Letters of comment

E. D. WEBBER
CoA: 19 Leslie Avenue, Goroken NSW 2263
To Paul Kincaid: While it is quite true that historians and novelists tend to be interested in the process of change and, for the sake of focus as a means of maintaining the reader's attention, what I found lacking in your alternative civil wars thesis in *Steam Engine Time* was a greater view of the states involved. At the risk of painting too large a canvas, the American War Between the States was essentially a contest between the industrialism of the northern states and the agricultural ones to the south. A contest between raw materials and techniques, in other words, and the British interest from the sidelines had as much to do with its own industrial interests in cheap raw materials as it did anything else, up to and including slavery.

The supply of cotton is but one example, capitalised as it was by Britain. So too was the American, and Argentinean, cattle business, explaining after a fashion why neither Americans nor Argentineans are lamb eaters to this day. Men on horseback against the tillers of Jeffersonian notions of a rural republic is another way to put it, as is the truism of Argentineans being Italians who speak Spanish and think they're English. This was while Australia was riding on the sheep's back and the Indian industrial establishment was being systematically neutered, due to the imperial interests of what was then Great Britain.

We see the Americans doing much the same thing throughout their empire — which their court stenographers say does not exist — today. The raw materials in question may have changed, oil and other opiates having supplanted king cotton, but the techniques of socioeconomic imperialism have not. Were the South to have won in its war to secede from the American Bismarck's, howsoever ungrammatical, 'more perfect union', it would undoubtedly have become a *de facto* British dominion of influence like Argentina until the shift of money from London to New York caused by World War I.

As for the slavery issue — and I say this as a former civil rights worker in the sunny southland of my former country — issues come and go but vested interests have an annoying habit of remaining the same. NAFTA, for instance, does not include the free movement of labour, and our leaders' pipe dreams of a free trade pact with the US was just that.

Still, your article about alternative civil wars was an interesting read.

30 December 2001

DAVID J. LAKE
7 Eighth Avenue, St Lucia QLD 4067
Steam Engine Time is fun. I liked your piece 'The Pure Quill': I actually often find autobiographies more interesting than novels — but only what one might call *interior* autobiographies, not just accounts of what happened and what triumphs or disasters the hero experienced. The contrast existed even in the 4th century AD — I have read the so-called 'autobiography' of one Libanius, an academic/rhetor [rhetorician?], which is an exterior one delivered mainly as a public speech, and Augustine's *Confessions*, which is the type specimen of the kind I like.

I want to correct Arthur Clarke (back cover of *SET*). What Belloc wrote in his comic poem 'Lord Lundy' was this, in a speech from the Duke, the 'aged grandsire' to the failed politician:

The stocks were sold; the Press was squared;
The Middle Class was quite prepared,
But as it is! . . . My language fails!
Go out and govern New South Wales!

That last is one of my favourite lines of English poetry.

Paul Kincaid's piece on alternate Civil Wars was very interesting to me. I have read Ward Moore and Churchill. If the South had won independence, it might have been a disaster for Britain in the twentieth century: Britain could not have won in either world war without huge American support . . . but Churchill was wrong to single out Gettysburg. I think the most crucial time for the North was the autumn of 1864. People were thoroughly tired of the war, and if McClellan had won the election in November, he might well have made peace. But then came the great victory of Sherman, taking Atlanta, plus a spectacular success by Sheridan in the Shenandoah valley. Those triumphs ensured that Lincoln would win, and facing four more years of Lincoln, the South had no hope.

11 January 2002

SEAN MCMULLEN
GPO Box 2653X, Melbourne VIC 3001
2001 felt like a ghastly year for us as well. The worst of it was when we were on the way back from the US, two hours out of Auckland, in a United 747 when the September 11 attacks began. As you can imagine, the cabin staff were pretty edgy, then we were confronted by most of New Zealand's police force in the airport terminal. After being put aboard a Qantas flight to Melbourne, then grilled by the Commonwealth Police (no, we had not noticed anyone suspicious on our flight), we floundered out, to be confronted by the media. I am not a good passenger at the best of times, so I was a bit of a basket case by now then. Confronted with a microphone, camera and the question 'What do you think of international terrorism?', I came out with some brilliant, witty, memorable reply along the lines of 'Someone ought to do something about it!' Well, I had been in the air for 17 hours, and did I mention the three earth tremors that happened while I was trying to have a quiet beer in the LA airport lounge? Catherine decided to call in at her school once we got home, and she arrived to find a general assembly in progress and prayers being said for her safety.

17 January 2002

[JS: *Thanks very much for taking the time to loc SET, Sean; I have a copy of* Glass Dragons *in the To Review pile of books (having landed a spot on Tor's mailing list, I get books from them regularly now). If I can't manage to sell a review of it, I'll certainly review it for* SET. *Glad to hear you got home safely after what must have been a bewildering experience at those airports on Sept. 11 — and I bet that'll be writing fodder soon enough.***]**

TOM COVERDALE
Flat 10, 25 Docker Street, Richmond VIC 3121
Belated thanks for the latest *Steam Engine Time*. I've been dipping into it along with my morning muesli. Not up to the last *SF Commentary*, but still well worthwhile. I'm thinking of ways I can pay for my subscription with some wordage but first have to finish *The Hook Book*, which I'm working on with Ray Wood. What sort of articles are you either looking for or short of in (a) *SF Commentary*, (b) *Steam Engine Time*?

23 January 2002

[JS: *See the introductory matter in thish for more details on what we'd like to see in* SET. *I'd like to see some articles that give an overview of books dealing with a particular theme; in a recent ish of* Peregrine Nations *(my genzine), I ran an article on eschatological SF novels. It wasn't all-inclusive, but several works were mentioned, many of which I'd never read.***]**

RICK KENNETT
PO Box 118, Pascoe Vale South, VIC 3044
I liked your piece on SF biographies and autobiographies. I could add to Alan Stewart's additions *Lovecraft: A Life* by S. T. Joshi, Robert Bloch's *Once Around the Bloch: An Unauthorized Autobiography* (is Merv Binns aware he's mentioned in this?), *Rod Serling: The Dreams and Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone* by Joel Engel, *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man* by Gordon F. Sander (OK, I'm reaching with these two, but if Serling wasn't strictly speaking a genre writer he was the next best thing), *On Writing* by Stephen King (as much an autobiography as it is a 'how to' book), and *Dean Koontz: A Writer's Biography* by Katharine Ramsland.

In *SET* 2, a letter of mine is immediately followed by one from Cy Chauvin. According to the editor's introduction to my story 'Due West' in *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* 12, Mr Chauvin is actually a fictional character invented by me. Quotie: 'Kennett does write the occasional space opera, most notably in the Cy Chauvin series of stories.' I *presume* this is a slip of the pen by the editor/copy editor/typesetter/printer and not leakage from an alternative universe. I've since pointed this out to Cy and we've had a bit of a chuckle over it via email.

23 January 2002

ERIC LINDSAY
PO Box 640, Airlie Beach QLD 4802
It is always good to read a lengthy, detailed review such as Claire Brialey provides of John

Kessel's *Corrupting Dr Nice*. However, at the same time, if you haven't read (or even heard of) the book, any actual reading now seems somewhat superfluous. **[JS:** *Did she really give that much away? Perspective is so individual; I didn't get that impression at all from reading the review.***]**

Maybe I should just make sure I read a bunch of reviews, sort of like *Cliff's Notes*, and not bother with science fiction at all. That would certainly save shelf space. It could go on the shelf next to Thesaurus of Book Digests, invaluable when you need a quick rundown of some classic you have neglected to read. **[JS:** *And, like pumpkin pie without spices, lose much of the flavor thereby.***]** It was long past Enid Blyton time before I finally discovered that books were produced by authors (what a concept!). Like Bruce, I initially thought they were part of the very fabric of the universe, revealing truth, liberty . . . oops, getting carried away there. However Moskowitz's two volumes of articles basically revealed that these people were not really in touch with reality. After all, why write for next to nothing? **[JS:** *There's a lot to be said for not acquiring information on people one admires; so very often, something they've done will cause them to turn into clay-footed nitwits in the eyes of their admirers. It isn't true for all admired persons; the more I learn about Russell Crowe as an actor and a person, the more I like him, despite his shortcomings (and there are a few). The early SF writers wrote for nothing because that's all that was on offer; I can't fault them for that, because all these years later there's a group of people still reading their work and talking about them.***]**

5 February 2002

JANINE STINSON
PO Box 248, East Lake MI 49626-0248, USA

Perhaps, given your previous concerns about finances for pubbing *SET* (and if you haven't done so already), you should have a chat with Eric Lindsay and Jean Weber about how they've set up a PayPal payment system for their published works. That's how I paid for a copy of Jean's book on Microsoft Word and made a donation to GUFF for a copy of their 2001 trip report. **[JS:** *I still think this is a good idea.***]** If you're worried that connecting a personal checking account to a Web entity is dangerous, you can always create a separate account for payments made to and by you. That way, your personal money is still safe and you have a way to increase the distribution of *SET* along with getting money for it at the same time. I feel safe in saying that at least 30 per cent of the people who'd download a copy of *SET* would be willing to pay at least $3 to $5 US for it. Heck, if you could get at least 10 people to cough up that much, you'd be ahead by 30 to 50 bucks! And it'd save you money too. It wouldn't be a money-making enterprise by any stretch of the imagination, but it'd put you a bit ahead when it comes to paying for print copies.

