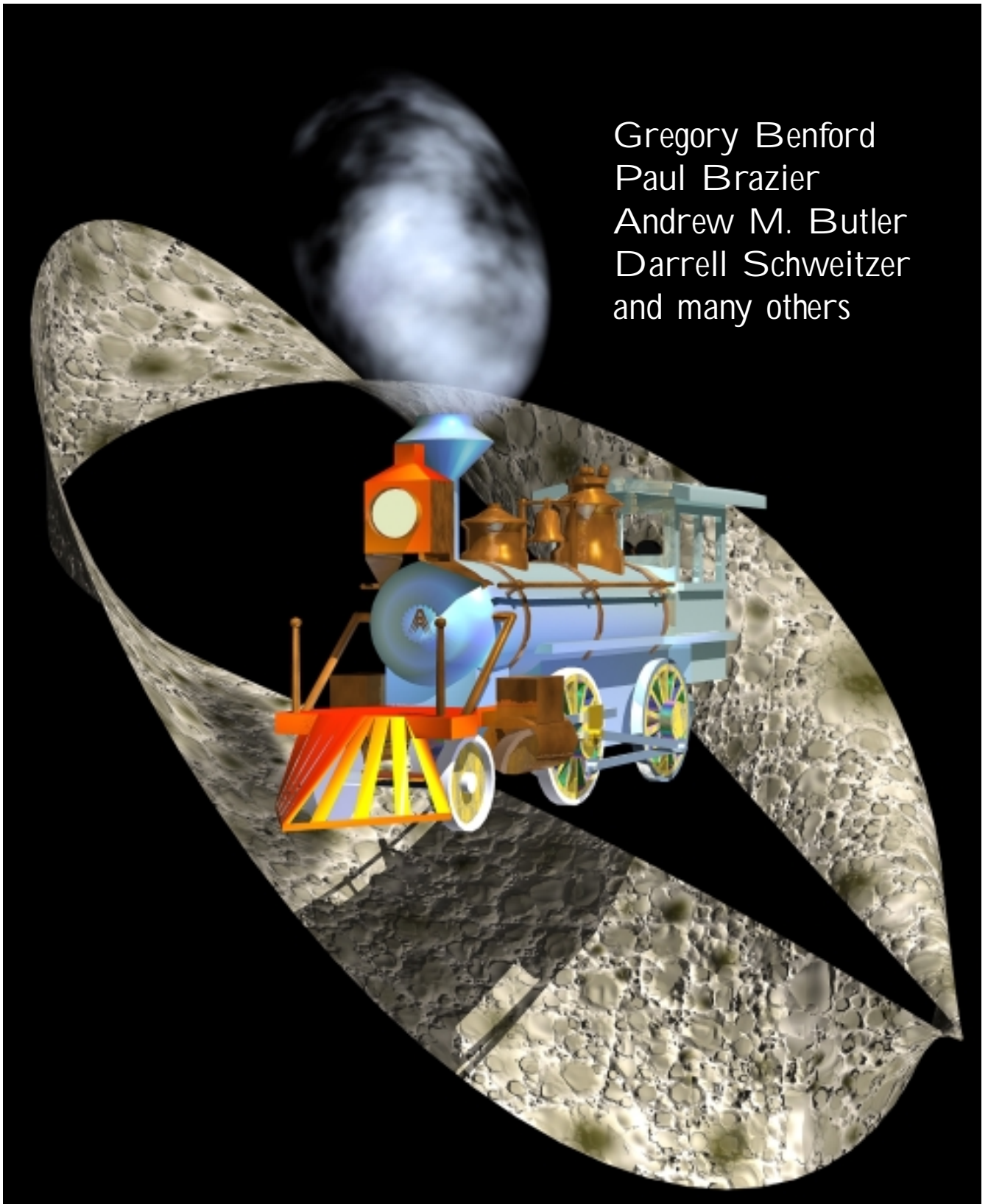


Steam Engine Time

Gregory Benford
Paul Brazier
Andrew M. Butler
Darrell Schweitzer
and many others



Issue 4

January 2005

Steam Engine Time 4

STEAM ENGINE TIME No. 4, January 2005

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Ditmar (Dick Jenssen) (front and back covers).

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Covers of various books and magazines discussed in this issue; plus photos of (p. 7) Darrell Schweitzer (unknown) and John Baxter (Dick Jenssen); (p. 8) Lee Harding, John Baxter and Mervyn Binns (Helena Binns); (p. 15) Andrew M. Butler (Paul Billinger).

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Mats Linder
Erika Maria Lacey Barrantes
Claire Brialey
and others</p> |
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Welcome to our new co-editor: Janine Stinson.
See her self-introduction on page 3.

Editorial 1:

Unlikely resurrections

I (**Bruce Gillespie**) thought *Steam Engine Time* had died when British co-editors **Maureen Kincaid Speller** and **Paul Kincaid** lost interest a year or so ago. Paul, as production editor, was a hard act to follow, and I was too busy with my other projects to try emulating his meticulous publishing style.

Early in 2004, **Janine Stinson** sent me an email offering to help revive *Steam Engine Time*. I knew little about her except that she was the affable editor of the small, regular fanzine *Peregrine Nations*. I wasn't even sure I was cut out to be a co-editor. Let Janine tell the story:

'I've been reading SF since seventh grade, when I found André Norton's *Moon of Three Rings* in my school library. That was back in the Jurassic, mind. I graduated from Western Michigan University in 1979 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. I've been a newspaper reporter and editor (arts and copy), a soldier (signals intelligence analyst), a thrift-shop item cleaner, a moving and storage company clerk, and a Baskin & Robbins ice-cream shop server.

'I've lived in a variety of places, most recently in the Florida Keys for over a decade, and had to leave the hard way — I was widowed in January 2003. My son and I now live in my heart's country in northern Michigan, where I write for publications such as the *New York Review*

of *Science Fiction*, the *Internet Review of Science Fiction*, and *Strange Horizons*. I approached Bruce Gillespie with the idea of reviving *Steam Engine Time* because, very simply, I missed getting and reading it and felt there weren't enough avenues available for the sercon variety of material I prefer to read.'

This new incarnation of *Steam Engine Time* doesn't look the same as the three issues assembled by Paul and Maureen. Paul gained some wonderful layout effects in Microsoft Publisher; so far I haven't worked how to emulate them in Ventura. Jan and I will find our own style.

Subscribers and others who receive the print edition: I had a financial crisis at the beginning of 2004. I announced my fanzines would go 'all-electronic': that is, be published in .PDF format on Bill Burns' wonderful efanazines.com website.

Readers objected. They wanted the print versions of *SF Commentary* and my other fanzines. They sent money. That also led to our commitment to publishing a print edition of *Steam Engine Time*. The very first edition, however, will appear on efanazines.com as a .PDF.

I've asked Paul Kincaid five times if he has any list of Americans, Britons or Europeans who subscribed to *Steam Engine Time*, and haven't received an answer. I have a list of the people who

subscribed through me, and will do my best to honour those subscriptions. I have no idea what to do about the subscribers whose names I don't have. All I can do is appeal through the email lists for them to get in touch. Otherwise, I will have to guess (from the *SET* correspondence lists) the people who took most interest in the first three issues of *SET*. Apologies in advance to interested readers who miss out.

Reprints: Jan asked me to comment about the number of reprint articles we've used in this issue of *Steam Engine Time*. When I accepted Greg Benford's article, he didn't tell me that it was also scheduled to appear in Guy Lillian's *Challenger* (No. 16) as well as in *Reason*. Darrell Schweitzer's article was offered first to *SET*, then appeared first in *New York Review of SF* only because of *SET*'s seeming disappearance. Andy's article appeared first in an academic journal (*Science Fiction Studies*) and Paul's in a semiprofessional magazine (*Interzone*), so you may not have read them before.

Jan also wondered why I was using a long review as my editorial. Read it and see; I think it's as much about me as about the book under discussion.

— **Bruce Gillespie (on behalf of Janine Stinson), December 2004**

Editorial 2:

The journeys they took

The Best Australian Science Fiction Writing: A Fifty Year Collection, edited by Rob Gerrand (Black Inc ISBN 1- 86395-301-9; 2004; 615 pp.; \$A39.95/\$US32.00)

Time is like an ever-expanding bowl. I stand forever at one edge of the bowl — the Present. Over the outside edge is The Dark. Perhaps it is the Future, and the bowl expands forever, or perhaps all

time ends one moment from now. I look backwards down the inside slope of the bowl — at History, a vast, colourful territory filled with everything that has happened. I cannot jump from where I am and land in any spot in the bowl, but from the edge I can see clearly sections of it, especially that small section through which I lived.

Rob Gerrand's vantage point on the bowl of time is very close to my own. No doubt he also remembers vividly a time in the 1950s when obtaining enjoyable

science fiction books in Australia was so difficult a task that it seemed almost unimaginable that any of those books should be written by Australians. Only a few of them were written by Britons; the rest, it seemed, by Americans.

Yet in 1959, when I was twelve and discovered the British magazines *New Worlds*, *Science Fiction Adventures* and *Science Fantasy*, I was amazed to find that Australian authors were published regularly there. The editor of the three magazines, E. J. (Ted) Carnell, had a feature

page in each *New Worlds* showing a picture of one of his regular authors, plus a short biography. Two I remember were those for Wynne N. Whiteford and David Rome (David Boutland), although I suspect he also did features on Lee Harding, John Baxter and Frank Bryning.

Frank Bryning and Wynne Whiteford had each begun a writing career in the American magazines before World War II. After the war, these and the other Australian authors usually sold their stories in Britain, although each no doubt hoped he might score a spot in one of the better-paying American magazines. David Rome (TV writer David Boutland) was unusual, in that his short story 'Parky' was picked up from *Science Fantasy* and included by Judith Merrill in one of her *Year's Best* anthologies. There it was read by Frederik Pohl, who some years later remembered the quality of the story, and asked David for more stories for *Galaxy* and *If*.

No doubt, Rob Gerrand also remembers this long period when we could find

stories by Australian writers only in overseas magazines. He chooses to begin his own journey through Australian SF in 1955 (with Frank Bryning's 'Infant Prodigy'), but, as his advisers Graham Stone, Sean McMullen and Van Ikin would have reminded him, he might have begun much earlier. The long reach back into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of the strengths of Van Ikin's 1981 anthology *Portable Australian Science Fiction*, which should be revised and reissued.

The lack of local markets had an inhibiting effect on the range and quality of local writing of SF, as can be seen from the first few stories in Rob Gerrand's new collection. Frank Bryning's 'Infant Prodigy', Norma Hemming's 'Debt of Lessor' (1958) and Wynne N. Whiteford's 'The Doorway' (1960) are stories that now seem a little creaky and outdated, although quite readable. They fitted well among stories by people such as Donald Malcolm, John Rackham, E. C. Tubb and Francis G. Rayer.

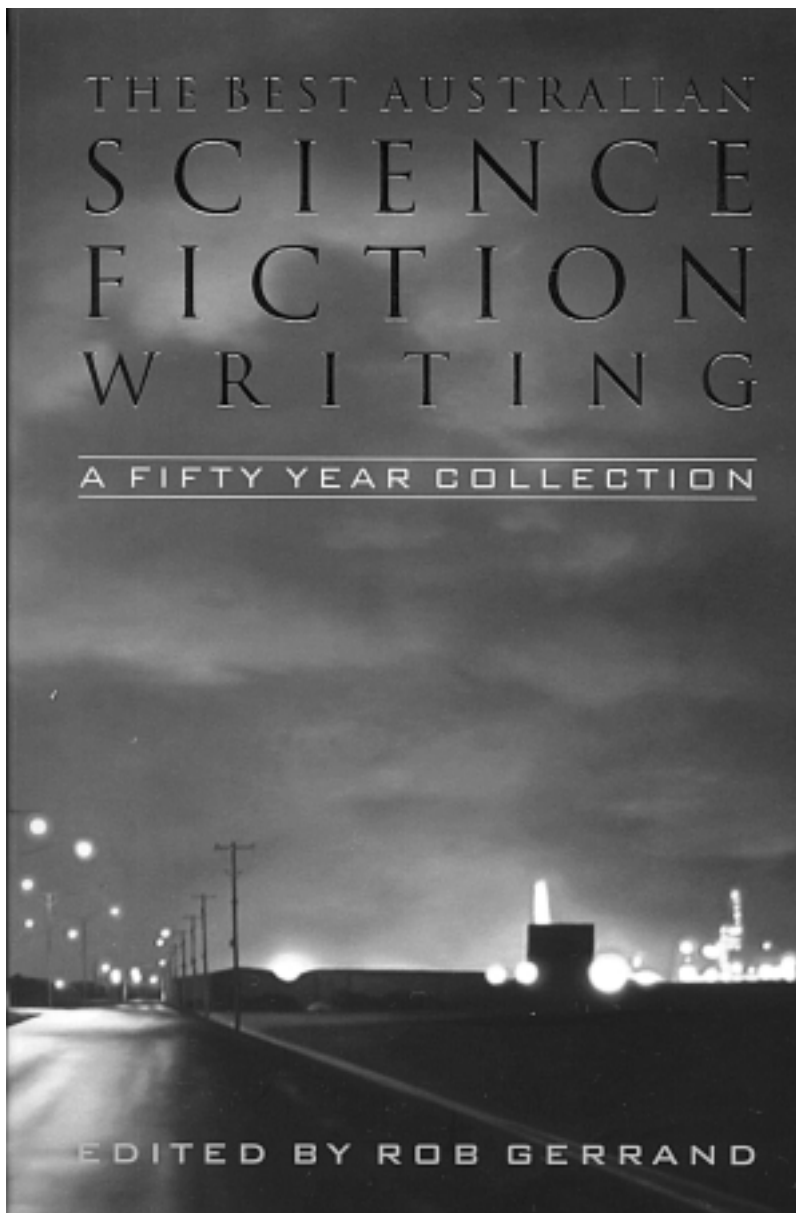
Much sharper, and with a memorable twist ending, is A. Bertram Chandler's 'The Cage' (1957), which had sold to one of the top markets, America's *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Chandler, a British sea captain, had chosen to make his home in Australia after already scoring some major successes in the American magazines. Until 1982, when he died, he was regarded here as Australia's senior SF writer, but the SF world in general saw him as one of the major writers of America's 'Golden Age' of SF magazine publishing.

Chandler, as 'George Whitley', also contributes the much-anthologised 'All Laced Up' (1961, from *New Worlds*). Today's reader might find the theme of alien visitation all too familiar, but it is difficult to emphasise how daring Chandler was to set his story in the Sydney he knew so well — the inner suburbs with their lace ironwork decorations, which were just becoming fashionable — and to have his main characters resemble closely himself and his wife. Until then, most Australian short stories had to be set in a never-never land, or somewhere in Britain or America.

As I've mentioned already, David Rome's 'Parky' had an international success. Years later, David was still debating with himself whether he should give up TV writing for what he regarded as more ambitious work in science fiction. Fortunately for him, he stayed with TV, becoming one of Australia's most successful script writers. 'Parky' has that extra spark in its dramatic style that is missing in most of the early stories in this collection; perhaps David did have in him a major SF novel that never was published.

At the launch for this book, Rob Gerrand said that he read several thousand stories before choosing its contents; and that he could have produced several more 600-page volumes while still telling the same story about the progress of Australian SF. One result of this selection dilemma is that the book itself has some odd gaps in chronology. Were there really no notable stories between 1961 and 1967? None leaps to my mind, I must admit.

In February 1967, Jack Wodhams published 'There Was a Crooked Man', the first of a number of stories he sold to John Campbell at *Analog*, then the top US SF magazine, a status it retained until Campbell's death in 1971. Campbell had never published anything like this story before, and I can't think of any later author whose works resemble those of Wodhams. On the page, 'Crooked Man' looked like the dreaded stories emerging from the new *New Worlds* in Britain (Michael Moorcock had taken over in the mid 1960s). It had no plot; it was told in



snappy little vignettes of dialogue; and its feeling was impressionistic rather than preachy. The manic world depicted by Wodhams had some resemblance to those shown by, say, Eric Frank Russell in the early 1950s, but that's the only influence I could ever detect. Wodhams appeared to be saying that any 'progress' in technology will have results that are so disastrous and unexpected that they will make the idea of 'progress' unthinkable. I would have thought this is not a message much liked by Campbell. But Campbell did like writers who poked fun at what he regarded as conventional wisdom; he was the only editor apart from Paul Collins (in the 1970s) to publish Wodhams regularly.

'The Case of the Perjured Planet', by 'Martin Loran' (John Baxter and Ron Smith) (*Analog*, December 1967), is more conventional in structure than Wodhams' story, but its oddly jagged imagery of a planet that seems insane to terrestrial observers also owes much to the British New Wave. If Campbell had lived, perhaps Australian writers might have undermined Campbell's many prejudices and led *Analog* into a 1970s renaissance. 'Perjured Planet' leaves out almost all the comforting paraphernalia of the detective story, yet it does retain a feeling of mystery. It also has a manic sense of fun that reminds me of the work of Eric Frank Russell, one of the few British authors who is still counted a part of the American Golden Age of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The assumption during the fifties and sixties was that Australian writers still needed to kowtow to overseas editors from either side of the Atlantic. Sydney publisher Horwitz Books, guided by American expatriate Ron Smith, published a couple of SF novels in the late sixties, but nobody could see that as the beginnings of a local industry.

Ron Graham, also from Sydney, caused great excitement when in 1968 he announced the forthcoming publication of a magazine, *Vision of Tomorrow*, that would feature half British stories and half Australian stories. It would be edited in Britain by Phil Harbottle (unknown to most SF people in Australia and Britain), but it would have an Australian advisory editor, John Bangsund. Stories were bought, and Lee Harding even went so far as to quit his job as a photographer to become a full-time author on the strength of all the positive feedback he was getting from Graham and Harbottle.

Vision of Tomorrow was published for one year. During the early seventies there were many harsh words said about its demise, but today we can see that the problems posed by its combination of ambition and poor distribution reflect

the problems faced by every Australian and British magazine since then. Although *Vision* looked glossy and substantial, the cover art on its first issues was just a bit oldfashioned. It became clear that Graham had chosen Harbottle as editor because of their mutual interest in a now almost forgotten British pulp era writer named John Russell Fearn. One of the ambitions of the editors was to publish a magazine that restored the style of the pulps. Meanwhile, the Australian writers who were trying to sell to *Vision of Tomorrow* were influenced most by Mike Moorcock's *New Worlds*, and wanted to leave the pulp style way behind them. *Vision* attracted mainly scorn in Britain, and was dropped by its distributor there. It was never distributed properly in Australia. But it did have its triumphs, including Lee Harding's 'Dancing Gerontius' (much anthologised, and now republished by Rob Gerrand) and 'The Custodian', which Lee illustrated with photos.

