

Steam Engine Time

Everything you wanted to know about

SHORT STORIES

ALAN GARNER

HOWARD WALDROP

BOOK AWARDS

HARRY POTTER



*Matthew Davis
Ditmar (Dick Jansen)
Bruce Gillespie
David J. Lake
Robert Mapson
Gillian Polack
David L. Russell
Ray Wood
and many others*

Issue 7

October 2007

Steam Engine Time 7

If human thought is a growth, like all other growths, its logic is without foundation of its own, and is only the adjusting constructiveness of all other growing things. A tree cannot find out, as it were, how to blossom, until comes blossom-time. A social growth cannot find out the use of steam engines, until comes steam-engine time.

— Charles Fort, *Lo!*, quoted in Westfahl, *Science Fiction Quotations*, Yale UP, 2005, p. 286

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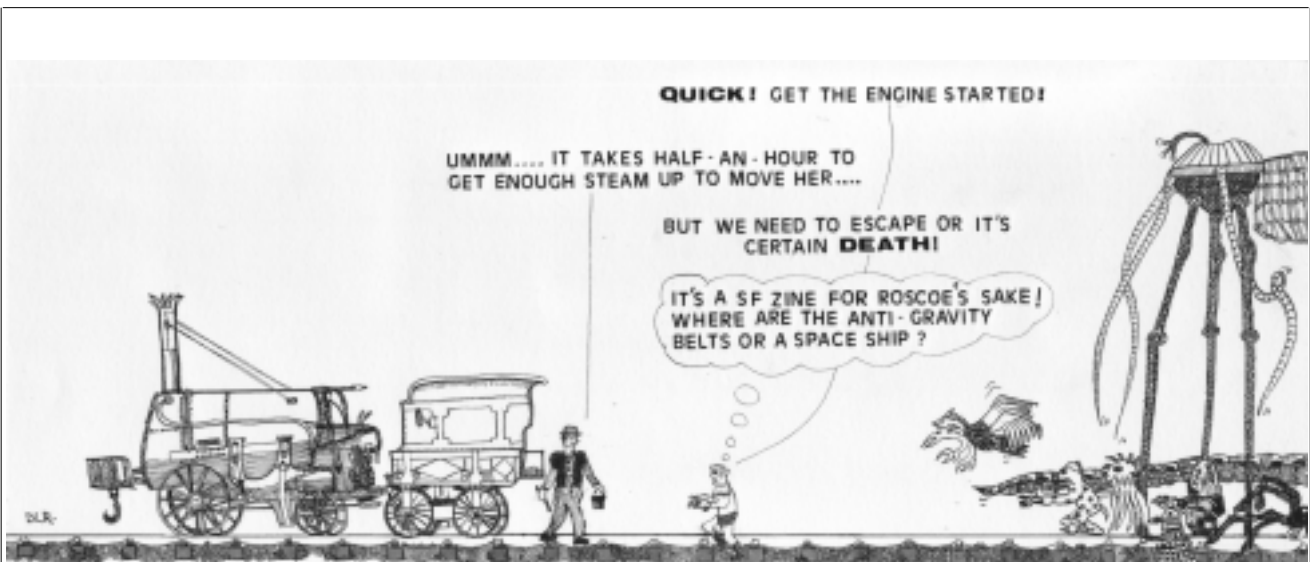
Photographs

Covers of various books and magazines discussed in this issue; plus photos by Cath Ortlieb (p. 7); Helena Binns (pp. 20, 23); *New York Review of Science Fiction* (p. 38).

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**This issue's cover:
Fair combat**

Once in a while I find myself pulling down an old and much-read SF work— novel or collection — in order to relive the feeling of the initial experience. Call it nostalgia, or, probably more appropriately, the reversion of an ever-aging and inefficient mind towards the remembrance of halcyon days. And every so often what I read stirs me to create an image. So it is with this issue's cover illustration. The stories were from collections by Poul Anderson, Eric Frank Russell and, especially, Henry Kuttner. I say especially because of these three authors he (or rather, he and C. L. Moore in collaboration) is (or rather are) by far the best. Recent collections of Kuttner and Moore may be found in *The Last Mimzy* by Kuttner (from DelRey), *Two-Handed Engine* by Kuttner and Moore (from the SF Book Club) and *Major Ingredients* by Russell (from NESFA Press). There may be a recent Anderson collection, but I don't know of it.

These authors, presumably to cater to John Campbell's insistence that aliens are almost always beaten by (read are 'inferior to') Earthmen, wrote a number of stories in which rigid other-world societies were brought to their knees by the quick-wittedness of humans — the galactic tricksters — and by a reliance on exposing the dangers of having closed minds. Russell excelled in such stories. When I first read these stories, oh so many years ago, I delighted in the humour that was a prime, necessary, hallmark of these tales. They are still, even now, very amusing, but rather unreal, despite their insistence on the power of the Earthlings' logic. For they set up a basic situation that is usually a straw man, and run with it and the humans' 'logic', to a desired end, which could at almost any plot moment have been thwarted by the aliens' use of commonsense. Nonetheless, as I say, these stories are marvellously entertaining provided they are approached as fantasies.

The cover is an attempt to portray the basic situation of power technology (alien group A) being thwarted by poor technology and trickery (alien group B). So we have two alien cultures in the illustration — one which is essentially at a comic-book level of science, the other at a much more advanced and sophisticated level. But, true to the fairytales, it is the apparently weaker group that is triumphing over the apparently stronger. Oh, did I forget to mention that many of the stories I have referred to seem to be wish-fulfillments in which the school bully is trounced by the wimp? Perhaps this is why I liked the yarns so much then. And still do . . .

And if you are as much of a Kuttner fan as I am, and if you a lover of books, of beautifully produced books, and if you have money to spare or have but slight regard for money, you may be interested in the special edition of *Two-Handed Engine* from Centipede Press (at US\$225) (<http://www.centipedepress.com/>). The Kuttner/Moore collaboration was responsible for what I consider to be the finest short SF work I have read — 'Vintage Season' — and the finest SF novel — *Fury*. You'll find the first in *Two-Handed Engine*, together with *Clash By Night*, which is the prequel to *Fury*.

— Ditmar (Dick Jensen)

Guest editorial

Book awards

Ray Wood

Jan Stinson, co-editor of *Steam Engine Time*, has kindly given up her editorial space this issue to make way for the Guest Editorial by Ray Wood.

Ray Wood used to post emails on Eidolist, but no longer does so. He admits to little more autobiographical detail than that he is a retired academic who still lives in the city in which he taught for many years: Quorn, South Australia, which is situated north of the Iron Triangle, at the head of Spencer Gulf, South Australia.

Ray's Guest Editorial is followed by an actual Editorial, by Bruce Gillespie.

Making awards to books seems odd to me. Consider the Nobel Prize for Literature, which you'd expect to be superbly judged.

Jorge Luis Borges
James Joyce
Bertolt Brecht
D. H. Lawrence
Anton Chekhov
Vladimir Nabokov
Joseph Conrad
George Orwell
F. Scott Fitzgerald
Marcel Proust
Maksim Gorky
August Strindberg
Graham Greene
Leo Tolstoy
Thomas Hardy
Mark Twain
Henrik Ibsen
H. G. Wells
Henry James
Virginia Woolf
Emile Zola

I think most would agree that that list includes some of the twentieth century's finest writers. However, *not one of them* was awarded the Nobel Prize. It's easy, too, to make another list of twenty writers who *did* win it, but who most people have never heard of.

How can you miss out giving the prize to writers like Tolstoy, Joyce, Proust and Woolf? (The Nobel has been awarded since 1901, and there were ten chances to give it to Tolstoy – and Mark Twain, too. They both died in 1910.)

It's awarded for a writer's lifetime achievement, yet so many of the best writers still didn't win it, despite its judges having all those years to reach a mature decision. If you can't judge a writer's lifetime output any better than the Nobel's judges, what chance do you have of judging books accurately in the same year that they're published? Yet that's how most book awards are made.

There are so many awards for writing these days that winning them has become something like little boy scouts collecting rows of badges on their sleeves.

Only the other day I checked the author's bio in a Minette Walters book I was reading.¹ And I found that her first novel, *The Ice House*, won the John Creasy Award; her second, *The Sculptress*, won the Edgar Allan Poe Award; and her third, *The Scold's Bridle*, won the CWA Gold Dagger Award. I couldn't help wondering, How many bloody awards *are* there for the mystery genre?

And then a few days later I read Elliot Perlman's author bio,² which told me that he'd won:

the Age Book of the Year Award, the Betty Trask Award (UK) and the Fellowship of Australian Writers Book of the Year Award for his novel, *Three Dollars*. His second book, *The Reasons I Won't Be Coming*, won the Steele Rudd Award for the best Australian short story collection.

Not one but *three* awards for just the one book! And how many readers would know the parameters of all those seven awards? They'd be no more than meaningless names to most.

Soon there'll be so many awards in the world that no writer will have a book published without getting one.

Surely awards amount to little else but a marketing exercise for writers, agents and publishers? Well, there may not be too much wrong with that, if readers know that that's all they are. But I imagine that most of them don't.

Great writing is seldom recognised as great for quite a time after it's published. As Hemingway says:³

Almost no new classics resemble other previous classics.

It's usual that great writing is seldom judged to be anything much when it first appears, because it so often breaks new ground. And critics, reviewers and awards judges rarely see that it's great until many years later on. The figure sometimes quoted for how long it takes to arrive at a mature judgment of writers' work is fifty years after they've died. I think it was Stendhal who once dismissed critics tearing one of his books to pieces by saying that it'd be a classic fifty years after his death. And it was. And it did take that long, too.

So what hope do judges of book awards have of getting it right, when they're judging books published as recently as during the last twelve months?

Does anyone else see this plethora of awards as one reason why people turn away from reading?

Consider the extreme hype on the covers of books.

To start with, look at their jacket screamers. Publishers seem to share a standard dictionary of adjectives for them. It includes: chilling, classic, compelling, enchanting, enthralling, epic, explosive, gripping, heart-stopping, heart-wrenching, irresistible, monumental, nerve-shattering, powerful, provocative, scorching, searing, shattering, sizzling, soaring, spell-binding, stunning, sweeping, terrifying, timeless, towering, turbulent and unput-downable. All books published are, in other words, superlative.

It also seems that many writers, after their first books, become 'acclaimed', at least on the covers of their second ones.

And look at how books are so often 'the greatest' since, say, *Catch-22*, *The Dice Man*, *The Day of the Jackal*, *Gone with the Wind*, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* or *Lolita*. Those are some of the titles that are publishers' favourites for such comparisons. And certain writers themselves become touchstones. Frances Gordon's 1994 vampire book, *Blood Ritual*, is 'in the great tradition of Anne Rice'.⁴

Even authors' biogs on jackets come across as a kind of hype:

... she has been variously, a teacher, puppet maker, Opera House guide, publisher's rep, journalist, broadcaster, coffee-packer, cinema usherette, traveller, nervous wreck and letter-writer.

Penelope Rowe, *Unacceptable Behaviour* (1992)

Barbara Hambly has been a high school teacher, a model, a waitress, a technical editor, a professional graduate student, an all-night clerk in a liquor store and a karate instructor.

Barbara Hambly, *Dragonsbane* (1986)

Mr L'Amour enjoyed a wide variety of jobs, including seaman, lumberjack, elephant handler, skinner of dead cattle, assessment miner, and officer on a tank destroyer during World War II. He also circled the world on a freighter, sailed a dhow on the Red Sea, was shipwrecked in the West Indies and stranded in the Mojave Desert.

Louis L'Amour, *Passin' Through* (1985)

Sharleen Cooper Cohen worked as a story editor, a model, a swimming instructor and a secretary . . . she also ran an interior design company for many years with designs appearing in many national magazines.

Sharleen Cooper Cohen, *Love, Sex & Money* (1988)

Clearly the more varied and exotic the professions, the greater a book this guarantees.

Authors seem to favour a minimum list of four jobs (or do publishers invent them?) that show physical, intellectual, artistic and business prowess. Apparently you must be an all-rounder to be a writer. And these lists almost always include a job that shows they have mixed with common people. Notice 'cinema usherette', 'clerk at a liquor store' and 'swimming instructor'? The ideal list for men seems to include: lumberjack (aka timber feller), merchant seaman, dishwasher, journalist, and sleeping rough in a park while completing a PhD.

Barbara Hambly's 'karate instructor' might deter critics from being negative about her books, and perhaps Louis L'Amour's 'elephant handler' means he was secretly guying the whole idea of author biogs as a big pile of shit.

One more curiosity about biogs is the considerable number that end up with something like this: 'she lives in Iram in the state of Butua with nine cats'. It's usually said in such a way that it puts cats on a par with husbands, wives and lovers. I presume we're meant to see this as a mark of distinction in writers. Here are people so dedicated to writing books that

they've even sacrificed the usual kinds of human society to the society of cats.

Awards are part of the hype, too. As soon as a book wins an award, what do you see on the front covers of all its writer's books? Something like this: 'By the Hugo Award-winning author Harq al-Ada'. It's usually worded in such a way that you think *this* book is the one that won the Hugo, though those words now appear on every one of his books. Worse, how often do publishers capitalise on al-Ada's award by hastily issuing his juvenilia and ephemera that they'd originally rejected?

If you have more than one set of awards within a genre, and each set gives its awards to different books, that in itself makes the whole thing a joke. At the least it suggests that a hundred sets of awards might come up with a hundred different winners.

To have both a Hugo and a Nebula for SF has long seemed a problem to me. Now I do know that their judges are different, but when different judges choose different winners, you end up with awards for *judges* instead of for books.

You might criticise my list of great writers who never won the Nobel Prize on the grounds that Alfred Nobel's will⁵ stipulates that it go to

the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency; . . .

So you might say that on these grounds you can understand why the Nobel's judges wouldn't have considered writers like James Joyce or D. H. Lawrence, because the sexual content of their books was shocking, at least during their lifetimes. But again, this says more about the judges and the mores of their times than it does about great and especially 'idealistic' literature.

When readers see books constantly hyped in the above ways, yet find that after all far too many of them are just the usual ho-hum stuff, who can blame them for being turned off reading?

Have you heard this before?

my son, be admonished: of making many books there is no end; . . .

That was said three thousand years ago by the Preacher in Ecclesiastes.⁶ But how few books *were* there that long ago? John Man says:⁷

In 1455 all Europe's printed books could have been carried in a single wagon . . . Today, books pour off presses at the rate of 10,000 million a year.

And you can be certain that every one of those 10,000 million, according to the hype on its cover, is absolutely brilliant.

He also quotes a list of titles, some of which are amusing in themselves.⁸ Here are a few:

Wheelbarrow Decoration
Vocational Diseases of Professional Cooks
The Semiotics of Sneaker Design
The Legacy of the Biro
Crime Control Strategies in the Modern Mall
The Art of the Afghani Truck
Was God a Chair-Leg?
Salads with Edible Flowers
Porn with Marmite

What are the chances that at least a few of these won 'The Elephantine Award for 2002'?

You know, anyone can set up an award — let's say the 'Cordus Award for the Best Book of the Year Written about the Ancient Greek Hero, Theseus'. But who would know how few books had actually qualified for its judging, when they saw a book whose jacket proclaimed no more than that it'd won 'The Cordus Award'?

This suggests a delicious ploy for ramping up the sales of a book that you've written. You yourself can invent an award that is so specific that only *your* book can win it. And to make sure of the result you can appoint its judges from your relatives and friends. Then your publisher can print this up big on your book's front cover and you're made!

Further to that, why not make a big drive to push sales of Aussie SF by inventing fifty different annual awards? Then every Aussie SF book can fly an award banner on its front cover.

You have to wonder what would happen to the business of making awards, if every book boasting an award were forced also to state how few people had voted for it, and what its geographical limits were. Imagine this: 'The William James Sidis Award for the Best Novel about Tram Tickets, restricted to Flinders Island Writers, voted for by six Members of the Flinders Island Rugmaking Club'.

I've often thought that the Bible of the twentieth century was not the King James Version but *The Guinness Book of Records*.⁹ I've been told by several librarians that it's the most-borrowed book that they stock. I wonder if anyone has ever thought to put in a claim to the *Guinness* that a book he or she wrote is the world champion for the number of awards it won? If not yet,

someone certainly will soon.

However, in the end writers and fans have far too much delicious fun tossing awards around like confetti at a wedding, for them to ever give the awards game away.

- 1 Minette Walters, *The Sculptress* (London: Macmillan, 1993, reissued 1998).
- 2 Elliot Perlman, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* Sydney: Macmillan, 2003).
- 3 Ernest Hemingway in an interview, *Paris Review*, vol. 18, 1958, p. 78.
- 4 Frances Gordon (pseudonym of Bridget Wood), *Blood Ritual* (London: Headline, 1994).
- 5 'Nobel Prizes', *Funk & Wagnall's New Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk & Wagnall, 1979), vol. 17.
- 6 Ecclesiastes 12: 12, in the King James version of the Bible (1611).
- 7 John Man, *The Gutenberg Revolution* (London: Review, 2002), p. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.
- 9 Now titled *Guinness World Records* (London: Guinness Publishing, annually since 1955). The book itself is included in its own list of world records as the 'top-selling copyright book in publishing history' (2004 edition).

— Ray Wood, 2003

Editorial

The state of the fanzine editor

Bruce Gillespie

I turned sixty in February. Elaine and I held an enjoyable gathering to celebrate this event, but could not invite more than a small proportion of the people with whom we would have liked to raise a glass. We would have needed a small-scale world convention to do that.

While this event was happening, my mother was very ill in hospital after falling, breaking her hip, in late January. At first she seemed to be improv-

ing, and was moved to a rehabilitation hospital for several weeks. In the second half of February she lost her strength; her body seemed to disappear from under her; she died on 4 March, three months before her eighty-ninth birthday.

When my sisters and I visited her at Christmas, although my mother looked frail and felt depressed, she was still living independently, with help from council services. My sister

Jeanette stayed down at Rosebud, on the Mornington Peninsula, during the five weeks my mother was in hospital or rehabilitation care, sitting with her for five hours a day. She had a much stronger bond with mum than I did. After my mother died, Jeanette took responsibility for all those necessities that had to be done.

My mother and I often annoyed each other without meaning to, and I found it difficult to spend more than a

day in her company. Most years I could see her only twice a year, when Elaine and I travelled down the Mornington Peninsula with Jeanette. But her continued existence was a rock of my existence. My mother kept up all the contacts with other members of the family, and also retained a store of family photos, some from the late nineteenth century. When Time claimed my mother, my own hold on Time became more fragile.

From January to July, I was undergoing a nightmare period of trying to balance three paying jobs at once. I've been offered no freelance work since. The period of maximum workload coincided with this year's Melbourne convention, ConVergence 2, 8-11 June, to which I had been looking forward. Because of my workload, I had time to attend only four hours of programming, including the Awards Presentation on the Saturday night.

The lists of Ditmar nominees seemed very peculiar to me: I recognised few of the names. Rose Mitchell, the Convention chair, had asked me to present the Fanzine Ditmar. I had never heard of three of the nominees (websites, not fanzines), and the two I did know are clubzines. Not only has there been a changing of the guard, but almost everybody whose work I value in Australian fandom seems to have been forgotten.

I was sitting in the second front row, thinking such dismal thoughts, when I noticed a Chandler Award on the table. Who would receive it this year? Usually the Australian SF Foundation, which makes the award, asks me to write the citation for the winner. I hadn't heard even a rumour this year. As Cath Ortlieb was going to the rostrum to announce the award, I thought, for one moment, 'Maybe it's my turn this year.' And it was.

The Chandler Award is given for lifetime achievement in Australian SF. I've only ever published three crappy SF stories, so I assumed the award was for publishing *SF Commentary* and my other fanzines since 1969, and for being a member of the Norstrilia Press partnership from 1975 to 1985. The Chandler Award means much more than that. It has been given to pro writers, such as Lee Harding, George Turner, Lucy Sussex and Wynne Whiteford, and to fan writers and publishers, such as Van Ikin, John Bangsund, John Foyster, Sue Batho, Graham Stone and Grant Stone. In winning the Chandler, I had been invited to join the company of the people I admire most.