24 February 2002

[BRG: *Had Bill Burns set up efanzines.com in February 2002? I doubt it. That's the main way we now hope to reach casual readers. Australian fans report difficulties in operating PayPal, whereas American and British fans seem to have no problems.***]**

JOSEPH NICHOLAS
15 Jansons Road, South Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

I feel I ought to say something in response to Clare Brialey's comments on John Kessel's *Corrupting Dr Nice*, if only because it mentions my review a number of times. I re-read that review, and glanced through parts of the novel, after reading Claire's article, but on reflection would pretty much stand by what I said. It's not the greatest novel in the world, and doubtless someone somewhere will one day write a more consistently funny one, but its twin satires — of rich Northern tourism to the Majority World, and the quest for ceaseless novelty (there and at home) by the citizens of the rich North — struck me as well realised. It might be — although it's surely unlikely — that one has to experience something of this tourism/novelty gig oneself to fully appreciate what Kessel is saying; perhaps it's therefore more likely that Claire's sense of humour is just not congruent with Kessel's. Oh well.

Paul Kincaid's article about alternate histories of the US Civil War seemed well researched, although US history isn't my forte (most of my knowledge of the Civil War is derived from western movies!) and I can't therefore comment directly on what he says; but what struck me as I read his article was just how many alternate histories of the US Civil War there are by comparison with other possible subjects.

Where, for instance are the alternate histories of the English Civil War? (Indeed, why are there none?) One reason might be that no matter how the English Civil War is rerun, you still end up with the Restoration in 1660 — but that of course addresses the particular example rather than the general issue. Several possible reasons for the overbalance in favour of the US Civil War suggest themselves — genre science fiction is largely a US creation that will necessarily draw heaviest on US themes; the causes and consequences of the Civil War still resonate in contemporary US society; the US Civil War was one of the modern world's first industrialised conflicts and for that reason more amenable to 'scientific' study of its outcomes; and so on. (A simpler reason might be that US writers are largely ignorant of other nations' histories.) But that still doesn't explain the failure of other writers to get to grips with other turning points in history; turning points that could have affected the path(s) taken by the world as a whole rather than one individual nation-state. For example, suppose the Roman siege of Syracuse in 212 BC had failed, leaving Carthage still in control of the Western Mediterranean and Greek cultural hegemony unchallenged in the Eastern half — would there ever have been a Roman empire, or a lasting Roman polity at all? For another example, what if the Byzantines had held or even defeated the Muslim forces at Yarmuk in 636 AD — would Islam have been confined to the Arabian peninsula, never to become a global political force? Or what if Ogadei Khan had not died in 1241 AD, forcing a recall of Mongolian forces from Central Europe to participate in the election of a new Khan — might they have carried on, as they clearly intended, into Western Europe, destroying enough to set back the dawning of the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration by a hundred or more years?

But perhaps a listing alone of these other alternates is sufficient to explain why no one has attempted them: they are just too damn complex for any one person to explore unless that person has an entire lifetime in which to do so. But then again, I wouldn't mind reading novels drawn from these premises. **[JS:** *If Steven Barnes can take Socrates escaping as his starting point and write two novels as a result, I think it's at least probable that someone could take one of your examples and run with it.***]**

16 March 2002

ROB GERRAND
11 Robe Street, St Kilda VIC 3182

I enjoyed Gregory Benford's 'Waiting for Shakespeare', and Russell Blackford's response. I wonder if Benford had posed his question more generally, would he have found an answer? In other words, has there been a second Shakespeare in any form of literature, not just in science fiction?

There have been many great writers, I would submit, but none that has been called another Shakespeare. We should therefore not worry too much that science fiction has yet to throw one up. **[JS:** *Dialectic differences are so interesting; this phrase conjured up a startled turkey vulture for me. They vomit when startled, and their diet consists solely of carrion.***]**

More interesting is the number of important writers the field has nurtured. To the names Benford mentions I would add Philip K. Dick and Jack Vance, both of whom have bodies of work increasingly relevant, fascinating and thought-provoking.

It is worth reflecting that Tom Shippey starts his book *J. R. R. Tolkien, Author of the Century*, with the statement, 'The dominant literary mode of the twentieth century has been the fantastic. This may appear a surprising claim, which would not have seemed even remotely conceivable at the start of the century and which is bound to encounter fierce resistance even now. However, when the time comes to look back at the century, it seems very likely that future literary historians, detached from the squabbles of the present, will see as its most representative and distinctive works books like J. R. R. Tolkein's *The Lord of the Rings*, and also George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Animal Farm*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and *The Inheritors*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Cat's Cradle*, Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. The list could readily be extended back to the late nineteenth century with H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* and *The War of the Worlds*, and up to writers currently active . . .'

I agree, though I would not include Pynchon in such illustrious company. Early last century it included Kafka, Huxley, Havel. Later, Borges, Barth and Burroughs.

For science fiction is — to take Christopher Priest's pregnant definition in this same issue — the literature of visionary realism. If you have something interesting to say these days, it is usually said in a science-fictional way.

Blackford writes: 'Some of the great modernists — Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound — gave permission to those who followed to produce fragmented, obscure, essentially private works . . . This has opened a gulf of incomprehension between much serious literature and the general reading public.'

Who else finds most 'mainstream' writing dull or trivial? Alas, this also applies to much published as science fiction.

Yet whether it's published as magic realism or with no SF badging, the writers with something to say usually use an SF or fantasy form. This is because, I think, SF has resurrected the role of myth and story in literature. The sense of wonder in great works such as Clarke's *The City and the Stars* is all the stronger because it resonates with our internal mythos.

17 April 2002

ARTHUR D. HLAVATY
206 Valentine Street, Yonkers NY 10704, USA

I particularly liked your article on SF biographies and autobiographies, and I agree there should be more. Robert Silverberg, for instance, has a fascinating personal chapter in *Hell's Cartographers* (it begins, 'Autobiography. Apparently one should not name the names of those one has been to bed with, or give explicit figures on the amount of money one has earned, those being the two data most eagerly sought by readers; all the rest is legitimate to reveal') and a more professionally orientated one in his *Worlds of Wonder* (now reprinted as *Science Fiction 101*), but I faunch for more. I eagerly await the promised Cordwainer Smith and Tiptree bios, and I think Theodore Sturgeon would be an excellent subject for one.

Judith Merril's autobiography has just been published; Clute and others have found it tantalisingly incomplete, as her writing energy appears to have given out halfway through. Still, I am looking forward to reading it.

All I know about L. Sprague de Camp's *Time and Chance* is that he admits to not having a sense of humor, and what I read of the book when we excerpted it in *New York Review of Science Fiction* gave me no reason to doubt his sincerity. We published a highly condensed Good Parts Version, and I fell asleep several times in the course of proofreading it.

I would never call Orson Scott Card a fascist — more like a conservative who thinks he's a liberal, which may be easier to do if one spends much of one's time amongst the Latter Day Saints. He reacts to Lit Profs with a remarkable display of fear and loathing. (See his essay in 'Meditations on Middle-Earth' on how those who claim to enjoy *Ulysses* could not possibly get any real pleasure except that of 'decoding'.)

I am sure that Christopher Priest is right that there are bigots who think of some SF as 'too British'. I can't imagine anyone finding a national flaw shared by such enjoyable writers as Eric Frank Russell, John Brunner, Barrington J. Bayley, Ken MacLeod, and Jasper Fforde. Perhaps it is the erroneous assumption that 'British' means catastrophe novels. I have never been able to distinguish between 'cosy catastrophes' and the less comfortable sort. To me, they are all tales of grubby little people squabbling in meticulously detailed mundane backgrounds, while somewhere off in the distance the world ends. (OK, that's overgeneralised; Ballard's catastrophes, particularly *The Crystal World*, are beautiful.) But Thomas M. Disch wrote one of the worst of those, *The Genocides*, before he'd set foot in the United Kingdom.

I'd say the situation of SF by mainstream writers in the U.S. is not as bleak as Gene Stewart suggests. Gore Vidal and John Updike have both written SF with impunity (*Live from Golgotha* and *Toward the End of Time*, respectively), and while Margaret Atwood is Canadian, United Statesmen (and of course -women) have often claimed her as One of Ours, and did not stop doing so after *The Handmaid's Tale*. The strangest reaction was back in the 70s when Thomas Berger did an uninspiring take on the good old gynocracy theme (*Regiment of Women*) and some mainstream reviewers praised it, adding that of course those sci-fi writers never came up with interesting ideas like that. I *hope* we've gotten more sophisticated since then. **[JS:** *We certainly have, but I often wonder if the mainstream reviewers have.***]**

I enjoyed the Benford/Blackford dialogue. I first encountered this discussion in Guy Lillian's *Challenger*, and was amused to see them say SF is an art form like jazz that doesn't need a major Shakespeare-like figure, just as Ken Burns did a Public TV series telling us that jazz had such a figure: Duke Ellington. (I wouldn't quite call him a Shakespeare, but the TV series may be a sign that we're finally getting over the racism that kept the Duke out of discussions of comparable modernist giants like Eliot and Picasso.)