'Dancing Gerontius' is a one-idea story that is saved from predictability by Harding's ambition and a genuine lyricism in its last pages. What shall we do with the old in society? Most SF writers have plumped for life extension, but Harding is hardly the first or last writer to suggest that we will all be killed off at a certain age. To judge from statements from Australian government sources during the last year or so, this idea has achieved renewed popularity in Canberra. Their idea is to work us to death by denying us retirement; Harding's 'solution' is rather different, and quite moving. Harding has done better work since, especially in his novels, but 'Dancing Gerontius' stays in the memory as a genre breakthrough story.

Rather more original, however, is the next story in the collection, Michael Wilding's 'The Man of Slow Feeling' (1970). Wilding is one of two non-genre writers in this collection. (The other is Peter Carey.) Literary writers in Australia have tended to stay far away from SF and fantasy, but Wilding (who became one half of Wild & Woolley, the pioneering small press from Sydney that offered much help to Norstrilia Press) shows a poised awareness of the balance between the exposition of the SF idea and exploration of the interpersonal implications of the idea. The idea of a person who is slightly out of time with the rest of the world is not entirely new, but only Brian Aldiss's 'Man in His Time' can match this story for subtle horror. The fine quality of Wilding's story-telling proved not to be unique: he pointed the way forward to the Australian SF of the seventies and beyond.

I don't know what to say about Damien Broderick's 'The Final Weapon'

(1969), which I don't like much. To publish a 'Best' collection without reprinting one of Broderick's best stories (especially 'The Magi') does a disservice to the most consistent and productive author and anthologist of the whole fifty-year period.

A most important date in Australian SF was 1969, when John Baxter edited for Angus & Robertson *The Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction*. The *Second Pacific Book* appeared soon after. Until those collections appeared, nobody had realised that Australia had a heritage of SF story-telling. Once we realised it, our authors, who had seen themselves as isolated lighthouse keepers sending out occasional flares to the rest of the world, began to think in terms of local stories to be told to local audiences. Damien Broderick edited two more collections of Australian short SF, each as interesting as Baxter's collections. Yet Gerrand skips eight years between 1970 and 1978, eight years in which everything, in a sense, had already happened!

As Rob Gerrand was a partner in Norstrilia Press, which began in 1975, it is not clear why he ignores several of Norstrilia's collections, especially *The Altered I*, when compiling *The Best Australian Science Fiction Writing*. In 1976, Paul Collins and Rowena Cory began *Void* magazine, which became *Void Publications*, and later Cory & Collins. Both Norstrilia Press and Cory & Collins were small presses that had little chance of making a profit, but both kept going for ten years, and laid the foundation for everything that has happened since in local small press publishing. Enterprising independent publishers, such as Hyland House/Quartet Australia and Wren, were publishing occasional Australian SF novels and anthologies during the same period. Even Penguin Australia offered a short-lived SF line.

Gerrand takes as his starting point for the 1970s renaissance *Rooms of Paradise*, edited by Lee Harding (Quartet Australia, 1978) and *Transmutations* (1979), the anthology Gerrand edited for Morry Schwartz (now the publisher at Black Inc), when Schwartz was publisher at Outback Press. Each of these landmark anthologies took advantage of the enormous boost to the quality and quantity of Australian SF writing that resulted from the visit of Ursula Le Guin to Australia in 1975 (the Writers' Workshop associated with Australia's first world SF convention, Aussiecon I), and Christopher Priest and Vonda McIntyre in 1977 (the second major SF workshop). David Lake's 'Redeem the Time', George Turner's 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs', Randal Flynn's 'The Paradigm' and Philippa Maddern's 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' have a swagger of approach and command of the

English language that one finds rarely in Australian SF stories before the mid 1970s.

David Lake's 'Re-deem the Time' is conventional in structure, with an H. G. Wellsian time traveller finding much more than he could have expected as he travels into the future. Its theme, our responsibility for a livable future, has become more rather than less pertinent during the last 25 years.

George Turner's 'In a Petri Dish Upstairs' is rather conventional, too, and even a bit creaky. Turner made no secret of his dislike of the short story/novella form, and wrote short works only on commission. He collapses the skeleton of an entire novel into the 38 pages of 'Petri Dish'. Turner did write better short pieces than this, but it has its memorable moments.

Randal Flynn's 'The Paradigm' is a story by a young writer about young writers in a future that has little time for creativity of any kind. It's a faithful portrait of the despair that many Australians felt as Fraserism took over from Whitlamism in Australia during the late seventies. It still has some fine sentences and accurate portraits, but perhaps has not aged as well as some of the other stories.

Philippa Maddern's first published story, 'The Ins and Outs of the Hadhya City-State' (1976, in *The Altered I*), was listed as Best Australian SF Short Story in a poll conducted by *Science Fiction* magazine fifteen years later. Maddern should have become the anointed monarch of Australian SF from the seventies onward, but she abdicated. 'Inhabiting the Interspaces', which reads as grippingly as it did in 1979, shows her great gifts. The main character, unemployed in a society that does not forgive the unemployed, can survive only by inhabiting the nooks and crannies of a large office building at night when its workers depart. This becomes a perilous enterprise. I had always remembered this story is a long, epic tale, but it proves to be only 14 pages.

Maddern published few stories after this, and in the last decade has been Associate Professor of History at the University of Western Australia. If only writing SF could have offered her a real career path.

By 1979 the maturation of Australian SF had already taken place. Again, Gerrand has an odd elision in his narrative, offering only two more stories before 1989.

Where is a story by our most successful writer of the period, Leanne Frahm, who sold stories to several American anthologies? Where, indeed, is the best Australian SF story ever, Frahm's 'On the Turn'?

Where is any recognition for *Omega* magazine? *Omega*, an *Omni*-style science

fact/science fiction magazine, began the careers of many of the best writers of the 1990s. Perhaps it's hard to find archival files of *Omega*.

Where is any recognition of the vital importance of Peter McNamara's *Aphe-lion* (magazine and publishing company) during the 1980s? McNamara's work is the link between the books by Norstrilia and Cory & Collins (both having disbanded by the mid eighties) and that of *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* magazines in the nineties.

The coverage of the 1980s is the weakest aspect of this book. I cannot believe that Gerrand did not have available for reference a copy of David King's *Dream-works* (Norstrilia Press), which he helped to publish, or King and Blackford's *Urban Fantasies* (Ebony Books), which included David Grigg's best story. However, Gerrand does include Paul Collins' 'The Government in Exile', a dark, amusing fable about future social breakdown, and Rosaleen Love's 'The Total Devotion Machine', hardly her best story, but an effective demonstration of her insouciant verbal facility and fine wit.

Rob Gerrand does his best to cover adequately the 'boom period' of Australian SF publishing (1990 onward). With the sudden development of writers such as Greg Egan, Sean Williams, Terry Dowling, Lucy Sussex, Simon Brown and many others, Australia entered the world stage. Australian stories began to be picked up for international 'Best Of' collections and feature on the annual *Locus* Awards lists. The major Australian publishers began to take an interest in their own writers. In the end, this led to the proliferation of endless fantasy blockbuster trilogies, but it also generated income for writers such as Sean Williams, who otherwise could never have quit his day job. The great Australian small press tradition continued in the form of *Eidolon* and *Aurealis* magazines, and publishers such as Ticonderonga and MirrorDanse. Recently, Agog! Press, the Vision Writers' Group, the Canberra Writers' Group, Mitch, and several other small presses have published a large number of original fiction anthologies.

I won't look at the later stories in detail, mainly because they are known signposts in the current landscape. I think that Gerrand could have chosen a better story of Sean Williams' than 'The Soap Bubble' and a better Stephen Dedman story than 'A Walk-on Part in the War', but at least the roles of these authors is recognised.

As Race Mathews pointed out when launching the book, Gerrand really scored the jackpot with his reprint of Petrina Smith's 'Angel Thing' (from Sussex and Buckrich's *She's Fantastical!* an-

thology, Sybylla Press, 1995). Smith was a graduate of the first major Writers' Workshop (the Le Guin Workshop of 1975); she has published little since; and she works very slowly. The fine writing and sharp dialogue of this quiet story of exploitation and the horrors of true belief makes it one of Australia's best short stories of any kind during the last fifty years.

Oddities remain in Gerrand's book. I can't pretend to like Terry Dowling's Tom Rynosseros stories, but how could one represent Dowling's strange career (adulation from Australian readers; very little success overseas) without featuring a Rynosseros story? 'He Tried to Catch the Light' represents some of Dowling's strengths, but it's hardly his best.

Neither 'Niagara Falling' nor 'The Diamond Pit' seem to represent Jack Dann's work at its best (and Janeen Webb has published stories that are much better than 'Niagara Falling'), but again, recognition must be paid to the role played by Dann and Webb in promoting Australian SF during the nineties, and these stories did win awards and impress people other than me.

The nineties was a good period in which to be an SF reader in Australia. It was satisfying to rediscover the subtlety and power of Lucy Sussex's 'Red Ochre' (it is fourteen years since I had read it). Re-reading Sussex's story and Margo Lanagan's 'The Boy Who Didn't Yearn' made me feel all gooey and patriotic and proud that the current best stylists in Australian fiction are part of the SF/fantasy genre. The division between literary fiction and science fiction disappears, much as it did in stories by Michael Wilding and Peter Carey all those years ago.

The last section of Gerrand's anthology includes plenty of my other favourites, some of which I've reviewed at length elsewhere: Greg Egan's 'The Caress' I've just re-read for the fifth time, with as much pleasure as ever; Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God' seems retains its freshness every time I return to it; and I enjoyed the only story new to me, Sean McMullen's 'Tower of Wings'.

My fifty-year journey through Australian SF is slightly different from Rob Gerrand's, but I'm satisfied that we have been looking back at the same timescape. For some of these writers, I would have chosen other stories. I might have chosen stories from the time gaps I've mentioned. But whatever its limitations, this fifty-year collection is an essential record of the long, rocky journey of Australian SF writing. Better, for me, it's the record of some achievements by people I grew up knowing and admiring.

— Bruce Gillespie, 28 November 2004

Tales of members of the Book Tribe

Darrell Schweitzer

Darrell Schweitzer has been writing for fanzines since about 1970. He has been selling stories since (depending on how you want to count) 1971 or 1973, and has sold about 275 stories to SF/fantasy publications in the US, UK, Australia and elsewhere. His books include three novels, *The White Isle*, *The Shattered Goddess* and *The Mask of the Sorcerer*. His numerous collections include *Transients*, *Refugees from an Imaginary Country*, *Nightscares*, *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out*. His verse ranges from serious poetry (*Groping toward the Light*) to a limerick rhyming 'Cthulhu' (in *Non Compost Mentis*). He has also published essays, interviews, and nonfiction books (on H. P. Lovecraft and Lord Dunsany). He has worked editorially on *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine* and *Amazing*. He has been co-editor of *Weird Tales* since 1988. A three-time nominee for World Fantasy Award, he has won it once (with George Scithers, for *Weird Tales*.) Most recently, he has edited a 'facsimile' of the April 1933 *Weird Trails: The Magazine of SF Supernatural Cowboy Stories*.



Darrell Schweitzer

A Pound of Paper by John Baxter

**Bantam Books (UK), 2004;
trade paperback; 336 pp.; £7.95.**

JOHN BAXTER IS A MEMBER OF MY tribe. That's what I conclude from reading this delightful memoir. Superficially, the book is the autobiography of a man I don't know, whose works I have more heard of than read, and whose interests do not necessarily coincide with my own. It's not really a fan memoir either, though the narrative weaves in and out of science fiction and fandom at times. Certainly a fan will recognise the Moment of Contact, when the proto-fan first meets another science-fictionist or attends a fan meeting for the first time. (How appropriate that the first SF story Baxter read was Murray Leinster's 'First Contact'.)

Mine happened a little earlier than Baxter's. I attended a Philadelphia Science Fiction Society meeting for the first time when I was fifteen. The PSFS is a most venerable organisation, founded in 1936, one of the two surviving chapters of Hugo Gernsback's Science Fiction League, still engaged in a genial dispute with the Los Angeles chapter over which is the oldest continuous fan group in the country or even the world, the question being whether PSFS can genuinely claim continuity through World War II. I wasn't sure, before I went to that first meeting, whether I was going to a convention such as I had read about in Lin Carter's 'Our Man in Fandom' columns in *Worlds of If* magazine, or something smaller. ('Don't buy the place out,' my father said to me.) The first fan I ever met, in the stairway on the way to the meeting room, was the PSFS president, J. B. Post, later famous for *The Atlas of Fantasy* and still a good friend after 37 years.

Baxter was seventeen at this point, considerably more mature (out of school and living on his own), but I could readily relate to his description of his first fan meeting in Sydney.

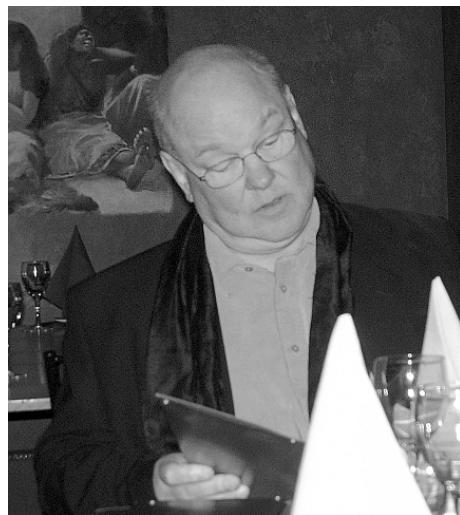
There's another early moment that's happened to all of us, described in chapter 4. Somewhere in the early teens, the proto-fan has a friend whose father reads science fiction and who will lend

out science fiction magazines. Thus I gained access to the *Galaxys* and *F&SFs* of the 1950s. Baxter's first SF magazine seems to have been the February 1940 *Super Science Stories*, which he borrowed and read sometime in the late '50s. I read that issue about ten years later, but by then I was in fandom and bought that issue from a mail-order dealer.

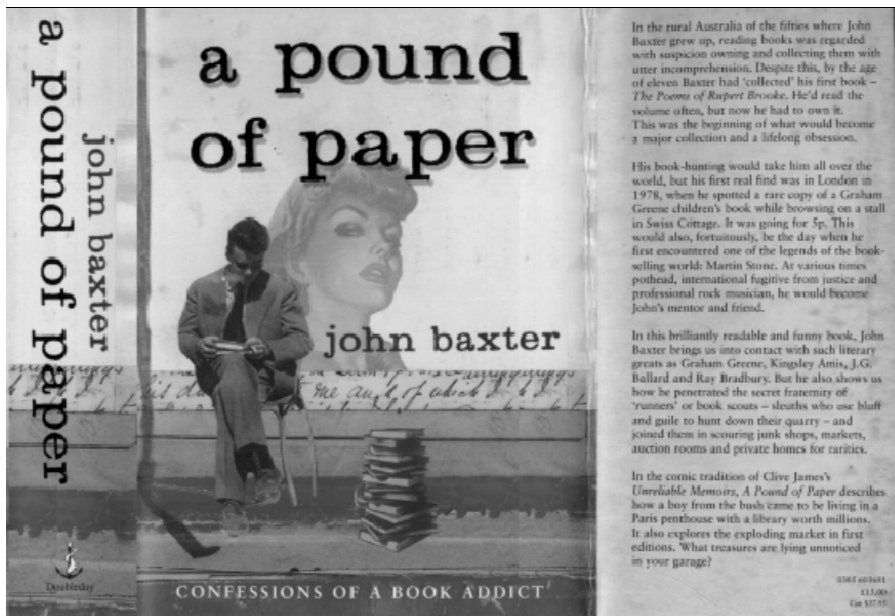
I am sure that if John Baxter and I ever got together, we could have a long and pleasant conversation that wouldn't mention science fiction all that much. If I visited him, he could show me his rarities. If he visited me, I could show him mine. What we truly have in common is that we are both members of the Tribe of Book People. H. P. Lovecraft, who was not, complained to one of his younger correspondents (I think it was Donald Wandrei), 'I love literature. You love books.'

There is something to be said for the book as *object*. Hopefully the collector does not lose touch with an appreciation for the contents, but the *book* is considerably more. Non-collectors, with whom Baxter has had many colorful encounters, will never grasp this. Baxter tells one ghastly incident in which someone casually ripped the flyleaf out of a Nigel Kneale book to make a note on it, and couldn't understand why he and the bookseller were virtually in a state of shock.

That brought to my mind a scene from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in which a high school bimbo is very obviously chewing



John Baxter (Melbourne, July 2003) (Photo: Dick Jensen.)



gum. 'Get rid of the gum,' says Giles the librarian. The bimbo tears the flyleaf out of one of those *Necronomicon*-like tomes with which Sunnydale High's library is so mysteriously well equipped. Giles looks like he's been slugged in the gut. 'But . . . that's a six-hundred-year-old book!' he manages to gasp. 'Well at least it wasn't a new one!' the bimbo says cheerfully. Giles is appalled.

Even TV fantasy sometimes touches on real life.

Books are part of real life. An obsession with them is not mere escapism. To quote the late L. Sprague de Camp, a book is as real as a board or a baby.

All through various mundane jobs and career moves, Baxter has been a devoted bookman. Of course he reacted like that to the desecration of a book. Any member of the tribe would. In fact, he has quite a bit to say about flyleaves and endpapers. Inscriptions by authors are one thing, but Baxter resents the sort of nobody who inscribes to another nobody messages of no significance even to the recipient. He tries to avoid having endpapers stamped by the bookseller, even when that allegedly makes the book more collectible. Endpapers, he remarks, are like the silences in a Pinter play, a pause between the cover and the text (p. 79). They are not to be marked on lightly. Condition matters. It is a major concern for book people. The *book* is more than just the words inside it. It is a whole object, a thing in itself.

Any one of us knows what it means to get up in the dimmest hours of the breaking dawn and travel to some remote, dingy district where other members of the book-tribe drift out of the gloom in search of bibliographic treasures. Most of them are shabbily dressed — there are few dapper book people, particularly when on the hunt — and all of them have soon-to-be-filled bags in hand.