What links us? I like to think we've all contributed to the Australian SF community, rather than being merely high achievers. Of course, Chandler winners *have* been very high achievers over a long period of time, but they are honoured for their contributions to the greater SF family.

Why should I accept an award for something that comes naturally — fanzine editing? In the light of Ray Wood's Guest Editorial, I suppose I should refuse all awards.

Put it another way: does receiving the Chandler for past achievements mean that I can expect to achieve nothing more?

I'm not really sixty; in the middle of my head I am still twenty-six. How much time do I have to achieve anything more? How can I keep publishing fanzines without necessary funds?

If I thought about these questions when I was forty-five, I would written myself off as a publisher after the age of sixty. When I was forty-five, in 1992, I had only just given up using a duplicator and stencils for publishing fanzines. The Internet had been barely glimpsed by the ordinary computer user.

In 2007, we have the World Wide

Web, and on that Web is a site called efanazines.com. Set up and managed by Bill Burns, it has given new literary life to a large number of people like me: people who are retired or about to retire, have little income, but still have great fanzine-publishing ambitions. To the invention of the Web add the invention of Adobe Acrobat's PDF technology, and one finds on <http://efanazines.com> an amazing range of superb fanzines in PDF format, many produced by people who have been absent from fandom for many years. *Pixel*, by Dave Burton, is one of the best. Dave was a contributor to *Gorbett* and *SF Waves*, which were edited by Dave Gorman in the early seventies. (Whatever happened to Dave Gorman?) Now Dave Burton is back. Arnie and Joyce Katz have had two distinguished careers in fandom, with a long period of gafia in between. Not only did they run the BBB Fan Fund that took me from Melbourne to California and back, but also Arnie has been publishing *Vegas Fandom Weekly* as a PDF-only fanzine for the last two years. Arnie and Joyce couldn't afford to publish *VWF* in paper format, and neither could Earl Kemp afford to print and post *e1*, a regular fanzine stuffed full of great fan articles.

Where major fanzine editors have gone, Jan Stinson and I will surely follow. Bob Sabella did it recently: his *Visions of Paradise* went all-online from one issue to another. I would love to keep publishing real fanzines, such as the issue of *SET* that you are holding. Thomas Bull, stalwart Melbourne fan, has donated enough money for me to publish *Steam Engine Time 7* and the first revived *SF Commentary* (No 80). But I don't see why Thomas should put himself out when the Great Solution offers itself — all-online editions. I will send out a note to everybody when the big day comes. Screams of anguish will be heard. No doubt we will come to some arrangement with people who have no access to the Internet. Jan and I will honour subscriptions to *Steam Engine Time*. But when I plan each new issue of *Steam Engine Time*, or *SF Commentary*, or even *The Metaphysical Review* (after nine years' absence), I won't have to say to myself: 'Can't afford it!'

Surely the best years of our fanzines are ahead.

— Bruce Gillespie, August 2007



Here's a pic of the astounded recipient of this year's Chandler Award: big blue bowl, plaque and citation. Cath Ortlieb handed me the award on behalf of the Australian SF Foundation, and she took this photo.

Alan Garner's career

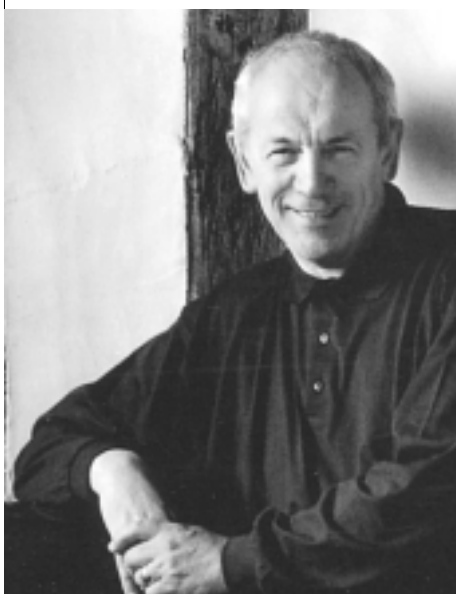
Inner stars: The novels of Alan Garner

by Bruce Gillespie

BRG: I wrote this article while I was the assistant editor of *The Secondary Teacher* (the weekly magazine of the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association) in 1977. I can't remember if it appeared there, or was spiked. I can't remember whether or not it's based on the Nova Mob talk I gave about Alan Garner in 1977. In fact, I can't remember writing it. But when I was packing to move from Collingwood to Greensborough, it suddenly appeared there in the files.

It hasn't dated much, since Garner hasn't published a whole lot since 1977: just *The Stone Book Quartet*, *Strandloper*, and an occasional title that never materialises in Australian bookshops. However, Garner has published a book of criticism since then, and my view of him might have changed greatly after 27 years. I found out by typing the article.

Alan Garner in 1996.



The scene: Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

The time: An evening in February 1975.

The happening: A white-faced, tense man rises to give a lecture on 'Inner Time'. He looks vulnerable; giving the lecture is painful for him. The audience listens intently, a bit embarrassed.

The words: 'The feeling is less that I choose the myth than that the myth chooses me; less that I write than that I am written . . . I simply plot the maps of inner stars.'

The writer: Alan Garner, author of five novels, several other books, two operas and several television plays.

New label?: 'Magic fiction' writer; English novelist.

So who are children these days?

Let's get rid of the label first. In his now-famous ICA lecture (published in *Science Fiction at Large*, edited by Peter Nicholls), Alan Garner does not talk about himself as a writer for children. Yet all his books have been published as 'children's books'. He has even been credited with revolutionising the genre. Labels stick, even when Alan Garner goes beyond them.

Garner's first two books, *The Weirstone of Brisinghamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath*, are 'children's books' in the old-fashioned sense. The two main characters are Colin and Susan, about ten years old. They are on holiday in the English moorland (as in Enid Blyton novels). They meet a wizard, and umpteen magical creatures, and survive endless hairbreadth adventures. The images are bright, the language is simple, and there is always home to return to.

The children's book has traditionally been a symbol for domestication. Let the children romp around a strange landscape; give them a bit of rope; but always end the book with 'happily ever after'. It was all a bit of a trick. The

'happily ever afters' were to reassure parents, not to soothe children.

Even in the first two books, Garner began to change all that. Colin and Susan are hardly memorable characters, but at least they are not typical child heroes. They get swept along with the magic events, rather than control them. They have to make important decisions, but they are not always the 'right' decisions.

There is no 'happy ending' in *The Moon of Gomrath*. Colin and Susan think they are on the side of the goodies, but the wizard Calledin proves to be a bit of a shyster. The forces of magic are not put back in their place. 'Old Evil' is still loose at the end of the book. Most of the loose ends are not tied up.

Children's books changed altogether when Alan Garner published *Elidor*, then *The Owl Service* and, most recently, *Red Shift*. Children's books are now dynamic, not to be touched by those who want a 'safe read'. Writers such as William Mayne, Leon Garfield, Ursula Le Guin and Ivan Southall have also been part of the change. But somehow the change is most noticeable in Garner's books.

It is not even certain that Garner's books are any longer for children, let alone about children.

In *Elidor*, Garner narrowed the focus of action to a suburban house in England. Great magic events still take place, but they bring only trouble to the children in this story, and not much adventure.

The Owl Service is about 'young adults', rather than children. Alison is Roger's half-sister, and Gwyn is a Welsh kid who is involved with them. The personal relationships are real, intense, and irritating to any reader who wants only an adventure story.

Red Shift breaks right out of the children's category. It will be hated by many adults who control book buying for their children. Only a third of the

book is actually about the young adult characters, Tom and Jan. Most of the book includes swearing, physical and verbal violence and a fair bit of talk about sex. All the old taboos have been broken. If *Red Shift* is a 'children's book' (and the publishers say it is), the label is losing its meaning.

Which is all to Alan Garner's advantage. But if they don't fit a label, what *are* Alan Garner's books?

Mything links

'The element common to all the books', said Alan Garner during the ICA lecture, 'is my present-day function within myth. The difference between that function and what are usually called "retellings" is that the retellings are stuffed trophies on the wall, whereas I have to bring them back alive.'

I'm one of those people for whom any retelling of a myth is like watching a stuffed trophy on a wall. Long lists of ancient names (as in Garner's first two books) make me yawn.

Yet, says Garner, 'the more I learn, the more I am convinced that there are no original stories. On several occasions I have "invented" an incident, and then come across it in an obscure fragment of Hebridean lore, orally collected, and privately printed, a hundred years ago.'

But it *is* a modern world, isn't it? Things were quite different way back then. Even people are different now. Why bore us with old legends, Mr Garner? Where's the originality?

The originality is in the art of the books themselves, of course, not in the bits and pieces from which they are made, though many readers of Garner may be most interested in those bits and pieces.

Not that there is much artistic originality in *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1960) and *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963). They fit the 'one damn thing after another' category: one adventure after another, without leaving space to think. Colin and Susan track across woods and moors, get trapped in magic-ridden houses, clamber through a particularly crazy system of underground caves, but not much is resolved.

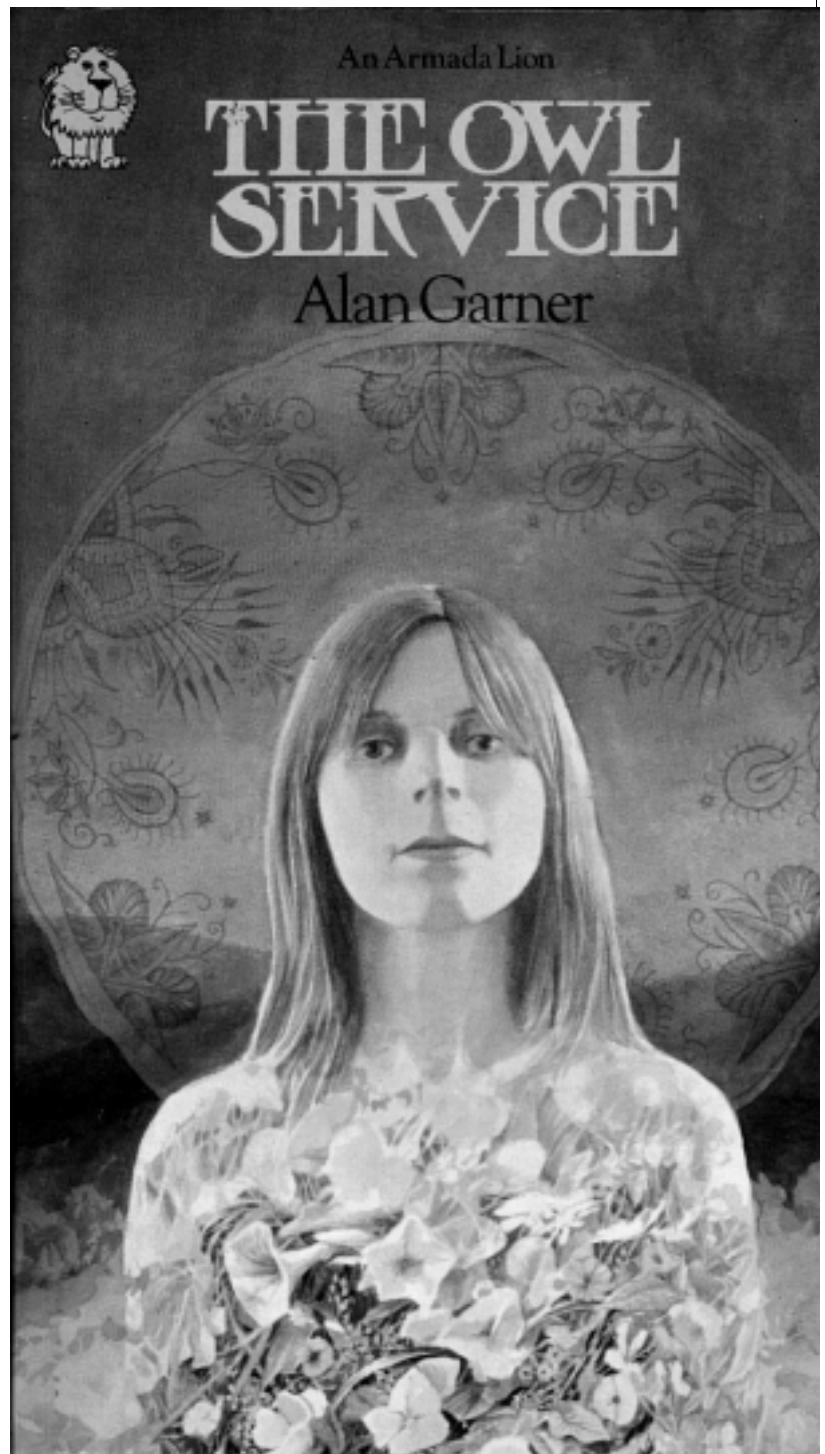
There are some memorable images: the magic lady on the island; the flying pony that takes Susan for a ride beyond the earth; the Wild Ride; the beam of moonlight that reveals a hidden path over the hills once a year. But mainly these books form a catalogue of old legends and legendary names.

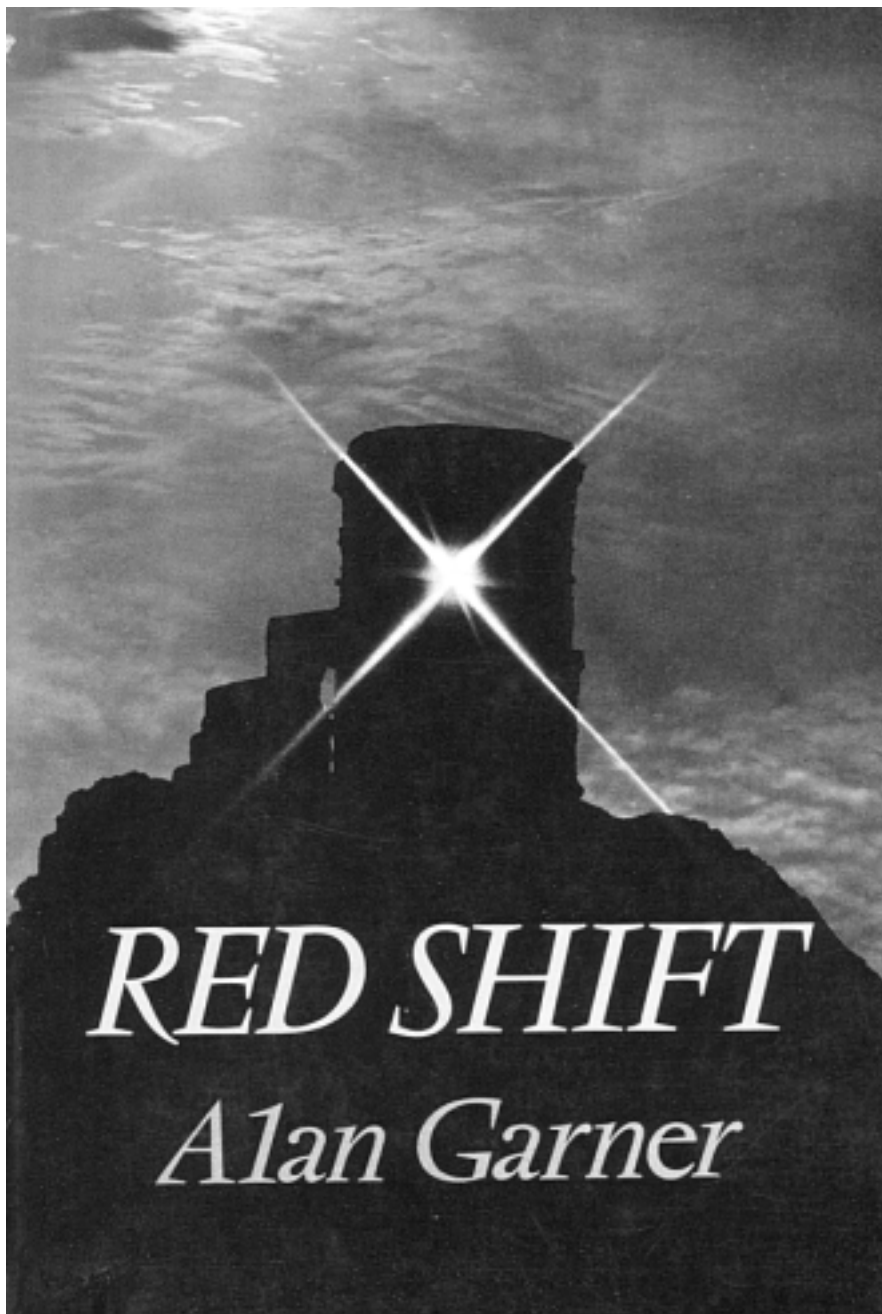
In *Elidor* (1965), Garner's work begins to get interesting. The book begins with a fairly hackneyed adventure into a magic kindom — but the children this time find the entrance to the magic kingdom in a ruined church in the middle of a slum clearance in Birmingham. No more country landscapes and natural images to help along the story.

For Garner, myth is not what happens in ancient stories. It represents what happens in all periods of time. In modern England, the four treasures turn into a length of iron railing, a keystone, two splintered laths and an old, cracked cup. Buried in the garden, these objects still disurb any electri-

cally driven machines in the vicinity. A year after the journey into Elidor, Roland looks through the keyhole in the front door — and sees an ancient eye peering back at him. The enemies of Elidor have found a magic doorway to catch up with the children. They wait in ambush — just outside the door, yet thousands of years in the past.

Still, Garner is concerned not so much with what happens to the treasures, or to Elidor, but with what happens to the children. Three of them pretend that Elidor never existed. Roland tries to solve the problem. *Elidor* is a sly protest against people who





say, 'It's nothing to do with me!' Garner does not quite meet the challenge set by his ideas. He settles for magical effects – a unicorn, a breathless chase – to end the story.

The Owl Service (1968) won the Guardian Award and the Carnegie Medal. It's been called the most important children's book of the last twenty years – which, as always, is to put it in a pigeonhole. *The Owl Service* is one of the best English novels in any category during the last twenty years. The readers have realised this already, even if the critics haven't.

The Owl Service is a terrifying book. No 'magic kingdoms' here. The magic is still here, but it is in the air that surrounds the characters. The magic is malevolent and inevitable, and it

settles down on the shoulders of the main characters like a stinking smog.

Two of the characters, Alison and Roger, are on holiday with their parents (his father, her mother) at a house in a Welsh valley. A daft Welsh gardener shuffles around the house. A sharp-tongued housekeeper reigns inside. Her son, Gwyn, forms a friendship with Roger and Alison.

A reminder of cosy British fiction for children? Of course. But nothing is cosy in this household. There are mysteries about why the English family owns the house at all. And daddy is henpecked by mummy. Gwyn has a chip on his shoulder about these visiting English upper-class slummers, and Roger treats Gwyn as a low pest. Alison wants everything to be 'nice',

but all her actions increase the bitterness.

Then Things Start to Happen. The three find themselves hit by a lightning bolt of magic; they are condemned to act out an ancient Welsh legend about a wizard who built a woman from flowers, who then turned into an owl and caused the deaths of both her husband and lover. The legend begins working again when Alison finds some old plates in the attic. A pattern of owls appears on the plate. The patterns disappear, and Alison begins to make paper owls. Garner hints, but never says directly, that she is turning into a magic owl.

The transformation is only the shell of the story. The legend itself shows in the bitterness between the three characters. This scarcely disguised sexual bitterness gives the book its strength. Magic is no longer a playground for wild adventures. It's a kind of disease that comes to life in everybody, and causes only grief.

Gwyn tries to escape responsibility for his part in the triangle. He tries to leave the valley, but local villagers force him back. Roger and Alison try to ignore what is happening to them, but it happens anyway. 'There are no original stories', says Garner. What he means is that there are no people who can escape from being what they are.

The Owl Service is very concentrated writing, each word picked precisely. The entire book is only 156 pages long. Many pages consist only of violent conversations between characters, yet the damp atmosphere of the Welsh valley sweeps out of the pages. We are part of the legend; Garner makes this idea live in the book.

Inner time: *Red Shift*

I suspect that nobody knew what to make of *Red Shift* when it was published in 1973. The reviewers didn't. Some of them admitted that they were baffled. They said all the usual things: about *Red Shift* changing the face of children's writing, which was true enough. Some other authors, such as Paul Zindel, might not have succeeded without Garner's pioneering success.