Anyway, I basically agree with Blackford, but I'd go further. Shakespeare did indeed work in a visual medium, but his work came down to us, and has had its influence, as words on a page. If all that survived of a Kubrick movie (particularly *2001*) was the screenplay, most of the experience would be gone. In general, I'd say that SF movies are a different art form from SF books — not better, not worse, but different, just as no one would say opera is the same sort of thing as poetry.

I loved Christopher Priest's hilarious descriptions of his dealings with publishers, including the one who found *The Affirmation* too long a title and the one who 'corrected' his dedication. His books always sound fascinating, but I assume from his remarks on starting and finishing that he still insists that a proper novel runs down, rather than ending. (I will resist the temptation to describe that as British. Phil Dick himself rarely knew when one of his books should end, a trait lovingly pastiched by Michael Bishop in *The Secret Ascension*.)

I also like his prescriptive definition of science fiction as the literature of visionary realism. It describes the essential *conjunctio oppositorum* at the heart of SF, as do the classical 'cognitive estrangement' and (my own favourite, generalisable from its original use as a description of *Illuminatus!*) 'straight-faced bullshit'.

8 June 2002

TERRY JEEVES
56 Red Scar Drive, Scarborough, North Yorks YO12 5RQ, UK

Benford (and others) seek a new Shakespeare, but aren't they looking in the wrong medium? Rather like seeking another Bing Crosby among a bunch of pianists. Bill was a playwright, not a book author. If they want a playwright, how about Alan Ayckbourn? **[JS:** *Perhaps the intent was to discern whether there is (or was) an SF writer comparable in stature to Shakespeare, and not specifically a playwright; that was my impression, at least.***]**

I also enjoyed the Chris Priest speech. His *Inverted World* is one of my favourites. He always finds a new and different angle to write about — see *The Space Machine*, his Wells pastiche. Nice to read his comments, as health and finance keep me away from cons these days.

(10 June 2002)

MATTHEW DAVIS
15 Impney Close, Church Hill North, Redditch B98 9LZ, UK

The first article I turned to was your own 'The Pure Quill'. Before I make comment I thought I'd just point out a few books you missed. Most notably there was a book of essays, *Fantastic Lives*, edited by Martin H. Greenberg with autobiographical/critical essays by R. A. Lafferty, P. J. Farmer, Norman Spinrad, Mack Reynolds, and others. Borgo Press and the Twayne writers series have published critical studies of various twentieth-century SF writers, which take in biographical material. The various reference guides by the Gale Research Group (*Contemporary Authors*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something About the Author*, etc.) include most of the significant SF writers of the last 60–70 years, and have given many of them the opportunity to compose autobiographical essays. It's also worth mentioning that SF and Fantasy, while overlooked in the newspapers and journals, have more reference guides available than other literary strands, including contemporary *mainstream* fiction: numerous encyclopaedias, the *St James Guides* to SF, Fantasy and Horror, the *Locus Index*es to fiction, and the *H. W. Hall Index*es to Criticism and Non-Fiction. With magazines, fanzines, and conventions, any SF or fantasy author will have many more venues and opportunities in which to make himself and his work known than any comparable writer in contemporary fiction.

As for why there are hardly any SF biographies. First, it's necessary to have some perspective regarding the publishing market for biographies. Fullscale biographies are very rarely written about contemporary authors, and then it's usually only the multi-million-selling household names. I may be wrong, but SF doesn't have any current author such as Stephen King, whose fans will buy anything with his name on, so there isn't the financial security for publishers to put money behind such a project. **[JS:** *What about Arthur Clarke?***]** Looking at your bibliography, it's telling that almost two-thirds of the books are from small presses or the smaller university presses.

Second, it's only within the last 10–15 years that many of the most famous names in SF died, so for the 20–30 years before that it was

unlikely that anyone would attempt a biography of Heinlein, Sturgeon, Leiber, et al., either because no publisher was interested, because any prospective biographer was too politic to pass comment on an author still alive and well, or else for the fear of the sheer stink that would arise by trying to unearth dirt from the closeknit world of the 30s and 40s, when everyone seems to have a different interpretation of who did what and when to whom. And now everyone who knew them is just dead. Most biographies are written either by academics or journalists. This is not a constituency that is much inclined to dip into the world of SF and the murkier waters of fandom. Journalists who do love SF are usually too busy trying to get their own novels published or working to hire on the cobbled-up biography of the latest flash-in-the-pan pop sensation to even begin such an undertaking. Most of your listed biographies are the works of people who really care about this or that given author, not respectable authors with an advance. **[JS:** *I'm missing something here. Are you saying that those listed biographers are not respectable and get no advances for their biographies? Or are you saying that the listed biographies are on writers who are not respectable and get no advance? What do respectability and advances have to do with the biographical worth of any given writer?***]**

Besides, writers' autobiographies are not much sought after in the publishing world. The majority of autobiographies are ghosted sports, media and music personalities. Writers' autobiographies make up a mere fraction of the yearly turnover, and about half of those are posthumous or as near as dammit, a favour to a long-serving list author. Most SF writers write up until their dying day, trying to sell novels and stories, to remain viable commercial names, and therefore have little time for such an uncertain project. The only SF writers who do seem to work on autobiographical materials are those who have withdrawn from writing fiction, which therefore places them in the perilous position for a publisher of being an SF writer who is no longer writing SF. **[JS:** *So where do writers' blogs fit into this scheme? A lot of currently working writers have them, and a lot of biographical material gets into those blogs.***]**

The last 10 years of Leiber's life saw almost no new fiction, but with columns in *Locus* and *Fantasy Newsletter* he'd already begun examining the course of his life, resulting in a piece like *Not Much Disorder and Not So Early Sex*.

The matter of fanzines and magazines is important, too: as I mentioned above, SF authors have more places in which to expatiate and blather, which to a certain extent precludes the need for them to say more. Across interview after interview, fanzine piece after critical review, by the time he dies, it's an unlucky author who hasn't had much of his working life and salient intimate moments displayed before anyone who cares to take notice. **[JS:** *Given this, it shouldn't be too difficult for a person to collect as much of this material as is still available, combine it with said person's own perspective on a particular writer, and have a biography published. There are plenty of small presses available, and there's always the POD companies as well. It's much easier to publish (but not so easy to sell) a book these days than in previous years. One might not make money on it, but one can do it quicker and easier now. Of course, whether a small press will publish a biography still depends on whether the writer in question had a significant enough impact on SF to warrant a biography, and a life of enough interest to make reading about it worth a reader's time.***]**

Look at the last few months of 2002: when an SF author dies, the tendency is to wrap this all up, say how sad, point out a few notable works, and hope that there'll be a revival of his works in a few years' time. Much of the SF readership is a casual readership. For all that they have favourite authors, they don't go much deeper than that. Almost 20 years on, who cares about (choose a name, any name, it doesn't even have to be from SF)? Most writers who died 20 years ago *won't* get a biography. SF is no different in this — unless a writer suffers some terrible affliction, is sex-mad, or was a highly controversial figure in his lifetime and therefore offers the reviewing cadre a healthy dose of prurience. SF can offer this, but it probably wouldn't do the overall image of SF much good. Maybe someday someone somewhere will write an *Eminent SF Writers* about Sturgeon, Heinlein, Campbell, Asimov and Hubbard, but I wouldn't hold your breath. **[JS:** *Perhaps someone is working on such a book this very minute . . .***]**

11 June 2002

STEVE SNEYD
4 Nowell Place, Almondbury, Huddersfield, West Yorkshire HD5 8PB, UK

Re the 'cosy catastrophe':

- It's surprising how the name of John Lymington is always ignored. To me he was the subtlest of this group of writers in his echoing of external collapse with internal character flaws and social decay.
- It's a neat irony that Aldiss himself produced a very elegant 'cosy catastrophe' in *Greyboard*, with its elegiac *Wind in the Willows* feel; and Michael Moorcock stays in the same frame in his Jerry Cornelius works, with JC as a lifestyle guru while worlds are going to destruction all around.

I enjoyed K.V. Bailey's elegant discussion of the mind-borne cosmic voyage genre. The tradition persists: the Poet Laureate (Andrew Motion)'s 'Millennium' poem took just that form.

To describe Keith Roberts' *The Chalk Giants* as evidence of a fear of the future seems unduly reductionist. It could equally be read as an effective meditation on the cyclic theory of history — a post-nuke future recapitulating the various stages of prehistory.