We all have book-stalking stories. Great Buy stories. The One that Got

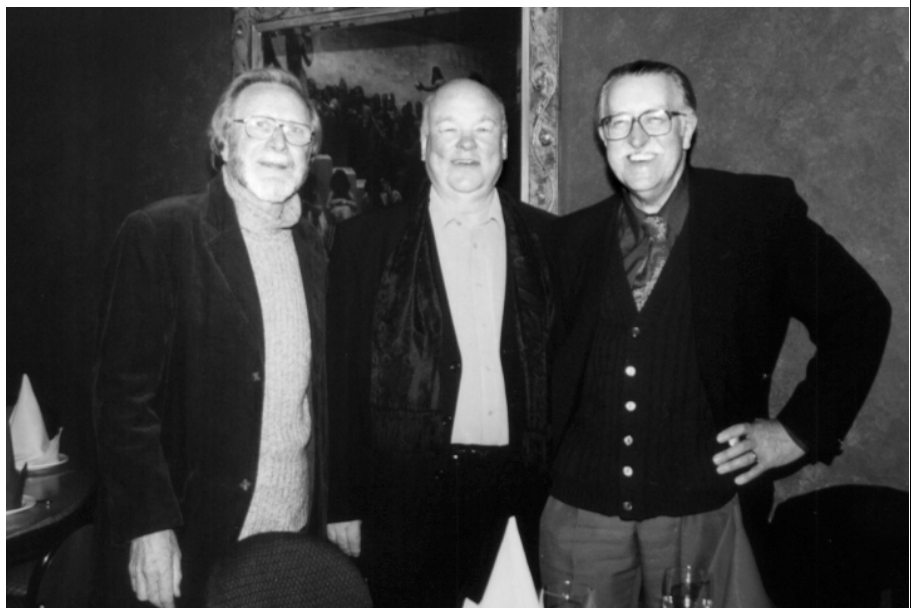
Away stories. The 'I bought *one*' story, with the subtext of, 'If I'd bought the whole stack I'd be a rich man today.' The dustjacket stories. Baxter tells of a find of ex-library Graham Greene books, not worth much for themselves, but a fabulous hoard of dustjackets, which could be put on better copies. I once bought a jacketless first edition of Stephen King's *Carrie* for two dollars back in the late '70s. I got King to sign it at a convention when that was still possible. I found a very ratty ex-library copy of *The Shining* for 25 cents, swapped that for an equally ratty ex-library *Carrie*, then extracted the wrinkled but intact jacket from the pasted-down mylar protector . . . We've all done that. In American bookseller idiom, this process is called, suggestively, 'mating.'

Baxter has some great bits here, wonderful digressions, one about the various intrigues regarding the authorship of *The Story of O*, another about verified copies

of books bound in human skin. What bookman would not be at least curious to see such a thing? Yes, the book world has a dark side. Morbid as it may have sounded at the time, the story of the Poppy Z. Brite books that smelled like burnt human flesh makes more sense in this context. (Not a story that Baxter tells, but I am sure he could appreciate it: A suicide or would-be vandal incinerated himself in a postal lobby. The smoke penetrated the post boxes, leaving four copies of a signed-limited Brite book smelling of charred human flesh. Rather than discard them as damaged books, bookseller Barry Levin wrapped them in plastic and listed them as unique collector's items for about four thousand dollars each — and got it. Ms Brite expressed regret that she could not afford one.)

Books, for members of the Book Tribe, are a way of life. Baxter describes what we all do. Whenever he settles in a new place, he immediately checks out the local book scene. His cast of characters includes authors, eccentrics, and grotesques. His scenes are great bookshops and obscure ones, sales in alleys, and what the English or Australians call 'boot sales' — which were once called 'tailgate sales' in America when cars had tailgates. It is precisely the universality of what he describes that makes *A Pound of Paper* so appealing. Even when the details are different, when the scene is in Sydney, London, or Paris, we've all been there. It is almost as if Baxter is bringing shared memories alive on the page.

— Darrell Schweitzer, October 2004



Lee Harding, John Baxter and Mervyn Binns (Melbourne, July 2003). (Photo: Helena Binns.)

Epilogue: If the house caught fire . . .

BRG: At the end of *A Pound of Paper*, John Baxter printed the answers that various friends (including several famous Australian SF fans) gave to the query: nominate the one book you would snatch from your shelves if your house was burning down. I asked Darrell for his nomination:

DS: To answer your question about what book I would grab if the house were on fire and I could save no other, I suppose the realistic answer is that in such a situation I would doubtless snatch a pillowcase off the bed and try to fill it with swag the way a burglar would, assuming I was in the upstairs bedroom where many of the best books are. I would doubtless

reach for my Mervyn Wall collection, *The Unfortunate Fursey* etc., which is a small group of hardcovers and magazines (copies of *The Irish Review* with the texts corrected in his hand, including a serialised novel thus) but I would also go for the signed/limiteds of Lord Dunsany's *The King Of Elfland's Daughter* and *Don Rodriguez*. There's also a signed/limited of Talbot Mundy's *Queen Cleopatra* right next to those two, and an Arkham House *The House on the Borderland* next to those two.

Depending on my prospects for escape at this point, I might well tie the pillowcase shut with a belt and hurl it out the window to (hopefully) a better fate than the books left behind, the way a desperate mother might hurl a child.

But I suppose if I were somehow limited to one book, I might well go for *A Dreamer's Tales* by Lord Dunsany (Luce, no date, circa 1917), which is a book that I first bought for 10 cents when I was a teenager and which opened many horizons for me, including my writing career

(because stories derivative of Dunsany were the first I was able to sell). Ironically, I don't even have my first copy, but have replaced it with a copy of the gift edition, which is bound in vellum and has gilt edges. It still has the same wonderful Sidney Sime illustrations.

One thing I would definitely take from the row of the books on the bedroom dresser, along with the Walls and the signed/limited Dunsanys, is a copy of *The Martian Chronicles*, the large illustrated Heritage Press edition (a reprint of the Limited Editions Club edition) signed to me by Bradbury. I doubt I will ever meet him again, so that is irreplaceable. The book itself is rare enough, one of the handful of Heritage Press books to be worth anything.

I would also try to get my copy of the surrealist *Codex Seraphinianus* into the swag-bag, but of course if I had to heave that out the widow, there would be concern that I'd bend a corner . . .

Funeral games

by Darrell Schweitzer

[First published in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, July 2003.]

I REMEMBER IT AS A SUNNY, LATE winter morning, about two years ago now, as time and chance and the press of other things prevented me from writing this essay when the impressions were immediate. But they are still vivid enough: late winter, when the snows have melted and car tires leave great, muddy gouges in unpaved driveways.

I was standing with about twenty other people on the porch of a sprawling Victorian house, one of those hodgepodes of stone and wood with peaked gables, a turret or two, an enormous porch, and a 'barn' in the back yard (actually a large garage-and-shed) which, I deduce from their proximity to one another (that is, with less-than-an-acre yards), must have passed for middle-class development houses circa 1890.

Wayne, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, has sections of such housing. I may well have stood on this porch as a kid, trick-or-treating, but now I was there for something all book-people have experienced. I was in line, early in the morning, in the company of strangers, near-strang-

ers, and a few familiar faces, waiting for a book sale to start.

This was the house of the late Ms _____, a lady whose name was apparently well known in the mail-order and internet business. She also sold books by appointment. She had a large invitational clientele. I never knew her, and had in fact had passed by this house many times without ever knowing what wonders were hoarded within. After her (recent) death, her family held a series of sales, first for her invitational clientele, at which everything was offered for 50 per cent off. But today was different. It was the everything-for-a-dollar blow-out, not advertised, but more or less open to anyone. I had been tipped off by a bookseller friend. I simply showed up, acted like I belonged there, and I more or less did.

But as I listened to the conversation around me, as people reminisced about what a great bookseller the dead woman was, what excellent things they had bought from her, what a shame it was to see her magnificent collection picked over like this (even as the speakers, like a school of piranhas, were prepared to wipe it out completely), I realised that I was intruding on a funeral. All the sad-and-weepy personal stuff aside, this was

the send-off that mattered in the book-selling world. A bookseller's funeral.

I take my title from a book, of course. *Funeral Games* is a novel by Mary Renault in which she extends the metaphor of 'funeral games' — the various athletic contests and such that the ancient Greeks held in honour of a dead king — to describe the scramble for power as Alexander the Great's generals carved up his empire among themselves after his death. The Greek version was much more polite than the Etruscan and (later) Roman versions, where the 'games' turned bloody — one flattered the dead by adding to their number, and the undertakers invented gladiatorialism.

Bookseller funerals are always polite.

Now the doors were opened. We filed inside, ever so politely, nobody pushing, no elbows making contact (despite all the jokes you hear at more ordinary book sales, where the 'usual suspects' make comments like, 'We're all here! That's the end of this sale!' and 'I think I'll get a pair of spikes for my elbows next time!'). Some people said a few words to the family members and helpers who admitted us.

Then the race was on. Even here there was a unspoken code, an etiquette. You

may not shove. The younger and more agile persons may twist and weave a little, and slip by. But you never grab something out of someone's hand, or even right under their nose (in the latter case, unless you say 'Excuse me' first).

I was at a disadvantage at this point, because most of these people (who were of the invitational clientele) had been to the earlier half-price sales, not so much to buy (since Ms ____'s prices, even reduced by 50 per cent, tended to be quite high) as to case the joint. They knew exactly where everything was. All I could do was follow the crowd, while a little alarm was going off in my head: *Emergency! Emergency! Where is the science fiction section? Where are her Arkham House books?*

Sometimes, half a second before I reached a given shelf, someone swept the entire contents into a box with their arm. (I think they'd done more than case the joint. They'd very likely sneakily arranged the desired books just so during a previous visit, ready for the quick grab on the dollar-day.)

This was a piranha-frenzy, but, yes, a very, very genteel one, with voices in low tones, everyone making quick, purposeful motions. Before long piles of books began to assemble themselves, in the middle of the floor, under coats and dropcloths. Another part of the booksale code — you never, never take a book someone else has selected. That is tantamount to stealing (and in a place like this would get you kicked out). If there is any doubt, you hold up the book and ask aloud, 'Does this belong to anybody?' and if it *does*, you can be certain the owner will be upon you in an instant, even if he's on the other end of a long gallery. Book people have special senses. They can feel someone else's fingers on their books from great distances. Then you politely give it back, and everyone goes about their polite ravening.

What you do is bring a cloth or use your coat to drape over your goodies once they have become too heavy to carry. In the summer, bring a light jacket, not so much to wear as to mark territory with. Another technique, which doesn't work so well in a crowded room, is to acquire the nearest cardboard box, fill it with your stuff, and push this along the floor with your foot.

The purposeful crowd spread throughout the house. I felt the inevitable anxiety: *The Heinlein first editions and the run of Weird Tales are in the other room which I haven't discovered yet.*

All this overwhelming courtesy reminded me of the etiquette of trash-pickers. No, I don't mean bums going through trashcans — although if someone drops *books* into a trashcan he is by definition a barbarian, whose opinion and contempt do not matter. (In the

wealthy neighborhood where I grew up, I once discovered an entire such can full of hardcover books. I pawed through them while a passerby saw me, and didn't pause. Nothing special, but the books didn't belong *there*. I later resold the first edition of *Lizzie Borden, the Untold Story* I rescued.)

I am instead referring to *high-class* scavengers like the ones you meet at major outdoor computer fairs. Toward the end of the day, the large companies represented in the 'flea market' section start disposing of their unsold inventory. So you climb into these huge dumpsters the size of railroad cars, often deep enough (if the accumulation is insufficiently high) that nobody's head sticks up over the edge. Safety necessitates speaking *loudly* and maybe even stationing someone on guard at the dumpster's edge, to make sure that incoming projectiles don't come crashing down on somebody's head. Everybody helps everybody else find whatever they're looking for: free televisions, spare parts, sacks of diskettes, or whatever. They lend screwdrivers and wrenches back and forth.

Trash-picking, I like to explain, is a gentlemanly occupation, closely related to archaeology. Complete strangers cooperate with one another, following an unspoken code. ('You, Sir, are a gentleman and a scholar', a techno-scavenger said to me once, 'but don't worry. Your secret is safe with me.')

There was no danger of incoming books landing on someone's head at Ms ____'s place, but it felt very much like truly elegant dumpster-driving. It was part of the same cultural experience.

I realised, ultimately, that this wasn't an ancient Greek funeral (with foot-races and discus-hurling) that I'd barged in on here. It was a *Ferengi* funeral. Watchers of *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* will remember those comic, rascally, cheapskate interstellar traders with the big ears who live by a sacred scripture called *The Rules of Acquisition*. There was a wonderful episode in which Quark the Ferengi has been tricked into thinking he was dying. Therefore he does what any sensible member of his species would do under such circumstances. He endeavours to make a *profit*, so that he will be honorably remembered, which is all-important to a Ferengi. (Indeed, a dream-sequence affords us a glimpse of Ferengi Heaven, a gaudy, gold-plated shopping mall, where you present your account books to the equivalent of St Peter, to show you made a profit in life, before they let you in.)

So Quark offers pieces of his own body for sale on interstellar eBay. It seems that Ferengi corpses are freeze-dried, chopped up into little bits, encased in plastic disks, and sold as coasters.

Relics of famous Ferengi become expensive collector's items.

Quark makes a 'killing', if you will pardon the expression, a bigger profit than all his lifetime of sales put together. Later when he discovers that, as part of a complicated conspiracy, his medical records have been switched, he is *not* dying after all, and an enemy has maliciously run the bidding up to incredible levels, Quark is terribly torn. He would almost rather die than give up that profit.

So here we were scrambling for the bits and pieces of the late Ms ____'s life and career, thus increasing her profit and her honor, since bookseller-Ferengi are ultimately remembered for the greatness of their hoard and the quality of their final, going-out-of-business sale. She was doing well, it seemed, from the praise I was overhearing from all around me. What great stuff she always had. What a shame to see her place taken apart like this — even as it was being taken apart.

But what about the *loot*? You want to hear about the *loot*? A tale of acquisition must include descriptions of the haul. I understand, having, as Quark would say, 'the lobes' for these things.

The Rare First Editions shelf (in what must have been the dining room) was almost bare by the time I got to it, 2.3 seconds into the sale. One of the few volumes left was a book called *The Corrector of Destinies* by Melville Davidson Post from 1908 ('being the tales of Randolph Mason, as related by his private secretary, Courtlandt Parks'), a beautiful, almost new copy with a Mylar protector over the boards. *What is this? I've vaguely heard of Melville Post. Some kind of Sherlockian mystery?* I drop it in my totebag (which grew to a box, which grew to a pile on the floor under my coat) to buy and sort out later.

If there was an Arkham House shelf or a pile of *Weird Tales*, I did not find them. One of the things I always do (and I am sure most of you do, too) when visiting an unfamiliar house is to glance at the books on the shelves. They tell so much about the person who lives there.

Ms ____ was a conventional literary person, although one of considerable refinement. She sold what she knew and liked, which was very sensible of her. You will never succeed in bookselling unless you can think like your customer, and appreciate what they appreciate. Her stock included a lot of poetry and art books, and a lot of odd little items from the nineteenth century with interesting bindings. There was no science-fiction section, though I found a couple of late Heinlein first editions (*To Sail Beyond the Sunset*, and *The Cat Who Walked Through Walls*) along with a British first of Arthur C. Clarke's *The Ghost from the Grand Banks*

in the mainstream literature/modern first editions section. (Not that they're particularly worth anything. Not that I have since been able to resell them, but when something like that is a buck, you take it now and ask questions later.) The one old science fiction book was Ralph Milne Farley's *The Radio Man* in hardcover, published by FPCI, 1948. I suspect I was the only person there who knew what that was. It had been left behind on that nearly swept-clean Rare First Editions shelf.

It was interesting to note that no one showed much interest in the mainstream/modern first editions area. *Those* shelves were packed solid, hours into the sale. I could go through them at leisure, after the initial frenzy had long abated, pick out the above-mentioned Heinleins and the Clarke, and also find a Salman Rushdie book I didn't have, *The Jaguar Smile, A Nicaraguan Journey*.

Upstairs, in a little side room which had gotten messy — debris on the floor, papers, envelopes, even a few boards from a few crumbling leatherbound volumes on a nearby shelf — I found a first edition of Kipling's *With the Night Mail* in the midst of that same pile of debris. A nice copy, with one plate loose. I shall have to carefully examine another copy to see precisely where that plate goes before I glue it back in. Then the book will be worth about \$100.00.

In that same room was an entire shelf of Christopher Morley first editions that had apparently interested no one. Poor Christopher Morley. His star has fallen.

After a while, as the crowd thinned out a bit (politely, politely . . .) it was time to really *pick* over the remains. Now (as long-time customers, my fellow Ferengi who had actually known Ms ____ lamented) the house was beginning to look a bit shabby, many of the shelves (save for mainstream modern first editions) almost bare, books fallen onto the floor. It was time to grab the expensive literary reference books in what must have once been an office — books that had not been for sale when Ms ____ was alive. Wow. *The Penguin Companion to World Literature*, a boxed, four-volume set, in immaculate condition. It counted as one item. I got it for a buck. I found an odd little book called *The Poet, the Fool, and the Fairies* by Madison Cawein (Bos-

ton: Small, Maynard and Company, 1912), a volume of verse, with nicely gilt-decorated boards. Immaculate condition. The title item seems to be a play of sorts ('A Lyrical Eclogue'). Is this worth reading/owning/selling? Buy now, research later.

Two hours into the sale, as I had assembled my first couple of crates of books, and was milling around the check-out table, I noticed Peter Ruber's *The Last Bookman* (a coffee-table-sized volume of tributes to Vincent Starrett, a great member of our tribe, Candlelight Press, 1968) among the cookbooks by the kitchen. After the feeding frenzy, you have to look for odd mis-shelvings like that.

I'd gone through everything, in every room of the house that was open to the public. How did I feel picking through the books in the shelf over Ms ____'s bed, the ones which were her obvious favourites, which she read through before she went to sleep each night? Did I feel like a ghoul, a scavenger, a tomb-raider? . . . Hell no. She was *one of us*. She would have *understood*. We were helping her orphaned books find good homes. Even though I had never known her, I honoured her, by making her last booksale all the more memorable (at least to me). While I can remember what books I bought from her stock, she lives on through them. It's all part of the Code. Quark the Ferengi would understand too, and salute her.

So there I was at checkout, maybe two and a half hours after this all started. I had just scarfed the copy of *The Last Bookman* (which ultimately turns out to be only worth about \$50, according to ABE-Books.com listings, but was still a pleasant find) when I learned, again from overheard conversation that the 'barn' out back *was also full of books!*

Oh my God . . .