It's easy to see why the reviewers scratched their heads. Make a hasty first reading of the book, as I did, and it's confusing. *Red Shift* flashes continually between three stories: the story of Tom and Jan (time: now); the story of Thomas and Margery (time: the English Civil War); the story of several Roman soldiers cut off from their legion and attempting to survive

in occupied Britain (time: about two thousand years ago). The third story is confusing because Alan Garner gives the Romans modern names (such as Macey and Magoo).

The three stories seem to have little to do with each other — except that each happens in the same area of England (on or around a castle hill called Mow Cop), and that the same axehead turns up in each story. In story 1, the Roman soldiers survive for a few months. All die except for Macey and a Celtic girl who survived a raid on a village. In story 2, the Puritan village is captured by a group of Irish Loyalist soldiers under the command of a former citizen of the village. Everybody is killed except Thomas and Margery. In story 3, Tom and Jan are separated by distance when Jan moves to the city. They meet each month until each believes the other is a betrayer. They separate permanently (or do they?)

It's the modern story that is puzzling. No sudden violence or real adventure. A boy discovers that his girlfriend once spent the weekend with another bloke. The girl discovers that her boyfriend has sold an old axehead that she cherished. A bit tame?

What does the book's title mean? It's easy to work out the scientific

meaning. The red shift of the stars is the change in their colour that is observed on earth as stars rush away from each other and the earth at ever increasing speeds.

'When we look at a starry sky', writes Alan Garner, 'we see a group of configurations that seem to be equidistant from us and existing now. That is an "apparent perspective". We are looking at a complexity of times past — a sky of "it-was", all at different epochs, distances and intensities. Inner time creates similar illusions.'

'Red shift', it seems, is something that happens inside people, and between people. Three eras of history in *Red Shift*, but one humanity.

There's that axehead, for example. In Roman times, it is the means by which the group survives. In Roundhead times, it is a good luck charm — and a symbol of last-ditch survival. In our time, Tom and Jan find it and Tom sells it to a museum. Twentieth-century people, Garner seems to say, have forgotten their history. They've forgotten the importance of really important things.

In the two historical sections, exterior violence draws people together. In the modern section, nobody is threatened by sword-carrying

soldiers. But, without exterior threat, the main characters fly apart from each other. They commit psychological violence instead.

I cannot do justice to the writing skill that Garner shows in *Red Shift*. Every line is important to everything else in the book. Much of the book is in dialogue. Not a word is wasted. At the beginning of the book, Jan has just returned from a holiday in Germany. By the end of the book, we know what happened to her there. So we read the beginning of the book again to find out how it affected them there. And so on, watching the pattern grow, word by word. Beware: read the last two pages carefully.

Each book that Alan Garner publishes, the pattern gets more complex. Garner is a 'wise fool', like the characters in *The Guizer*, his recent book of retold legends.

He calls himself a 'boundary-rider', finding the boundaries of knowledge and going beyond them. We must explain ourselves to ourselves; we can explore the inner worlds through myth and story. There are stars flaming inside our heads, and Garner can draw star-maps for us.

— Bruce Gillespie, 1977

'turning, tapping, knapping, shaping, twisting, rubbing and making':

The novels of Alan Garner since *Red Shift*

Robert Mapson

BRG: Robert Mapson is a Western Australian fan and writer who has never told me much about himself, but who has contributed letters and other material to my fanzines for many years. When I posted my Garner article on my blog, Mapson found it and suggested I write about *Thursbitch*, Garner's most recent novel. I had not been able to find it in Australia. Robert also asked me to write about Garner's work since *Red Shift*. A few weeks later I found a paperback copy of *Thursbitch*, and Robert sent me the following article and mini-autobiography. Google for

Robert's own Alan Garner website.

As he writes of himself, Robert 'first encountered SF in the Dark Ages, attended Swancon II, and has drifted around the shoals of fandom in the subsequent years. He discovered Alan Garner around the same time, and has maintained the Unofficial Alan Garner Page since 1997. His current activities involve hoarding supplies to wait out the tides of darkness and superstition sweeping the nation in the guise of psychics, homeopathy, intelligent design, etc etc.'

In Alan Garner's latest novel, *Thursbitch* (2003), there is discussion of the slow process of geological transformation: 'So the sediments would have been about three kilometres below the sea floor at the time. There's foresteping here. And here's a trace of the palaeoslope.'

In the same manner, Garner's novels appear to grow at the rate of geological processes. *Thursbitch* appeared seven years after its predecessor, *Strandloper* (1996), and that 18 years after *The Stone Book Quartet* (1978). 'I knew I'd been away a long time when children started writing, "Dear Mr Garner, if you're not dead"' (*Carousel*

10, Summer 1999).

Like geological processes, though, Garner was not dead but surprisingly active, if most of this activity was not immediately obvious.

Presently, Garner is busy with the formation of the Blackden Trust, to preserve his house into the future. It is a site that has been continuously inhabited for over ten thousand years, and he doesn't want to see it sold and redeveloped like so much of surrounding Manchester. The Trust is intended to 'preserve this house and its site from future depredations and for the purpose of architectural and archaeological study and to provide a place where works of artistic or scientific merit may be completed'.

Apart from the novels, there have been a number of minor books retelling various myths and fairy tales, performing a task for mainly British tales that the Brothers Grimm did earlier for Germanic tales: *The Lad of the Gad* (1980), *Fairytales of Gold* (1980), *Alan Garner's Book of British Fairytales* (1984), *A Bag of Moonshine* (1986), *Once Upon A Time* (1993), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1993), *The Little Red Hen* (1997), *Grey Wolf, Prince Jack and the Firebird* (1998), and *The Well of the Wind* (1998), as well as *Potter Thompson* (an opera libretto, 1985).

Though these might be considered minor Garner, the use of language that hovers dangerously between the compression and rhythm of poetry, and the

music of fairy stories, is still evident.

Once upon a time, though it wasn't in your time, and it wasn't in my time, and it wasn't in anybody else's time, but whatever it was, a fox and a hare lived by a lake.

Once Upon a Time
(London: Dorling Kindersley, 1993)

Jack climbed, and he climbed, and he climbed; he climbed up, and up, and up, and up; up, up, up Jack went. He went past weathercocks and larks, higher than the swallows he went, up, up in the air, till at last he came to the top of the beanstalk and the end of the sky.

Jack and the Beanstalk
(London: HarperCollins, 1992)

During this time he also published a book of essays, *The Voice that Thunders* (1997), which ranges over autobiography, mythology, madness, creation and archaeology and provides much insight into the way a writer is formed and how the creative forces work through him to produce, at the end, a novel. Though Garner might not agree, there is much in his past that parallels the shamanistic storytellers of other cultures: the childhood illnesses (of such severity that he was expected to die) and manic depression, the deep and holding history of family and place rooted in his

particular location in Cheshire, and the dislocation from that culture (he was the first of his family to go to university) so that he has become a creature of both and none, both part of and exiled from his heritage, able to observe, digest and integrate, and bring forth something that recreates that culture in a new and multilayered way.

If Garner was just writing or re-writing Cheshire history and tales, he would be of little interest outside that area, but he deals with deeper themes that apply to all humanity: myth, history, relationships.

This is shown by the three original works published since *Red Shift: The Stone Book Quartet*, *Strandloper* and *Thursbitch*.

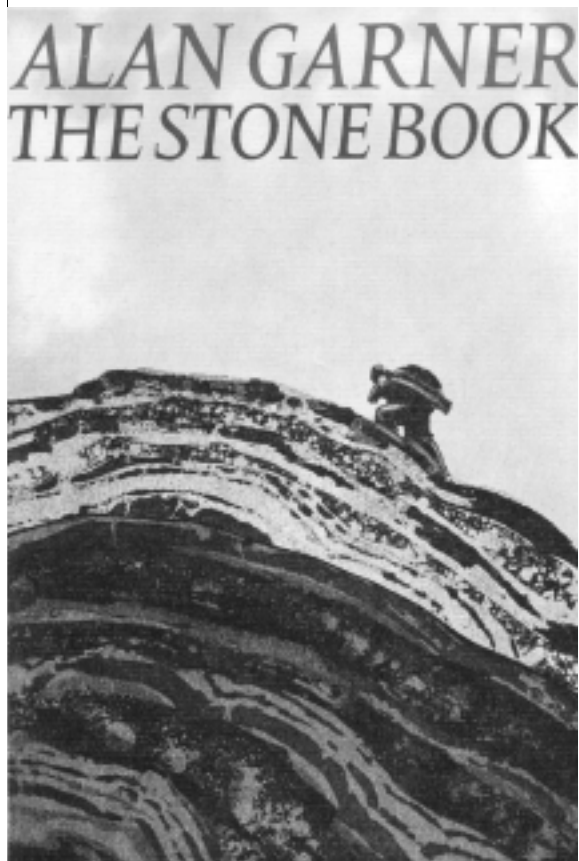
After the compressed and difficult *Red Shift*, which pared the novel back almost beyond its bones, *The Stone Book Quartet* is a deceptively simple work. At first glance it might almost appear to be only that object Garner denies creating: a children's book. The four volumes that make up the quartet are slim (less than 80 pages each) and illustrated (admirably by Michael Foreman), they feature children as the main characters, and the language is simple, but it is here that Garner really finds for the first time his true voice. It is in this work that he eschews the camp dialect of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* for the use of Cheshire dialect that reflects its actual usage.

'And you shall,' said Grandfather. 'Stone and you, you'd never marry: I've seen it, Joseph. And, Joseph, we do us best, but you're a granny reardun, think on, and a granny reardun you'll be. So you get prenticed, and a roof over you, and meat in you, and drink. You're like to have to look to yourself sooner than most in this world. Hey!' he shouted to Damper Latham. 'My grandson! See at him! He's going for a generous, ingenious hammerman!'

Granny Reardun
(London: Collins, 1997)

The four volumes relate to specific events in the history of Garner's family, keypoints where the children must make life-changing decisions (*The Stone Book*, July 1864; *Granny Reardun*, Friday 11 June 1886; *The Aimer Gate*, Wednesday 7 September 1916; *Tom Fobble's Day*, Friday 10 January 1941).

The Stone Book is Mary's story.



While she climbs to the future and the sky, up the spire her father is completing on the new church, Mary also climbs to the past and the depths, deep below ground, like Theseus and Ariadne reversed, to discover the bull, and to find a transcendental understanding of the ground she stands upon.

The language is assured and poetic. These are books about craftsmen, both of the hand and the brain, and, in a phrase that recurs, Garner describes the creative process as 'turning, tapping, knapping, shaping, twisting, rubbing and making'. It is both a magical process and an affirmative process.

Granny Reardun tells the story of Joseph (the granny reared 'un of the title) as school finishes and he must decide what to do with the rest of his life.

'I must get somewhere: somewhere aback of you. I must. It's my time. Else I'll never.'

This is the same dilemma and decision that Garner found himself faced with. Coming from a line of craftsmen, he had to find the one form of shaping and making that fitted him. In his case, it became the fitting of words into a form that stands as firmly as the walls of his ancestors, where the craft is not immediately obvious but where, without the craft, the wall or the novel would not stand.

The Aimer Gate is Robert's story, one harvest day. In a novel about death and change (though none of that, in Garner's way, is overtly stated) the final paragraph is a superb linking of the workers and the turning of the ages:

The corn kivers waited on three church bells. The last cry went up, 'Who-whoop! Wo-whoop! Wo-o-o-o!' and was quiet at Leah's Hill. Wicked Winnie took Faddock Allman home. Father and Uncle Charlie played the great tune of the Hough, E Flat cornet and rifle, on either side of the fire, and the day swung in the chapel clock, escapement to the sun.

Tom Fobble's Day takes us to the Second World War, and tells of William and his relationship to his grandfather. While the account is historically accurate, it is a work of fiction, and William should not necessarily be read directly as Alan Garner (though there is every reason why he also should,

given the depth and intensity of Garner's biographical research).

Taken together, the volumes of the *Stone Book Quartet* are effectively Garner's manifesto, and his most sublime work. The layers that were so much a part of *Red Shift* are here as well, but more tightly integrated so that a casual reading might miss them. The language (and particularly dialect) also become a natural part of the flow of the work, and not a shift in style. While a word out of context (baggin, aback, fettling, feckazing) may be meaningless, in the novel the sense is clear and the meaning plain. More than anything, they indicate an acceptance of Garner's place in the world, in his family, and in his home.

While I personally consider *Red Shift* Garner's most important book (simply because it did something to the novel that other authors had not), I think *The Stone Book Quartet* is Garner's best book because of its deep personal roots, and the use of language. *The Stone Book Quartet* won the 1996 Phoenix Award.

After the culmination of *The Stone Book Quartet*, it seemed Garner had nothing more to say. Apart from the minor books, there was no new novel until *Strandloper* in 1996. Partly this can be explained by difficulties with his publisher: Garner changed publishers between the two books (his previous publisher wanted him to write more *Weirdstone of Brislington* sequels – something that would have undoubtedly been popular, but would have turned Garner into a J. K. Rowling type of literary journeyman rather than a master of his art and which was clearly anathema to a craftsman of his calibre). Partly it is explained by Garner's working methods: he researches (often beyond the call of the novel) until the novel is formed in his mind, and only then the writing begins. Indeed, he likens the creative process to a gestation, using the term 'pregnant' with a novel, until it is fully formed and can be brought to light.

Strandloper is Garner's first novel not to be marketed as children's literature. It tells the story of William Buckley, a Cheshire bricklayer in the 1790s who was transported to Australia. He escaped, naively hoping to walk north to China and then turn left for home. Instead, he is found by a tribe of Aborigines, is initiated, spends 32 years with them, and becomes Murrangurk, an elder of the tribe. Eventually, he returns to the white people, and home

to Cheshire, where he becomes Strandloper, the strider of the boundary between land and water (Australian readers will be familiar with William from the phrase 'Buckley's chance').

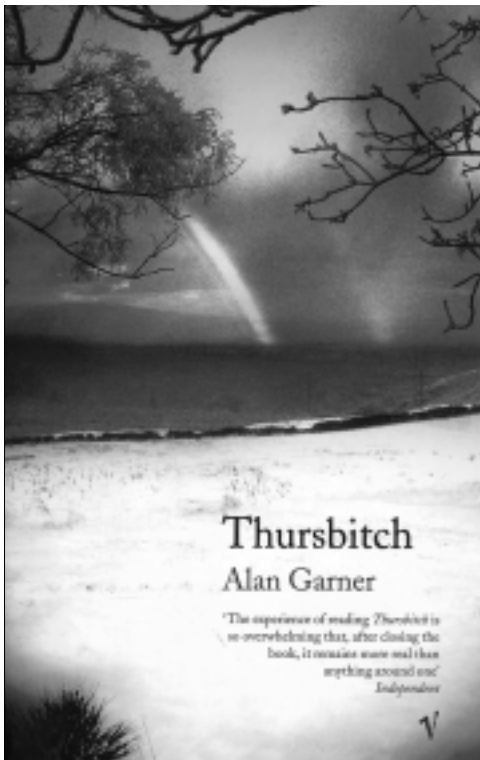
Apart from the final return (in reality, William Buckley died in Australia without returning to Cheshire) the rest is based on fact, but a historical retelling is not Garner's concern, nor does a simple outline of the plot indicate the scope and power of the novel. He deals with the world of the mind and of myth, with great circles that link Australia and Cheshire, Aboriginal and British folklore, and the world of dreaming and imagination: the motifs of William's dreaming in Aboriginal Australia occur also in the stained glass windows of an actual church in Cheshire (the church of St James and St Paul at Marton) – both are entoptic patterns.

While much of the novel utilises Garner's compressed style, and unannotated dialogue (there is one section, on the transport ship to Australia, where a plethora of voices all speak without explanation, yet Garner manages to differentiate them all and give them a character from the dialogue alone – a fugue of disparate characters lost at sea) this is a more expansive novel than *Red Shift* (it is 200 pages – lengthy for a Garner novel) in both format and territory covered.

The final section of the novel describes the transcendental unifying of the Aboriginal world (and world-view) with that of Cheshire: the languages meld and are not different, the dreamings meld and are not different, and Buckley/Murrangurk link and bestride them both though, like Garner, without completely belonging to either. It is a piece of writing that strives to reach beyond the mundane and to impart a knowledge that cannot be written. 'Tundun and the Silence and the Song were All and One.'

Garner's most recent novel, *Thursbitch*, might almost have seemed to appear with undue haste, arriving as it did only seven years after *Strandloper*, but it has also been the longest in development, originating in an incident over forty years ago when Garner accidentally found a mysterious memorial stone. Having only spent two years with it, I hesitate to even comment on the novel, feeling I need at least forty years to fully understand it.

The novel centres around the valley of Thursbitch (etymologically, Garner



argues that this means Valley of the Demon), and the stories of Jack Turner and Nan Sarah in the eighteenth century, and Ian and Sal in the twentieth century, whose lives parallel and mirror each other, but not in a direct one-to-one correspondence. It is not *Red Shift II*, but it is its thematic sequel, pared down to two stories.

I find it hard to do justice to this novel: it is compressed and layered like *Red Shift* (and, like that novel, it deals with linked lives, astronomy – Orion again – and one particular place), but it is much more of an onion than the earlier work. It needs to be read carefully, and it needs to be re-read, to even begin understanding its deeper layers (discussing it with other people, I know I'm not alone in missing that Nan Sarah gives birth to twins as she dies, for example). Where *Red Shift* was a red giant, this is a white dwarf: more intense, more burning, more dangerous.

Thursbitch is about many things: it is about how time and space interact in astronomical and geological terms, but it is also about how lives have patterns and interact on their own smaller scale. It is about myth and religion (Jack Turner leads an ancient bull cult that is being displaced by Christianity, Ian is a Jesuit faced with Sal's terminal illness); it is about death and how things do not disappear but are transformed (Nan Sarah dies of the plague, Sal has a degenerative disease – probably Huntington's Disease); above all it is

about place and history. It deals with issues of Dionysian myth, Orpheus and Mithraism, the Eleusinian Mysteries, Sumerian myth and language (the entranced devotees of the bull break into Sumerian – just for fun I attempted translating these and, while not being a Sumerian scholar and relying on a dictionary, they do make sense in context).

Garner's art is that these themes are an integral part of the twin narratives, but do not distract from the human story. It is a novel of implication, not explication. For example, there are a number of scenes where the eighteenth-century and the twenty-first-century narratives appear to cross, where the characters seem to meet each other in passing, or to hear each other. Indeed, a number of reviewers have stated this as fact. The novel makes no such statement: the possibility is implied that there is a meeting across time, but it could also be coincidences. It could be an example of recurring patterns, recurring types, a sort of collective unconscious providing the ostinato to the short lives being lived above in the melody line. Nothing is certain. What seems is something else, the deeper we penetrate.

Garner's writing is poetic and lucid (though what is being described may well be something else – symbols and dreams, ciphers and keys):

Jack sat, one heel beneath him, and waited. The night was still. He watched. Listened. Waited. He tucked his neckcloth into his shirt. And waited. The moon rose higher, drawing with it the mist. Jack stood to see above it, listening, looking on the hare's path.

The first stars were showing, their sounds the echoes of the moon, and the moonlight on the brook rippled up to him. As in the day, he took of the valley and the sky and the valley and the sky took of him; but now all was lapped in a greater silence, and in it and from it he heard something in front of him, and a rustling and a plashing in the mist.

Jack stood firm and waited. The rustling and the plashing drew near, the mist snorted, and of it and from it came a bull, a great white bull, marked only by a red stripe along its muzzle, dark in the moon.

'O sweet Bull. O noble Bull. O worthy Bull. O bonny Bull.'

The conclusion of the novel, more ecstatic and life-affirming than the end of *Red Shift*, points back to the beginning, and leads the reader back to the first page.

Thursbitch originally included a T. S. Eliot quote, but this was removed before the first printing, and if you want to understand the novel more T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* deals with the same themes. Of course, you should also go back and read the Greek tragedies (Garner studied Classics at Oxford University) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a major influence on Garner – he recounts his recognition of familiarity with it when he realised the dialect it is written in was wholly understandable to him from the language of his family) – such is the integration of Garner's method):

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time
future
And time future contained in time
past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an
abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what
has been
Point to one end, which is always
present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did
not take.