11 June 2002

[BRG: *Bob Smith died several months before John Foyster, in 2003. He discovered fandom in the 1950s, was an important figure of the Sydney scene during the 1960s, then gafiated after being one of the main organisers of Syncon II in 1972. In the last ten years his letters of comment have again graced the pages of fanzines throughout the world. The following is by no means the last letter of comment that he wrote:***]**

BOB SMITH
Bradbury NSW 2560

We can look at your look at biographies and autobiographies, and ask ourselves 'why?' Your bibliography, on the surface, seems reasonable, except that we have become familiar with an awful lot of SF writers over the years, and most of what we have read was pretty straightforward biographical material that did not influence our continued reading of that particular author. Unlike mainstream literature, it seems to have taken science fiction quite a while to reveal the naughty bits. But that seems to be the flavour of recent years, in many aspects of the media: revealing the unpleasant and tragic sides of Big Name lives. From the science fiction fan's point of view, perhaps it's a case of 'familiarity breeds . . .' We were familiar with our favourite SF writers via fanzines and brief biogs in anthologies, etc., and we happily referred to them on a first-name basis, or nickname. Would we plunge eagerly into the details of their lives? For the most part, we already knew their lives were little different from ours. Their names were, in the main, only famous in our genre. We all have our favourite biographies and autobiographies, and what a science fiction writer has to say seems tame by comparison. If you have grown up on a rich diet of prose writing about great people, then the likes of Pohl's 'memoirs' is almost boring (and I'm an SF fan), and Miller on Hubbard is fascinatingly readable for all the wrong reasons. Sure, biographies and autobiographies are Big Business, but wouldn't we rather leave our favourite SF writers with a modicum of mystery? I have no doubt the completist collectors amongst your readers will add a few more to your bibliography; didn't Grania Davis write about Avram Davidson, and Frederic Brown's wife ditto?

Steam Engine Time 3: I have a lurking suspicion that Greg Benford's tongue was firmly in his cheek when he wrote this piece about Shakespeare and SF, but it was entertaining. I hope that back in the 1960s the young Greg Benford put that academic in his place. Perhaps if he had come down a few pegs from Towering Genius, some interesting comparisons could have been made with science fiction; but old Will stands alone. Many who found SF fascinating over the years were happy to leave Shakespeare behind 'em at high school; ironically, nowadays a good film or TV adaptation of the Bard's work will attract more attention than any of the so-called SF nonsense that appears. I chuckled at the hoary chestnut of Edward Devere that Greg tossed in, particularly since his descendant is still making waves. I like the comparison with jazz (particularly if one has grown up with SF and jazz); but really, science fiction, whatever end of the time scale one discovered it, is what the individual makes it.

12 June 2002

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
PO Box 8093, Silver Spring, MD 20907, USA

Many thanks for *Steam Engine Time* Nos 2 and 3. I found Bruce Gillespie's article about biographies and autobiographies fascinating, since I collect these books. As a result, I found some errors, and several books that Bruce missed:

- The Judith Merril book, *Better to Have Loved*, is not a biography, but an autobiography that Merril did not finish by the time of her death in 1997. It was completed by Merril's granddaughter, Emily Pohl-Weary, from a partial manuscript and from tapes dictated by Merril.
- L. Sprague de Camp also published an autobiography, *Time and Chance* (Donald Grant, 1995), which won the Hugo.
- Russell Miller's biography of L. Ron Hubbard is *Bare-Faced*, not 'Barefaced', *Messiah*. My understanding of the lawsuit with the Scientologists is that the hardcover editions were allowed to be published in Britain and America while the paperbacks were blocked.
- SF interview collections include at least four volumes of *Science Fiction Voices* from Borgo Press, of which I believe one is by Darrell Schweitzer and three are by Jeffrey Elliot. Confusingly, Schweitzer has a different volume called *SF Voices* (T-K Graphics, 1976), which has earlier interviews. Paul Walker's *Speaking of Science Fiction* (Luna Publications, 1978) includes interviews conducted in the early 1970s for *Luna Monthly*. Larry McCaffery's *Across the Wounded Galaxies* (University of Illinois Press, 1990) is pompous and academic, but nonetheless has substantial interviews with Russ, Sterling, Benford and other writers. Last, Stan Nicholls's *Wordsmiths of Wonder* (Orion, 1993) has 50 interviews with SF, fantasy and horror writers, but fully half the interviews are with SF writers.
- Piers Anthony has followed *Bio of an Ogre* with a second volume of autobiography, *How Precious Was That While* (Tor, 2001).
- Keith Roberts' *Lemady* is a curious autobiography, since the framing device of the book is a dialogue between Roberts and one of his characters. This may be one reason why the first edition did not appear from a major publisher, but from Borgo Press in 1997.
- The author of the authorised biography of Arthur C. Clarke is Neil McAteer, not 'McAlfer'. I own this book but have not read it.

Perhaps Christopher Priest would be less bothered by Sturgeon's Law if it was inverted; instead of saying that 90 per cent of everything is bad, why not argue that 10 per cent of everything is excellent?

Priest is right about the best German and French SF authors not being translated into English. Perhaps an enthusiastic print-on-demand publisher would do the job. I could also see a small or medium-sized publisher issuing these writers as literary SF, with the first edition being a trade paperback. As for Priest thinking that Americans would find 'glamour' an 'eccentric' spelling — doesn't he know that one of the highest-circulation fashion magazines in the US is *Glamour*?

Gregory Benford has made the argument about SF being 'jazz' before, most notably in a preface to *Foundation's Fear*. But, of course, the next question is: what sort of jazz? Perhaps Benford likes the improvisational and free-wheeling nature of early jazz, but if the future of SF resembles that of jazz, SF is a genre in permanent decline, which it will only survive because of patronage. **[JS:** *Why does the next question have to be 'What sort of jazz?' My understanding was that the analogy between SF and jazz that Benford made was to include all forms of jazz (as science fiction includes many 'sub-genres'). And if you think the future of jazz is in jeopardy, what evidence do you have that supports your theory? I went to see Bela Fleck and the Flecktones this summer and, from what I heard there, at least one form of jazz is alive, well and living in the US. If you've never heard of Fleck, then you haven't been paying attention to jazz lately. As for the 'highly paid superstars' of jazz, you don't name them. Rock and pop generally have a handful or so of 'highly paid superstars' at any given time, and the rest are mid-range in popularity, climbing up or down the charts at any given time, so if the same is true for jazz, then it's nothing extraordinary. The only patronage jazz needs is listeners; the availability of music via the Web has made it possible for thousands of musicians to provide their music to potential listeners (regardless of their musical capability) in an inexpensive way, and often without a record company included. Niche marketing is now in its heyday; just look around the Web.***]**

13 June 2002

LLOYD & YVONNE PENNEY
1706-24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B2, Canada

Steam Engine Time 2:

Not only is there a need, there is a demand for a fanzine, or more fanzines, that actually discusses themes and ideas in SF. Fandom and the reading/watching public, all consumers of SF in its various forms, discuss all aspects of both written and visual works online. But, as I've said elsewhere, there are so many SF&F books available, and a dwindling number of literate readers, and the possibility that any group of readers has read the same book is fairly low. Nonetheless, that group is there, and they need to discuss those books, and possibly draw in those who haven't, and point them towards something good to read, or steer them away from something bad.

The review of John Kessel's book reminded me of some suspicions confirmed by a local pro author . . . watch for the promotional blurbs on a book's cover, and the more there are, or the more effusive they are, the greater the probability that the book's a stinker. The lack of these blurbs indicates a publisher's confidence in the quality of the book. I guess the more the praise given, the more the book needs it. **[JS:** *That still depends on the book and the publisher. It's not a general rule among all publishers, in my experience. Steven Barnes'* Lion's Blood *had some major endorsement blurbs, and I found them all to be quite accurate (and I loved the book).***]** I think when it comes to biographies and autobiographies, readers and proto-writers from decades past might have read those books to find out what steps the greats took to become great. Today, I find that many modern SF writers have little or no knowledge of those greats, or don't really care to know how Heinlein, Campbell and Asimov did it, and are content to carve their own way into the genre. **[JS:** *SF and publishing have changed a lot since their time; how much of their experience is still germane to writers today? Much of what writers learn about the technical aspects of writing are common to all fiction (characterisation, story line, setting, theme, etc.), and not specific to SF. Heinlein, Campbell and Asimov had the pulps to push their careers along, at first, then went primarily to books when the pulps died. Today's writers have the Web, which I find at least minimally analogous to the pulps, as it is a medium which often has no quality meter included.***]** Perhaps they believe that the greatness of those mentioned is magnified through the lens of time, and their own place in the SF pantheon will be similarly enhanced given enough time. Is there anything to learn in a biography or autobiography, or are they simply interesting and pleasant reads? Are they complements to fan histories, especially the Knight book on the Futurians? I tend to the pleasant read, myself, based on the few bios I've read, but I'd be happy to be proved wrong with some educational and informative books, like Jack Williamson's book. **[JS:** *Someone should be paying attention to this. It sounds like a great idea for an article.***]**

Emily Pohl-Weary has published and publicised her biography of Judith Merril through a signing promo tour, which has gone through Toronto several times now. I cannot speak of the success of the book, but it has been long awaited, especially by those in the Toronto community who had long-time involvement with Judith, and even those who really didn't like her all that much, of which there were more than several. One critic we all know said that Judith was respected and loved, but she wasn't all that likable.