The sellers had made a major strategic error, which worked to my advantage. I deserved some advantage after everybody else got the jump on me in the first minutes of the sale. They should have put up a huge sign saying, MORE BOOKS IN BARN, but possibly, since even this sale was not, theoretically, open to the public, perhaps they didn't want to get mobbed. Or else they just didn't think of it. In any case, few of my fellow book-vultures

(some of whom were elderly) had braved the ankle-deep mud in the unpaved driveway and the puddles in the back yard to go out to the barn. It was almost untouched. *That* was where I found the early William Morris book, the Dunsany first edition, the Rider Haggards, the history, photography, and old periodicals section.

It went on and on. Most of this material was tangential to my own interests, but stuff I could easily resell. I made, of course, a huge profit that day. My car was full when I left. I resold much of the loot to my friend the bookseller who had tipped me off about this sale in the first place. We both understood exactly what was going on. She had been unable to get away from her shop to attend. The service I had performed for her, for which I was rewarded by mark-ups on the books I resold to her, is called, in the trade, 'scouting'. If you buy for a dealer, you are a book-scout.

Some of the remainder I resold elsewhere. Some went into my own collection. It was not the very best book sale I had ever been to, but it was a very good one. A year or so later I got myself onto eBay, thus greatly expanding my capacity to resell things that I might not, myself, particularly want to keep. So of course I think back and wonder: *what should I have taken, that I left behind?* At the end of such a day, as your car fills up, you begin to feel a sense of 'restraint'. Maybe I have enough. Maybe I should leave a little for somebody else. What am I going to *do* with all this stuff? In retrospect you always come to appreciate a further Law of Acquisition that Quark the Ferengi has not yet explicitly revealed to humans: *restraint is for losers*.

Hail and farewell to the valiant Ms ____, whom I never knew. Thus do I praise and remember her. Thus did we all praise and remember her. By the time the sale was over, I was no longer an interloper, but one more of her 'mourners'. I could have addressed anybody there by their first name, if I knew their first name.

This kind of 'funeral' sure beats having yourself chopped up into little bits and sold as coasters.

And a profit, of course, is not without honour.

— Darrell Schweitzer, February 2003

Gregory Benford

Leaping the abyss

[First published in *Reason*, April 2002.]

Stephen Hawking seemed slightly worse, as always.

It is a miracle that he has clung to life for over twenty years with Lou Gehrig's disease. Each time I see him I feel that this will be the last, that he cannot hold on to such a thin thread for much longer.

The enormous success of his *A Brief History of Time* has made Stephen a curious kind of cultural icon. Its huge success has made him a curious kind of world-scale metaphor. He wonders himself how many of the starlets and rock stars who mentioned the book on talk shows actually read it.

With his latest book, *The Universe in a Nutshell*, he aims to remedy the situation, with a plethora of friendly illustrations to help readers along. In it, Hawking offers imagistic explanations for such complexities as superstring theory and the nature of time. The trick, of course, is translating equations to sentences, two very different languages. Pictures help enormously, though purists deplore them as oversimplified. I feel that any device is justified to span such an abyss of incomprehension.

As I entered, his office staff was wary of visitors, plainly suspecting I was a 'civilian' harbouring a crank theory of the universe. But I'd called beforehand, and then his secretary recognised me from years past. When I entered the familiar office his shrunken form lolled in his motorised chair, staring out, rendered goggle-eyed by his thick glasses — but a strong spirit animated all he said. You could sense the inner fire.

He had lost his vocal cords years ago to an emergency tracheotomy. His gnarled, feeble hands could not hold a pen. For a while after the operation he was completely cut off from the world — an unsettling analogy with the fate of mathematical observers who plunge into black holes, their signals to the outside red-shifted and slowed, by gravity's grip, to dim, whispering oblivion.

A Silicon Valley firm had come to the rescue. Engineers devised tailored, user-friendly software and a special keyboard for him. His frail hand now moved across it with crablike intent. The software is deft, and he could build sentences quickly. I watched him rapidly flit through the menu of often-used words on his liquid crystal display, which hung before him in his wheelchair. The inven-

tion has been such a success that the Silicon Valley folk now supplied units to similarly afflicted people worldwide.

'Please excuse my American accent,' the speaker mounted behind the wheelchair said with a California inflection. He coded this entire remark with two key-strokes.

Though I had been here before, again I was struck that this man who had suffered such an agonising physical decline had on his walls several large posters of a person very nearly his opposite: Marilyn Monroe. I mentioned her and he responded instantly, tapping one-handed on his keyboard, so that soon his transduced voice replied, 'Yes, she's wonderful. Cosmological. I wanted to put a picture of her in my latest book, as a celestial object.' I remarked that to me the book was like a French impressionist painting of a cow, meant to give a glancing essence, not the real, smelly animal. Few would care to savour the details. Stephen took off from this to discuss some ideas currently booting around the physics community about the origin of the universe, the moment just after the Big Bang.

Hawking's great politeness paradoxically put me ill at ease; I was acutely aware of the many demands on his time, and after all, I had just stopped by to talk shop. I am an astrophysicist and have known Stephen since the 1970s.

'For years my early work with Roger Penrose seemed to be a disaster for science,' Stephen said. 'It showed that the universe must have begun with a singularity, if Einstein's general theory of relativity is correct. That appeared to indicate that science could not predict how the universe would begin. The laws would break down at the point of singularity, of infinite density.'

I recalled that I had spoken to him about mathematical methods of getting around this, one evening at a party in King's College. There were analogies to methods in elementary quantum mechanics, methods he was trying to carry over into this surrealistic terrain.

'It now appears that the way the universe began can indeed be determined, using imaginary time.' We discussed this a bit. Stephen had been using a mathematical device in which time is replaced by imaginary time, as a notational convenience. This changes the nature of the equations, so he could use some ideas from the tiny quantum world. In the new

equations, a kind of tunnelling occurs, in which the universe, before the Big Bang, has many different ways to pass through the singularity. With imaginary time, one can calculate the chances for a given tunnelling path into our early universe, after the beginning of time as we know it.

'Sure, the equations can be interpreted that way,' I argued, 'but it's really a trick, isn't it?'

Stephen said, 'Yes, but perhaps an insightful trick.'

'We don't have a truly deep understanding of time, so replacing real time with imaginary time doesn't mean much to us.'

'Imaginary time is a new dimension, at right angles to ordinary, real time. Along this axis, if the universe satisfies the "no boundary" condition, we can do our calculations. This condition says that the universe has no singularities or boundaries, in the imaginary direction of time. With the "no boundary" condition, there will be no beginning or end, to imaginary time, just as there is no beginning or end to a path on the surface of the Earth.'

'If the path goes all the way around the Earth,' I said. 'But of course, we don't know that in imaginary time, there won't be a boundary.'

'My intuition says there will be no blocking in that special coordinate, so our calculations make sense.'

'Sense is just the problem, isn't it? Imaginary time is just a mathematical convenience.' I shrugged in exasperation at the span between cool mathematical spaces and the immediacy of the raw world; this is a common tension in doing physics. 'It's unrelated to how we *feel* time. The seconds sliding by. Birth and death.'

'True. Our minds work in real time, which begins at the Big Bang, and will end, if there is a Big Crunch — which seems unlikely, now, from the latest data showing accelerating expansion. Consciousness would come to an end at a singularity.'

'Not a great consolation,' I said.

He grins. 'No, but I like the "no boundary" condition. It seems to imply that the universe will be in a state of high order at one end of real time, but will be disordered at the other end of time, so that disorder increases in one direction of time. We define this to be the direction of increasing time. When we record something in our memory, the disorder of the



Greg Benford.

universe will increase. This explains why we remember events only in what we call the past, and not in the future.'

'Remember what you predicted in 1980 about final theories, like this?' I chided him.

'I suggested we might find a complete unified theory, by the end of the century.' Stephen made the transponder laugh dryly. 'Okay, I was wrong. At that time, the best candidate seemed to be $N=8$ supergravity. Now it appears that this theory may be an approximation to a more fundamental theory, of superstrings. I was a bit optimistic, to hope that we would have solved the problem by the end of the century. But I still think there's a fifty-fifty chance that we will find a complete unified theory in the next twenty years.'

'I've always suspected that the structure never ends, as we look to smaller and smaller scales — and neither will the theories.'

'It is possible that there is no ultimate theory of physics at all. Instead, we will keep on discovering new layers of structure. But it seems that physics gets simpler, and more unified, the smaller the scale on which we look. There is an ultimate length scale, the Planck length, below which spacetime may just not be defined. So I think there will be a limit to the number of layers of structure, and there will be some ultimate theory, which we will discover if we are smart enough.'

'Does it seem likely we are smart enough?'

Another grin. 'You will have to get your faith elsewhere.'

'I can't keep up with the torrent of work on superstrings.'

Mathematical physics is like music, which a young and zesty spirit can best seize and use, as did Mozart.

'I try,' he said modestly.

We began discussing recent work on 'baby universes' — bubbles in space time. To us, space-time is like the sea seen from an ocean liner, smooth and serene.

Up close, though, it's waves and bubbles. At extremely fine scales, pockets and bubbles of spacetime can form at random, sputtering into being, then dissolving. Arcane details of particle physics suggest that sometimes — rarely, but inevitably — these bubbles could grow.

This might have happened a lot at the instant just immediately after the Big Bang. Indeed, some properties of our universe may have been created by the space-time foam that roiled through those infinitesimally split seconds. Studying this possibility uses the 'worm-hole calculus', which samples the myriad possible frothing bubbles (and their connections, called wormholes).

Averaging over this foam in a mathematical sense, Stephen and others have tried to find out whether a final, rather benign universe like ours was an inevitable outcome of that early turbulence. The jury isn't in on this point, and may be out forever — the calculations are tough, guided by intuition rather than facts. Deciding whether they really meaningfully predict anything is a matter of taste. This recalls Oscar Wilde's aphorism, that in matters of great import, style is always more important than substance.

If this picture of the first split second is remotely right, much depends on the energy content of the foam. The energy to blow up these bubbles would be compensated by an opposite, negative energy, which comes from the gravitational attraction of all the matter in the bubble. If the outward pressure just balances the inward attraction (a pressure, really) of the mass, then you could get a universe much like ours — rather mild, with space-time flat on such relatively tiny scales as our solar system, and even flat on the size range of our galaxy.

It turns out that such bubbles could even form right now. An entirely separate space-time could pop into existence in your living room, say. It would start unimaginably small, then balloon to the size of a cantaloupe — but not before your very eyes, because for quite fundamental reasons, you can't see it.

'They don't form in space, of course,' Stephen said. 'It doesn't mean anything to ask where in space these things occur.'

'They're cut off from us, after we make them,' I said. 'No relics, no fossil?'

'I do not think there could be.'

'Like an ungrateful child who doesn't write home.' When talking about immensities, I sometimes grasp for something human.

'It would not form in our space, but rather as another space-time.'

We discussed for a while some speculations about this I had put into two novels, *Cosm* and *Timescape*. I had used Cambridge and the British scientific style in *Timescape*, published in 1980, before

these ideas became current. I had arrived at them in part from some wide-ranging talks I had enjoyed with Stephen — all suitably disguised, of course. Such enclosed space-times I had termed 'onion universes', since in principle they could have further locked-away space-times inside them, too, and so on. It is an odd sensation when a guess turns out to have some substance — as much as anything as gossamer as these ideas can be said to be substantial. Again, the image of mathematical physics as French impressionism.

'So they form and go,' I mused. 'Vanish. Between us and these other universes lies absolute nothingness, in the exact sense — no space or time, no matter, no energy.'

'There can be no way to reach them,' his flat voice said. 'The gulf between us and them is unbridgeable. It is beyond physics because it is truly nothing, not physical at all.'

The mechanical laugh resounded. Stephen likes the tug of the philosophical, and seemed amused by the notion that universes are simply one of those things that happen from time to time.

His nurse appeared for a bit of physical cleanup, and I left him. Inert confinement to a wheelchair exacts a demeaning toll on dignity, but he showed no reaction to the daily round of being cared for by another in the most intimate way. Perhaps for him, it even helps the mind to slip free of the world's rub.

I sat in the common room outside his office, having tea and talking to some of his postdoctoral students. They were working on similarly wild ideas and were quick, witty, keenly observant as they sipped their strong, dark Ceylonese tea. A sharp crew, perhaps a bit jealous of Stephen's time. They were no doubt wondering who this guy was, nobody they had ever heard of, a Californian with an accent tainted by southern nuances, somebody who worked in astrophysics and plasma physics — which was, in our age of remorseless specialisation, quite a remote province from theirs. I didn't explain; after all, I really had no formal reason to be here, except that we were friends.

Stephen's secretary quietly came out and asked if I would join Stephen for dinner at Caius College. I had intended to eat in my favourite Indian restaurant, where the chicken vindaloo is a purging experience, and then simply rove the walks of Cambridge alone, for I love the atmosphere — but I instantly assented. Dinner at college high table was one of the legendary experiences of England. I could remember keenly each one I had attended; the repartee is sharper than the cutlery.

We made our way through through

the cool, atmospheric turns of the colleges, the worn wood and grey stones reflecting the piping of voices and squeaks of rusty bicycles. In misty twilight, student shouts echoing, his wheelchair jouncing over cobbled streets. He insisted on steering it himself, though his nurse hovered rather nervously. It had never occurred to me just how much of a strain on everyone there can be in round-the-clock care. A few people drifted along behind us, just watching him. 'Take no notice,' his mechanical voice said flatly, 'many of them come here just to stare at me.'

We wound among the ancient stone and manicured gardens, into Caius College. Students entering the dining hall made an eager rumpus. Stephen took the elevator and I ascended the creaking stairs. The faculty entered after the students, me following with the nurse.

The high table is literally so. They carefully placed Stephen with his back to the long, broad tables of undergraduates. I soon realised that this is because watching him eat, with virtually no lip control, is not appetising. He follows a set diet that requires no chewing. His nurse must chop up his food and spoonfeed him.

The dinner was noisy, with the year's new undergraduates staring at the famous Hawking's back. Stephen carried on a matter-of-fact, steady flow of conversation through his keyboard.

He had concerns about physicists' Holy Grail, a unified theory of everything. Even if we could thrash our way through a thicket of mathematics to glimpse its outlines, it might not be specific enough — that is, we would still have a range of choices. Physics could end up dithering over arcane points, undecided, perhaps far from our particular primate experience. Here is where aesthetics might enter.

'If such a theory is not unique, one would have to appeal to some outside principle, which one might call God.'

I frowned. 'Not as the Creator, but as a referee?'

'He would decide which theory was more than just a set of equations, but described a universe that actually exists.'

'This one.'

'Or maybe all possible theories describe universes that exist!' he said with glee. 'It is unclear what it means to say that something exists — in questions like, does there exist a man with two left feet in Cambridge. One can answer this by examining every man in Cambridge. But there is no way that one can decide if a universe exists, if one is not inside it.'

'The space-time Catch-22.'

'So it is not easy to see what meaning

can be given to the question, why does the universe exist. But it is a question that one can't help asking.'

As usual, the ability to pose a question simply and clearly in no way implied a similar answer — or than an answer even existed.

After the dining hall, high table moved to the senior common room upstairs. We relaxed among long, polished table, comfortable padded chairs, the traditional crisp walnuts and ancient aromatic port, Cuban cigars. And somewhat arch conversation, occasionally skewered by a witty interjection from Stephen.

Someone mentioned Stephen Weinberg's statement, in *The First Three Minutes*, that the more we comprehend the universe, the more meaningless it seems. Stephen doesn't agree, and neither do I, but he has a better reason. 'I think it is not meaningful in the first place to say that the universe is pointless, or that it is designed for some purpose.'

I asked, 'No meaning, then, to the pursuit of meaning?'

'To do that would require one to stand outside the universe, which is not possible.'

Again the image of the separation between the observer and the object of study. The gulf. 'Still,' I persisted, 'there amazing structure we can see from inside.'

'The overwhelming impression is of order. The more we discover about the universe, the more we find that it is governed by rational laws. If one liked, one could say that this order was the work of God. Einstein thought so.'

One of the college fellows asked, 'Rational faith?'

Stephen tapped quickly. 'We shouldn't be surprised that conditions in the universe are suitable for life, but this is not evidence that the universe was designed to allow for life. We could call order by the name of God, but it would be an impersonal God. There's not much personal about the laws of physics.'

Walnuts eaten, port drunk, cigars smoked, it was time to go. When we left Stephen guided his wheelchair through the shadowy reaches of the college, indulging my curiosity about a time-honoured undergraduate sport: climbing Cambridge.

At night young men sometimes scrambled among the upper reaches of the steeply steeped old buildings, scaling the most difficult points. They risked their necks, for the glory of it. Quite out of bounds, of course. Part of the thrill is eluding the proctors who scan the rooftops late at night, listening for the

scrape of heels. There is even a booklet about roof-climbing describing the triumphs and centuries-long history.

Stephen took me to a passageway I had been through many times, a short cut toward the Cam river between high, peaked buildings of undergraduate rooms. He said that it was one of the tough events, jumping across that, and then scaling a steep, often slick roof beyond.

The passage looked to be about three metres across. I couldn't imagine leaping that abyss from the slate-dark roofs. And in the dark, too. 'All that distance?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said.

'Anybody ever miss?'

'Yes.'

'Injured?'

'Yes.'

'Killed?'

His eyes twinkled and he gave us a broad smile. 'Yes.' These Cambridge sorts had the real stuff, all right.

In the cool night he recalled some of his favourite science fiction stories. How much stranger the universe was turning out than even those writers had imagined. Even when they discussed the next billion years, they could not guess the odd theories that would spring up within the next generation of physicists.

A week after this evening, I got from Stephen's secretary a transcript of all his remarks. I have used it here to reproduce his style of conversation. Printed out on his wheelchair-computer, his sole link with us, the lines seem to come from a great distance. Across an abyss.

Portraying the flinty faces of science — daunting complexity twinned with numbing wonder — demands both craft and art. Some of us paint with fiction. Stephen paints with his impressionistic views of vast, cool mathematical landscapes. To knit together our fraying times, to span the cultural abyss, demands all these approaches — and more, if we can but invent them.

Stephen had faced daunting physical constrictions with a renewed attack on the large issues, on great sweeps of space and time. Daily he struggled without much fuss against the narrowing that is perhaps the worst element of infirmity. I recalled him rapt with Marilyn, still deeply engaged with life, holding firmly against tides of entropy.