T. S. Eliot: *Burnt Norton*

In my beginning is my end.

T. S. Eliot: *East Coker*

To get the most from the novel, it needs to be read and reread slowly and carefully so that, like the initiation into the ancient mysteries, the reader absorbs each level of meaning before moving on to the next. The more work the reader is prepared to do, the more the reader will gain from this novel. Unfortunately, such readers are rare these days. *Thursbitch* has been nominated for no literary prizes. Indeed, you probably won't even find it in your bookstore unless you ask for it (and maybe not even then). Those who know Garner's work, and those who know *Thursbitch*, however will treasure this jewel of a book.

– Robert Mapson, 21 August 2005

The iceberg symposium, part 1

Imagination and science fiction

Ray Wood

I

I'm not sure why it is that SF writers tend to explain too much. I don't mean their speculations about science and technology, nor about other-worldly places and times. I mean that they seem unwilling to leave as much of their *stories* to their readers' imagination as they should. In a way it isn't so much what's told or described that makes fiction powerful; it's what's left untold, what's not described.

Might this be because SF writers have a more methodical bent of mind than other writers? — a bent towards the thoroughness of the scientist and the technician? — a desire to explain everything, and not leave anything mysterious.

II

I stumbled across SF in 1948 when I was twelve. In that year I discovered *Astounding Science Fiction*, and a couple of years later when it first appeared, *Galaxy Science Fiction*.¹ Today's young people can have little idea how astonishing SF was back then. Today SF is universal. Today you're familiar with SF from babyhood. But back then it was a ghetto literature, and reading it said that you were weird. And you were probably the only kid in your class who read it, perhaps the only one in your school. It may be true that at that time most people hadn't even heard of it.

If you'd asked me who I was before 1948, I would have said that I lived in Broken Hill, Australia. At the most I would have labelled myself British, as Australians did at that time. But this SF that I'd discovered changed who I thought I was, and my sense of myself expanded hugely over the next few years. I felt — to adapt Heinlein's title,

*Citizen of the Galaxy*² — that I'd become a citizen of the universe. No, I would have gone further, and said that I was just a speck of life in the universe. I no longer even regarded being *Homo sapiens* as important. This was the most wonderful thing I got from SF.

Many people I've known, who became enthusiastic readers of SF, have told me that their love of it lasted only around ten years. They gave it up when its stories and milieux lost their novelty for them. Then they could no longer put up with the poor style, banal dialogue and inadequate characterisation that infects so much SF. I was slower than most, and my love affair with it lasted from 1948 until the mid 1960s. I still do read it, but since then I've rarely found anything worthwhile.

However, I'll never forget the debt that I owe it, for changing me from a small boy in an outback Aussie town into a member of the universe. And I still vividly remember when I began reading SF, how the extraordinary power of those stories caused my mind to explode far out beyond anything I'd ever dreamed of before.

III

In the November 1953 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* was a novellette by James Blish, 'Earthman, Come Home'. How astonishing it was back then! Its opening words are:

The city hovered, then settled silently through the early morning darkness toward the broad expanse of heath which the planet's Proctors had designated as its landing place. At this hour, the edge of the misty acres of diamonds which were the Greater Magellanic Cloud was just beginning to touch the western

horizon; the whole cloud covered nearly 35° of the sky. The cloud would set at 5:12 a.m.; at 6:00 the near edge of the home galaxy would rise, but during the summer the sun rose earlier and would blot it out.

An entire *city* coming out of space, and landing on a planet? Now that was stunning. Well, it'd be ho-hum stuff today, but back then it was stunning.

Further in the story the city's mayor, Amalfi, listens to the 'City Fathers' — presumably a computer of some kind. He's asked them 'for a review of the [city's] Violations Docket'. And in this review are three paragraphs, three of the most wonderful I had ever read.

Then there was the moving of He. The city had fulfilled its contract with that planet to the letter, but unfortunately that could never be proven; He was now well on its way across the intergalactic gap toward Andromeda, and could not testify on the city's behalf. As far as the cops knew, the city had destroyed He, a notion the cops would be no less likely to accept simply because it was ridiculous.

Worst of all, however, was the city's participation in the March on Earth. The March had been a tragedy from beginning to end, and few of the several hundred Okie cities which had taken part in it had survived it. It had been a product of the galaxy-wide depression which had followed the collapse of the germanium standard. Amalfi's city — already accused of several crimes in the star-system where the March had started, crimes which as a matter of fact the city had actually been forced to commit — had gone along

because it had had no better choice, and had done what it could to change the March from a mutual massacre to a collective bargaining session; but the massacre had occurred all the same. No one city, not even Amalfi's, could have made its voice heard above the long roar of galactic collapse.

There was the redeeming fact that the city, during the March, had found and extirpated one of the last residues of the Vegan tyranny. But it could never be proven; like the affair on He, the city had done so thorough a job that even the evidence was gone irrevocably.

For me a story is good if it insinuates itself into my imagination forever, and I find that I'm inventing my own stories about the characters and events and milieux of the original. And 'Earthman, Come Home' stimulated my imagination more than any other SF stories I'd read. So much was crammed into it, yet not detailed. So much was left for my own imagination

Solonevich cover for *Analog*, September 1962, used as the model for the covers of some later omnibus editions of *Cities in Flight*.

to fill in.

I read some time later that Blish was working on a whole series of novels about his cities in space. And so I was eager to read them. He himself wrote:

The germ of *Cities in Flight* was a sketch [. . .] in which — hindsight shows with its usual useless clarity — I set out to throw away an idea of Wagnerian proportions within the compass of 10,000 words. The alert magazine editor [. . .] refused to let me be so foolish. He rejected the story ['Earthman, Come Home'] with a four-page, single-space letter in which he pointed out in detail the many questions I had failed to ask myself — thus involving me in a project which took me some fifteen years to realize properly.

And in the middle of the 1970s I found the four volumes that this story had now become. In narrative order they are, *They Shall Have Stars* (1956), *A Life for the Stars* (1962), *Earthman, Come Home* (1955), and *A Clash of Cym-*

bals/The Triumph of Time (1958).⁴ That original novelette is now merely the last two chapters of the third volume, *Earthman, Come Home*. And the three paragraphs I quote above have been expanded into the entire book. Blish's explanation of the genesis of *Cities in Flight* is from his 'Author's Note' to this volume.⁵

You may imagine how eagerly I started to read these books that I'd looked forward to for so long.

But how disappointing they were, after all those years.

You see, the power of the original novelette comes from just what it leaves untold, what it does not describe, what it only hints at. It comes from how much is left to your imagination. In a 1958 *Paris Review* interview,⁶ the American writer Ernest Hemingway said:

If it is any use to know it, I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.

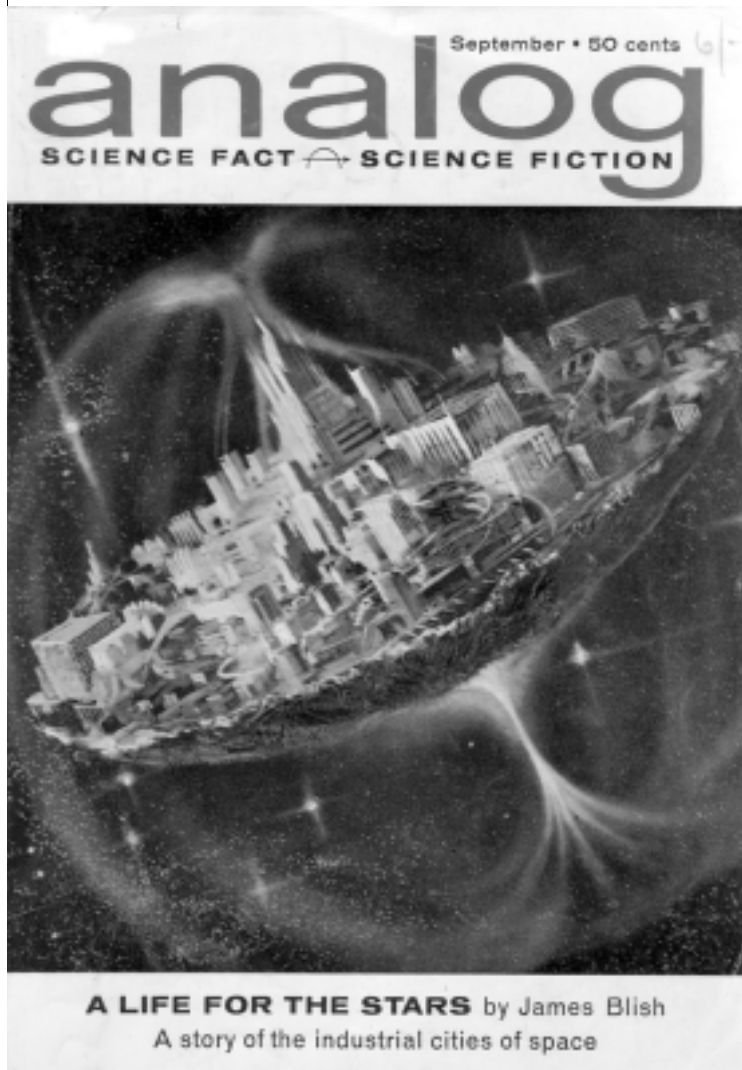
Unfortunately, Blish has dragged the whole iceberg above the water.

It's often been pointed out that Homer never made the mistake of describing Helen of Troy. So for nearly three thousand years she has tantalised everyone who reads his epics. What if he had described her as specifically as, say, a red-head with sleepy eyes and bee-stung lips? How many of his readers would then have been disappointed because that's not how they see *their* ideal women? When Christopher Marlowe lets Faust describe Helen's face in his 1604 play, *The Tragical History of Dr Faustus*, he doesn't detail it in any such mechanical way either. Faust says no more than,

Was this the face that launch'd a
thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of
Ilium?

(Ilium is the city of Troy.) Therefore you can imagine Helen to be whatever *your* ideal woman is. And 'the face that launched a thousand ships' is a description so powerful that it's known to many people who've never heard of Marlowe, or Faust, or even of Helen herself.

Similarly Blish's 'moving of He', 'the March on Earth', and the extirpation of 'one of the last residues of the Vegan tyranny', are far more powerful when left to your imagination than any



number of chapters or books describing them in detail. Even to discover no more than that the mysterious city of the original story is New York, is so disappointing.

Ever since reading the *Cities in Flight* series, I've wished that that editor had not sent his 'four-page, single-space letter' to Blish, prompting him to spoil his original novelette for me. And to this day I still curse the urge in so many SF writers to illuminate every tiny corner of a story until nothing is left for my imagination.

One of the most wonderful SF stories I read was Theodore Sturgeon's novella, 'Baby is Three', in *Galaxy Science Fiction* (October 1952). It was especially wonderful because so very little back story was given, and I was therefore left on my own to invent it for myself. Many years later I read the full-length book that this became, *More than Human* (1953). And I found that the original story was ruined for me by the two tedious added parts that now sandwich the original novella: 'The Fabulous Idiot', and 'Morality'. They fill in far too much, and destroy the original story's mystery.

The Russian writer Anton Chekhov said,⁷

I think that when one has finished writing a short story one should delete the beginning and the end.

Although he is speaking only about short stories, this illuminates why 'Baby is Three' is so good, and why *More than Human* is not. The novella simply hangs there – isolated from space and time, you might say – unconnected to anything around it, or before and after it. Where Lone, Janie, Bonnie & Beanie, and Baby came from and how they got together, are not explained. And as soon as the protagonist Gerry finds out what they all are – 'Homo Gestalt' – the story ends. *More than Human* removes this mystery of the novella's before and after. But it had been a mystery that stirred your imagination so powerfully. It's this mystery that Sturgeon should have left untouched.

Why do so many SF writers do this? Why do they ruin their *story* ideas by writing them to death? They seem to pride themselves on how fecund they are with *speculative* ideas. Yet on the other hand it's almost as if story ideas are so hard to come by that they're afraid to treat them rigorously, and economically. And so they stretch them to such a length and fill in so

much detail that they become mundane, and dull.

Of course, my examples are to an extent a matter of personal taste. So I suspect you may say indignantly how ridiculous this or that particular judgement of mine is. And I suspect that dedicated SF readers are more cerebral than I, readers to whom the scientific speculations of SF are more important than the stories themselves. But do you agree that my point may perhaps be generally true?

IV

I sometimes imagine that SF writers, when they get an idea for a story, promptly wonder how many volumes they can expand it across. No one should blame them for wanting to make as much money out of their ideas as they can. But again and again I find that multivolume stories rapidly become dreary. Often only the first volume is good, and the following ones increasingly spoil it for me.

I found Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes's *Legacy of Heorot* (1987) breathtaking, and therefore seized on its sequel with glee – *The Dragons of Heorot/Beowulf's Children* (1995). But it was trite in an undergraduate sort of way. And what a miserable anticlimax it was, that the Grendels were tamed!

Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern* stories were wonderful in her first two volumes, *Dragonflight* (1968), and *Dragonquest* (1971). But the further the series continued, the more she destroyed their milieu by gradually removing its mystery. The series did seem more like fantasy at its start, but gradually segued into SF as it developed, and it may have been better if it had remained fantasy throughout. For me *The Crystal Singer* (1982) is the best novel she's written, mainly because Killashandra Ree isn't as cloying as her protagonists usually are. But the second half of the next volume, *Killashandra* (1985), spoiled the series with not only an embarrassingly juvenile love story, but also some very inept characterisation. I couldn't even force myself to finish her third volume, *The Crystal Line* (1992). It's a pity too, that as a McCaffrey series continues, she so often moves towards telling instead of showing, as if her own interest in it has slackened. But how illuminating that is about a writer pushing a series much further than it ought to have gone!

The tendency of SF writers to extract every fragment from a story idea

through a multivolume series isn't new. When I was young I read Edgar Rice Burroughs's Martian tales. How disappointed I was that its delightful first volume, *A Princess of Mars* (1917), was spoiled more and still more by the following ten volumes (1918–64).

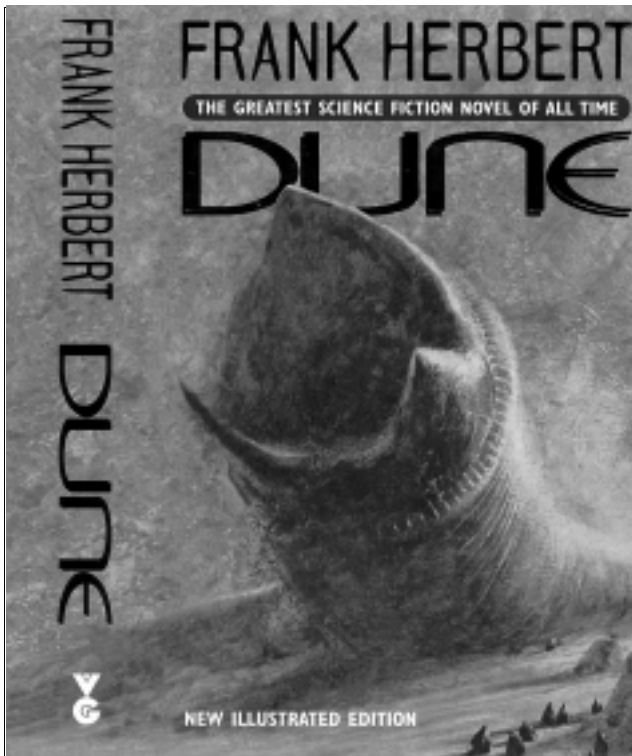
I suppose any reader who has been thrilled by a story wants more of the same. But I believe that too often getting more of the same is disastrous. I thought Vonda N. McIntyre's short story 'Of Mist, and Grass, and Sand' (*Analog*, October 1973) was magnificent, and so I was eager to read the 1978 novel, *Dreamsnake*, that she built on it. The short story is now only its first chapter. But the power of the original is missing from the rest of the book, which is so obviously tacked on. And the vividly pictured and mysterious setting of the short story is diminished by being placed in a larger environment.

There's a mysterious underground city called Center in *Dreamsnake*, that you don't get inside. It features briefly at the end of chapter 9. But it's the setting for most of McIntyre's earlier 1975 novel, *The Exile Waiting*. I read these books in reverse order, and the mystery of Center in those nine pages of *Dreamsnake* vanished when she took me inside it in *The Exile Waiting*. However, because the characters aren't the same in the two books, I didn't find as much of that falling away that happens to so many SF novel series.

Therefore I asked McIntyre in a March 1998 email if she intended writing more stories set in the milieu of these two books. She said, 'The characters of those books haven't grabbed me by the collar and insisted that I write more about them, but in this biz you never know.' How could I have been so stupid as to ask her that? So many times I'd seen how disastrous this exhaustion of a story idea or milieu could be. Yet here I was, asking for the same thing too.

I wonder if milieu is easier to eviscerate through a series than the story set in it? William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy consists of *Neuromancer* (1984), *Count Zero* (1986), and *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988). The milieu that is so stunning in his first book fails to excite me nearly as much in the other two as it becomes more detailed. And perhaps the milieu's power fading after the first volume is why the later characters are not so gripping either.

The difference between SF and other genres is that it more than any



Although *Dune* is hardly 'the greatest science fiction novel of all time', it had one of the best set of illustrations. This Gollancz edition reprints one of John Schoenherr's illustrations for the original *Analog* serialisation of the novel.

leave his story idea alone, and five increasingly tedious novels followed *Dune*, and dissipated it. The best part of the series is from where Paul and his mother are lost in the Arakeen desert at the start of 'Muad'Dib', Part II of *Dune*, to the start of the battle with the Emperor Shaddam IV that climaxes the novel. This is despite its *mirabile dictu* tendency to pile superlative on superlative. The Arakeen desert with its Fremen society is one of the two most vivid SF milieux that I've ever come across, but never so vivid after that battle. (The other is of Ridley Scott's 1982 film, *Blade Runner*.)

Then came Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson's *Prelude to Dune: House Atreides* (1999), and the power of Frank's first novel led me to read it. Or try to, because so much of *Dune* is spoiled by Herbert and Anderson. They do little more than fill in the original back story, and therefore remove much of *Dune's* mystery. It doesn't help either that *Prelude to Dune* is so pedestrian. So I recoiled from it even before I finished it, and I've not bothered to look at their subsequent volumes.

In a way, what Frank's son and Anderson have done is an insult to Frank. *His* judgement was to leave various parts of his story untold, unexplained, and mysterious – that is, to trust his readers' imagination to fill in the gaps that he left. But *they've* presumed to narrate those parts, to fill in those gaps. What else does this suggest but that Frank's judgement as a novelist was poor?

So what are we to expect now? That even if some SF writers have not managed in their lifetimes to spoil their stories and milieux by exhausting them, this won't matter because their children will?

I was interested to read something in an article, 'Buffy's Season in Hell', in *Melbourne's Age* (26 July 2001). The article is about the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003).⁹

Once upon a time, Buffy had no sister but Dawn's insertion into the family came early in series five, and, typically, it was achieved in striking style. Suddenly, out of the blue, she was living in the Summers' suburban home, griping like young girls do about how unfair life is and shyly making eyes at Xander.

other depends on novelty: novelty of milieu, novelty of character, and novelty of idea. And it's difficult to stretch novelty over more than one volume. This is why the shorter story is where SF shines most, more than it does in any other genre. Incidentally, it's here that I think you can see the difference between the two kinds of readers SF attracts: those who read it for only a decade or so, and its lifelong aficionados. The first are attracted more to its novelty of milieu and character, and the second more to its novelty of idea. It's also why the first aren't so upset if the science is wrong.

You may ask what I mean by novelty of character. SF more than any other genre blurs the sharp delineation of character as purely human. (When animals are the characters in stories such as Kenneth Graham's 1908 *The Wind in the Willows*, they're little more than anthropomorphised.) In SF, humans and other life forms and machines, and even gods, tend to merge. 'Man as monster' you might say is the chief character of SF, if you'll forgive the politically inept but more alliterative 'man'. SF democratises the Middle Ages' hierarchical Ladder of Being,⁸ making everyone and even *everything* equal members of the universe.