In the letter column, Gene Stewart says that science fiction is moribund unless it can come up with new wonders to dazzle us. As SF continues under the management of new writers, its ability to dazzle us is more a function of our increasing age than any failure on SF's part. SF needs not only new wonders, but new readers who need dazzling, with, I hope, some of the dazzle that may have bounced off our thickening hides. When readers of any genre fail to get that same spark from their reading, they find something new to read. So, as some of our own numbers leave to reclaim the spark in another genre, say, suspense/mystery/detective fiction, as many of them do, I would hope that some who get tired of Clancy, Steele, Grisham and the like might see what we've been reading, and like it. **[JS:** *One of the things that sucks about getting older is that one has seen a lot already, and that makes it more difficult for an artistic work to 'dazzle,' as it's too easy to see influences and then pick the thing apart. I have to tell that part of my brain to shut up so I can enjoy the work, more often than I care to recall.***]**

You ask about articles detailing how I discovered a particular writer . . . I could write about how I discovered the work of Richard Matheson, but I did so through the media, Matheson's *Twilight Zone* screenplays, and then through the movie *Somewhere in Time*. It does get very literary as I try to find all of Matheson's books, and enjoy all his SF . . . Matheson's horror leaves me cold, as does most horror.

Anders Holstrom mentioned in the WAHF

column that issue 1 had 'Not even any frivolous illos to take the edge off'. Any complaints from him about the cartoon on page 31?

Steam Engine Time 3:
Congratulations to Ditmar on his Ditmar! Well deserved, and overdue, too.

I'm thinking that trying to find a modern Shakespeare in SF's writers is like trying to describe how sharp a knife is. Perhaps some are sharper than others, but for most, as long as it cuts, it's good. I don't know how constructive it is to try to crown a king or queen among our writers . . . there's always enough egoboo to go around, and credit to go to those who have given us that fleeting sensawunda.

Early in my SFnal career, I read a lot of John Wyndham . . . *Chocky*, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *The Kraken Awakes*, *The Chrysalids*, *The Day of the Triffids*, more. At the time, I found Wyndham one of the few British authors I could read and enjoy. About a year ago, I had a job interview with an insurance company who also owned and operated a magazine for the insurance industry. The man who interviewed me was named John Wyndham. We had the interview, and then we talked for the rest of the hour on his namesake's fiction, with which he was well acquainted. I didn't get the job. I'm sure Mr Wyndham and I would have been too busy talking to get much done.

There's so much that I've read that has been discussed in these pages that I simply can't comment further on. And of course, there's so much I've yet to read. I have a nagging fear that as the field continues to grow in size, we'll be less able to discuss any given book or short story because there is so much to read. We'll have to further specialise in a particular subgenre or author or theme of writing, and the balkanisation of SF fans and readers will continue. (Worth discussing? Maybe we should.) **[JS:** *Yes, let's. You first.***]**

18 June 2002

ULRICH SPIEGEL
Huelsenpfad 8, 51491 Overath, Germany

Does science fiction need a Shakespeare? Is there a best science fiction writer?

First, the bard was a playwright, so he appealed to which muse? Drama was his genre, as was poetry, whereas the candidates in the science fiction area are mainly novelists or short story writers.

Was Shakespeare generally accepted by his contemporaries? I think he was seen as an entertaining author, but it was idealising professors and the Stratford industry that made him into *the* bard. I am a long-time member of the Deutsche Shakespeare Gesellschaft, so I rate Shakespeare over 90 per cent of all written literature, including our own Goethe and Schiller. However, Shakespeare's talent was absorbing various literary sources and combining them with everyday life in Elizabethan and Jacobean England, adding a vast amount of insight into the human psyche, plus a variety and dexterity of language never later paralleled, and presenting this blend as only a great author is allowed to do: he never dared bore his audience.

Gregory Benford is right in insisting that SF started at the top with H. G. Wells, who created the archetypal SF plots: alien invasion, the trip to another planet, the mad scientist, etc. But was Wells a Shakespeare? Rather not, as he lacked the verbal skill of the Bard.

On the Continent, Jules Verne created world-stretching *voyages extraordinaires*, but did he have any language skills? Did he use characterisation? *Jamais*.

As a Middle European reader of SF I understand that German authors are mainly left out of the general discussion because of the language barrier. Who else but Kurd Lasswitz was ever translated? Have you or your readers heard of Herbert W. Franke, Gisbert, Haefs, Marcus Hammerschmitt, to name a few of the better German authors?

There are also such outstanding East European writers as Stanislaw Lem and Arkadi and Boris Strugatski (who wrote *Roadside Picnic*, my alltime favourite SF novel).

I would not compare Lem to Shakespeare, but the author of *Solaris* and *The Futurological Congress* and *The Star Diaries* and a large number of essays could be ranked with the likes of Ursula Le Guin or George Turner. Unfortunately, Lem disqualified himself in later years by producing suboptimal books like *Fiasco* or self-pitying essays in which he claims to have been the apostle of cyberspace.

The whole debate is rather futile. As Russell Blackford suggests, if a book is well written and puts forth brilliant insights into human progress, critics will not regard it as SF. Who is the most influential SF writer? Wait 200 years to find out.

19 June 2002

FRANZ ROTTENSTEINER
Marchettigasse 9/17, A-1060 Wien, Austria

Shortly after the sad news on John Foyster I received the latest issues of your fanzine *Steam Engine Time*, and I always wonder anew how you manage to put out such interesting publications that, without any pretensions, manage to maintain a high level and to be entertaining at the same time. I was especially pleased to see Dave Langford's perceptive review of Kubin's *The Other Side*, and Christopher Priest's remarks on the German writers Andreas Eschbach and Marcus Hammerschmitt. There have always been a number of European SF and fantasy writers highly regarded in their own countries (at least by the fans), and even some that were huge bestsellers. But that had very little effect on foreign markets, and I cannot see any change here; and if there is any, it is to the worse.

There is little exchange in SF between European countries, even between closely related languages, such as Italian and French, or French and Spanish; the only current exception seems to be Polish and Czech, at least from Polish to Czech, since a number of Polish writers (above all the fantasy humorist Andrzej Sapkowski) seem to be hugely popular in the Czech Republic. But compared to the number of translations from English, these do not matter at all. And into English it doesn't work at all, except perhaps for some private contacts and small publishers. There is the case of Wolfgang Hohlbein, a guaranteed bestseller in Germany, with some 16 million copies in print. He had one fantasy novel translated into English at his own expense, *Das Druidentor*, in Germany a bestseller and the bestselling title in its quarter in the Bertelsmann Book Clubs, but nevertheless nobody was interested. Donald Wollheim published a number of translations as a hobby. Michael Kandel was supposed to do a translation of Marek S. Huberath's *The Nest of Worlds* for Harcourt Brace, but that was a couple of years ago and the novel still hasn't appeared. I read somewhere that Eschbach's *Der Haarteppichknopfer* would appear in English, but I do not know where; but at least in France Eschbach and Kai Meyer, another of the young successful writers, appear to do very well.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, no SF works of the highest quality appeared that couldn't have been published in Soviet times, and the general run of SF there seems to be very low, with many US books being best-sellers there that nobody has heard of here. The Strugatskys are still by far the best Russian SF writers, with nobody else even coming close. The book markets in Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary are full of American bestsellers, all the trite stuff that the readers missed out on during Communist times, and while many excellent books get published too, their sales figures are usually minuscule.

20 June 2002

ANDREW WEINER
26 Summerhill Gardens, Toronto ON M4T 1B4, Canada

The Shakespeare of SF: that would have to be Philip K. Dick, wouldn't it? Although based not so much on what he actually wrote (it's hard to imagine widespread quoting of Dick's phrases and sayings) as his impact on the culture. Just before reading Benford's piece, I saw a trailer for a new-to-video SF flick — as soon as I saw the aircars, I knew it had to be Dick, and it was, the much-panned *Impostor*. **[JS:** *Just goes to show it's all a matter of taste – I kinda liked that movie.***]** Dick's vocabulary of the future — androids, aircars, wallscreens — has become synonymous with masscult sci-fi.

I remember seeing a British TV adaptation of *Impostor* around 1962, before I was really aware of Dick's work. No aircars, but quite engrossing, with what seemed a rather audacious resolution back then, but would surely be an inadequate payoff to a full-length movie now. Too bad Kubrick never got his hands on 'The Electric Ant'.

14 August 2002

KIM HUETT
Flat 29, 63 Pearson Street, Holder ACT 2611

As somebody who has long enjoyed a well-written biography (most of the folk I've been interested in weren't the sort to sit down and write about themselves) I can empathise with your disappointment that so few have been written about or by SF authors.