I had learned a good deal from these few days, I realised, and most of it not at all about cosmology.

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The British Boom: What boom? Whose boom?

Thirteen ways of looking at the British Boom

Andrew M. Butler

Andrew Butler, 'the greatest SF critic the galaxy has ever known' (Cheryl Morgan, *Emerald City*) is 'a pipe-smoking, vaguely sarcastic academic' who has a PhD in the works of Philip K. Dick, and has published books on Philip K. Dick, Cyberpunk, Terry Pratchett, Film Studies, and Postmodernism, co-edited books on Terry Pratchett and Ken MacLeod, and has been features editor on *Vector* since 1995. The following article on the British Boom, described by the leading British SF magazine *Interzone* as 'a farrago', won the 2004 Pioneer Award (the Science Fiction Research Association Award for Excellence in Scholarship). In his spare time Andrew teaches Media Studies, Cultural Studies and Digital Culture at Canterbury Christ Church University College. I (BRG) 'met' Andrew first through Acnestis, the prestigious British amateur publishing association. He has visited Melbourne twice in recent years, and is welcome back any time.



Andrew M. Butler, speaking at Aussiecon Three, 1999. (Photo: Paul Billinger.)

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1. 'There certainly seems to be something of a boom. To a certain extent these things are always artefacts — there's no objective criteria by which one can judge "boom-ness" (boomitude? Boomosity?) — so the fact that everyone's talking about it is to a certain extent definitional of the fact that something's going on' (China Miéville in Butler, 'Beyond' 7).

2. Mapping the Terrain

It is asserted that there is currently a boom within British science fiction — by editors, by critics, by authors, by readers, in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* and in the publicity for some events at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London in May 2003. Let us assume that this is not a mass delusion, and there is indeed a boom. The Boom is thought of mostly as a British Science Fiction Boom, and to limit it to this genre is clearly within the parameters of a journal named *Science Fiction Studies*. But there is also a parallel boom within fantasy and horror, as well as within children's fiction — dominated by the hype surrounding the publication of the fourth and fifth Harry Potter novels by J. K. Rowling and the fact that the third volume of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *The Amber Spyglass* (2000), won the overall Whitbread Prize, the first children's book to do so.¹ We could no doubt make a case for other, less cognate, genres. What we also need to remember is the generic slippage and interchange that goes on within adult and children's science fiction, fantasy and horror.

It is impossible to draw a clear, stable boundary around these distinct and overlapping booms, to subsume them within a single movement, but that is

what, with the clarity of hindsight and the demand for narrative convenience, we do with Romanticism and Modernism. What this article sets out to do is to survey the terrain from a variety of perspectives, in the hope that this will help to give some indication of the phenomenon's scope and characteristics. The Boom contains cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk, cyberpunk-flavored fiction, steampunk, splatterpunk, space opera, hard sf, soft sf, feminist sf, utopias, dystopias, anti-utopias, apocalypses, cosy catastrophes, uncomfortable catastrophes, *Bildungsromans*, New Wave-style writing, planetary romances, alternate histories, big dumb objects, comedies, tragedies, slipstream, horror, fantasy and any combination of generic hybrids and cross-breeds. Hopefully a series of micronarratives about Boom writing and writers will avoid the dangers of prescription in an era when the macronarrative or metanarrative is no longer achievable or desirable.

It is worth first comparing the Boom with two other movements within science fiction. The British New Wave in science fiction is primarily associated with the Michael Moorcock era of *New Worlds* magazine from 1964 onwards, dissipating at some point in the 1970s — the experimental writings of J. G. Ballard, Moorcock, Barrington Bayley, Brian Aldiss, John Brunner, and visiting Americans Thomas M. Disch, John Sladek, Pamela Zoline, and Norman Spinrad. If Moorcock can be said to be its polemicist, its Ezra Pound figure, then Ballard was its resident T. S. Eliot — although arguably the New Wave had found its creed in Ballard's 1962 guest editorial where he argued that 'science fiction must jettison its present narrative forms and plots [. . .] It is *inner* space not outer, that needs to be explored. The only truly alien planet is Earth' (117). Langdon Jones's *The New SF: An Original Anthology of Modern Speculative Fiction* (1969) anthology can stand as its archetypal collection. *New Worlds* did continue to publish non-New Wave material, but writers

The Boom is thought of mostly as a British Science Fiction Boom . . . but there is also a parallel boom within fantasy and horror, as well as within children's fiction.

such as Robert Presslie, Don Malcolm and John Phillifent were more or less silenced. A movement can exclude as well as include; indeed different hailers of the Boom have their own list of exclusions.

In the previous paragraph I specified *British New Wave*, because the application of the term to American writing has led to some confusion. Certainly Judith Merrill, in her *Best of SF* anthologies, was looking to Britain for material, exposure to which may have led to a greater experimentation in form in US science fiction. There was a growing permissiveness that led to a greater willingness to explore sexual themes within sf. One product of this was Harlan Ellison's groundbreaking anthology *Dangerous Visions* (1967), in which taboos (for the science fiction market) were broken. This, along with a growing divide between hard and soft science fiction, has led to a retrospective acknowledgment of an American New Wave, which could include 'Aldiss, Ballard, Disch, Delany, Heinlein [sic] and on' (Brooke-Rose 99) or Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, Thomas M. Disch and Samuel Delany (Pfeil).² Broadly speaking the American New Wave seems to be a new kind of content, a paradigmatic New Wave, and the British one a new kind of structure, a syntagmatic New Wave. In turn it should be noted that British and American perceptions of the Boom are different.

The second movement is cyberpunk. It might be true that Bruce Bethke was the first to use the word cyberpunk — the title of a manuscript circulating in the early 1980s — and that it was Gardner Dozois who was the first to use the term to refer to a group of writers, but for the larger critical community it began with William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984). Meanwhile Bruce Sterling circulated a fanzine, *Cheap Truth* (1983–86), edited as by Vincent Omniaveritas, which critiqued much existing sf and set out the grounds for cyberpunk — although it was not until issue 12 that cyberpunk was mentioned. In the final issue Omniaveritas declared cyberpunk to be dead, with *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*

(1986) as its tombstone. Indeed, many of the stories within the collection hardly conform to the concept of cyberpunk as it is now understood. In the years since, many other writers have been labeled as cyberpunk, post-cyberpunk or cyberpunk-flavored, irrespective of their connection to the original impulse. Here we have a model of how a movement can begin almost as a hobbyhorse, grow through association with a number of writers, and then explode beyond the control of its originators — and be increasingly difficult to define as cyberpunk.

The Boom has no resident polemicist (although M. John Harrison, China Miéville and others have found spaces to talk about it³), no key writer (although some would suggest Miéville), and no defining anthology or magazine (although *Interzone* could take some of the credit). Even such a thing as a starting point has yet to be agreed. Mark Bould has outlined a number of starting points between 1982 and 1995 (Bould, 'Boom' 308–9) and each of these starting points would lead to a different conceptualization of the boom. A writer like Mary Gentle found success with *Ash: A Secret History* (1999), winning among others the British Science Fiction Association Award, which ought to put her smack into the British Boom — although she's been a highly regarded writer since the 1980s and was first published in 1977. Perhaps we should borrow Borges's terminology and speak of precursors to the Boom, even of work precursive to the Boom. There are a number of writers — Brian Aldiss, J. G. Ballard, M. John Harrison and Christopher Priest, among others — who have been successful in the past and are now enjoying a renewed period of success or republication. There is also the problem as to whether the British Boom should only include British-born writers, or be expanded to include writers from the United States (Pat Cadigan, Tricia Sullivan, Molly Brown) or Canada (John Clute, Geoff Ryman) who have become long-time resident in the UK. Whilst many of the writers within the Boom know each other, there are varying degrees of influence and social connection. Some of them do have lunch together on a weekly basis, but that is as much the bonds of friendship as the secret powerhouse of a movement.

3. A (Partial) Census

Joan Aiken, Brian Aldiss, David Almond, Joe Ahearne, Chris Amies, Tom Arden, Neal Asher, Steve Aylett, Wilhelmina Baird, Cherith Baldry, J. G. Ballard, Iain M. Banks, James Barclay, Clive Barker, Paul Barnett/John Grant, Stephen Baxter, Malorie Blackman, Stephen Bowkett,

Chaz Brenchley, Keith Brooke/Nick Gifford, Christopher Brookmyre, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Eugene Byrne, Pat Cadigan, Richard Calder, Mark Chadbourn, Simon Clark, Susanna Clarke, John Clute, Michael Cobley, Steve Cockayne, Storm Constantine, Louise Cooper, Paul Cornell, Gillian Cross, Peter Crowther, Russell T. Davies, Jack Deighton, Peter Dickinson, Eric Evans, Jasper Fforde, Christopher Fowler, Maggie Furey, Neil Gaiman, Stephen Gallagher, David S. Garnett/David Ferring, Mary Gentle, Debi Gliori, Muriel Gray, Colin Greenland, Nicola Griffith, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Peter F. Hamilton, M. John Harrison, Robert Holdstock, Tom Holland, Tom Holt, Lesley Howarth, Eva Ibbotson, Simon Ings, Brian Jacques, Robin Jarvis, Ben Jeapes, Diana Wynne Jones, Gwyneth Jones/Ann Halam, Graham Joyce, Peter Kalu, Garry Kilworth, William King, David Langford, Tanith Lee, Roger Levy, James Lovegrove/J. M. S. Lovegrove, Brian Lumley, Ian R. MacLeod, Ken MacLeod, Jan Mark, Graham Masterton, Paul McAuley, Geraldine McCaughrean, Ian McDonald, Juliet E. McKenna, Robin McKinley, John Meaney, China Miéville, Martin Millar/Martin Scott, David Mitchell, Michael Moorcock, Alan Moore, Simon Morden, Richard Morgan, Grant Morrison, Kim Newman/Jack Yeovil, William Nicholson, Jenny Nimmo, Jeff Noon, Daniel O'Mahoney, Darren O'Shaughnessy/Darren Shan, Stephen Palmer, K. J. Parker, Terry Pratchett, Christopher Priest, Philip Pullman, Robert Rankin, Philip Reeve, Alastair Reynolds, Chris Riddell, Philip Ridley, Adam Roberts/A. R. R. Roberts, Katherine Roberts, Justina Robson, J. K. Rowling, Nicholas Royle, Geoff Ryman, Jan Siegel, Alison Sinclair, Gus Smith, Michael Marshall Smith, Brian Stableford/Brian Craig/Francis Amery, Paul Stewart, Charles Stross, Tricia Sullivan/Valery Leith, Brian Talbot, Sue Thomas, Karen Traviss, Lisa Tuttle, Jo Walton, Ian Watson, John Whitbourn, Liz Williams, John Wilson, David Wingrove, Chris Wooding.

4. The Long Wave

The history of science fiction in Britain has been traced back to *Frankenstein* (Aldiss 1973), to *Paradise Lost* (Roberts, *Science Fiction*) and even to *Utopia* (Kincaid, 'More'; although Malory's *Le Mort d'Arthur* [1485] is the root fantastical text in Kincaid, *British 7*). None of these ur-texts was consciously written as science fiction. The various scientific romances of the last thirty years or so of the nineteenth century were often prompted by impulses which we would now recognize as science fictional; H. G. Wells's writings could stand as a definitive starting point



SET EDITORIAL COMMENT: The British New Wave — did it ever disappear? Compare the cover for *New Worlds* 178, December 1967/January 1968 (by Charles Platt and Christopher Finch) with the cover for *Interzone* 188, April 2003 (by Judith Clute). Okay, no nudes on *Interzone* covers; the cutup effect is achieved digitally rather than with scissors and paste; and the names on the covers have changed. But who could doubt that British SF is still Cool Britannia after 35 short years?

were it not that this would seem a nationalistic move. The American domination of the genre coalesces in *Amazing Stories* in 1926, but some British writers did contribute to the sf pulp magazines — most notably John Wyndham, Eric Frank Russell, and Arthur C. Clarke — and tried to meet the demands of the US market. Only with the onset of the New Wave in the 1960s did British science fiction begin to make an impact upon the way that generic science fiction perceived itself, in the writings of Moorcock, Aldiss, and Ballard. The moment did not last, however, and after a brief period of success in the early 1970s, the market for British sf collapsed. Brian Stableford cites the 1978 special All-British issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* with its article by Brian Aldiss celebrating the wealth of professional British authors: 'Ian Watson, Andrew Stephenson, Robert Holdstock, Chris Morgan, Mark Adlard, Bob Shaw and Philip Dunn [. . .] Richard Cowper, Edmund Cooper, Christopher Priest, Duncan Lunan, Laurence James, Barrington Bayley, Michael Coney, D. G. Compton, Angus Wells and M. John Harrison' (21). But, as Stableford notes, most of them had already produced their best work or would disappear until the 1980s or later, having reinvented themselves as fantasists. Adlard has not published a novel since *The*

Greenlander (1978), the first of a projected trilogy, Compton was only occasionally published after 1975 and few now will know the names of Morgan, Dunn and Lunan as writers of fiction. The Holdstock and Priest-edited anthology *Stars of Albion* coincided with the World Science Fiction Convention being held in Brighton in 1979, but it was the last gasp of the market. *New Worlds* was no more — there were four, irregular issues between 1978 and 1979 — and since the only other British science fiction magazine, *Science Fiction Monthly*, and its replacement, *SF Digest*, had both closed in 1976, the only outlets for written British science fiction was the book and anthology markets and overseas sales.

In 1981 a group of fans, critics and writers based in Leeds — David Pringle,

Simon Ounsley, Alan Dorey, and Graham James — decided to take the profits of the Yorcon II convention to set up a new magazine. Meanwhile in London, Malcolm Edwards pitched the idea for a new magazine to the BSFA (then chaired by Alan Dorey) and brought John Clute, Colin Greenland, and Roz Kaveney in as associate editors. The BSFA plan having come to nothing, the eight banded together to set up a quarterly magazine that they eventually called *Interzone* (see Pringle and Terran for more on this). Inevitably it suffered comparisons to *New Worlds*; in part it was championing former New Wave writers such as Aldiss, Ballard, Sladek, and Disch. Many of the stories it published in the early days had the downbeat endings typical of much if not the bulk of British science fiction since the Second World War. The *Interzone* editorial collective dwindled until Pringle became the main editor, but the magazine went from strength to strength, going bimonthly in 1988 and monthly in 1990. Other professional magazines have emerged: among others *Extro* (which published three issues in Northern Ireland in 1982), *Back Brain Recluse* (edited by Chris Reed from 1984 and linked to the small press scene), *The Gate* (1989–91), *SF Nexus* (1993–1994, which merged with *Interzone*), *Amaranth*, *Spectrum* (paid for by editor Paul Fraser), *Od-*

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yssey and 3SF (published in 2002–03 by Ben Jeapes's Big Engine small press). There is also TTA, also known as *The Third Alternative*, which is more geared to dark fantasy and horror. However, *Interzone* is the only paper-based science fiction magazine to keep a regular schedule over a sustained period of time in Britain.⁴

Among the British writers who carved out their science fiction writing careers in the magazine were S. M. — later Stephen — Baxter, Keith Brooke, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, Eugene Byrne, Richard Calder, Nicola Griffith, Peter F. Hamilton, Simon Ings, Graham Joyce, Paul McAuley, Ian MacLeod, Ian McDonald, Kim Newman, Alastair Reynolds, and Charles Stross, leading to what *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* called 'a second new wave of UK SF' (Clute and Nicholls 622). Their writing was diverse in scope, yet within an identifiably British mode: for example Baxter wrote hard sf within his Xeelee sequence and has been compared to Clarke, McAuley has tried his hand over the years at hard sf, steampunk, and technothrillers, and Newman and Byrne mapped out alternate histories rooted in British popular culture. As if giving this new generation of writers a regular market was not enough, Pringle branched out into editing role-playing game tie-ins with the Warhammer series of novels and anthologies, giving Kim Newman, David Garnett, Brian Stableford, and Ian Watson opportunities to write novels in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and many others of the *Interzone* generation another market for short stories (Baxter, 'Freedom').

After this generation of short story writers began to publish novels, they were joined by a series of writers who had not first appeared in *Interzone*, though in some cases not for the want of trying. Iain M. Banks had begun as an *enfant terrible* with the publication of his controversial *The Wasp Factory* (1984), and followed it up with the sf-tinged *Walking on Glass* (1985) and *The Bridge* (1986), before publishing his space opera *Consider Phlebas* (1987). Jeff Noon — previously known only for winning the Mobil Playwriting prize at the Manchester Royal Exchange Theatre in 1985 with his Falklands play *Woundings* — wrote a novel called *Vurt* (1993), which launched a new Manchester-based publisher called Ringpull and became a cult hit. He followed this up with *Pollen* (1995), but it was not enough to save the publisher from bankruptcy. Ken MacLeod, a friend of Iain M. Banks since childhood, launched his first novel *The Star Fraction* (1995) at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, a convention that saw Pringle's *Interzone* finally winning a

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Hugo and Noon winning the John W. Campbell Award. Since then Jon Courtenay Grimwood and China Miéville have both begun having novels published without a visible track record of short stories.

From its nadir in 1977 and 1978, British science fiction has spent two decades rebuilding itself and finally is being taken notice of again. It is worth quoting Brian Stableford here:

The writers [...] felt that science fiction had been labouring too long under artificial constraints, held back by the walls of the 'pulp ghetto' and subjected to the unreasonable contempt of literary critics. They were longing to break free, to carry the cause of science fiction forward to a position of honour and prestige that it had been unjustly denied. They [had . . .] the conviction that the tide had turned, and that the battle — although not yet won — was theirs for the taking. [...] It looked as if the last barriers to the progress of the genre had been removed — and the one thing no one could imagine was that new ones would be raised against it (21).

This passage has much of the same rhetoric of the current generation of writers considered to be part of the Boom. However, Stableford is talking about the

perspective of the New Wave writers in 1970, looking forward with boundless optimism. By 1975 that optimism was misplaced, and there is no guarantee that the current Boom will continue indefinitely.