It seems rare to me for a single character in SF to be powerful enough to carry more than one volume. One of the few SF characters who do seem strong enough to do this is Isaac Asimov's detective, Elijah Baley, in *The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957), and *The Robots of Dawn* (1983).

However, though the setting in a roofed city on Earth in *The Caves of Steel* is powerful, it's weaker in the second volume on the planet Solaria, and weaker still in the third on the planet Aurora, though they are three separate milieux, of course.

It seems harder in SF to build a series around a single character and a single milieu, whereas this seems to be one of the great strengths of detective fiction. Think of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and London, Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe and Los Angeles, and Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and San Francisco. On the other hand, the thriller genre usually fails badly when its writers use a character in more than one volume. Robert Ludlum tried this with Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity* (1980), *The Bourne Supremacy* (1986), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (1990). But once we know who Bourne is, the two later volumes aren't nearly as exciting – Bourne's character is not strong enough to carry them. The spy genre when it's not so much the excitement of the unknown that has to carry a series, has more chance of a character doing so, as does John Le Carré's George Smiley, Ian Fleming's James Bond, and Andrew York's Jonas Wilde. But the spy story in these cases is more akin to the detective story than to the thriller.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965) is one of the best SF novels I've read. This is despite its tending to be pretentious when he stops the story and lectures the reader – a fault particularly of the awful fourth volume, *God Emperor of Dune* (1981). But Herbert, too, couldn't

And nobody blinked. It was simply constructed as though she had always been there.

Most TV shows would have jumped through narrative hoops in order to introduce a new family member and most likely come up with some transparently inadequate explanation about adoption or long-lost relatives. It's indicative of the elan that Whedon and his team bring to *Buffy* that they just plonked the kid at the kitchen table and moved on.

Yes! — that's how it should be done. (You do gradually find out more about Dawn's origin in later episodes. But the point is still valid, since throughout the series Whedon and his team make similar leaps that are not filled in later on.)

And so, may I deduce two principles for SF writers that are perhaps worth their thinking about? *Make your stories as short as you can, not as long as you can*; and *Explain as little as you can get away with*. In other words, *Trust your readers' imagination far more*.

V

I said at the start of this diatribe that I wasn't sure why SF writers don't leave as much of their stories to their readers' imagination as they should. But I do have one suspicion. Now I've never been a fan of SF, nor have I ever regarded myself as a fan, nor have I ever attended any SF conventions. And I imagine fans might be enraged by what I am going to say, which is: I suspect that fandom is one of SF's biggest weaknesses.

I think that when writers too often tap into their readers' feedback, they tend to respond by writing more of the same. And the result is that they overuse their story ideas, characters and milieux. So I wonder whether SF would benefit greatly from its writers and readers cutting themselves off from one another, and ceasing to live in the mutually cannibalistic way that they seem to now.

I've seen some genre writers on their websites plead with their readers to let them know what they like about their stories, and which characters they'd like to read more about. And so they deliberately produce what their readers say they want, which means more and still more of the same. But how many fans are going to come up with totally new directions for writers whose stories they love? And are writers going to produce more mature

work if they simply oblige their fans with endless variations on their first successful stories?

Now since I have never been an SF fan, I'm quite prepared to be told that this just isn't so. Yet perhaps lifelong SF fans are the last people able to judge this, and are most blind to the harm that they do. I imagine there are more people like me — those who did read lots of SF for a while, but then gave it away when it lost the novelty that had attracted them in the first place — many more such people than there are lifelong SF fans. And I think that these people may be more likely than fans to look at SF objectively. (Perhaps SF fans — and writers of SF — need to remind themselves that the word 'fan' is abbreviated from 'fanatic', which is 'a person with an extreme and unreasoning enthusiasm or zeal', *The Macquarie Dictionary* says. And note that word *unreasoning!*)

It's after that novelty has worn off for those who were never fans, that the failure to tell SF stories well becomes evident. Unless characterisation, dialogue, style and so forth — and what this diatribe is about, leaving far more to readers' imagination — are all well done, then most SF readers *will* continue to quit, and *will* end up moving to other genres for their entertainment.

Of course writers have to write stories that people want to read. But I believe they should move their readers forward to new books, and introduce them to new story ideas, new characters, and new milieux, rather than let their readers drag them back into territories they've already made them familiar with. Like Marcel Proust, writers should instead of so often going to bed with their readers, go to bed alone in a cork-lined bedroom for a decade or two and, isolated from their readers, write their books entirely on their own.

What if Shakespeare's fans had caused him to write nothing but more plays illustrating the history of England, so that we never got *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Hamlet*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*? What if Dickens's fans had persuaded him to write nothing but sequels to *Pickwick Papers*, so that there were no *Oliver Twist*, no *Nicholas Nickleby*, no *Bleak House*, and no *Great Expectations*?

Is that the way writers ought to go?

Notes

1 Today, *Astounding Science Fiction* is *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, a title that it's had with minor vari-

ations since 1960; first published 1930. *Galaxy Science Fiction* was published 1950–80.

2 Robert A. Heinlein's novel, *Citizen of the Galaxy* (1957).

3 In the US a severe near-decade-long drought starting in 1934 destroyed crops and turned the soil to dust in the states of Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. This, combined with the Great Depression of the 1930s, forced large numbers of people off the land, to migrate to other states, desperate for work and a place to live. They were known as Okies, after the state of Oklahoma.

4 I checked SF story dates from John Clute and Peter Nicholls, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (New York, 1993, updated 1995). Unless I say so, dates are of book publication.

James Blish's four volumes are also available in an omnibus edition, *Cities in Flight*.

Book titles are sometimes changed in the UK from their US originals, and vice versa.

5 This 'Author's Note' is dated 1964, and is in the Arrow Books edition (London, 1974). It isn't in all editions of *Cities in Flight*. The editor he mentions but names only obliquely in the Note is John W. Campbell, editor of *Astounding Science Fiction/Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, 1937–71.

6 *Paris Review*, volume 18, 1958, p. 84. The interview is perhaps easier to find in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series* (London, 1963), p. 198. This is sometimes known as Hemingway's 'Iceberg Principle/Theory', one which he expounded on at various times, such as in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) at the end of chapter 16, p. 183.

7 Unsourced quote in Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London, 1977), pp. 62–3. I'd love to know its source.

8 The Ladder has six rungs that are, from bottom to top, inanimate matter, plants, animals, humans, angels, and God. Each has an additional attribute: plants grow, whereas inanimate matter does not; animals move about, which plants do not; humans have souls, which animals do not; etc.

9 Season 5, Episode 1, 'Buffy versus Dracula', et seq.

— Ray Wood, 2004

The iceberg symposium, part 2

The appeal of the short story

by Gillian Polack

Gillian Polack has written several books. *Illuminations* (described by one critic as 'fantasy with footnotes') was published in 2002. Everything else is either forthcoming or controversial, including 'The Art of Effective Dreaming' where Morris dancers die dreadful deaths. Occasionally she writes short stories. The most recent is in *Subterranean Magazine* 4. One of her short stories won a rather minor literary award and another was listed as recommended in Ellen Datlow's *Year's Best*. She writes a great deal of short non-fiction, especially material about the Middle Ages for enthusiasts and novelists. Currently she is working on a couple of larger projects. The most interesting concerns bringing together and sharing the types of information writers need to get a solid medieval backdrop for their fiction. She teaches components of the project through the Australian National University and through writers' centres. Gillian has received two Varuna Fellowships.

Gillian Polack at ConVergence 2, June 2007. (Photo: Helena Binns.)



Books discussed:

The Fall of Tartarus

by Eric Brown

Gollancz 0-575-07618-6; 2005;
312 pp.; £6.99/\$A21.00

Black Juice

by Margo Lanagan

Gollancz 0-57507-781-6; 2006
(original Australian publication
2004); 230 pp.

'The Memory of Breathing',

by Lynn Triffitt,

*Andromeda Spaceways Inflight
Magazine*, vol. 17.

Why do we read short stories? Why don't we read short stories? Some of the answers to these questions are of the unfathomable variety. Some of them are simply to do with the mechanics of writing. This is not a review of Eric Brown's *The Fall of Tartarus* and Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice*. Both of them have been reviewed elsewhere, to good effect. It is a review of what a story can be and can do, using these anthologies as examples.

How do writers tempt readers into a short story?

Writers tempt readers through engaging with them. Easily said; not so easily explained. Engagement happens at several levels. The first level is that of intellectual and emotional engagement. This is something writers have been very comfortable discussing: over and over again, writers discuss how far engagement is intellectual and how far emotional. Editors also seem to have a high level of comfort with these terms. In a weblog discussion (see note, below), Ellen Datlow admitted to choosing stories because of their emotional engagement.

This is important. Whatever reasoning that readers apply, and whatever the paradigms applied by academics, writers and editors have a tendency to divide things between the emotional and the intellectual. Let's look at what these terms might mean in practice.

Intellectual engagement is the soaring aspiration of science fiction. Science fiction writers talk about pushing the envelope and trying out new ideas, opening new worlds and stretching the reader's universe. Eric Brown's anthology provides an excellent example of this. He uses every story in a single anthology focused on the destruction of a single world (*The Fall of Tartarus*) to explore a variety of human assumptions about relationships, and life and eternity. Each story takes a slightly different position, so throughout the anthology, the intellect is engaged.

Emotional engagement is much more subjective. What appeals to one reader might be dull to another. It is the immediacy of the story for the reader; what pulls the reader into liking or disliking a particular story; how quickly the reader is engaged and how slowly the reader disengages. Since emotional engagement can only really be discussed at the personal level, it is hard to find examples that are guaranteed to mean the same to all readers. Almost impossible, in fact. Feel free to find your own examples, if mine don't give you the same reaction as they aroused in me.

Lanagan's prize-winning tale 'Singing My Sister Down' (*Black Juice*) had a deep emotional impact for me, both immediate and lingering. I felt I was there, with the family on the tar pit. I had no such feeling for the people in any of Eric Brown's stories, no matter how close to home the themes were. Even 'A Prayer for the Dead' does not make me feel with

empathy with Joe, who sees his world collapse. Brown's works do not engage me as readily as Lanagan's, when I compare stories volume to volume.

When I analyse Brown's and Lanagan's stories at the micro level, I find that Brown is no less technically competent than Lanagan. In fact, in some ways he is more competent, ringing several changes on themes without repeating a story line.

Interestingly, many readers will announce that the level of their personal engagement with a story is evidence of that a given writer is better or worse than another. Emotional engagement is important, but it is not the only feature of a story that a writer uses to entertain a reader. More than any other element of technique, it can create reader loyalty.

How does a writer lead a reader into engagement? There are several ways: by creating reader identification with a character; by developing reader identification with a narrative arc (tempting the reader into following the plot or engaging him or her with an interesting situation); by using the lure of the main idea (particularly important in science fiction).

Making acquaintance: the importance of openings

Short stories must have immediate appeal. It is impossible to say 'wait a hundred pages and see how this shapes up', because a hundred pages later, the story will be long past. So the introduction must present more of the tale than is needed in the introduction in a novel; it fulfils more functions, and it must fulfil them well, otherwise the reader has not been hooked.

Eric Brown opens his tale 'The Ultimate Sacrifice' very science-fictionally. The first paragraph gives the setting, and the second, the protagonist.

There was a spectacular aurora in the early hours of the morning, a dancing sheet of magnesium-white light which illuminated the night sky and brought a premature daylight to the darkside of Tartarus Major.

The flare awoke Katerina from a dream about her brother, and it seemed a long time before she could get back to sleep. She woke again when . . .

An aurora can't be spectacular unless there is a watcher categorising it. Brown lets us know that the sun and

its flares are going to be important to the story, but shows that the characters will be more important. Brown moves us into the plot through the actions of the protagonist Katerina as she awakens, but the sun's actions also remain important. In those few words, Brown encapsulates the key background we need, both to become hooked on the story and to follow it.

The story engages us, within the opening two paragraphs, by means of a main character (Katerina, from the second paragraph), a narrative arc (the decline of the sun is crucial to all of Brown's plots, so this hook ties in with both earlier and alter stories), an idea (the dying world) and a situation (again, from paragraph two, with Katerina's situation on Tartarus).

Emotional engagement and intellectual engagement are the most obvious levels at which we, as readers, engage with a short story. There is a second level beneath both of these: the writing devices used to ensure such engagement. They make the intellectual understandable and lead the reader gently into an emotional reaction to a piece. Of these techniques, the one that seems to create the most discussion among writers is the initial sentence or paragraph of a story. Writing devices open a dialogue between the story and the reader.

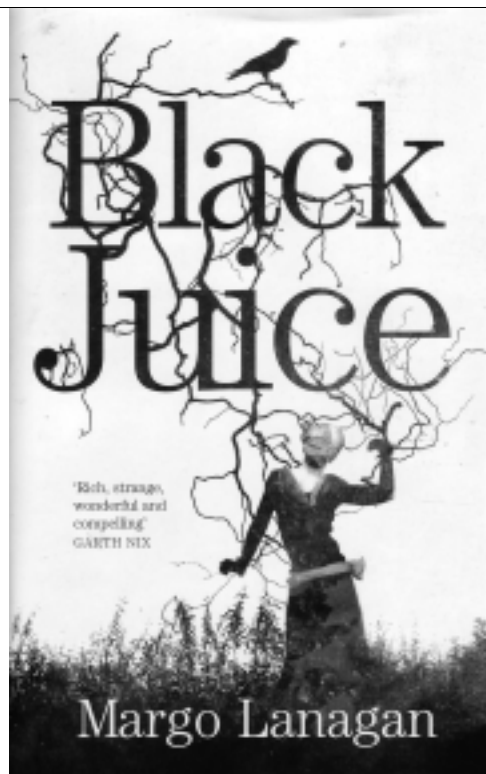
Lanagan's techniques often keep the voice of the narrator at one remove from the reader. She uses distancing techniques, such as being unspecific about the place and even the world in which her story occurs. The themes of her stories are strongly emotive, and counterbalance the distancing in the prose, drawing the reader into the stories in *Black Juice*.

Keeping the reader's attention

Once readers have been drawn into the story, the writer must maintain their engagement. Passive readers who do not feel any engagement with a story will merely skim read.

A writer might engage readers by leaving much in a story unexplained, pushing the reader into using deductive reasoning. The reader is forced into an interaction with the story. Such a strategy, however, often leads different readers into widely different understandings of the work. This often happens among readers of Lanagan's work, where backgrounds and even reasons for doing things are offered without explanation, and the reader is forced to supply these explanations.

Another common technique is



'dropping a shoe': the beginning of an action is separated from its ending, and the reader must actively anticipate the end. The reader wants to see what the completion of the action or idea. In many short stories (largely because of their length), this gives the effect of bringing the story full circle to a resounding emotional conclusion. This fulfils an emotional contract the writer has made with the reader.

What happens when this contract is not met? The reader might feel that a story has ended in a state of suspension, with no joy in its ending, or might experience intentionally induced suspense. The difference between these two similar endings is like the difference between a perfect cadence and an interrupted cadence. The ending is given shock value.

As I've shown, a reader's loyalty is most likely to be engaged when his or her emotions are engaged. This can lead to an emotive theme overshadowing other elements in a story, or a story with a strong emotional power overshadowing other stories in the same volume. An excellent example can be found in Lyn Triffitt's 'The Memory of Breathing', a story in *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, no 17.

A writer can use a variety of techniques to convey emotions. In the online discussion cited below, Ross Hamilton refers to the shortcuts that Harlan Ellison uses to create immediate reactions in readers (such as threatening the eye with a knife to create flinching). Another technique is to use

language that is subtly coloured to persuade the reader to take a position on a subject, then challenge or support that position.

Triffitt uses all these techniques to develop an affection in the reader for the dead child, and engage the reader in the moral dilemmas of her story.

These techniques help to bring the speculative fiction writer one step closer to mimetic writing.

Mimetic or mainstream realistic literary fiction can be analysed into the same types of short cuts and technical tricks. Mimetic fiction is usually seen as related to characterisation, but what causes the reader to feel that a story has strong characters is the writer's ability to evoke emotional engagement in the reader. If the characters are not convincing in mimetic fiction, the story doesn't come to life: it fails.

The techniques used by speculative fiction writers are equally bridges between the reader and the world the writer has created or speculative fiction as in mimetic fiction; if the emotional identification happens, the bridge is crossed. Brown's 'Destiny on Tartarus' is a story that shows how the bridge works. The son talking to the image of his father provides the audience's access to the son's quest. It links us directly with the plot.

It would take a book to list all the techniques writers use to create bridges. There are not an infinite number, but there are subtle differences between them. Sometimes a story is written in first person to create an instant bond with the reader (for example, Lanagan's 'Singing My Sister Down'). Sometimes variations on themes familiar to a writer's audience are used, as in Brown's playing and replaying of the world-end and relationship themes. Sometimes the readers creates a link with the reader by recreating some familiarity with a place or sentiment, whether by referring to a real place or a known unreal one, such as Lanagan's use of the pseudo-medieval in *Black Juice*.

The perfect story brings together all of these elements. It will have an emotive theme, with its techniques creating strong reader engagement. For example, 'Singing My Sister Down' works well at all levels.

Is genre important?

Readers love to buy their books and short stories according to genre. 'I like fantasy,' declares one. 'Me, I prefer horror and science fiction,' says another. We classify short stories according to genres, but often these classifications are independent of the techniques discussed above.

Reader engagement with specific genres is not decided by writing techniques or whether the work is short story or three-volume novel, but by the choice of setting and theme. Within the broad short-story classification, we can find the numinous and the terrifying, internal growth, and world-deaths. The welding of genre characteristics to a particular story links it to a genre and enables us, as readers, to decide in advance if we want to read a given story.

However, do readers know they are reading a work of speculative fiction before they begin it? If so, how does this affect their expectations and change their reading experiences? This is why I used the comparison between Brown and Lanagan as basis for discussion. Brown has mainly an speculative fiction audience (as far as I know) while Lanagan has a wider appeal.

Most people read a short story knowing it is a short story, and (from my personal experience at point of sale) will ask about the story's genre before they buy it. This means that Brown is writing to a very specific audience, whereas what might be perceived as weaknesses by Lanagan's broader audience are actually strengths. Lanagan's best work has an extraordinarily universal quality, which means her short stories can be appreciated equally by readers of mimetic and literary fiction and by readers of young adult fiction, as by SF genre readers. It doesn't matter if Brown's work doesn't engage a wider audience, if his techniques successfully capture the speculative fiction reader.

First and foremost, a speculative fiction short story needs to have a clear speculative element. In his collection, Brown achieves this by focusing on the future of humankind, particularly as it is exemplified in the world of Tartarus. Every aspect of the emotional development of each story fits within the broader framework of the destruction of Tartarus. Brown uses this overall

structure — the motif of the endangered world and the relationship of living beings to that world — to add depth to the emotional aspects of each story.

Lanagan's stories, on the other hand, have fuzzier edges. Some of her short stories are set in unfamiliar societies, but the actual stories have no magic, no scientific wizardry, and all the horror is created by human reactions to what is going on. 'Singing My Sister Down' exemplifies this.

Lanagan's speculative fiction signals can seem less clear for the reader. The main focus for each of her stories tends to be at the personal level, and to relate more to emotional and voice and character development than to plot or the intellectual engagement with the external world that Brown gives us with his Tartarus.

The level of satisfaction with the speculative elements is a part of the reader engagement with short stories, so this difference is a crucial one. Genre, in other words, brings important elements to reader engagement. The differences between Brown and Lanagan, therefore, help point to some of the specifics of short fiction in general, as well as helping to isolate the reader's specific expectations for speculative fiction.

In summary, a writer can use many techniques to bring readers inside a short story and encourage them to engage with it and identify closely. The differences between writers partly depend on the story they are telling, but also depend on the audience they seek.

Note

The blogverse gives you a chance to think around ideas in a way otherwise unavailable. I owe a lot of the development of my thinking about stories to various weblogs and the discussion on them. Most of them have linked to mine at some stage, so try <http://www.livejournal.com/users/gillpolack> (particularly <http://www.livejournal.com/users/gillpolack/42422.html> and <http://www.livejournal.com/users/deborahb/60883.html>).