This is doubly disappointing, given that I have read *Hell's Cartographers* from cover to cover several times over the years and enjoyed the various histories. Not evenly, though I must admit that Robert Silverberg's story enthrals me head and shoulders above all others for reasons I can't clearly pin down. I only know his is the only piece that makes me want to lay down the

book and start writing myself.

On a more positive note, at least we have, in addition to the more usual resources or private papers and surviving friends and relatives, fanzines. A careful search will turn up something by or about just about any author you care to mention. **[JS:** *The nonfiction book* Meet Me At Infinity *did a good job of collecting Tiptree's articles in magazines and fanzines, as well as unpublished writings. I found it a very useful and insight-provoking read.***]** With other, higher profile writers I wouldn't be surprised if at least a career outline and some insight into them could be divined by what's been written in fanzines. Of course, to make use of it somebody would need to search those fanzines.

How right are you about the unobtainability of the Hubbard biography? I have a copy here that you may have if you're at all interested. More importantly, I know the nearest branch of the ACT Library has a copy, because the bugger leers at me every time I walk down the biography isle. Scientologists worldwide may well have bought a lot of copies but I suspect they fell well short of their objective. Buying up all the copies after all would be a project that requires years of searching to scoop up all the secondhand copies. Actually if I were the publisher I'd be thrilled to learn the Scientologists were planning to do this. I could put out two editions and offer one for them to buy while sneaking the other out the back for everybody else. I just know they would fall for this trick since the only Scientologist who understood capitalism was Elron himself.

I see in the latest issue that Greg Benford likes the idea of naming Stanley Kubrick as the Shakespeare of science fiction. The proposition fails to move me, on the basis that films are so long and you have to sit there and watch them all the way through to properly appreciate the story. Clearly an inferior medium to books, which I can read in small amounts, at times and in places that suit me. **[JS:** *Now that there are VHS and DVD players, one can do the same with them as one does with a book, so this isn't as much of a problem as it used to be.***]** But then, the twentieth century was a time of resurgent fascism, so a fascist medium like film was an appropriate art form. If we really must consider other media beside books then my vote would go to Outline's classic 1981 single, 'The Cicada that Ate Fivedock'. A classic SF story set to three minutes of snappy pop rhythms perfect for bouncing along to. Let's see you do that to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. **[JS:** *Well, I could do that to Space Oddity (David Bowie), especially with the title song; it's a bit slow, but still dance-able. I'd give it a 75. 'Return of the Giant Hogweed' by Genesis (the version with Peter Gabriel) also fits this slot.***]**

29 August 2002

CY CHAUVIN
14248 Wilfred, Detroit MI 48213, USA

Your article about SF autobiographies and biographies is interesting. In some ways, it's interesting to see you writing the article, because in the early days of *SFC* you used to take the point of view, I thought, that one should judge the fiction as fiction alone, and not be influenced by the circumstances of its writing or the author. And then Franz Rottensteiner made the comment that the best SF critics were in Australia, because they were furthest removed from the influence of the authors. (I think he was right.) **[BRG:** *In my better moments, Cy, I probably still agree with you. On the one hand, I realise that becoming friendly with the overseas authors and editors over the last thirty years has corrupted the Australian critical scene completely. On the other hand, getting to know something of the lives of some writers – preferably dead writers you're never likely to meet over a dinner table at SF conventions – can tell you a lot about their work. Crossley's biography of Stapledon had that effect on me. Sutin's biography of Dick is a constant source of valuable insights about PKD. Knight's book about the Futurians illuminates an entire era in a way no other book does. These are hardly exercises in hagiography, unlike (say) most Locus author interviews.***]**

I see the Judith Merril autobiography–biography has just been published. But Doris Lessing has also published a three-volume autobiography, and it seems to me that, while she has obviously written much else besides science fiction, she must be included. Besides her five 'space' novels, there are *The Memoirs of A Survivor*, *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell* and the last section of *The Four Gated City*, which is set in the future. (This is much more science fiction than Merril wrote.) And *The Four Gated City* also has Lessing's description of her visit to a One Tun meeting in London in the 1950s, which she also writes about in her autobiography.

I also recently completed reading *The Invisible Man: The Life and Liberties Of H. G. Wells* by Michael Corain. The author stated in his introduction that he had admired Wells, before he began the research on this biography, and then found many things that had been neglected in previous biographies. Some of the emphasis is on the numerous affairs he had (all while he lived with his wife — although forcing his wife to change her first name upon their marriage somehow seems even more odious) but quotations of various racist and anti-Semitic remarks in Wells' first non-fiction book seems even worse. The book describes Wells' vision of the future (I believe it's called *A Modern Utopia*), and seems so reactionary after his evolution of mankind in *The Time Machine*. But perhaps not. (I reread *The Time Machine* and *The War in the Air* after reading the Wells biography, and while I still enjoyed them, there are so many comic book ideas in them: eating human flesh, all the tentacles — even in the wonderful scenes on the beach in *The Time Machine* at the earth's end. And the time traveller doesn't seem to mind too much leaving Weena behind; she simply disappears: I don't think he returns for her. Perhaps this is a result of Wells' attitude toward women.)

I tried to read *Arslan* after reading your review (I already had the book from the W3F collection) but quite quickly found it becoming too sadistic/violent for my taste; not that you didn't warn us. (Perhaps I thought the writing would be too exquisite to resist.) **[BRG:** *It's the old problem, isn't it? A book may tell of violent events, but the writing itself is not violent.* Arslan*, rather, is one of SF's few essays in complex and sinuous irony.***]**

Kev McVeigh's article on *The Chrysalids* captured the fond boyhood memory I have of that better than the novel itself did when I reread it and subsequently wrote him a letter about it for *Vector*. I don't wish to diminish anyone's opinion of *The Chrysalids*. I only wish I could evoke again the wonderful pleasure and visions I had when first reading and re-reading and re-reading that book so long ago. It's just so amazing what one finds when re-reading books: I never noticed the wonderful period charm of *The War Of The Worlds* before. That never meant anything to me as a teenager.

13 February 2003

MATS LINDER
Gustav Adolfs vag 7B, S-761 40 Norrtalje, Sweden

Elaine Cochrane's appreciation of R. A. Lafferty I hope will draw more well-deserved attention to this mad genius whose work is like none other but, it seems, is nowadays very difficult to come by. I was lucky to start collecting him in time, many years ago.

It is always fun to read other people's lists of favourite works in one aspect or another. Inspired by the 'Essentials' lists, I started thinking and came up with another such aspect which I have not seen implemented before . . . Among all the books I have read there are many which I consider great but there are only some of them — indeed not very many — which I would really, really want to re-read. (For instance, I want to re-read *Crime and Punishment* but not *The Idiot*; in this case, as in many others, it is quite difficult to pin down the reasons why I remember reading the one with such enjoyment and fascination but not the other — although perhaps finding it just as 'good'; whatever that means.)

Here, then, in no particular order, is a list of SF and fantasy novels that may not be among the 'best' or 'most important' ones that I have read — but that I am looking forward to reading again. (And which in some cases may turn out to be a disappointment . . .)

- *High-Rise* (J. G. Ballard). Will not disappoint me; I've read it twice already. A fascinating counterpart to *Lord of the Flies*, but this time with adults; riveting and disquieting (just read the first paragraph!)
- *Echo Round His Bones* and *Mankind Under the Leash* (Thomas M. Disch). The only thing I really remember about these books is that I found them very interesting. And well-written, of course.
- *The Owl Service* (Alan Garner). Such a beautiful, sad and moving little book!
- *Skallagrigg* (William Horwood). Bought on a whim many years ago; proved to be an original and gripping story about people affected by cerebral palsy; contains a slight fantasy element, and why it is not more renowned in the SF/fantasy world I'll never understand.
- *Hard to Be a God* and *The Second Martian Invasion* (A. and B. Strugatsky). Masterpieces by the masters of stories with a moral content (but without a boring moment); will keep you thinking for a long time afterwards.
- *Some of Your Blood* (Theodore Sturgeon). Remember very little of it apart from how

very good I thought it was.