5. British British vs US British Boom

One thing that has become clear to me in discussing the state of British science fiction at various locations on both sides of the Atlantic, is that there are two different perceptions of the Boom in terms of the market place. At a discussion panel at the ICFA in 2002 I noted that two writers had blazed a trail for best-selling science fiction and fantasy prior to the contemporary boom, Terry Pratchett from *The Colour of Magic* (1983) and Iain M. Banks. But Pratchett has been through a whole series of different American publishers, suggesting that he has not sold consistently, and Banks seems to be a name that had not broken as much in the United States as it has in the UK. It almost feels that the leg-up apparently given to Ken MacLeod by Banks in the UK has been reversed in the United States; MacLeod's Fall Revolution Quartet may have been published in a different order but it has now all been published, and first US editions of the Engines of Light trilogy have followed swiftly upon the British. In Britain MacLeod has been perceived as one of a number of Marxist or left-wing writers that also includes Gwyneth Jones, Adam Roberts, and Miéville, but in the USA it is his libertarian interests that seem to have caught attention.

It is likely that a large number of the names I have listed in section 3 remain unpublished in the USA, but equally many British writers have been able to sell in New York what has not sold in London. Ian McDonald, Manchester-born but based in Northern Ireland and first published by *Extro* in 1982, sold his story collection *Empire Dreams* (1988) and his first novel *Desolation Road* (1988) to American publishers, prior to any British publication. Equally Ian R. MacLeod was able to enter the US book market well before the British one. His story 'Through' was published in the July/August 1989 issue of *Interzone*, but his first books were the collection *Voyages by Starlight* (1997), mostly collecting stories from *Asimov's* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and the novel *The Great Wheel* (1997). It was not until Summer 2003 that *The Light Ages* marked his novel debut in Britain.

There is clearly a complex interplay between the British and United States markets, with either side at various points appearing to the other country to dominate the genre. The perception from British writers and readers during the 1980s and early 1990s was that they could

not sell their work in the US because they were perceived as being too-British; this ironically was at a time when American steampunks such as Blaylock and Jeter could set novels in Victorian London. Not only did Gibson's novels include near-future British settings, but also several of them were first published in book form in Britain. Bruce Sterling, the cyberpunk subgenre's best polemicist, clearly saw British writers Ballard and John Brunner as forebears, and wrote columns for *Interzone*. It might even be argued that the downbeat endings of *Neuromancer* (1984) and other cyberpunk novels owe something to British sensibilities. At a panel I chaired on British science fiction in the 1980s and 1990s at the 1999 Eastercon, a member of the audience argued that, 'we, from the American side of the Atlantic, look on Britain as being a hot house of cyberpunk' (Butler, Brown and Billinger 13; see also Cobley).

6. Cool Britannia?

Perhaps American eyes were also looking across the water because of the fuss about Cool Britannia.

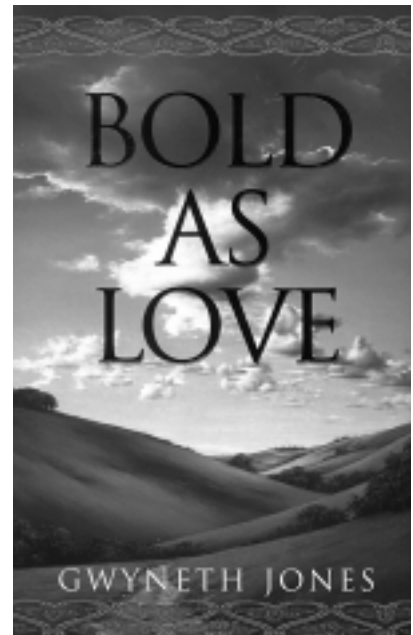
The British New Wave seemed focused on and drew imagery from Swinging London, although many of the successful bands and musicians had emanated from Liverpool. Perhaps by coincidence, the Boom emerged during a renewed period of optimism about the cultural significance of Britain. This time the musical powerhouse was Manchester and there was a cross-fertilization of psychedelia in the forms of acid house and rave, as well as the guitar-based lad bands such as The Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses of the Manchester/Madchester indie music scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rivalries emerged between the music scenes of Manchester, Sheffield, Hull, and Bristol, among other late industrial cities, and the ultra-hip Camden, London. The Mancunian band Oasis — centered on the Gallagher brothers — went head to head on chart success with the southern art school mockney Blur and came out on top. Oasis looked back to the chords and tunes of The Beatles and the Liverpool scene whereas Blur drew lyrically on predecessors such as The Kinks. Both had a sense of Englishness about them, as did Pulp, but an Englishness that was capable of being read ironically. Their vast audiences were being eyed by a Labour Party trying to pull itself together after their defeat by the grey man John Major of the Conservative party who on any rational level was surely unelectable.⁵

Jeff Noon's position in Manchester surely helped him in the mid-1990s, in a period when publishing houses outside of London appeared to be thriving. *Vurt* could have been plotted on an A to Z map

of Manchester: focused on the broken glass and dog excrement surrounding the tenements in Hulme and the Moss Side crescents which had seen riots in the 1980s, and had become the province of the squatter, the dealer, the student and the infirm, to a soundtrack of pounding bass. Within a few years of the publication of *Vurt*, urban renewal came to the area and the crescents and tenements were demolished to make way for prettier low-rise flats. Whether the battle against glass and dog excrement will be won remains to be seen. The novel also featured the club scene that had been dominated by the Hacienda in Manchester. Noon in time abandoned Manchester for Brighton, which increasingly became the music capital in terms of DJ culture and a thriving club and gay scene. He also temporarily abandoned sf after *Pixel Juice: Stories from the Avant Pulp* (1998), although *Falling Out of Cars* (2002) saw a return to the genre.

The sense of place in Noon was duplicated by other novelists who lived outside London. Before Peter Hamilton turned to his monumental *Night's Dawn* trilogy (1996–99) he had set the *Quantum Murder* trilogy (1993–95) in a near-future Rutland — a county that had been disappeared in the reorganization of local government in 1974 and reappeared in a further reorganization in 1997. Nicola Griffith's *Slow River* (1995), written in the United States, recreated her previous home of Hull and the landmarks, including the Polar Bear pub, of the Avenues/Spring Bank area of the city. Stephen Palmer's *Memory Seed* (1996) disguised Anglesey and north-east Wales as a post-apocalyptic city and landscape.

Meanwhile there was the shared experience of the final defeat of the much-hated Conservative government in the landslide Labour victory of the 1997 General Election. For weeks the phatic was dominated by the question: 'Were you up for Portillo?' — referring to the unseating in the early hours of the morning by the openly gay Labour candidate Stephen Twigg of arch-Conservative MP, Michael Portillo, widely assumed to be a closeted gay. The pleasure taken in the defeat of specific Conservatives blinded many to the ironic possibilities inherent in Labour's choice of 'Things Can Only Get Better' as their victory anthem. After a brief early period of radicalism in the form of the introduction of a minimum wage (compromised as it was) and other reforms, New Labour seemed to progress to putting Conservative-type policies into practice. Portillo, in the meantime, read Marcel Proust and seems to have reinvented himself as a compassionate Conservative, more caring than and apparently to the left of the Blairite Twigg. New Labour quickly became a political



party more interested in big business than unions, and in being tougher than their Conservative predecessors.

Whilst some British sf writers may have been carried along by the publicity of Cool Britannia, and, with some exceptions, the default position of contemporary British science fiction writers is on the left, it is difficult to think of a British science fiction writer sympathetic to the Blairite cause. Blair's love affair with celebrities, including Oasis and other pop stars, must in part be Gwyneth Jones's inspiration for her near-future fantasy *Bold as Love* (2001) and its sequels, in which pop stars of a more sixties vintage share power. China Miéville stood as a Socialist Alliance candidate in Kensington and Chelsea and was hailed by the London *Evening Standard* (not known for its leftist tendencies) as the sexiest man in British politics (Renton 25).

7. Eclipse

Nature abhors a vacuum. It seemed clearest in the announcement of the novels shortlisted for the Hugo Awards in May 2001: *A Storm of Swords* by George R. R. Martin, *Calculating God* by Robert J. Sawyer, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* by J. K. Rowling, *Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson and *The Sky Road* by Ken MacLeod. Martin was the only American writer; the rest included two Canadians and two British writers. The eventual winner was J. K. Rowling — the first British recipient of the award since Arthur C. Clarke in 1980, indeed only the third British recipient after Clarke (who had also won in 1974) and Brunner in 1969. Generic American science fiction appeared to be in some kind of trouble.

Cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk still dominated the 1990s sf scene in America, and a series of writers were being com-

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pared to both William Gibson and Quentin Tarantino. No new movement seems to have come along to replace it, and many of the big writers of the 1980s seem to have been diverted into sequels to books by other writers and media tie-ins. Gibson is mapping a trajectory for the mainstream, and Neal Stephenson's output is slowing. The philosophizing that underlay Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars* (1992) expanded through the rest of the trilogy, and dominated *Antarctica* (1997); what many had first perceived as hard sf had become much more cerebral and politicized. For whatever reason the genre seemed to losing its buzz.

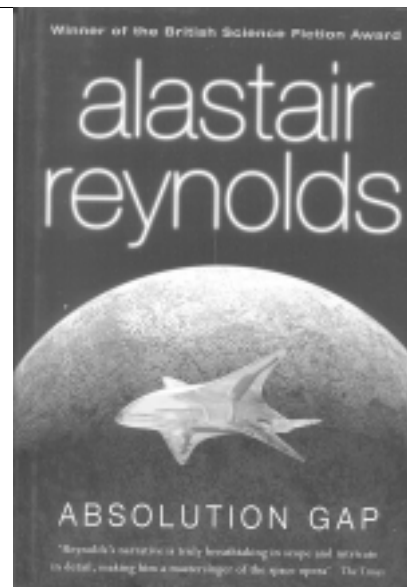
Pages of magazines, pages in journals, slots at conferences still had to be filled, and so editors, critics and academics were casting around for new writers to interview or write about. At first the smart money was on Australian science fiction, boosted by the 1999 Melbourne Worldcon, the anthologies *Dreaming Down Under* (1998) and *Centaurus: The Best of Australian Science Fiction* (1999) and the non-fiction *The MUP Encyclopedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (1998) and *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999). Janeen Webb, co-editor of *Dreaming Down Under*, wrote that: 'Whether we have somehow arrived in the much discussed new Golden Age or are undergoing an entirely different occurrence remains to be seen, but we are certainly experiencing one of those spikes in literary output that occur when conditions are right' (114). Greg Egan, Sean McMullen, and Stephen Dedman were the three names to watch. Instead the eclipse of American genre sf allowed British talent to shine through, marked by Charles N. Brown's assertion in conversation that only British writers were being interviewed for *Locus*.⁶

8. Remix

To some extent a genre is always parodic of itself. Just as parodies and pastiches depend on the reproduction and recognition of particular codes and conventions, so does writing within a given genre. The codes of genre science fiction, whilst they may look back to Shelley, Poe, Verne, and Wells, were largely formulated in American pulp fiction magazines, within the period of the emergence of America from the isolationism of the 1920s to becoming one of the world superpowers in the aftermath of the Second World War. One man, with his wits, and his bare hands if necessary, can bring down an empire, and save the world. Except in short-lived marketplaces that have existed within Britain and the Commonwealth, there is a sense that British writers have had to parody American formulae to make their way in the marketplace — during the period in which the British lost an empire.

Some authors have foregrounded this parodic intent in their writings; Ian McDonald clearly drew on Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) for *Desolation Road* (1988), as well as elements of Gabriel García Márquez, and *Hearts, Hands and Voices* (1992) drew on works by Geoff Ryman, most notably *The Child Garden* (1989) and *The Unconquered Country* (1986). McDonald's Northern Ireland-set *Sacrifice of Fools* (1996) mixes the police procedural with the sexual politics of Gwyneth Jones's Aleutian trilogy (1991–97), which in itself offered a response to Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). McDonald's remix aesthetic, which draws to some extent on music culture of the 1980s to date, puts little store in originality, but more in the skilful blending of the individual elements. Adam Roberts, a self-acknowledged fan of McDonald, is the author of four novels to date, including *Salt* (2000), which owes debts to *Dune* (1965) and Le Guin, *On* (2001), which echoes Christopher Priest's *Inverted World* (1974), and *Polystom* (2003), which echoes Bob Shaw's Ragged Astronauts trilogy (1986–89), as well as having virtues of their own.

But perhaps where British science fiction has become most systematically parodic and revisionary is in its revival of the subgenre of space opera, which had been more or less relegated to the sidelines as contaminated by media sf — *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and so forth. Iain M. Banks's *Consider Phlebas* had the sort of galaxy-spanning plot that we had perhaps thought was no longer possible. As Ken MacLeod writes in his introduction to the German edition: 'Space opera — the colourful, violent, galaxy-spanning space opera so many of us had read when younger, and which Brian Aldiss has



called “widescreen baroque”, was evidently back with a bang. And moreover, it was up-to-date, well-written, fast, and cool’ (MacLeod, ‘Phlebas’ 2). But the novel, which introduced the left-of-center, post-scarcity, utopian empire known as the Culture, is deceptive. The mercenary hero, Bora Horza Gobuchal, is actually fighting for the wrong side, against the Culture, but is brought in from the cold by the end of the book, if only in the name of a spaceship. Having established the peaceful, utopian, game-playing tendencies of the Culture — usually viewed from the outside — Banks then increasingly undercuts this in his portrayals of the processes by which other civilizations join the Culture. Sure, it is a utopia that these civilizations join, but the dice are loaded so that it seems in these civilizations’ interests that they do join — and in later volumes the Culture’s dirty tricks are more exposed. What begins as a left-wing, anti-imperialist utopia ends up in self-critique.

By then there was also Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty* (1990), a caper that featured Tabitha Jute and her spaceship, Alice, who owes a debt to McCaffery's ship who sang as well as to Lewis Carroll. Jute is persuaded to transport a troupe of players from Plenty to Titan and is caught up in intrigue and criminal deeds, among the canals of Mars and the steaming jungles of Venus, which are inspired more by Edgar Rice Burroughs than *New Scientist* or *Nature*. As Rachel Pollack wrote in her review: ‘the writer must play with or work against what has gone before’ (Pollack 102). Having won both the Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA Awards for this novel, Greenland eventually bowed to popular pressure and brought back Jute in *Seasons of Plenty* (1995) and *Mother of Plenty* (1998). Unfortunately the audience were less receptive this time round — or Greenland's grafting of a trilogy structure on to a standalone novel failed. More successful was *Harm's Way* (1993),

There is a 'can't do' spirit that infuses much of British society . . . There is something in the British character that loves a loser — Captain Scott, who did not get to the South Pole first, Eddie the Eagle, the world's worst ski jumper . . .

a steampunk tale where ships sail the solar winds around the system.

Space opera is also the starting point for Alastair Reynolds's novels, beginning with *Revelation Space* (2000). Dan Sylveste is a tough archaeologist and scientist, risking the lives of his team in his exploration of an extinct civilization on the colony world Resurgam. It is not long before his past and local politics catch up with him, but it is clear that the previous species died out for a reason. It might be that he will not have time to investigate this as both an assassin with an anonymous client and the crew of a spaceship, *Nostalgia for Infinity*, with its half-dead captain are on his trail — always assuming that whatever caused the extinction of a space-faring species will not happen again. As Paul Billinger notes in his review 'the most sympathetic character is a professional killer' (30), and no one is entirely who they seem: Sylveste is a modified clone of his lost father and has various other copies of his father, and has lied about his experience with the revelation space of the title; the triumvirate deputizing on *Nostalgia for Infinity* have their own motives; the assassin, press-ganged by one of the triumvirate, is not letting on about her true profession. As in Banks's space opera, it is no longer possible to identify heroes and villains with any certainty.

9. The 'Can't Do' Spirit

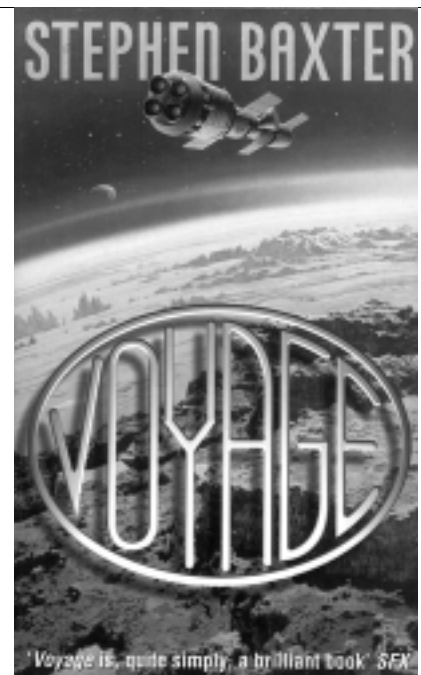
If the United States has been going through a period of expanding influence over the last century, with each new problem just a challenge to be solved, then Britain is very much a country that is declining, that can only see the problem. There is a 'can't do' spirit that infuses much of British society, largely from our experience of declining public services (that seem strong across Europe). Britain is in a unique position with three different international structures: we are the junior power in the special relationship with the United States, we are the often-despised begetter

of a Commonwealth of Nations (who delight in defeating us at cricket), and we are the odd one out in the European Union, resisting integration and clinging on to our pounds and ounces decades after we agreed to go metric in the 1960s and to our decimalized pounds (whilst still mourning shillings). There is something in the British character that loves a loser — Captain Scott, who did not get to the South Pole first, Eddie the Eagle, the world's worst ski jumper, and numerous others. There are also the internal divisions as well — the distinct countries of England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, each with their own north-south, east-west or other divides. As a fractured country yet to relocate its rôle, pessimism is the only course to take.

The fracturedness reflects the multicultural nature of Britain, with some attempt to represent the diversity of personal identity. John Meaney, for example, attempts to imagine diversity within alien species rather than seeing them all as other; there are nationalities, different cultures, subgroups, factions, and so forth. That being said, Peter Kalu is probably the only Black British science fiction writer, and the list of Boom writers is rather chappist — most of the female writers listed in section three are part of the children's market. The male writers are at least attempting to portray female characters, including a series of lesbian lead characters such as Greenland's Tabitha Jute, Malise Arnim in Simon Ings's *Hot Head* (1992), and the central characters of Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*. There is a nod towards Islam in several books, including *Hot Head*, and to the new Europe in Ings's *Headlong* (1999), Paul McAuley's *Fairyland* (1995), and Gwyneth Jones's *Kairos* (1988/1995).

