsville district. Arslan uses unarmed combat to execute them all. Arslan's son, Sanjar, takes centre stage; Hunt is demoted to lieutenant. Hunt seems so powerless that everybody forgets how much power he still has.

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The link between the inner world of this novel and its outer world is Sanjar, barely a character in his own right, and the threat he poses to Hunt Morgan. By the time that Sanjar and his mother arrive in Kraftsville, he is the only child under ten left in the world.

Although we see Arslan only when he is pitching himself against the citizens of the miniature world of Kraftsville, his real enterprise is to subdue the citizens of the whole world.

He decides that humanity is too dangerous to continue its dominance of the world; that he should 'make the world a good place in which to live' by getting rid of technological civilisation. As he tells Franklin Bond: 'That is my hope, sir; that, once destroyed, civilisation will not rise again, or at worst will rise only very slowly.' His armies divide the world into small, completely self-reliant areas; since city populations depend on food imported from the rural areas, they die. At first it seems that Arslan is merely putting into practice the policies of mass murder carried out in Cambodia a year or two after the publication of this novel.

Kraftsville County is cut off from the rest of the world, but most of its people survive the worst of Arslan's restructions. Arslan's rule is less strict than that of, say, the Russians in C. M. Kornbluth's *Christmas Eve (Not This August)*. Arslan is that most dangerous of persons: the absolute idealist. He seems to be nothing but an egotist, but he shows little self-interest in his work. It will not be enough to destroy civilisation, no matter how much saner he makes the world by confining its people within small self-sufficient

communities. 'Man is a mistake of evolution,' he tells Franklin Bond. 'He is too potent.' Arslan attacks human potency. All women left alive after the first few years of his rule are inoculated, they are told, against all known diseases. They are also sterilised. At the end of the novel, no baby has been born on Earth (or so Arslan believes) for more than a decade – other than his own child. Arslan's plan is 'to save the world from mankind . . . If a civilisation cannot be thoroughly eradicated, it remains necessary to exterminate the human species.'

Is Arslan mad? Can he be stopped? Should he be stopped? These questions give the vital tension to *Arslan*, particularly as they are the questions asked more and more frequently by the world's citizens during the 1990s. Engh is not advocating anything. She draws a portrait of a person who sets out to rule the world for an idealistic purpose, then plays with

various consequences of that purpose. She succeeds because she does not preach; indeed, she avoids abstractions. She does what almost no sf writers seem willing to do: write a novel about the future entirely in terms of character and place. The great abstractions of world policy, which haunt us in a new way since 11 September 2001, are merely glimpsed somewhere behind the latticework of reality. Engh's latticework, however, is palpable: her world is that of a fine novelist, not a polemicist. The fate of her individual characters engages us

more than the fate of her future world, yet increasingly her future world is ours. ♦

Arslan by M. J. Engh

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