— Gillian Polack, 2006

The iceberg symposium, part 3

Back to the short story

by Bruce Gillespie

It's very liberating turning sixty. Now I can join the ranks of the Grumpy Old Men. It's so much more fun being irritated than pretending to be polite. Not that I will be grumpy about *everything* — now I feel free to be grumpy about the things that matter: books, fanzines, music and films. No longer do I have to put up with the second rate in those fields. In particular, I don't have to put up with second-rate books just because they are new or highly praised. I don't have to put up with long, dull novels because that's what everybody else is reading. I can return to the pleasures of reading short stories.

Brcue Gillespie, 2007. (Photo: Helana Binns.)



Delivered as a talk to the Nova Mob, Wednesday, 7 February 2007.

I

Turning sixty has set off a number of bees buzzing in my irritated belfry. The first bee in my bonnet is my irritation at hearing from some people in the SF world that they no longer read short stories, but only novels. Yet science fiction publications provide one of the few remaining venues where large numbers of short stories are published every year. Somebody must be reading them, and I am one of them.

I've always assumed that the whole mighty science fiction enterprise is based on the short story, but I couldn't have explained why. Since I began reading SF in 1959, my most vivid reading experiences have always been the short stories in the field, from the first Cordwainer Smith and Robert Sheckley stories I read in *Galaxy*, through the best work of J. G. Ballard and Brian Aldiss in the late sixties, the fables of writers such as Calvino and Borges in the early seventies, the outbreak of new writing in the eighties, and a whole crop of fine new Australian storytellers in the nineties. I still remember Michael Bishop's first published short story 'Piñon Fall' (*Galaxy*, October–November 1970), which was followed by a stream of distinguished works from him through the seventies. I can trace the rise and rise of Gene Wolfe and Ursula Le Guin through their memorable best stories as much as by their novels. Short stories are the brightest flares in the field: indelible idea-prints that stay in the mind.

Science fiction is, for me, the fiction of alternative ideas, usually about the future. If a story or novel doesn't give me some new idea, or even a variation on an idea, about the world or the uni-

verse, it seems a waste of time. Short stories or novellas seem much more effective conveyors of ideas than novels. What is one to do with a novel: spread the story like a smear of Vegemite over the whole story, or throw in so many idea ingredients that the novel dissolves into a sort of alphabet soup? This seems to have been the approach taken by many of the writers of today's giant lumpy novels: either fire vast numbers of ideas at the reader, or not bother about ideas at all. Both procedures are very boring.

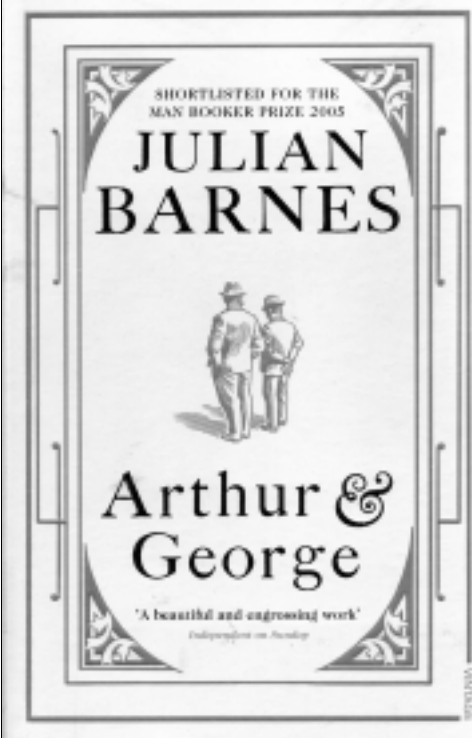
II

The second bee in my bonnet has been assembling this issue of *Steam Engine Time*. I received two articles about SF short stories, which fit nicely under the heading of 'The Iceberg Symposium'. But I needed a third article for the issue, which is this one.

The first article is by Ray Wood, a rather mysterious denizen of Eidolist email list. His snail mail address is in Quorn, South Australia, which is north of Whyalla, and that sounds hot and ghodforsaken to me. His article is entitled 'Imagination and Science Fiction'. Ray Wood tries to explain why there isn't a lot of it around these days — imagination, that is. In his article he quotes Ernest Hemingway:

I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.

The 'iceberg principle' has always seemed to me a great strength of the SF short story. By contrast, the SF novel tends to drag the whole iceberg on top of the water. Ray Wood's article is mainly about writers who have forgotten the principle of the iceberg.



This issue of *Steam Engine Time* also features Gillian Polack's article about the SF short story. Gillian writes short stories and conducts classes at Australian National University. Her article, called 'The Appeal of the Short Story', suffers only from a tendency to speak to Australian would-be writers of short stories rather than to readers. Since I'm not writing short stories or attempting to sell them, I speak only as a consumer of fiction; hence the differences of emphasis between our articles.

III

My third bee in my bonnet is the failure of recent novels, including SF and fantasy novels, to satisfy this particular Grumpy Old Reader. It's well over twenty-five years since Paul Stevens, once a looming presence behind the counter at Space Age Books, asked a customer what sort of book he wanted. 'Thick,' said the customer. 'I want a thick book.' Thus began the era of the thick customer. SF and fantasy books have become steadily thicker since then. That's why I don't read most of them.

This disease has spread to literary fiction. Recently Julian Barnes was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize for 2005 for the novel *Arthur & George*. It tells in fictional form the story of one of the few real-life cases that Arthur Conan Doyle took on after becoming well known as the author of the Sher-

lock Holmes stories. George Edalji was an unusual man in late Victorian Britain, the child of an Indian vicar and an English wife, living in a small English village. Persecuted by a poison-pen letter writer, George was falsely accused of killing horses, of all things, then inexorably railroaded by some members of the police force into a long prison sentence. Only after he had been imprisoned did Arthur Conan Doyle become aware of the case and begin his very public defence of George, whose sentence was much reduced.

It seems to me that this novel should have been a rattling good yarn, much in the manner of the Conan Doyle 'long stories', but it isn't. At 503 pages, it is at least 250 pages too long. The most unnecessary section is the trial scene itself, nearly 100 pages long. We know from the shape of the novel what the outcome of that trial will be. We are shown clearly early in the novel the way in which the prosecutor is going to use circumstantial evidence to gain a conviction. The author insisted on plodding through every boring stage to get to the other side. I nearly gave up on the novel, as I've started to do with novels for the first time in my life.

Although Julian Barnes has a formidable reputation in Britain for his literary fiction, the actual writing level of *Arthur & George* is not much above that of a current British thriller. And most of them are also far too long. I blame P. D. James, in her mystery novels, for starting the trend towards bloated narratives in English popular fiction. Almost every bestselling mystery novelist except Ruth Rendell has followed her example.

Each year, as you know, I make a list of my favourite novels. I have found over the last few years that I have been struggling to find a riveting novel to pick as my favourite for the year. In 2005, the only novels that really interested me were Gyneth Jones's *Life*, a powerful mixture of SF novel, biological thriller and love story – and only 370 pages long – and Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, which tells what might have happened if Joseph Roth's own Jewish immigrant family had been trapped in an America where pro-Nazi Charles Lindbergh had run for office in 1942 and had beaten Roosevelt to win the Presidency. This could easily have happened. Lindbergh, a flying hero, was offered the Republican nomination in 1942, but turned it down. Roth's novel,

391 pages, has the advantage of mixing humour and looming horror. He speculates how his own zany family might have pitted itself against the accumulating horror.

In 2006, I read quite a few novels that contained exemplary prose. They include Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, which took all my interest while I was reading it, but about which I can remember little; Kathryn Davis's undeniably fine novel *Labrador*, whose gorgeous sentences have disappeared from memory, and Elizabeth McCracken's *The Giant's House*, which at 259 pages, was both short and memorable. The only novels that really seemed worth the trouble were John Le Carré's *Absolute Friends*, a convincing post 9/11 thriller, just ripe for filming; and Anne Tyler's *A Patchwork Planet*, which floats above the rest because of two sublime pages, which I won't quote here. I spent the year looking for the tips of icebergs, and found few.

While I've been growing more and more impatient with novels, I've been finding jewels of short stories without looking for them. I don't read the SF magazines any more, and some years I don't pick up an anthology for months at a time. In 2006, however, I kept finding real treats among short story collections.

Dick Jenssen put in my hands a copy of *The Stories of Paul Bowles*. Gore Vidal describes Bowles as one of the three best American short story writers of the twentieth century. Bowles is not better than Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty or Scott Fitzgerald, but he's pretty good. As Bowles did for many years, his restless characters travel around a wide variety of overseas countries, usually in northern Africa or India. His characters slightly resemble those colonials in British fiction, those 'mad dogs and Englishmen' who totter around in the noonday sun. Bowles implies that if you let a rich American loose in many countries, he or she will go barmy and undergo very odd adventures.

Bowles must have some admirers still in America. *The Best American Stories 2005* includes an astonishing story called 'Death Defier' by Tom Bissell. The story has the same kind of immediacy as Bowles' best stories. I've never heard of Bissell until now, but no doubt I will keep hearing from him. The story tells of a small group of American soldiers find themselves marooned in the middle of post-9/11 Afghanistan after their car is wrecked.

THE BEST
AMERICAN
SHORT
STORIES

MICHAEL CHABON

EDITOR
KATRINA KENISON
SERIES EDITOR

They try walking to their own base, asking for help from local tribesmen. They come to realise they are in very foreign territory indeed. Again, one might point to similar British stories about the Raj or East Africa, but Bissell, like Bowles, has a vivid sense of how helpless Americans can be when cut off from everything they take for granted.

The other interesting aspect of *The Best American Stories* for 2005 is that it is edited by Michael Chabon, who is both an American literary lion and One of Us. His novel *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, about two comics artists during the 1930s, is the best novel of the last ten years. Chabon loves a good SF yarn, as can be seen in the issues of *McSweeney's* magazine that he has edited. He is the first guest editor of *The Best American Stories* for fifteen years to choose any genre short stories, by people such as Kelly Link and Tim Pratt. Most of the stories in the volume, especially those from non-SF authors, have that offbeat quality that today we label as 'slipstream fiction'.

IV

The fourth bee in my bonnet is making sense of the concept of the short story. What is so special about this form? Why does there need to be any division between the SF, fantasy or other genre short story and the so-called 'literary' short story? Why have science fiction magazines, from their beginnings in 1926, been based on the short story? Why were they not based, say, on seri-

alised novels?

When I tried doing a bit of research on the subject, I hit a brick wall. My *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* does not even give a definition for the short story, let alone any explanation of its origins. *The Macquarie Dictionary*, which is often much more useful than the *Oxford*, has this definition: 'Short story: a piece of prose fiction, usually confined to a small group of characters and a single main event, and much shorter than a novel.' This definition helps to explain why short stories suit science fiction: the writer doesn't have to worry about bringing to life more than a few characters, and the idea itself can be maximised through one short punchy sequence of events.

Where does the short story come from? I turned to the Nicholls/Clute *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*. No entry for 'Short stories'. This seemed astonishing to me, since I had taken for granted that the main engine of SF has always been the short story, and that the *Encyclopedia* would have said much about its early evolution.

I then turned to my two encyclopedias about mystery or detective stories. This is the genre that is historically closest to science fiction, and one in which many SF writers earn extra income. Herbert's *Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* has a section on the short story, but it tells me nothing about how the form came into being. It traces the beginning of the mystery short story in America to Edgar Allan Poe, then to the magazines of the pulp era, through to the digest magazines of the forties and fifties, especially *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. It sets a division between mass market short stories, written for the pulps, and up-market stories for the 'slicks', such as those written by Chandler and Hammett, that is, the middle-class fiction in magazines such as *Harper's*.

The same source traces the beginnings of the *British* short story to non-fiction accounts, written as memoirs, in the first magazines of the late eighteenth century. It lists the first real boost to the popularity of the mystery story as being Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. However, any account of Conan Doyle's life, such as that in *Arthur & George*, emphasises that he wrote his stories to a formula already well established in magazines such as the *Strand*. As Lucy Sussex has discovered when she went looking in Australian sources, the form of the mystery story was already well established

here long before the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes.

Our 1962 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* takes a sniffy literary view of the short story, being only interested in what it calls 'the serious short story': 'The serious short story of the 20th century might be visualized as occupying a square, the four corners of which are marked by the narrative essay or sketch, the lyric poem, the prose drama and the unit of local social history'. My own interest is in the short stories that people actually read, and have enjoyed reading over the last two centuries. The 1962 *Britannica* lists the first collections of short stories as the fairy stories and folk tales put together by E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Grimm brothers in Germany, and the stories of Washington Irving in America. *Britannica* credits Edgar Allan Poe as one of the earliest practitioners. Poe called the short story the 'child of the American magazine'.

Both editions of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* are silent about the 'short story', although they do have a short entry for 'Magazine fiction', claiming that the English short story began in *Pearson's Magazine* in the 1820s.

What all these sources might have said, and nobody did, is that the main attraction of the short story, up to the advent of radio, was that members of a family could gather around the fire in the living room while somebody with a bit of a flair read a short story at a single sitting. The other main use of the short story was for reading on public transport. In either case, the *voice* of the short story is its most important characteristic: its assurance, from the first line, that the storyteller will tell you something you have never heard before, and that will keep you on the edge of your seat until the final paragraph.

Although the *SF Encyclopedia* does not have an entry for the short story as such, it covers several of its forms. The popular SF story probably begins in America in Munsey's pulp magazines, which begin in 1896, but there is no specialist SF magazine until Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in 1926. However, many of the H. G. Wells and Jules Verne SF novels, and all the early Edgar Rice Burroughs 'Tarzan' and 'Mars' novels, had already been serialised in *Argosy* and other major pulp magazines long before *Amazing* began. The pulps were called that because they were printed on the cheapest possible pulp paper, and sold very

TELLING MOMENTS

Everyday Ethics in Health Care

Marilyn Guillemain and Lynn Gillam

IP Communications

cheaply. Until the cinema really became popular about 1910, they had no competition as a form of popular entertainment. The *Encyclopedia* lists the main features of their fiction as 'action, romance, heroism, success, exotic milieu, fantastic adventures (often with a sprinkling of love interest), and almost invariably a cheerful ending'. Today we still give the name of 'pulp fiction' to stories with those qualities. Their other main feature is that they are 'stylistically crude', but with 'good narrative pacing'.

Because of the Internet, and especially a YahooGroup called Fictionmags, I've discovered there are many readers throughout the world who collect and read pulp magazines when they can find them, because they provide just the qualities I've listed. The SF genre itself, though, seems to have gone in another direction.

In the *Encyclopedia's* entry on 'Mainstream' (as opposed to 'Pulps'), the literary short story is described as a 'realistic story of human character', although the entry does make the point that science fiction began in the mainstream of English literature, with the books and stories of H. G. Wells, and only became a cut-off genre when it became part of American magazine fiction. The article makes a very nice distinction between Golden Age SF genre fiction, where 'its whole creative effort is bent on making its imaginary worlds, its imaginary future, as real as possible', and much genre fiction of the last twenty years, which could be called 'fabulism' or 'slipstream'. As the

Encyclopedia says, the fabulists tend to be 'distrustful of the tools and as to whether the world *can* be known'. I would point out that this distrustful attitude goes back at least to Philip Dick's earliest short stories of the early 1950s, many of which appeared in the pulps, and the best stories of Robert Sheckley, most of which appeared before the 1960s. The reason why I fell in love with science fiction was because of its scepticism about everything I had always taken for granted, not because it offered 'heroism, success' or a 'cheerful ending'.

Although none of the sources makes this point, the main difference between genre SF stories and literary short stories, at least as far as SF readers are concerned, is the difference between the way they tell the stories, not the content. As the old-time purists keep saying, a story should have a beginning, middle and an end. Many *New Yorker* stories – and the *New Yorker* still seems to be the standard-bearer for literary fiction throughout the world – have a beginning, a big emotional middle, and a whimpy, squashed-soufflé ending. Many such stories still work because the big revelation – the epiphany – is in the middle, not the end, which is all right as long as you're not expecting a satisfactory ending.

V

The main bee in my day-to-day bonnet is attempting to make a meagre living while being addicted to an expensive hobby – publishing a fanzine. Much of the year I have to live on savings from the few freelance editing jobs I manage to scrounge. It's not often that one of the books I work on as a freelance editor casts any light on my own personal interests. However, last year I edited a book for IP Communications called *Telling Moments: Everyday Ethics in Health Care*, by Marilyn Guillemain and Lynn Gillam.

Telling Moments does not deal with fiction stories as such. It is a book designed for health care practitioners who use stories told by practitioners to help counsel patients and carers. This turns out not to be a straightforward approach. In fact, it has led to the discipline called 'narratology', which is the analysis of the ways in which narratives work.

Much of the terminology of narratology borders on the territory of semiotics, a field I don't understand and usually try to avoid. Guillemain

and Gillam's book is based on research by H. L. Nelson, in a book called *Stories and Their Limits*. The authors choose five stories told by practitioners about cases, and analyse them according to the following 'triggers': 'Naming questions', 'Sideways-looking questions', and 'Forward-looking questions'. The latter two apply to fiction as much as to the telling of personal histories. *Sideways-looking questions* include:

- What is the narrative frame, time, plot, and desire?
- How has the narrator cast her- or himself and the other characters?
- Who is telling the story?
- What has been left out of the narrative? Whose voice is not being heard? What other stories does this story resist?

Forward-looking questions include:

- What does this story tell us (that would not otherwise be heard)?
- How can engaging with this story lead to 'ethical mindfulness' (for the health care professions)/'subtext' (for readers of literature)?

If we change a few terms in this set of 'triggers', we gain an analysis method that is much more useful for talking about genre stories than most of those offered in short story courses. In particular, I like that term 'sideways-looking questions'. It's really helpful when trying to talk about the stories of Kaaron Warren.

The stories of Kaaron Warren and Margo Lanagan have been buzzing around in my head ever since I first read their books a year or two ago. I was very late in discovering Margo Lanagan, whose first book *White Time* won an Aurealis Award some years ago. Her second book, *Black Juice*, has been released in America and Britain, and its feature story, 'Singing My Sister Down', keeps picking up awards. Since Gillian Polack has discussed that story in her article, I'll won't talk about Lanagan's work here.

Kaaron Warren's first collection, *The Grinding House*, has not yet had the success of Margo Lanagan's *Black Juice*, but its stories are even darker and more interesting than Lanagan's.

Take Warren's story 'Fresh Young Widow', which Bill Congreve and Michelle Marquardt picked up for the *Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Vol. 2.

In the story's first paragraph:

The fresh young widow washed her husband's body. She dipped

her cloth into cloudy water and rub rubbed at him, cleaning the pores, washing away dried blood, picking at it with her long, strong fingernails. She closed her eyes as she touched his body but he was so cold that she couldn't imagine him alive. She laid her head on his belly and let her tears wet him.

This is my idea of 'poetic prose': almost no adjectives, few words that overtly emotional, with all the work done through muscular nouns and verbs. This storyteller seems to have a steely quality to her as well as a capacity for strong emotion. That term 'fresh young widow' is interesting; we want to know as much as possible about her.

We think we know what is happening, and quickly discover that we don't. Why has the husband died? The only comment is, from Connie, the second voice in the story, is: 'Why do they even let the tourists in?' Another character says: 'There will be no clay walk.' So what is the 'clay walk'?

The story becomes increasingly strange. As readers we have no choice but to ask 'sideways-looking questions', because it becomes plain that the author will not give direct answers to our implied questions. Some sort of magic seems to be invoked. Marla, the widow of the title, talks about adding 'fingernail clippings, a link from his mother's chain and a pinch of coriander' to something she calls the 'clay mix'. The clay is being mixed as part of the funeral ritual. Marla begins to cover her husband's body in the clay.

Abruptly we realise that we not in a terrestrial world of ancient ritual. Marla builds a penis for the clay man, then makes love to the figure. The clay man is then taken to the Kiln and baked hard.

As part of the funeral ritual, the equivalent of the chief priest invokes a blessing: 'Into the wall we cement thy physical being. May your soul be free to roam until the great clay walk. May your body stay safe within the wall, an empty vessel awaiting your return.'