- *Pillar of the Sky* (Cecelia Holland). Another underrated masterpiece; one of the best stories about political power (although set in Stonehenge times) I have ever read. **[JS:** *I enjoyed this one a lot too.***]**
- *The Man in the Maze* (Robert Silverberg). A 'minor' work from his golden age, probably, but such an original story!
- *Untouched by Human Hands*, *Citizen in Space*, *Pilgrimage to Earth*, *Notions: Unlimited*, *Store of Infinity* and *Shards of Space* (Robert Sheckley). Short stories than which almost nothing is more fun to read.
- *Gloriana* (Michael Moorcock). Simply marvellous; this is what 'historically inspired' fantasy is all about but what so many other writers have botched. **[JS:** *This treatment of Elisabeth I made her sound too ditzy for my taste; I suspect I never understood what Moorcock was trying to do in this novel.***]**
- *Nature's End* (Whitley Strieber and James Kunetka). I have a soft spot for environmental-disaster stories; this is one of the best. (Two other fine ones — Wylie's *The End of the Dream* and Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* — I have already re-read enough.) **[JS:** *I still have my copy of the Strieber and Kunetka, even after the former's rather embarrassing venture into 'true life' books with his alien-abduction tales. These days, the events in NE seem even more likely. Maybe it's time someone wrote about it?***]**
- *The Prometheus Crisis* (Thomas N. Scortia and Frank M. Robinson). Another disaster novel; this time about nuclear power. Very realistic and insightful, as I remember it.
- *Last and First Men* (Olaf Stapledon). How could I not include it?
- *The Once and Future King* (T. H. White). Such a masterful combination of fairy tale and real people, anachronisms and realism (at least so it seemed to me). Will never stop moving me.
- *Dune* (Frank Herbert). I would like to see if it is still as exciting as when I first read it more than 30 years ago.
- *1984* (George Orwell). Such good writing; such an interesting story.
- *Castle Crispin* (Allen Andrews). A moving, adult sequel to the more YA-oriented (but still fine) *The Pig Plantagenet*. Why is it not better known?
- *The Food of the Gods* and *The Island of Dr Moreau* (H. G. Wells). I have already re-read *The Time Machine* and *The First Men in the Moon*.
- The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (J. R. R. Tolkien). Have not read it in 30 years — will I still enjoy it as much?
- *Glimpses* (Lewis Shiner). A fascinating story in particular for those of us who were young at the time of Hendrix, Doors, Beatles and Beach Boys, by yet another underrated fine SF writer.
- *Jack of Shadows* (Roger Zelazny). Great fun 25 years ago . . .
- *Zodiac* (Neal Stephenson). Another story about environmental problems, written with such vitality and humour as to make it still my Stephenson favourite, even above *Snow Crash*.

ERIKA MARIA LACEY BARRANTES
(current address uncertain; somewhere in Queensland)

Reading about books I've already read is interesting enough; I've managed to get my hands on a copy of *Corrupting Dr Nice*, long before I received *Steam Engine Time*. (Long ago now!) I do remember it, which is a lot more than I can say about most of what I consume. That's a good sign. I could see how it was meant to be funny, but didn't think it much so — I kept griping about the stupidity of the woman running around Dr Nice and falling in love with him.

Maybe the reason for why there aren't many autobiographies or biographies of SF writers is that they're being written about in fanzines or have done so themselves. People have 'when I met so-and-so' or 'the time Harlan nearly shot me' . . . wait, that last one did get written. Fans can also talk to longer-established fans who've met up with these folk and get to hear anecdotes about what Writer X did when certain things happened. Just my theory on this.

I laugh at the description, 'I stickytaped a portable brown-paper cover which I used to cover my paperback books' — the only books I ever wanted to do that to were the Mills & Boon I used to read as a teenager. I kept being hyper-aware on the trains I was reading them and didn't want others to know. Not an unusual reaction, if the advertisements in the back of the books were anything to go by: they sold plastic covers with a discreet Mills & Boon logo down one end 'for your privacy'. In the end I said sod it, I want to read this and anyone who objects can just stick it up their nose. Now I spend my time trainspotting science fiction readers instead.

Perhaps the reason for why there are few autobiographies is that people don't want to speak about their lives, or they're not quite interesting enough. I think that one for Tiptree would be quite excellent, actually, and there's apparently one written by Tiptree's mother . . . which I haven't thought about in ages and ought to make an attempt to find. I love having access to feminist science fiction fans. Find out all kinds of fascinating things.

I love reading about people's lives. I'd be interested in the more fascinating people. I find unfortunate, however, that a lot of people feel that to write about themselves means to begin with 'I found fandom when I was 10, buying science fiction magazines', etc etc. I long for a different start to that story. Horror of horrors, I find myself skipping the beginning of those articles when I see them in fanzines these days, going to the second or third page (if they're that long). **[BRG:** *But that's how we all started, except for the small number of fans whose parents read and collected SF. It was the thrill of first discovery, first of the books and then of each other, that made us into SF fans.***]**

Erickson saying he'd never become a famous author was something I found rather refreshing. It reminds me of an acquaintance of mine who's been writing for about as long as I've known her. I guess one would call it an epic fantasy novel. I suppose. She's never read a bit of fantasy in her life, and possibly, quite possibly, it's the worst piece of fiction ever written. I don't feel as bad about any of the fiction published I do read as such. Unfortunately I became the person she'd shove every new 'chapter 99, because I haven't decided where to put it yet' my way, although they always were blessedly short.

I think that 'Call Me Dumbo' is a brilliant story, one I'll be remembering for a long time. I read that in my early university years, too, and so I'm all the more impressed I remember it. I think that perhaps the reason why I edged away from doing English at university was the preponderance of Dead Old Men in the literature they were making people read. I had a look at the required readings list . . . and was promptly scared away. The sole 'science fiction' subject was no better; they made people read Stephen Lawhead's *Song of Albion* trilogy. Not the best of things to read, especially not when the tutor was known to have chosen it because of liking Celtic imagery.

Kincaid's information about history . . . never knew most of that. Just don't read enough about history, I guess, sticking too much to social history and social commentary than anything else. If the First or Second World Wars hadn't happened . . . I wonder how we would be today, technologically and medically speaking. If nothing else the wars did a lot to spur people into doing all kinds of things and contributed immensely towards rights of women and those of non-white ethnicities in the first world countries. Now that I'd be curious about.

I've never thought of Sturgeon's Law, as Christopher Priest mentions it, that 90 per cent of everything can't be crud, like with sunsets. What a marvellously uplifting thing to say. So positive. Really, one person's crud is another's treasure. I've been shown this time and again, working in an art gallery. If I had a tenner, as Priest puts it, for every time I heard someone say 'my three-year-old could do better', I'd be with a rather fat wallet. Actually, I would dearly love to put up a sign on the front desk saying 'I charge to hear about how your child/grandchild could do better than this art, or what you consider to be real art'.

On to *Steam Engine Time* 3:

The Shakespeare of science fiction. I don't think there can be any such thing. There can be such of movements — choose one's movement, point at a writer, a number of writers. I am hardly a historian, but I think the phenomenon of Shakespeare is something unduplicable, due to social atmosphere and historical antecedents. At Shakespeare's time, were there as many writers as there were in the 1920s of science fiction, for example? Or of people since then? I don't think so. Shakespeare could become what he was because his plays were performed and have still been performed since then. He could be the influence he was because not only did he write, they were shown, and they could be seen *and* read. You can't exactly say that of science fiction, not if you're trying to point at someone of that same influence. Science fiction has had a lot of people contribute to it. When it comes to movements, then yes. One could say that William Gibson's the Shakespeare of cyberpunk, for example — just about everyone's heard of him. He's been quoted as influence for

movies, books, music, you name it. The whole question of a science-fictional Shakespeare is completely inappropriate. It's very different. There's no *need* for one, for science fiction is such a hard thing to really point at sometimes. I like the idea of people who are influences on movements instead, despite not thinking that there's much of a movement going on at the moment.

Science fiction of the day is television and film. Most of the fans I know, people who are quite *into* things, are into the medium — they can watch an episode of a TV show every week, taking up to 24 hours to find out what happens in their favourite show (or, an hour a week.) Films? How about people who design science fictional games? I don't have any idea about this, because it's not my thing, but I've friends who get twitches at the mere thought of getting their hands on the next game from their favourite game designer.

I'll always think that *Babylon 5* was absolutely clever with the story arc across the seasons, and that was a movement in the science fiction genre, where it was once episodic (and a lot, unfortunately, still are).

Reading *The Chrysalids* was a requirement at high school, along with the barrage of texts like Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow* (an Australian time travel novel!) and a bunch of classics best forgotten. (*Wuthering Heights* as a romance? I wanted to strangle everyone for being a bunch of twits, Cathy running around killing herself out of spite and Heathcliff being an absolute arse? Sheesh. So then I'd go to the library and get a bunch of Mills & Boon instead.)

For the first time, I didn't mind going through a book and dissecting it. I loved doing that for *The Chrysalids* — a couple of the assignments I had to write are up on my website, actually, for all that they reflect my mental age of the time. One of the things we had to do was make our own cover for the book. I drew a picture of a nuclear bomb cloud and had under it the words: 'the devil is the father of deviation'. I was all of 14 when this was happening, and by the end of high school I'd moved on enough that I had read more (and so ended up in psychology, damn it). Just recently I had the opportunity to pick up a bunch of Wyndham books very cheaply, and was especially excited about *The Chrysalids*. I had to work with that book for something like a month of my life. I haven't expended so much energy in something I liked since. I wonder how the book would hold up to being read now, nearly ten years later. A number of those I read fifteen years ago no longer hold up (Tolkien is an example of this).