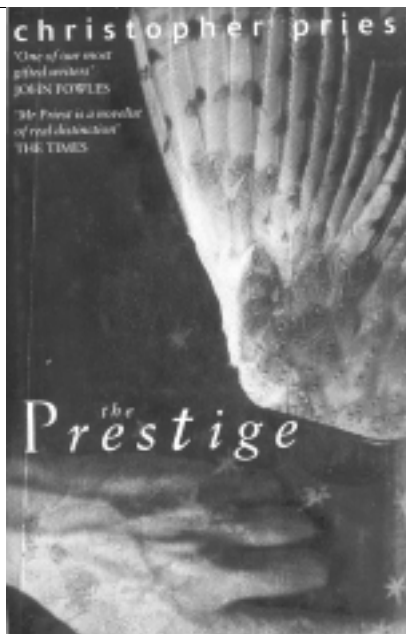
In Ings' work there is a portrayal of life after the cyberpunk future: after the machines have gone out of control and chips have been banned in *Hot Head*. In *Headlong*, Christopher and Joanne Yale have been made redundant, and their chips have been removed. After they both begin to suffer from Epistemic Appetite Imbalance, Joanne dies and Christopher sets out to investigate, keeping one step ahead of European Union agents. The novel, told in retrospect from somewhere in Leeds, is suffused with a nostalgia for the posthuman. Technology is not bad — you cannot live without it — but it is unlikely to make life any easier.

Stephen Baxter's alt.space stories show part of the tension between hope and pessimism at work. He is clearly sorry that the Apollo moon missions ended and that human exploration did not continue further into the solar system. In various short stories, as well as *Voyage* (1996) and *Titan* (1997), he creates



futures (and pasts) where the program continues, where humanity makes it to Mars and even to Titan. If only for dramatic reasons, these are hardly triumphant missions; Baxter imagines a future where more money went into space missions but also where more disasters also occurred. His attitude seems ambivalent: 'though in some ways *Voyage* for me was an exercise in wish-fulfillment, I found I could no longer believe whole-heartedly that throwing humans at Mars regardless would necessarily be a Good Thing' (Baxter, alt.space 19). From the stories as a whole a curious sense of nostalgia emerges — for failures that never happened, for lost opportunities for things to go wrong. In *Titan* there is an utterly convincing portrayal of the harshness of space, the dangers of exploration and penultimately an almost Stapledonian sweep of a universe without humanity. Alas, for many of us, Baxter finds a happy ending — which for me is more interesting for its failure than its success.

There's a curious and not entirely convincing eucatastrophic closure to Roger Levy's first novel, *Reckless Sleep* (2000), which might almost owe a debt to *Brazil* (Gilliam, 1985). The world is literally falling apart, thanks to a series of nuclear explosions on undersea faultlines; London is partially ruined and covered in ash. There had been the hope of a colony, Dirangasept, but the colonists had been attacked by unidentified alien inhabitants, and the Far Warriors who had been sent to operate remote control war robots have been defeated. The Far Warriors, suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, thanks to too much VR remote control of the robots, are now more or less blamed for the debacle. Veteran and poet Jon Sciler gets a job testing a new VR environment at the same time that Chrye, a psych student studying the effects of



using VR, starts to interview him for her project. Sciler discovers that his fellow veterans, also VR testers, are being killed one by one.

This future is unrelentingly grim, and the outlook bleak. VR should be a great new hope for escape from Earth, but seems to be another chance for Armageddon; indeed it might be infected by the telepathic aliens unwittingly brought back from Dirangasept by the Far Warriors. The novel even offers up the possibility that Dirangasept is itself purely a simulacrum, and that the aliens were simply monsters from the id. VR is no solution to real world problems. As Steve Jeffery wrote in his review: 'Levy's debut is assured but tries perhaps too hard [...] to be too many things at once: sf thriller, fantasy, dystopia and romance' (Jeffery 28). However, this intergenrification is typical of the British Boom.

10. Irony

The key to British science fiction must be a sense of irony. There is something in the British psyche that sees things doubled, and refuses to let the addressee know which version is meant. Politeness is a key sign of contempt, insults a sign that you have been taken into their heart.⁷ John Wyndham's novels were long thought to be cosy catastrophes, but in fact they are more bleak than Wyndham's readers initially perceived (Wymer 1992). We simply misread him and missed the irony. Perhaps irony is particularly prevalent in British science fiction: if we assume that the scope of the genre has been shaped within a US market context, it has been influenced by a whole series of ideologies such as the American Dream, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and has developed a range of narrative tropes and devices which engage in, mediate with, or resist these ideologies. Clearly a British writer

cannot unproblematically 'inhabit' the US national identity, but ends up using the tropes and devices despite the ideological mismatch. This is particularly true of Baxter's alt.space stories.

Paul Kincaid and Colin Greenland, talking about the other British writers who emerged at the time of the British New Wave, both identified a voice that was present in the works of Keith Roberts, D. G. Compton, Richard Cowper, Michael Coney and Christopher Priest, among others. Greenland identified it as being 'ironic [...] It's informed with a sense of literary tradition, not simply spinning out words and racking up pages. It feels the tensions and connotations of language, so it's richer in history, and mood, and atmosphere, and the shades of character. Time and memory are every bit as important as space and action' (Butler, Greenland and Kincaid 23). That same voice seems still to be at work in Boom writing, although the relationship to the tradition has become more problematic. In a novel like Jon Courtenay Grimwood's *neoAddix* (1997) there is an acknowledgment of earlier cyberpunk and its forebears with its naming of its protagonist Alex Gibson, and there is another (albeit pointless) tip of the hat to the closing line of Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Nine Billion Names of God' (1953).⁸

Boom science fiction should not be taken at face value. In the few happy endings something more sinister must be taken into account — characters may have achieved their desires but at a cost. In the bleak endings many ironies come together, including the consequences of the characters' actions. But perhaps the bleakness itself needs to be ironized as a pose, a nod to the depression of Douglas Adams's Marvin the Paranoid Android, and before him Eeyore in A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926). Quite often — and this can be a problem as well as a strength — the resolutions do not resolve anything.

11. The Mainstream

Since the actual readership of just science fiction in Britain is rather small, and new fans of science fiction seem more interested in films, tv and comics than the written word, British science fiction is dependent on the mainstream. In a sense there is a tradition of British mainstream writers being allowed their one generic dalliance — think Conrad and Ford's *The Inheritors* (1902), Forster's 'The Machine Stops' (1909) and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Sometimes it is less happy — E. P. Thompson's overly long *The Sykaos Papers* (1988), or P. D. James's *The Children of the Moon* (1992), which could not possibly be science fiction because it was well written, was not about

The key to British science fiction must be a sense of irony.

Martians, or was about the real world. Martin Amis scores points for dealing with the nuclear bomb in *Einstein's Monsters* (1987) but loses them again for claiming this is the first fiction about the bomb — and for his allegation in a documentary that science fiction readers are a bit like trainspotters. Ian McEwan, Will Self, David Mitchell, and Louis de Bernières have all used fantastical elements in their works, to some success. This has some way to catch up on theater, where plays on quantum physics, probability, chaos theory and so on by Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard, and others have been acceptable for years.

The mainstream media in Britain is beginning to take science fiction more seriously, although there is still a slight sneer in some presenters' voices on BBC Radio 4. Cadigan, McAuley, Newman, Miéville, and others are increasingly being called on to review films for the radio, but not as often as the mainstream writers of their generation. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* both review science fiction frequently, even allowing the coverage to spill over beyond the monthly round-up of five or six novels into a five-hundred-word review. *The Guardian* not only reported on Priest's win of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, but gave him space to discuss his inspiration for *The Separation* (2002). *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* all carry obituaries when British science fiction writers die.

Not all is rosy though. In 1983 the British Book Council compiled a list of twenty young British writers who seemed promising — including Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie, and the already veteran Christopher Priest. Two lists later and the broadsheet newspapers wondered what had happened to the 1983 generation — indeed where Christopher Priest was now (this being symptomatic of the publicity his publisher had lavished on his latest book . . .). In 2003, China Miéville was specifically excluded from the list because of his generic status (Jack 11). The barricades have been drawn back, but not that far.

12. '[. . .] these moments are cyclical. We're lucky enough to be in a time when sf is loud and proud and exciting. It won't last forever. It's fun milking it while it lasts . . .' (China Miéville in Butler, 'Beyond' 7).

13. An[drew]thropic Principle

The Boom exists because I am here to observe it.

Perhaps I flatter myself. I do not wish to claim that I am single-handedly responsible for the Boom, but I have been in the right places a number of times, and helped to provide a space for discourse about the Boom, as well as adding my own voice. In 1995, the year of the Glasgow Worldcon and various British Hugo wins, I became co-features editor of *Vector*, the critical journal of the BSFA first published in 1958. Whilst Gary Dalkin, my co-editor, and I were more interested in media than our predecessors (for media, read film, tv, and some comics, not necessarily sf),⁹ we both agreed that the field was being destroyed by what Mike Resnick was calling wookie books — tie-in books. We would rail against them at any opportunity — in editorials, in articles, and in responses to letters of comment. At the same time, we took every opportunity we could to promote interesting novels by British writers, in a sense wanting to put the British back into the BSFA. In the run up to the BSFA's fortieth anniversary and the 200th issue of their magazine *Vector* in 1998, we held a poll to establish the most popular British sf novels. The results were published in the 201st issue; and at the following year's Eastercon I ran several panels on the history of British science fiction to the then present day discussing the results.¹⁰

A coincidence of connections led Mark Bould and myself to the launch of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000), Mark conducting an interview for *Vector* with Miéville and an invitation to both of us to hear him speak at Marxism 2000 on the subject of Marxism and fantasy. In an editorial for *Vector* I commented on the Marxism 2000 event and added: 'With writers like Miéville, MacLeod, Meaney and many more, sf in Britain at the end of the century seems to be revolutionary: clearly in a tradition, but still finding new ways to tell new (and old) stories. Could this be another Golden Age? Or am I being just too utopian?' (Butler, 'Revolution' 3). By the end of June the following year critics such as Gary Wolfe and John Clute and authors such as M. John Harrison were talking of a Boom, leading to the guerrilla panel at 2001: A Celebration of British Science Fiction.

Not that the feeling was unanimous. After a paper at that conference (on science in a number of British plays) Nicholas Ruddick argued (without using the exact word) that current sf was banal and that literary values were in decline; as I wrote in an editorial: 'If Miéville, MacLeod, Meaney, Grimwood and Robson had been in the room, let alone a slightly older generation of Baxter,

Greenland and Jones, then I would have been able to refute it *thus*' (Butler, 'Foresight' 3).¹¹ In noting the buzz about British sf being at the cutting edge I still sounded a warning, sceptical note:

[. . .] the image of Colin Welland at the Oscars, shouting, 'The British are coming!' does loom rather large at this point.

(And then a more science fictional image, of Kevin McCarthy stopping cars, and screaming 'They're coming! They're coming!...') (Butler, 'Foresight' 3).

By the time I wrote the following editorial, I had spent three weeks in Melbourne — where both *Ash* and *Perdido Street Station* were hot reads — and I had been to the Hugo Awards Ceremony where Rowling won:

There's a sense, which we've been trumpeting for a couple of years now, that we are in a boom time for British science fiction, in the last eighteen months or so we've had a couple of novels which have been respected by gratifyingly large audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, and both seem to be making inroads Down Under in Australia (Butler, 'Hugos' 3).

The Boom was off and running.

In film, the British did not come, as Goldcrest, the producers of *Chariots of Fire*, went belly-up after a series of poor choices — such as editing out Mark Bould's performance from *Revolution*. Some British directors, actors, and writers are enjoying Oscar success, but largely in American films. Is the Boom doomed? Entropy, after all, is a favored metaphor of British sf — and everything must pass. With so many writers active, can the market sustain them all? How many more will the American publishers take on? Meanwhile Tor has set up a British imprint, mostly publishing American authors, and this is likely to offer the existing sf imprints — Gollancz, Headline, Earthlight, HarperCollinsVoyager, Penguin and Little, Brown — a run for their money. As some of these are connected to US companies, could these face a US resurgence? Tor is piggy-backing off Pan Macmillan — home to Miéville, among others — so for how long can the two remain distinct? Worried voices are already beginning to mutter. Paul Kincaid has noted in the pages of *Science Fiction Studies* that: 'the pool of British publishers is growing smaller, and looking at the current economic climate, I suspect that advances will be falling, if they haven't fallen already. [. . .] I do wonder whether we have

the infrastructure to support the renaissance we seem to be engendering' (Kincaid, 'Golden' 531).

The first sign of this may have just arisen in July 2003. Under the watchful eye of veteran sf editor John Jarrold (who had published Banks, MacLeod, and others at Legend and Orbit), the Earthlight imprint of Simon and Schuster UK had grown to rival the position Granada/Panther/Grafton/HarperCollinsVoyager had held in the 1970s and 1980s. Earthlight republished the sf back catalogue of Ray Bradbury among others, and new novels by Byrne, Calder, Cobley, Grimwood, Holdstock, McDonald, Whitbourn, and others. Jarrold decided to go freelance and was replaced by Darren Nash, who continued to maintain Earthlight's prestige as HarperCollinsVoyager seemed to dwindle to myriad editions of Tolkien and a handful of other classics in uniform, dark blue, editions. However, Simon and Schuster have decided to restructure, in the process closing the Earthlight imprint and ousting Nash. It might be that this marks a death of sf as the list is to be absorbed into Simon and Schuster's Pocket Books imprint, and thus not necessarily distinguished as science fiction. The mood, however, is more that the books will no longer get the kind of specialist attention that Jarrold and Nash were able to give. It is too early yet to tell whether this is the beginning of the end of the Boom.¹²

It is perhaps very British to expect it all to fail — but there is some part of us that is forever Eeyore.

Notes

1. The Whitbread Prize is a two-step process, with individual awards and juries for novel, first novel, non-fiction, poetry and children's fiction, with the children's fiction award sometimes being announced at a different time of year. These winners are then judged together to gain an overall award.
2. For a critique of Pfeil's position see Butler, 'Modelling Sf'.
3. Among other spaces, the Boom was discussed as a piece of guerrilla programming by Harrison, Miéville, and others at 2001: A Celebration of British Science Fiction (28 June–1 July 2001) endorsed by the organizers (Farah Mendlesohn, Andy Sawyer, and myself), by John Clute, Brian Aldiss, Ellen Datlow, Gary Wolfe, China Miéville, Farah Mendlesohn, and myself at a panel at the 2002 ICFA, by Paul Kincaid and myself at The Goldfish Factor (the Science Fiction Foundation/British Science Fiction Association joint AGM event) in April 2003, and at the ICA in May 2003 in

events organized by Miéville and Harrison. Gary S. Dalkin and myself often turned to the topic of the state of British sf in our editorials for *Vector* from 1995 to present. There have no doubt been other moments. To many of these people — along with Mark Bould and Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., who patiently watched me scribble on the backs of envelopes — I clearly owe a debt.

4. [2004] But see section 13 and note 12.
5. [2004] See Luckhurst for a longer treatment of the context and project of New Labour's 'New' Britain.
6. This was over breakfast at ICFA 2002. In 2002 there were six interviews with British writers Miéville and Siegel (March), Baxter (April), Joyce (May), McAuley (June), Gaiman (September), which clearly showed the period in Spring and Summer to be dominated by British writers. However there were also six interviews with British writers in 1995 (counting Pat Cadigan) and in 1998.
7. This is not just an English phenomenon; there is also a divided consciousness at work in the Welsh, Northern Irish, and Scottish, either as writers from those countries are subsumed into metropolitan, London life or as the apparently English claim authenticity from 'provincial' roots. For two examinations of a Scottish dividedness see Middleton and Butler, 'Strange Case'.
8. I am not making a nonsensical claim that writers from Britain are ironic and writers from the USA are always sincere — a list including Twain, Bierce, Vonnegut, Michael Moore, and the Coens would refute this — but that the dominant mode of narrative voice in British sf is ironic.
9. [2004] Despite this interest in media, there is a regrettable absence of any real consideration of comics in either this article or the rest of the British Boom issue of *SFS*, as John Newsinger pointed out in the next issue. I regret this absence and that none of the people we invited to contribute (including John) covered the topic. I had drafted a section on media (predominately television), but dropped it because Mark Bould was covering the ground in his article (Bould, 'Monster'). In the absence of that article, let me reinstate that deleted version of section 9:

There is a shared media background to the Boom writers aged between thirty and fifty, which has informed their aesthetic. One of the earliest — this generation

being just too young for the Quatermass serials — are the various series for children by the animators Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin: the proto-fantasy/faux-Norse tales of *Noggin the Nog* and his archenemy Nogbad the Bad, the uncanny tale of a stuffed cat *Bagpuss* (1974), but most importantly the science fiction series *The Clangers* (1969–1974), featuring a whole family of aliens who sounded like swanee whistles and co-existed with a soap dragon. Despite the making of only a handful of episodes of these and other series, they remain a strong presence in the psyche of any British thirty to fifty something, creating a mythology from the simplest of animations.

Rather more sophisticated in technique were the marionette acted series of Gerry Anderson: *Supercar* (1961–1962) featuring a car that could fly or be a submarine, *Fireball XL5* (1962–1963) with a space patrol, *Stingray* (1964–1965) in which various undersea menaces are met, *Thunderbirds* (1965–1966) featuring an international rescue team and *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967–1968) in which the alien Mysterons are trying to infiltrate Earth and *Joe 90* (1968–1969) where a nine-year-old-boy is used as secret agent. The series were backed by a comic — variously called *TV Century 21* and *TV21* — which featured both strips spinning off from characters in the various series, and introducing characters from future series. Together it formed a single continuity for the range of the Supermarionation series. Stephen Baxter, an avid reader of the comic through the 1960s, has written: 'it was an important and formative part of my life, and no doubt of others' (Baxter, 'Adventures' 8). The Anderson series continue to gather viewers as they are repeated to this day.

For a slightly older audience there were the two long-running series *Doctor Who* and *Blakes Seven*, the former beginning 23 November 1963 in a Saturday teatime slot on BBC1 and featuring an eccentric old man — apparently an alien — who travelled through time and space in a spaceship disguised as a Police call box, rescuing people and saving the day. When the initial actor in the rôle, William Hart-

nell, grew tired, the producers simply had his ship rejuvenate him into Patrick Troughton; in time he regenerated into a further six incarnations, most recently in a television movie. Whilst the character and the format of the series would change from year to year or producer to producer, some things remained constant — beyond the attractive assistant ready to scream at the first sign of danger. Reason and rationality had priority over force; the Doctor rarely fired a gun and always tried to solve a problem rather than calling for violence. The production values were better than the budget would suggest, with gravel pits and quarries across the south east of England standing in for alien planets (or, in one episode when they did land in a quarry, for a quarry).