It's pretty easy to see the parallels to the biblical notion, in our world, of souls arising at the end of time and reoccupying their bodies. It seems that the dead of this town are all baked into clay figures and placed inside a wall of

clay that surrounds the town. The clay itself seems to have some magic qualities. After the clay figure is set in the wall, Marla sneaks out at night, cracks the appropriate area of the clay case, reaches in, and takes out a baby girl. No babies have been born in the town in two years.

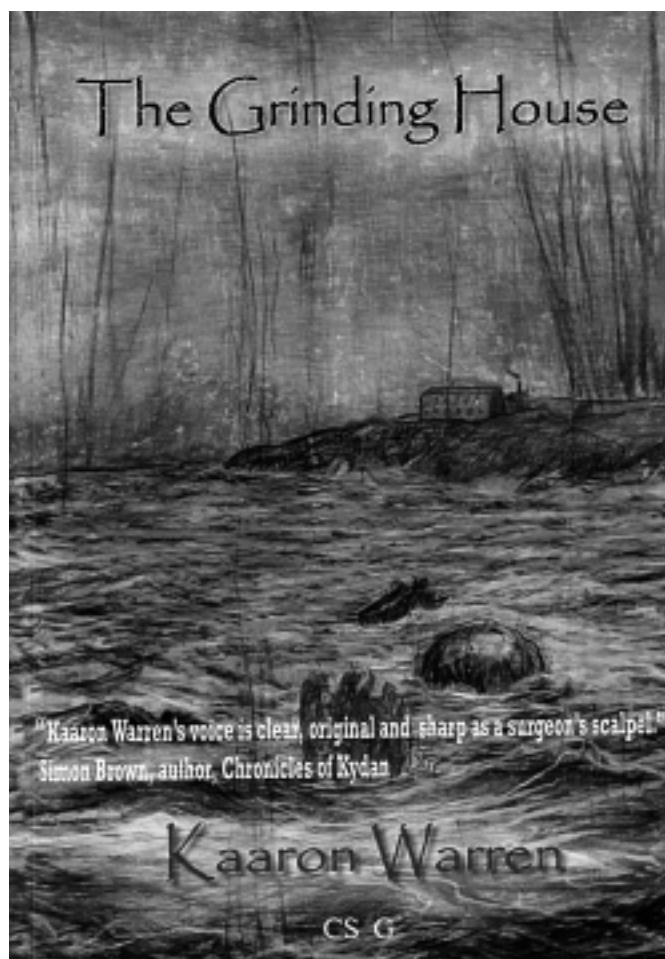
The story gains much of its strength from the fact that Kaaron Warren has no intention of explaining these strange happenings. Is this magic, or an alternative physics? We see things only through the eyes of Marla and the rest of the townspeople. They capture the husband's killer, kill him, and bake him upside down into his own clay man, which is also set in the wall. Everything in the town is ruled by ritual and perpetual stoic despair. The characters hope that some time in the future all the bodies placed in the wall during the history of the city will come alive.

Like Margo Lanagan, Warren sees things from the inside out. This is a very different approach from that of the classic SF writers, who tended to explore strange words and universes from the viewpoint of the outsider explorer. In most of the stories in *The Grinding House*, we have to guess at what is 'really' happening — that is, from our viewpoint. We have to empa-

these with strange characters, dig deep into the story, to find out its truths. A very powerful example of this process can be found in the title story 'The Grinding House', which tells of the world caused by the ossification of all humans and higher creatures on earth. They are all turning into bone from the inside out. The power of the story comes not from its general situation, but from taking a last pilgrimage with one family whose members are ossifying, and therefore dying, one by one. If this story is reprinted widely overseas, it will make Kaaron Warren famous.

SF and fantasy short stories have retained their capacity for change. I was going to discuss Jerome Bixby's 'It's a Good Life' (1953), one of the most famous American SF short stories. Like many of the great stories from that period, it also has that ability to let us see characters and situations from the inside out. Its situation is horrifying, but its cool, concentrated prose works admirably. The fact that writers like Warren and Lanagan in Australia can take up this tradition and run with it in a wholly original way means that I still find it very satisfying to explore books of short stories. I urge you to do the same.

— Bruce Gillespie, January 2007



Enjoy a good short story

Bruce Gillespie

The following charts emerged from my 'researches' (fossicking around) for the article you have just read. You are invited to send in your own lists, comments on your and my lists, or long articles about the short story form.

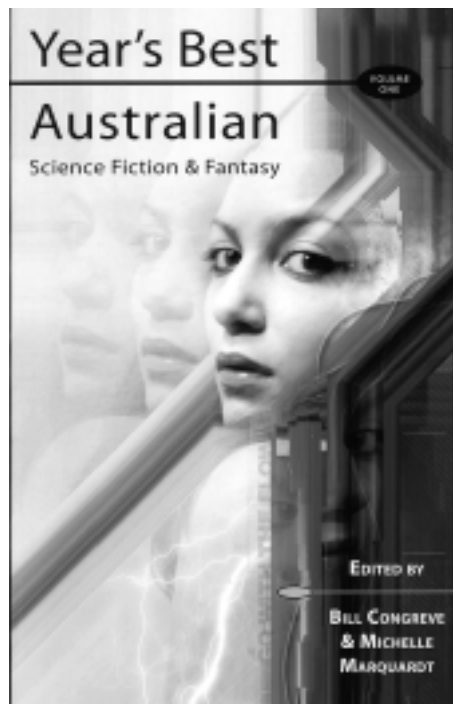
Bruce Gillespie's favourite short fiction (SF and fantasy) published 1977-2006

The following list was prompted by discussion on one of the email groups (probably Fictionmags) more than a year ago. Somebody was asking for candidates for an upcoming anthology. I cannot remember why the years to be covered began in 1977.

A = Australian author.

- 1 'The Mask' (Stanislaw Lem) 1977
- 2 'The Battle of Acosta Nu' (Gerald Murnane) 1985 A
- 3 'The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne' (Steven Millhauser) 1993
- 4 'Little Red's Tango' (Peter Straub) 2006
- 5 'Seven American Nights' (Gene Wolfe) 1978
- 6 'The Pressure of Time' (Thomas M. Disch) 1980
- 7 'On the Turn' (Leanne Frahm) 1988 A
- 8 'A Map of the Mines of Barnath' (Sean Williams) 1995 A
- 9 'The Fittest' (George Turner) 1985 A
- 10 'A Letter from the Clearys' (Connie Willis) 1986
- 11 'The Caress' (Greg Egan) 1990 A
- 12 'Ashland, Kentucky' (Terence M. Green) 1993
- 13 'Seven Guesses of the Heart' (M. John Harrison) 2000
- 14 'Leningrad Nights' (Graham Joyce) 2002
- 15 'Tendeleo's Story' (Ian McDonald) 2002
- 16 'Pie Row Joe' (Kevin McKay) 1978 A
- 17 'Out There Where the Big Ships Go' (Richard Cowper) 1979
- 18 'Houston, Houston, Do You Read?' (James Tiptree Jr) 1979
- 19 'Life the Solitude' (Kevin McKay) 1983 A
- 20 'The Dominant Style' (Sean McMullen) 1991 A
- 21 'The Twist of Fate' (David Grigg) 1985 A
- 22 'The Safe-Deposit Box' (Greg Egan) 1995 A
- 23 'On for the Long Haul' (T. Coraghessan Boyle) 1988
- 24 'The Unicorn Tapestry' (Suzy McKee Charnas) 1980
- 25 'God and Her Black Sense of History' (Lucy Sussex) 1990 A
- 26 'Rainbow Bridge' (Kim Stanley Robinson) 1992
- 27 'Firewatch' (Connie Willis) 1983
- 28 'The Walk' (Greg Egan) 1994 A
- 29 'Varicose Worms' (Scott Baker) 1991
- 30 'The Green Road to Quephanda' (Ruth Rendell) 1995
- 31 'The Dirty Little Girl' (Joanna Russ) 1998
- 32 'The Boy Who Didn't Yearn' (Margo Lanagan) 2003 A
- 33 'Steppenperd' (Brian W. Aldiss) 2001
- 34 'How the Other Half Lives' (James Lovegrove) 2002
- 35 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' (Philippa C. Maddern) 1979 A
- 36 'Looking Forward to the Harvest' (Cherry Wilder) 1996
- 37 'The True State of Affairs' (Diana Wynne Jones) 1998
- 38 'A Man and His Dreams' (Marele Day) 1997 A
- 39 'Not with Love' (Philippa C. Maddern) 1995 A
- 40 'Angel Thing' (Petrina Smith) 1995 A
- 41 'The Bone Ship' (Terry Dowling) 2003 A
- 42 'White Time' (Margo Lanagan) 2000 A
- 43 'The Silence of the Falling Stars' (Mike O'Driscoll) 2003
- 44 'The Ragthorn' (Robert Holdstock and Gary Kilworth) 1994
- 45 'Horse Meat' (Brian W. Aldiss) 1997
- 46 'Red Ochre' (Lucy Sussex) 1990 A
- 47 'The Dove Game' (Marele Day) 2003 A
- 48 'Wooden Bridge' (Margo Lanagan) 2004 A
- 49 'The Grinding House' (Kaaron Warren) 2005 A
- 50 'Singing My Sister Down' (Margo Lanagan) 2004 A
- 51 'No 3 Raw Place' (Deborah Biancotti) 2004 A
- 52 'The Gloaming' (Lucy Sussex) 2000 A
- 53 'Fresh Young Widow' (Kaaron Warren) 2005 A
- 54 'One Thing About the Night' (Terry Dowling) 2003 A
- 55 'Basic Black' (Terry Dowling) 2003 A
- 56 'Saving Face' (Michael Bishop) 1984
- 57 'Re-deem the Night' (David J. Lake) 1979 A
- 58 'Isobel Avens Returns to Stepney in the Spring' (M. John Harrison) 1994
- 59 'Bones' (Rjurik Davidson) 2004 A

(30 Australian stories.)



Bruce Gillespie's favourite short fiction read in 2005

Yes, I realise I've changed the rules slightly for this list. Of the following stories, I would count as genre or borderline SF or fantasy nos 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

- 1 'The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne' (Steven Millhauser) *Little Kingdoms*
- 2 'A Man Called Horse' (Dorothy M. Johnson) *Adaptations*
- 3 'The Sepia Postcard' (Steven Millhauser) *The Barnum Museum*
- 4 'Revenge' (Steven Millhauser) *The King in the Tree*
- 5 'Babylon Revisited' (F. Scott Fitzgerald) *Adaptations*
- 6 'Coming to Terms' (Eileen Gunn) *Stable Strategies*
- 7 'The Gloaming' (Lucy Sussex) *A Tour Guide in Utopia A*
- 8 'An Adventure of Don Juan' (Steven Millhauser) *The King in the Tree*
- 9 'No 3 Raw Place' (Deborah Biancotti) *The Year's Best Australian SF and Fantasy, Vol. 1 A*
- 10 'Bones' (Rjurik Davidson) *The Year's Best Australian SF and Fantasy, Vol. 1 A*

Bruce Gillespie's favourite short fiction read in 2006

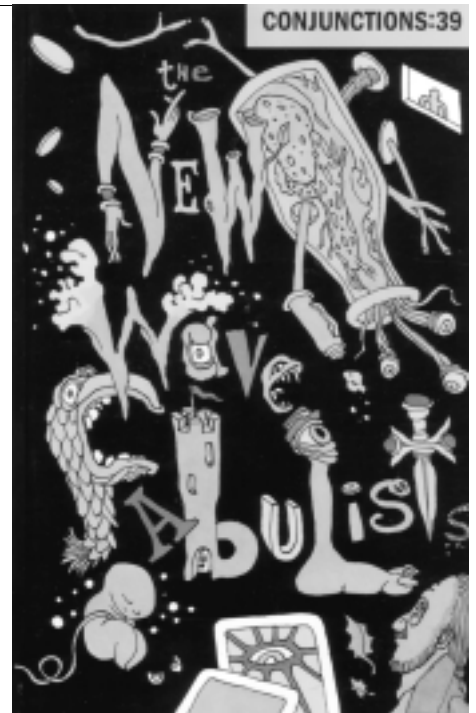
- 1 'Little Red's Tango' (Peter Straub) *Conjunctions:39*
- 2 'The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines' (John Crowley) *Conjunctions:39*
- 3 'Silence' (Alice Munro) *Best American Stories 2005*
- 4 'Death Defier' (Tom Bissell) *Best*

- 5 'Pages from Cold Point' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 6 'Here to Learn' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 7 'Call at Corazon' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 8 'Pastor Dowe at Tacaté' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 9 'The Grinding House' (Kaaron Warren) *The Grinding House A*
- 10 'Fresh Young Widow' (Kaaron Warren) *The Grinding House A*
- 11 'You Are Not I' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 12 'Justice Shiva Ram Murthy' (Rishi Raddi) *Best American Stories 2005*
- 13 'The Circular Valley' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 14 'The Fourth Day Out from Santa Cruz' (Paul Bowles) *The Stories of Paul Bowles*
- 15 'No One Writes to the Colonel' (Gabriel Garcia Marquez) *No One Writes to the Colonel*
- 16 'Skein Dogs' (Leanne Frahm) *Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy, Vol. 2 A*
- 17 'The Red Priest's Homecoming' (Dirk Flinthart) *Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy, Vol. 2 A*
- 18 'The Hortlak' (Kelly Link) *Magic for Beginners*
- 19 'The Wrong Seat' (Kaaron Warren) *The Grinding House A*
- 20 'The Hanging People' (Kaaron Warren) *The Grinding House A*

Favourite SF short stories as chosen by members of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1969

Source: Robert Silverberg (ed.): *Science Fiction Hall of Fame* (Doubleday; 1970).

- 1 'Nightfall', Isaac Asimov
- 2 'A Martian Odyssey', Stanley G. Weinbaum
- 3 'Flowers for Algernon', Daniel Keyes
- 4 'Microcosmic God', Theodore Sturgeon
- (tie) 'First Contact', Murray Leinster
- 6 'A Rose for Ecclesiastes', Roger Zelazny
- 7 'The Roads Must Roll', Robert A. Heinlein
- (tie) 'Mimsy Were the Borogoves', Lewis Padgett
- (tie) 'Coming Attraction', Fritz Leiber
- (tie) 'The Cold Equations', Tom Godwin
- 11 'The Nine Billion Names of God', Arthur C. Clarke
- 12 'Surface Tension', James Blish



- 13 'The Weapon Shop', A. E. van Vogt
- (tie) 'Twilight', John W. Campbell
- 15 'Arena', Fredric Brown

Favourite SF novellas as chosen by members of the Science Fiction Writers of America in 1971

Source: Ben Bova (ed.): *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, Vol. 2A (Doubleday; 1973).

The ten most popular novellas:

- 'Who Goes There?' by John W. Campbell, Jr.
 'A Canticle For Leibowitz' by Walter M. Miller, Jr.
 'With Folded Hands' by Jack Williamson
 'The Time Machine' by H. G. Wells
 'Baby Is Three' by Theodore Sturgeon
 'Vintage Season' by Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore
 'The Marching Morons' by C. M. Kornbluth
 'Universe' by Robert A. Heinlein
 'By His Bootstraps' by Robert A. Heinlein
 'Nerves' by Lester Del Rey

The ten most popular authors:

- Robert A. Heinlein
 Theodore Sturgeon
 John W. Campbell, Jr.
 Walter M. Miller, Jr.
 Lester del Rey
 C. M. Kornbluth
 Jack Williamson
 H. G. Wells
 Poul Anderson
 Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore



Howard Waldrop: The music of the spheres is Frankie Lymon

by Matthew Davis

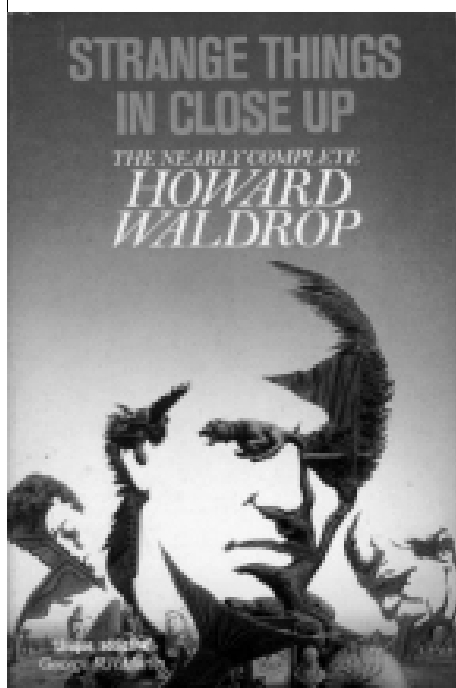
Matthew Davis is responsible for a small part-time public library in the Midlands, England. He's only been shot at once during opening hours. He has had articles appear in *Foundation*, *The Internet Review of Science Fiction*, and *Snake's Hands: The Fiction of John Crowley*.

The folk myth of Howard Waldrop is a tale to whisper into the cribs of future SF writers, a version of the artist starving in his garret (or on the banks of the Stillaguamish, as the case may be) to make a literary agent blanche. And yet Waldrop should be as popular as Stephen King, since their similarities are much greater than their differences. Both were born in the late 1940s and are exemplars of the baby boomer imagination: the prosperous '50s childhood, the '60s revolution, the self-reverence for their popular culture, the aspirations, anxieties and disillusionment of a generation heaving itself into adulthood and after. Not only do they choose to write in a vein of American mass culture, they also relish any opportunity to incorporate pop references. They both exude a folksy gosh-wow persona. But if King has been more successful in winning a broad audience, it is because he reflects, amplifies and validates their experiences and assumptions, propitiating a generation's folk myths to the extent that he too has become one of them. Waldrop wants to explain each individual pop icon or event, and therefore his writing is not so trapped in nostalgic acceptance, instead examining the ties between American arts such as cinema and music and personalised American history, dramatising his exegesis into fiction. For if the reader can wallow in King's lengthy narratives of family and social ties, then the concision and rapid juxtapositions of Waldrop's stories threaten to induce vertigo.

Baby boomers were raised on TV and went steady with rock and roll. They had a love affair with the pop culture of their youth and adolescence as strongly affecting and formative as any teenage crush. Whatever literary and cultural touchstone preceding generations may have had, baby boomers had mass culture. A generation of young men followed the same stations of the baby boomer cross: Scrooge McDuck and EC comics, *Life*

magazine and the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Aurora Models*, *Sputnik*, Beatlemania, *Rolling Stone* and Kent State: that is all you know and all you need to know. If their predecessors had looked to unlock the history of Western civilisation in *Ulysses* or Wagner, baby boomers brought that same imaginative and critical intensity to Roger Corman films, Elvis and Batman. From being consumers, they rapidly became fans, self-indoctrinated in the glamour of semiotics and explication of the pop culture they championed and claimed for themselves, and then went on to get their hands on the means of production: the film-school brats like Spielberg, Coppola and Dante; the snide collegiates of the *National Lampoon*; or critics of such differing stripes as Lester Bangs (who also casts a lengthy shadow over '80s cyberpunk) and Camille Paglia: a generation of Americans who, if they had experience of the supra-narratives of Western civilisation, it was subsumed in the total shared experiences of the popular media American dream (Oswald Spengler and Marxist revisionism direct more than a few Waldrop stories about movie monsters or theme park characters).

Whatever the reality and quality of those old films, pop songs, magazines, TV adverts, sitcoms, etc., the baby boomers made them transcendent by awe and love (as too do SF fans with the contents of their long-dead pulps; and there is a larger argument to be made that contemporary consumption of pop culture has adopted the neotenic paradigms of fannishness first pioneered by the SF community). They refined them in their minds to the iconic noumena their teenage eyes first discovered in these shoddy productions, cherishing the pure imaginative content and the incidentals of creation. It was they who made the icons, their fandom claiming them as fetishes from the wash of mere commodities. Pop culture, later given the nod by



Marshall McLuhan, Andy Warhol and Roland Barthes, took over from the old myths, and new writers realised that modern society was saying the most important things about itself through its mass media culture. SF writers such as Fritz Leiber, P. J. Farmer and Roger Zelazny could take the classical myths they'd read as children and contort them to fit SF's new worlds. The new generation knew the dreams of the future would be woven out of the present pop culture, and when they turned to inner space the characters waiting for them were out of old pulp magazines and the comics pages, not Frazer or Freud. New Wave fiction is awash with representations of Mickey Mouse and Superman. The most extreme example would be Arthur Byron Cover's 'Autumn Angels' series of zany depressing stories, in which the last all-powerful humans at the end of time have exhausted all opportunities for self-expression save to adopt the personas of Captain Marvel, Sherlock Holmes, etc.