10 August 2003

CLAIRE BRIALEY
14 Northway Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 6JE, UK

[*A review of* SET *3 from Claire's personal fanzine* No Sin But Ignorance *46, April 2004, but it looks like a loc to us:*]

Greg Benford wrote an article about science fiction . . . his central interesting idea was to try to identify whether SF has yet had, or in fact needs, its Shakespeare, although, perversely, I found that its greatest interest lay in Benford's definition of his terms. He defined Shakespeare early on as 'a towering figure who could take the form to its heights, never to be equalled', and supplemented this with the thought that 'Shakespeare came to the young English stage and made it grow up'. On several occasions, he identified Shakespeare's primary challenge to would-be imitators as his 'range'. Against these criteria, Benford found all writers somehow lacking, but suggested that the director Stanley Kubrick might have embodied more of the qualities he was looking for.

I wonder if the task would have been easier if instead he had looked for a science-fictional Shakespeare against different criteria: rather than an icon, the embodiment of a canon, what if he looked for someone who was writing at a time when the genre was the most popular it had ever been (or, perhaps, ever would be again), who was as notable for the length of their career and for the number of works produced and preserved as for their quality and diversity — and indeed who was often equalled in terms of plot, characterisation and sheer poetry by a number of his contemporaries whose output was simply not as prolific? Someone whose work was derivative, in plot terms at least, and often rested on audience familiarity with his basic story in order to do something different with it? Someone whose jokes have often not survived either the cultural shift in standards of humour or simpler shifts in colloquial language? Someone who was, above all, popular and whose work played to all elements of the crowd in a way which can seem variously exquisitely balanced, economically astute, or disappointingly disjointed?

No, of course it wouldn't. But it might have widened the field. It might have opened the way for more of the writers who started in pulp fiction. It might have included (with no detriment intended by association) Brian Stableford or Michael Moorcock or Iain Banks or Harry Turtledove, or even Anne McCaffrey or Piers Anthony. And it might have ended with the near-outsider, in several senses, Terry Pratchett. Like Shakespeare, Pratchett is a prolific author who uses often familiar plots and scenarios (including Shakespeare) in new ways, who is widely popular, who creates enduring characters, who has a very distinctive turn of phrase, and who — even though he may not be the greatest or more critically regarded author of his time — is likely to be remembered, due not least to the wide number of texts in circulation, the almost universal contemporary appeal, and the ready availability of copies of the text. I think there's a more than superficial resemblance.

Definitions can be distracting. Benford himself mentioned in passing the speculation that the works of 'Shakespeare' were written by the Earl of Oxford, thereby cracking open the can to let slip one worm but hoping to leave the others wiggling in the darkness. By introducing to the argument all the other candidates beloved of conspiracy theorists — Francis Bacon, Elizabeth I, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe (in which case, as Woody Allen mused, 'If Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's works, who wrote Marlowe's?') — it could be a fascinating game not only to choose a Shakespeare front-man figure in SF but to attempt to establish his *eminence gris* as well. In such an openly pseudonymous field it seems quite tempting. John Russell Fearn, perhaps? Lionel Fanthorpe? No, it really is all too distracting: far too far not only from Benford's respectful definition but even from my alternatives.

It will come as no surprise to those readers who know my tastes that what I'd personally like to look for is SF's Marlowe. And, preferably to stretch a point and find one that won't die with too much potential unrealised this time.

In the same issue of *SET*, Russell Blackford took a different tack — as no doubt the editors intended — picking up Greg Benford's Kubrick proposition in order to ponder whether it is in fact cinema which has produced 'the towering works of the genre'. Having selected and developed this hypothesis, Blackford went on to demolish it by demonstrating that the dominance of big budget movies with an SF flavour in the mainstream of popular culture is built on their popularity in the youth market. SF-like movies are kids' stuff, and thus clearly not comparable to Shakespeare.

This approached a parody of the dismissal of all forms of SF — most damaging for novels — by the critical mainstream: the attitude, in fact, which Benford described when he noted that 'SF has become the pre-eminent genre' but that it is still 'excluded from serious consideration'. I found more cause and effect in these statements than may have been intended. Blackford went on to claim that the degraded image of SF in public perception is quite understandable, which I suppose it is if you're willing to consider mass market mainstream movies to be the core of SF. For all that Blackford ultimately rejected the idea that the majority of SF's masterpieces lie in the cinema, his arguments overall seemed to run on rails from which he seemed surprised the steam engine couldn't break free and still keep moving freely. He also examined the development of the English poetic tradition, subsequently claiming that he could not find the equal of its great figures within the SF field: a proposition which surely leads the witness to agree that no, the great innovative, memorable, thought-provoking writers of science fiction in the late twentieth century are not immediately comparable to Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Yeats *et al*. Yet what we have from all these canonical figures is distance, building on decades or even centuries of critical acceptance and academic authority; read what the intellectuals of the day or their own contemporaries within the field said when their work was unblessed by the canon and there'll be at least as much criticism — especially for anyone who has received popular success — as credit.

Yet when you examine SF novels it's often clear that they are part of the same literary tradition: the most immediate and overt example to hand is Damien Broderick's latest novel *Transcension*, which in its culminating vision of the transcendence of human consciousness sees the characters expressing their experience through apposite paraphrasing of Milton, Dante and the like. And no, this won't get the popular success of the latest film or tie-in or novelisation; nor will it get the critical acclaim that it should because it's SF.

So how can we assess our own great figures?

Russell Blackford acknowledged in his *SET* piece that if any of the key figures in recent SF are the equal of the literary greats of the past it is not yet obvious. And in concluding that SF's great works are more like the product of a jazz band than a classical symphony, Greg Benford argued that 'New Orleans never needed a Shakespeare'. To me, the strength of contemporary SF is a cumulative one, in much the same way that I consider Shakespeare's greatest value to be as a major contributor to the vibrancy of the wider fields of Elizabethan poetry and Jacobean drama. There may be no towering individuals that we can see from here; but perhaps that's not only because we're too close to see but also because so many SF authors could loom so high.

(*No Sin But Ignorance*, No 46, April 2004, pp. 11–12)

We Also Heard From:

Michael Waite, who located and sent a copy of H. G. Wells's *An Experiment in Autobiography*; **Damien Broderick** ('Have you read Swanwick's *Jack Faust*? Interesting; not as clever or well written as he thinks, but nifty in its way, and with more than one quite dazzling setpiece, not least the delicious explanation for Mephistopheles' name. (Faust kickstarts the Industrial Revolution in 1500; horrors inevitably ensue.)'; **Ian Sales** ('Greg Benford asks if science fiction has a Shakespeare. Well . . . yes. Peter F. Hamilton. And yes, I am prepared to defend that choice :-) I have my argument all worked out . . .)'; **Sandra Bond** also picked up Arthur Clarke's misquotation of Hilaire Belloc's 'Lord Lundy'; and confesses that 'sercon fanzines usually defeat me when it comes to loccing because I read so little SF nowadays'; **Lee Harding**, **Robert Day**, **Dwain Kaiser**, **Terence Green**, **Greg Pickersgill** ('Your fanzines and *SET* definitely reawaken my interest in fanzines; they all *about* something for a start, about books and music that either I know or might have an interest in or otherwise be simply engaged in reading people's opinions thereof'); **Sydney J. Bounds** ('An SF Shakespeare? Wells must be the obvious nominee. I can't imagine anyone coming along now and taking over from him . . . The photo of John Wyndham reminds me of evenings at the White Horse where John, Sam Youd and others were busy solving the world's problems'); **Toni Weisskopf** ('Recently published is a neat book by E. Hoffman Price, *The Book of the Dead*, which contains short bios of other pulp writers'); **Willam M. Breiding**; and **Frank Weissenborn**.

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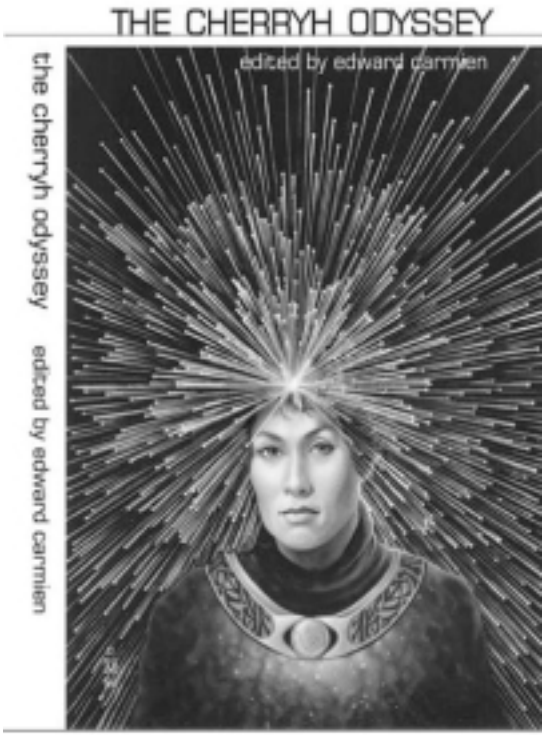

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