Blakes Seven (1978–1981) was created by Terry Nation who had created the Daleks for *Doctor Who*, although some credit should also be given to script editor Chris Boucher. The series began with Blake being shipped for political reasons to a prison planet and his escape with a motley band of prisoners. They locate a ship, named the *Liberator*, and begin a series of attacks on the evil Federation, personified by the shaven headed female Servalan. Whereas Spock and McCoy might banter in *Star Trek*, here heroic Blake, cynical Avon and cowardly Vila and the others would argue, fall out and even plot against each other. It was impossible to tell who was a hero and who a villain, even down to the apparent central character Blake, written out at the end of the second series only to return as a possible traitor in the blood-bath that ended the final series. Whilst *Doctor Who* had dabbled with moral ambiguities, here there was no moral certainty at all.

There are various other television series that are remembered with various kinds of affection — several incarnations of *The Tomorrow People* (1974–1978), a partial adaptation of *The Tripods* (1984–1985), intended as a replacement for *Doctor Who*, as well as occasional plays by Nigel Kneale, serials by Michael J. Bird and so on. Perhaps more important than any of this, though, is the shared heritage of main-

stream programming such as *Blue Peter*, *Tiswas*, shows featuring northern comedians, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *The Goodies* (especially the episodes 'Kitten Kong' and one where children's tv characters take over the world), *Fawlty Towers*, and *Blackadder* among many others which have added to the unconscious linguistic resources of the writers. In *Vurt* the characters hallucinate a typical Saturday night's viewing from the 1980s.

To shift from influences to the influenced, it is clear that the heritage of British television sf and fantasy has had a influence on recent television – a remake of *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*, the darkly surreal *League of Gentleman*, and even in the details of the British *Queer as Folk* (one of the central characters' *Doctor Who* fixation was inspired by creator Russell T. Davies' own taste, indeed Davies has penned some science fiction serials for children [2004: and was tasked with reviving *Doctor Who*]). In addition, British writers have had a huge influence in other media, notably comics where Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman, among others, have helped to invigorate the mode. [2004: The weekly comic *2,000 AD* (1977-) has had an incalculable influence upon British sf, most obviously through the Judge Dredd strip. Artists included Brian Bolland, who went onto to work for DC, including *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) and Dave Gibbons, who also drew for *Doctor Who Weekly* and drew *Watchmen* (1986-87), and went to work for DC. Writer Alan Moore, who had collaborated with Gibbons on *2,000 AD*, *Doctor Who*, and *Watchmen* went on to work for Marvel, DC and alone, producing such seminal works as *Swamp Thing*, *V for Vendetta*, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, *From Hell*, and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Other significant figures include Grant Morrison, Bryan Talbot, John Wagner, and Dave McKean. Neil Gaiman wrote *The Sandman* and *Miracle Man*, as well as collaborating with Terry Pratchett on *Good Omens* (1990) and J. Michael Straczynski on *Babylon 5*.] Finally, the British film industry remains immersed in heritage and comedies penned by Richard Curtis, although Bond has at least one foot in the sf camp. However recent years have seen low budget sf and horror films such as *Reign of Fire*, *Dog Soldiers* and *28 Days Later*. Clive Barker has long

been active in Hollywood; Neil Gaiman is likely to join him.

10. Each voter was given five votes which would be weighted according to their ranking. The top ten was 9th Coney, *Hello Summer*, *Goodbye* (1975) and Brunner, *The Sheep Look Up* (1972), 8th Roberts, *Pavane* (1968), 7th Wyndham, *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) and Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), 5th Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), 4th Baxter, *The Time Ships* (1993), 3rd Brunner, *Stand On Zanzibar* (1968), 2nd Clarke, *Childhood's End* (1953) and 1st Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The most popular writer was Arthur C. Clarke. See Butler, 'Best'.
11. Contrast this statement a year later from Miéville on the Boom: 'Generally, good to excellent "literary" quality' (Butler, 'Beyond Consolation' 7).
12. [2004] A success story I neglected to discuss was Peter Crowther's series of novellas and story collections under the PS Publishing imprint, which included works by Baxter, Barclay, Campbell, Chadbourn, Gallagher, Gentle, Lovegrove, MacLeod, McAuley, McDonald, Miéville, Newman, Roberts, Ryman, Smith, Tuttle, and others. Crowther has also edited the first issue of a quarterly magazine, *Post-Scripts*, dated Spring 2004. Also in 2004, David Pringle came to the end of his tenure as editor of *Interzone*. The schedule had become erratic, and it looks as if the economics of fiction magazines had finally caught up; however the baton has been passed to TTA, which is revamping the magazine. Pringle's importance within British science fiction, and the emergence of the Boom, is unique – he is not the only begetter of it, but he did more than most to allow it to come forward.

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Pioneer Award Acceptance Speech

Andrew M. Butler

[The SET editors tracked down Andrew Butler's article because it won the most recent Pioneer Award for an essay written about science fiction. Also, Andrew is one of our favourite SF critics. The award was made formally at the 2004 conference of the Science Fiction Research Association held at Skokie, Illinois. Andrew faced the problem of travelling several thousand kilometres to receive an award from a committee chairman (Paul Kincaid) who lived not far from him in Britain. Hence, his acceptance speech was delivered by Maureen Kincaid Speller – friend of Andrew, partner of Paul Kincaid, and founding editor of *Acnestis* – at the SFRA 2004 conference.]

I'd like to begin with two apologies: first I am not Andrew Butler. Nor for that matter am I Andrew M. Butler.

Secondly, I, which is to say Andrew and/or Andrew M. Butler, channelled for now via Maureen Kincaid Speller, am sorry not to be with you at this conference, because I would very much have liked to receive this award in person – in part because it might be the very first thing I've won.

Actually, I might be lying. I have this dim memory of a school sports day, where I led the field in the egg and spoon race.

Then there was the occasion when I came second in the Science Fiction Foundation raffle, and won a pile of signed Neil Gaiman comic books. First place went to John Clute who, if I recall correctly, won a Happy Meal at a major burger chain. I think I got the better deal.

But I did plan to be with you today. It appealed to my sense of humour that evening when I received an email about the award from Paul Kincaid, the chair of the Pioneer judges, who lives some twenty minutes away from me, giving me news that meant we both needed to fly a few thousand miles and across several time zones to shake each other's hands. I did wonder whether it would be more convenient for Paul and I simply to invite all of you lot across to visit us. As it is, you are being addressed by someone even closer to Paul, and that appeals even more.

At first, I confess, I presumed that Paul's email was a joke, or that he'd got

the wrong person, and I had to turn my computer back on to double check what the message had said. You see, ever since I've been writing I've written under the pseudonym of Andrew M. Butler, and so perhaps the judges confused me with somebody else, such as, say, Andrew Butler.

(Actually, there is an Andrew Butler, who edits or has edited one of the Tolkien Society magazines in Britain, although to the best of my knowledge I've never been confused with him. It may, of course, be that he's been confused with me, which rather suggests I should offer a third apology, to him.)

I am also confused with Andy Sawyer. I have to be careful what I say here, because I have nothing against Andy Sawyer, but it's just that Andy Sawyer does such a good job of being Andy Sawyer, that I can't begin to compete. I can remember a Liverpool PhD student suggesting a drink after work, which was a pleasant idea, but inconvenient as I lived two hundred miles away – whereas Andy was rather closer – and then there a letter of complaint from a reviewer whose name had been misspelt in *Foundation* and who, by the way, had enjoyed talking to me at a conference (to which I hadn't actually been). I presume that was Andy Sawyer again at that conference.

I have to say, and this is partly why I insist on my middle initial and partly a result of it, that I live in constant fear of being exposed as the charlatan I so clearly am. This is not some inverted modesty on my part or fishing for compliments, but I am genuinely surprised by the fact that anyone wishes to read what I write. The M. is a comfort blanket. The shy, retiring, introverted Andrew Butler can sit at his computer, drafting a script that Andrew M. Butler can read out – but Andrew Butler could never say those things. In fact Andrew Butler would be reluctant to be with you because he'd be embarrassed. My fear is that if I lose my M., then you'll never hear from me again.

(I realise, of course, that this may mean some concerted campaign to leave out my M. from each appearance of my pseudonym in future, precisely in the hope that I disappear.)

Neither of us can be with you for two further reasons – I am right in the middle of hitting a marking deadline and this

really couldn't be avoided. Then there is my health – I registered with a doctor and had a medical, which revealed my blood pressure to be so high that it was practically off the scale. In fact they had to send for a bigger device to measure it with. Given the blood was so pressurised, it was then rather odd that they then had to extract any to take to test, when surely it should spurt out at the tiniest prick. I'm now on beta-blockers and the pressure's coming down.

There are, of course, people I should thank in my absence – although perhaps they'd rather not in case they get the blame. Obviously thanks go to the people who judged the award and to those people who have organised this year's SFRA conference; as a former co-organiser of an SFRA conference I have some idea of what you are going through right now.

Thank you to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr, whose suggestion that Mark Bould and I should do a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on the British Boom we learnt of by reading the journal. I jotted down my ideas about the boom on the back on an envelope and Istvan nodded sagely, before taking it away with him, presumably to ensure that I'd never write the article.

Thanks to my old comrade, Mark Bould, who generously indulged my neuroses as they developed at the institution where we worked together for three and a half years, and whose article (Mark Bould, 'What Kind of Monster Are You? Situating the Boom', *Science Fiction Studies* 30.3 (November 2003), pp. 394–417) was written in tandem with my own. I suspect we both ended up stealing from each others' drafts, and it must have been those bits that swung the award for me.

I've learnt so much from so many of you, and I'm constantly struck by the excellence of the science fiction academic community, as scholars and as friends. Thank you all.

And now thinking back, I can remember more details of that egg and spoon race. It would have been 1975 or 1976, and it was actually my birthday. Think of me being five or six and in short trousers. I presume I'd already demonstrated my prowess by coming a distant last in every other race else I'd entered, but for some reason I went in for the egg and spoon

race in which you had to balance an egg-sized ball on a spoon over fifty yards, without the aid of glue or your thumb. I turned out to be good at this, and in fact was leading the field. The crowd were cheering me on as everyone else was dropping their eggs all over the place. I was a good dozen yards ahead of whoever was in second place, if I could only

keep my nerve and my balance . . . Five yards. Four yards . . . Three . . . Two . . . And then I looked back to see how far ahead I was. Disaster! I dropped the egg. By the time I'd scooped it up, everyone else had crossed the line. Later that day I had to retire to bed with sun stroke or heat exhaustion.

There's a moral there, I suspect.

So this is the first thing I've ever won, and I'm flattered and flabbergasted and honoured beyond words to receive it, even in absentia. If you do find yourself in Canterbury (especially if you picked up a bottle of Laphroig in duty-free), do drop in so I can thank you in person.

Thank you.

Dissenting opinion

If this goes on: Butler, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Interzone* and the 'British Boom'

Paul Brazier

[The following section was first published as 'If This Goes On', *Interzone* 193, Spring 2004, pp. 59–60; also reviewed were Gwyneth Jones' *Midnight Lamp*, Mary Gentle's *1610* and Elizabeth Hand's *Bibliomancy*.]

I don't know much about Paul Brazier, but I do know that he has been involved in the publication of David Pringle's *Interzone* for some years, and, since David has relinquished editorship of the magazine, has announced his own subscriber site, quercus.com, which will feature high-quality new short science fiction.]

We don't often review academic journals here [in *Interzone*] because they plough their own furrow and it is parallel and rather distant from our focus on fiction. However, *Science Fiction Studies* No 91 (\$US12, SF-TH Inc. at DePauw University) purports to be a first attempt to examine 'The British Boom'. I place that title in ironic quotation marks because I disagree that any such thing exists and find the essays offered here unfocused, unconvincing and extremely partial.

The issue begins with an interview by Joan Gordon of China Miéville and as such it is an interesting piece of work. However, it quickly becomes plain that the editors of this magazine see Miéville as somehow embodying or representing the British Boom, whereas the books he has published are no more than some of the more recent representatives of a solid trend in British publishing that has been growing for the past 20 years.

I would expect a critical investigation such as this purports to be to attempt to examine the evidence, all of it, and draw conclusions based on it. Instead of this, we get a hotch-potch of assertions that select their evidence and ignore large tranches of what has happened since 1984.

Following the Miéville interview, there is a farrago entitled 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at the British Boom' wherein Andrew M. Butler, having apparently made notes towards an essay, then finds that he can't make a coherent essay out of those notes but doesn't want to waste all that work so publishes the notes undigested.

The point apparently being made is that, unlike the New Wave, there is no one movement that has given rise to this 'boom'; there are just an extraordinarily diverse number of different people who have all made it happen. This collection of undigested nuggets concludes with Butler quoting largely from his own work elsewhere, which only reveals how self-referential the whole process has been.

Next up, Mark Bould makes a brave stab at linking the 'Boom' to the *Doctor Who* milieu and media SF in general. This is an interesting point of view. There is certainly a stream of continuity that can't be ignored here and I would have liked to see more. However, instead, it is followed by Roger Luckhurst trying to claim that the 'boom' is somehow a product of the Labour Government's cultural governance. He makes an interesting

case, but the current 'boom' features mostly writers who were already active when Labour came to power, so while the government may have encouraged a pre-existing trend, it seems ridiculous to claim that they are responsible for it, however in favour of them you might be.

Matt Hills now offers an intriguing look at counterfictions in Kim Newman's work. Again, there is a lot to think about here, but precious little to do with the boom, and also precious little to do with science fiction. I like Kim Newman and I think he is a fine writer, but I have read few of his books because I often don't understand the post-modern cultural references in them. I would have put him down as a horror writer but Hills claims his rewritings of Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde story mean he is reinventing Gothic SF as a counterfactual or, to use the more familiar term, a parallel world. All very interesting but not my idea of science fiction, and certainly not central to 'the boom.'

Joan Gordon returns with a long essay on China Miéville. Were they really so short of material that they had to feature the same author examined by the same critic twice? Perhaps so, because the next piece is the text of a largely autobiographical talk given by Stephen Baxter about baby boomers. It is fascinating in itself but adds little to the debate about 'the British Boom.'

Finally, Andy Butler and Mark Bould offer a selection of comments from other leading lights in British science fiction, a kind of letter column before the fact, and

most of the penetrating comments that appear in this publication appear here. The section closes with a long list of writings that might or might not be considered part of the boom.

And I threw my hands up in despair. It is mentioned several times that the definition of science fiction that *Science Fiction Studies* uses has been revamped recently to allow more discussion of related works such as fantasy and horror. However, this reading list and the previous list of authors who might be deemed to be part of 'the boom' seems determined to rope in every single author who has published anything even vaguely fantastic from the past twenty years and, by excluding nothing, effectively fails to draw any kind of boundary around its subject area.

Its sins of inclusion, however, are massively overwhelmed by its sins of omission. To fail to examine the role of Peter F. Hamilton in starting the snowball rolling is to ignore the core powerhouse of the current success of science fiction in Britain. Equally, to overlook Iain M. Banks is to dismiss an extraordinary talent who has succeeded in bridging the gulf between mainstream and science fiction and insisted that each side take the other seriously. And to pass over Alasdair Reynolds is miss the prime example of what they are talking about,

not a boom, but the emergence into notice of a long-established steady growth, a simple resurgence in science fiction in Britain.

But their sins are more heinous even than that. Much is made throughout this publication of the fragmentary nature of what they are trying to discuss. Of course it's fragmentary: they've pulled in everything they can find that might be labelled fantastic in any way in order to justify talking about works of fantasy as being at the centre of their subject where they should have been talking about works of science fiction.

They got closest to understanding what they were doing when they discussed cultural continuity. The editors, the people who buy books that then sell, they are the ones who have made this happen and they are the products and manifestations of that cultural continuity. There are far too many to name them all, but certain names spring immediately to mind — Malcolm Edwards, John Jarrold, Jane Johnson, Peter Lavery, Cathy Gale, who originally encouraged Peter F. Hamilton and, of course, our own David Pringle — have been there, soldiering on, largely unacknowledged outside the trade, but doing the work that has made modern British science fiction the success it is.

For many, John W. Campbell editing

Astounding/Analog characterises the Golden Age of science fiction, while Michael Moorcock and *New Worlds* does the same for the New Wave. But this new movement, this so-called British Boom, is not magazine-focused at all. Of course, *Interzone* has launched the careers of many novelists from Stephen Baxter, Richard Calder, and Greg Egan to, latterly, Liz Williams, and it is difficult to assess accurately how much influence the fact that there was a home-grown professional magazine market has had — certainly, several of the new writers that I have introduced here are now producing and submitting novels to publishers and I have high hopes for them — but most of this new resurgence is novel-based, and it is sad to have to acknowledge that perhaps the magazine as the guiding light of a generation of novelists has had its day.

Nevertheless, to ignore the work of the editors in the trade today is quite simply to ignore the reason there is anything that could be termed a boom. This issue of *Science Fiction Studies* adds nothing to our understanding of where it came from or where it is going. If you want real insight, look rather to the historical record of *Interzone* to give you some notion of what might have caused today's boom. David Pringle should be proud.



Thank you, everybody

for raising the money through the BBB (Bring Bruce Bayside) Fund to send me (Bruce Gillespie) to Corflu in February 2005.

The Fund has been subscribed beyond the wildest dreams of me or the administrators, but we still have available copies for sale of

The Incomplete Bruce Gillespie
A selection of Bruce Gillespie's fanzine writing

\$10 from Bill Wright, Unit 4, 1 Park Street, St Kilda West VIC 3182
or see me at Corflu or Potlatch in San Francisco in February.



Letters of comment

E. D. WEBBER

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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

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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

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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

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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 *this* 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

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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

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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

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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 efanazines.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

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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

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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. Tolkien'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

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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 Tip-tree bios, and I think Theodore Sturgeon would be an excellent subject for one.

Judith Merrill'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 back-

grounds, 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 Lilian'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

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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

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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 Indexes* to fiction, and the *H. W. Hall Indexes* 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

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Re the 'cosy catastrophe':

- It's surprising how the name of John Lymington is always ignored. To me he was the subtext 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

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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

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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 Merrill book, *Better to Have Loved*, is not a biography, but an autobiography that Merrill did not finish by the time of her death in 1997. It was completed by Merrill's granddaughter, Emily Pohl-Weary, from a partial manuscript and from tapes dictated by Merrill.
- 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

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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 Merrill 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 sub-genre 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

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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

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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 Haartepichknopfer* 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

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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

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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 enthralled 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

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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 Merrill 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 Merrill 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* cap-

tured 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

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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*.

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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

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[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 unblest 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)

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'); **William M. Breiding**; and **Frank Weissenborn**.

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