Which diegesis, through swerve and bend, brings us rushing back to Howard Waldrop. He is a profoundly American writer. For while King uses pop mythopoeia for references of verisimilitude, or as familiar signpost by which to direct his readers, Waldrop ratchets it to the next level, making these representations the subjects of his fiction, as worlds in which to operate in and of themselves. Outside of SF, Waldrop's peers are those post-modern avant-gardists, whom David Foster Wallace identifies as hyper-realist, whose realism depicts as its subject the imaginary landscapes of a world deformed by electric images: DeLillo's novels, Coover's *A Public Burning*, Cantor's *Krazy Kat*, Woody Allen's *Zelig*. To write about the consequences of American history is to write about how it has been represented in the American media, and then how this feeds back into subsequent history. The question is always, 'Will art replace history?' Or can the artistic act survive outside of its historical fact? Waldrop's characters find themselves walking through history and through others' artistic endeavours. For how can we know a period except through how the people of that time represented themselves; as in the extreme case of 'What Makes Hieronymous Run', where his time travellers find themselves overshooting the sixteenth century to find themselves trapped in sixteenth-century paintings instead. Or the protagonist of 'French Scenes',

who through technology can make the whole of film history permeable, introducing characters and scenes from old films into his scenarios, until he becomes unable to tell his present from their past, sucked into an imaginative singularity.

In one sense Waldrop's stories are almost improvisations around that feedback, the industrial whine created by America's culture and history, trying to find the true chord. Really though, Waldrop is less a meta-historical Jimi Hendrix than a modern Brothers Grimm, using the pop icons of his youth and all the minutiae of Americana to write contemporary American folk tales (indeed, in 'Our Mortal Span' Waldrop identified the historic necessities out of which folk and fairy tales are formed). Like American tall tales, his stories demonstrate a love for the exuberant and comic, but, ultimately, they have pathetic endings. The passions of his adolescence for celluloid and transistor fantasies are animated by zany humour but leavened by affectionate tender melancholy (SF is not necessarily much noted for its sense of compassion). Tenderness is demonstrated by Waldrop to his characters rather than within the stories themselves. The amorous and sensual aspects of art that seem largely absent from his work are instead sublimated into the creation of his work, thereby seducing his readers. Unlike many academic cultural critics, through the dramas of his fictions Waldrop offers stories that are alive to the pleasures of his subjects, that truly are erotic hermeneutics, with all the pleasure and loss true eroticism denotes. Waldrop likes to trace back his first experience of SF to seeing a dinosaur standing next to a barn in an early children's book, and his fiction has that same wonder of a child explaining to anyone who will listen about dinosaurs and the same feeling of loss for a marvel that has passed from the world. (Later Waldrop will include TV programs and actors among his 'Strange Monsters of the Recent Past'.)

His alternative history stories are about how we may be trapped by history. Dodos, Neanderthals, passenger pigeons, mammoths, Thomas Wolfe, Charles Lindbergh Jr., all get a second chance. Their glamour and romance is made actual and revived, but at the last moment they must be lost again so that their loss in our real world may be felt more keenly. Howard Waldrop wants to save the

past: 'Save A Place In the Lifeboat for Me' is about the attempt to prevent Buddy Holly from dying. Stories are animated by the adolescent wonder at the freshness of these pop icons and the place they had in his generation's life, but the adult Waldrop knows that they can't be brought back, despite mass culture's rush to reissue. All the adult Waldrop can do is make you thrill as he thrilled and then feel the importance of their subsequent passing. For all the invention of his scenarios, the dodos and the Big Bopper still die, totalitarian terror obtains and the Holocaust is inevitable. The price to be paid for an alternate world, maybe a better world, may be too painful, too much to be borne by any individual. The apparently congenial village life of an African boy in 'The Lions Are Asleep Tonight' is a result of the obliteration of native Americans from the record of history. The protagonist of 'Calling Your Name', a figure who might in this one rare instance be Waldrop's surrogate, finds as he slips across several alternate contemporary Americas the apparent benefits are enjoyed at the expense of his personal relations and the life already built for himself.

If there is a recurrent theme in Waldrop's stories, it is 'They coulda been contenders'. Indeed, Waldrop explicitly uses this phrase, echoing Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* to begin 'Flying Saucer Rock and Roll'. Many of Waldrop's stories are built around contests: the psychic sumo wrestling of 'Man-Mountain Gentian', the tractor pull of 'Mary Margaret Road-Grader', the doo-wop of 'Flying Saucer Rock and Roll', and fishing in 'God's Hooks', with the climax being the description of the bout itself. Or else many stories build up to some artistic or dramatic achievement, which might have but never did occur in this world: 'Ike at the Mike', 'Fin de Cycle', 'Occam's Ducks', 'The Effects of Alienation'. The protagonists usually win; they pull off their artistic attempt, typically to standing ovations and shrieks from the audience.

Ike was crying as they went into the final number. He stepped forward to the mike Helen had used when she came out to sing with them for the last three numbers. 'This song is for the memory of George Smith Patton,' he said. They played 'The Old, Rugged Cross.' Ike, nor anybody else, had ever played it just like that before. Ike broke down

halfway through. He waved to the crowd, took his mouthpiece off, and walked into the wings. Pops kept playing. He tried to motion Ike back. Helen was hugging him. He waved and brushed the tears away. Armstrong finished the song. The audience tore the place apart. They were on their feet and stamping, screaming, applauding. Presley, out there, sat in his chair. He was crying too, but quickly stood up and cheered. Then the whole thing was over.

'Ike at the Mike'

Yet the victory is in fact an anticlimax, since this is usually the high-point for Waldrop's protagonists. It does not carry their lives forward; their lives have no second acts. Waldrop can give them an iconic, shining moment, but he can't give them more than that. The moments of appealing high energy and inventiveness give way to the smallness of real life. 'We live beyond any tale we happen to enact; so in the saddest or most sardonic of tales we are conscious of the simple persistence of a person's power to live out his life; in this there is nothing futile — the private silence in which we live and which enables us to endure our own solitude' (V. S. Pritchett on Chekhov).

Waldrop does not disparage the American Dream, but rather tries to include those who have been excluded, those who would in fact add to this dream, and in so doing make the Dream worthy by their inclusion. For all American mass culture's tendency to triumphalism, Waldrop's sympathies are with the marginalised and the underdogs that American Manifest Destiny would otherwise run over, be they historical, as evidenced by his recurrent interest in native Americans, or literary, with his attempt to create a sanctuary for America's fictional misfits in 'Why Did?'. Failure is only a superficial consideration, since Waldrop's stories could never be anti-American, sullen philippics in tones of aimlessness and hopelessness. There is always an excitement in reading a Waldrop, in response to a spirit of hopefulness and wishfulness. The avidity of SF for the world of tomorrow is mirrored in Waldrop's retrospection for the world through which we've already lived. Though fascinated by the potential of alternate worlds, Waldrop is restrained by experience and a melancholy understanding of the constraints of reality. He cannot be one of SF's technocratic

boosters. Indeed, the few stories that do pay attention to technology usually recount its collapse, as in 'Helpless, Helpless' or 'Major Spacer in the 21st Century'. Every introduction of change is not de facto 'progress', and has a human cost.

Alternative history fascinates me, especially social alternative history. Nearly everybody writes military or political alternative history — the event that changed everything was some crucial event like a battle or assassination. I write about individual acts, like Eisenhower being a jazz musician, Elvis a politician. What it changes is their lives, though it does actually change the whole world. You see the society reflected in what's happened to them. It doesn't have to be a big change.

'Howard Waldrop
Interview', *Locus*, August 1988

It is for this reason that so many of Waldrop's stories are told in the first person. His narrators are witnesses who can testify to the personal importance of the events and perform as unwitting votaries to enact Waldrop's own devotion. They are plot mechanisms that are able to register the transformative effect of Waldrop's suppositions upon their lives, even when there is no apparent external change in the wider world. The typical Waldrop protagonist tends to be somewhat of a blank, yet is highly responsive to the events around him (rather like someone intensely involved in watching the TV or a film), often an innocent adolescent. Although later stories do identify more the passing of time and opportunity in the individual's lengthy life. Character development is not a great concern, and most often takes the form of the narrative pattern of innocence lost, an awakening to the thrills of possible experience entwined with the pangs of future adult disappointment. Waldrop's may not be stories of how one person changes the world, but how in a changed world a person may still be able to act, an artist's paeons to the persistence of endeavour. The dramas of his characters are the necessary tools for the detailed dissection of his remade worlds. Waldrop chooses crucial moments in his characters' lives, in which, as they try to make sense of the direction of their own lives, we attempt to unravel the holistic trails of causality, unpicking past hope from

present reality, to determine the quanta that make up the apparently brute implacable reality. At its worst, this viewpoint of history results in a story like 'Horror We Got', where paranoid anti-Semitic conspiracy fantasies are lovingly detailed and then enacted to create an inescapable nightmare of history. At his most affirmative Waldrop is one with Robert F. Kennedy: 'Some men see things as they are and say "Why?" I see things that never were and say "Why not?"'

Of course, all of this is to wilfully ignore his foremost appeal to readers. The humour, enthusiasm, invention, technical skill and pastiche that constitute his stories regularly win Waldrop accolades of 'eccentric', 'unique', 'bizarre', and also 'difficult' and 'obscure'. Though his stories may seem impenetrable, smooth monoliths of received history, in fact they are highly porous. At every moment the reader's attention and judgment are attracted by some new detail that is a pivot point, not merely some gestalt contribution to verisimilitude, but another microscopic juncture at which the story can swivel into new possibilities. At the compositional level the stories enact the same pluralism that is Waldrop's animating spirit, that love of the diverse and forgotten. The details do not intend in just one direction but ramify, are a process in and of themselves, causing the reader to become almost motionsick as he or she tries to negotiate and consolidate all these possibilities. Waldrop's parables of the American consciousness are worked out in flashes of consonance rather than being yoked into some massive metaphorical programmatic monolith, a reductionist allegory of the twentieth century. They have the lucidity and slipperiness of dreams. Waldrop's recombinant approach to culture means that his stories wander through that dreamscape of pop culture and western history, where the historical and fictional brush up against each other. His writing has a visionary quality, as a result of which the reader is often chasing to keep up with Waldrop and explicate his vision. Waldrop doesn't write down to the audience, and to the extent that he feels that these are things worth remembering (which is the primary fact that his stories attest to), he expects his audience to be his potential equals so that his stories may soar at optimum conditions. However, to the extent that Waldrop also writes above his characters, not making explicit to them the

nature of their worlds, so he is also on the verge of writing above his readers, not explicitly guiding and holding their hands, instead relying upon them to decipher and make the necessary interpretations. His taste for vaudeville, comic shtick and dialogue compresses a novel's worth of detail and

thought, eliciting wonder, laughter or confusion at his willingness to push his manipulation of all his available elements to surreal liberties, leaving it to the surprised readers to project their own context and themes upon what may be genius or 'refer madness'. It is up to each reader of Waldrop's writing

to decide whether he or she wishes to take up his invitation to be baptised in the holy stream of the American subconscious.

— Matthew Davis, 2004

Waldrop: Three short story collections



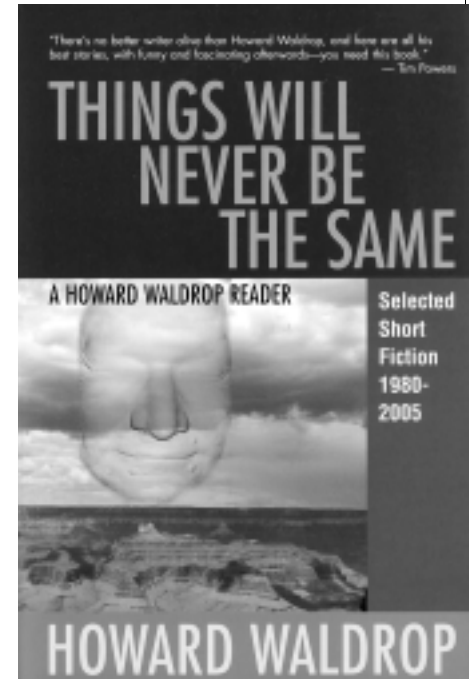
Ursus, Kansas City, MO/Mark V. Ziesing, Shingletown, CA; 0-942681-05-3; 1990; Introduction by Chad Oliver; 231 pp; hb; \$US25.00.

Introduction: Chad Oliver
 'Night of the Cooters' (first published 1987)
 'French Scenes' (1988)
 'The Passing of the Western' (1989)
 'The Adventure of the Grinder's Whistle' (1977)
 'Thirty Minutes Over Broadway!' (1986)
The Annotated Jetboy (1986)
 'Hoover's Men' (1988)
 'Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance?' (1988)
 'Wild, Wild Horses' (1988)
 'Fin de Cyclé' (1990)



Eidolon Publications, Perth, WA; 0-9586864-0-8; 1997; Foreword by Lucius Shepard; Introduction by Howard Waldrop; 223 pp.; tpb; \$A16.96.

Foreword: Lucius Shepard
 Introduction: Howard Waldrop
 'You Could Go Home Again' (1993)
 'Household Words; or, The Powers That Be' (1994)
 'The Effects of Alienation' (1992)
 'The Sawing Boys' (1994)
 'Why Did?' (1994)
 'Occam's Ducks; (1995)
 'Flatfeet!' (1996)
 'El Castillo de la Perseverancia' (1995)
 'Scientifiction' (1997)
 Bibliography



Old Earth Books, Baltimore, MD; 978-1-882968-36-7; 2007; Introduction by Howard Waldrop; 311 pp.; tpb; \$US15.

Introduction: Howard Waldrop
 'The Ugly Chickens' (1980)
 'Flying Saucer Rock and Roll' (1984)
 'Heirs of the Perisphere' (1985)
 'The Lions Are Asleep This Night' (1986)
 'Night of the Cooters' (1987)
 'Do Ya, Do Ya, Wanna Dance? (1988)
 'Wild, Wild Horses' (1988)
 'French Scenes' (1988)
 'Household Words; or, The Powers That Be' (1994)
 'The Sawing Boys' 1994)
 'Heart of Whitenesse' (1997)
 'Mr Goober's Show' (1998)
 'US' (1998)
 'The Dynasters; vol. 1: On the Downs' (1999)
 'Calling Your Name' (2003)
 'The King of Where-I-Go' (2006)

Letters of comment

CY CHAUVIN
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Detroit MI 48213, USA

This is a terribly late letter on *Steam Engine Time* 5. The letter has been sitting in my computer waiting to be finished, but I don't think it will be ever more complete or polished, so I will send it as it is.

I quite liked Gillian Polack's article, which interrelated Cordwainer Smith's experiences in 1960s Australia and Canberra with his fiction (although Smith spent most of his time in Australia in 1957, and *Norstrilia* was completed in 1960, but held back from publication by the author). Her explanations seem to offer some insight, and I read the article twice. Sometimes the better articles may not provoke as many comments. I wonder if she has read the Arthur Burns article about Smith/Linebarger?

Her mention of the abba-dingo and 'Alpha Ralph Boulevard' reminds me how much I love that story. I feel a little uneasy that so much of her interpretation of Smith should be in terms of allegory, and I don't think that Smith's universe is always predetermined. 'Alpha Ralph Boulevard' is all about how the element of chance is re-introduced on Earth. It is significant that the character Virginia is most concerned about whether she is really free to make her own choices now, or whether she is directed in her actions by the Instrumentality. She receives the reassuring prediction that 'she will love Paul all her life', while Paul receives the foreboding prediction that 'he will love Virginia for another 23 minutes'. But it is certainly Virginia's choice when she recoils away from C'mell's help in crossing the gap in Alpha Ralph Boulevard – and falls to her death. Nothing could be more her choice, and in a predetermined universe, there would be no choice. A prediction can after all be true or false. It is also interesting that 'Alpha Ralph Boulevard' is the only Smith story that I know of that is written in first person.

I don't think I want to make any real judgment about Harry Buerkett's link between *Dune* and *Norstrilia*. I read *Dune* when I was a teenager, and I don't think I want to spoil my memories of it by trying to reread; I couldn't read *Dune Messiah*. And while I reread *Norstrilia* just two years ago, I think

Cordwainer Smith's short stories are far superior.

But it seems that some of the similarities he is finding in the two books are suspect or shaky. For instance, the similarity in what Rod McBan and Paul A. are wearing for a wrestling contest in a desert climate does not indicate a common ancestry for the two novels! Science fiction seems to lend itself particularly to those who wish to see reflections of other events within the story because (perhaps) we know that the events in the stories cannot be real, so we look for some other source for the stories.

Eric Raymond's 'A Political History of Science Fiction' seems somewhat disappointing, since it's terribly unspecific and makes huge generalisations. He somehow misses one of the larger political revolutions within science fiction against the Campbellian norm: feminism. This is still going on, and the James Tiptree Jr award is given out annually (although not at the Worldcon) for the best science fiction treating gender-related issues, so libertarianism is not the only political stripe within science fiction.

I did like his use of the term 'radial category': 'one that is not defined by any one logical predicate but by a central prototype and a set of permissible or customary variations'. Or maybe what I like is his example of 'fruit' in English being defined by 'apple' and including very similar fruits like pears, peaches, etc., but also avocados and coconuts. But then he goes and self-defines science fiction with hard science fiction as being at the core of SF. Yet surely this does not explain the wide appeal of fantasy to many SF readers? Fantasy and SF are twin fruits. I think that some of the *frisson* that you can get from Gregory Benford and Greg Bear with their hard science artifacts that are wonderful puzzles is something you also can get from the more magical and fantastic elements in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* by Suzanne Clarke. There is something there, some 'fruit'.

I really believe that the 'fruit' of all this is fiction, and science fiction and fantasy a subset of fiction; how can it be so substantially different from other types of fiction to not be related to it in the same manner that apples, oranges, and even avocados are fruit?

9 August 2007

[BRG: I agree with you, Cy, but many people in the SF world don't. The best description of fiction I've heard recently is that it deals with 'the truth of human behaviour'. Eric Raymond wants SF to support one very narrow view of human behaviour and society, whereas ideally science fiction would deal with all future possibilities of human existence — instead of the authors that Raymond favours, let's mention Stapledon, Wells, Aldiss, Cordwainer Smith, Le Guin, Lem and a few others.]

JOSEPH NICHOLAS
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Thanks for your email of giving the link to *Steam Engine Time* 6 — a substantial issue, so of course I haven't yet read all of it. I am progressing slowly through it, fitting it in with all my other reading — other fanzines (as and when there are any; since it's summer and there aren't any conventions in prospect, people's publishing frequency seems to have dropped away), other magazines (*New Scientist* every week, *Private Eye* every other week, a couple of history magazines every month), even a book when I can find the time, although most of what I've read over the past year has been history of one kind or another. I seem to read so much less than I used to, at least when I was a young and carefree twenty-something, that I can only suppose I must be slowing down as I get older. Or else it's just that the demands of ordinary everyday life (someone has to cut the grass — make the breakfast — keep the house clean) squeeze out the opportunities for reading that one enjoyed in previous decades.

In this interim rejoinder, I want to respond to the two comments by Janine to my letter about Eric Raymond's article in the previous issue (and thank you, too, for publishing my letter). In her first comment, Janine follows my list of lone genius inventors with a query as to whether Stephen Hawking should be counted among them. No, he should not, because he is not a lone genius of the same nature as Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison: that is, a private individual, maintained by private funding, working in a private laboratory. Or, to put it more simply: the criterion here is not the insights of the scientists in question but the manner in which they worked. As far as I'm

Why I don't like Harry Potter

by David J. Lake

C. S. Lewis once wrote an amiable book, *Experiment in Criticism* (1965), in which he defined 'utter trash' as fiction *nobody* wants to read twice. This fits well with my own firm principle that all value in the arts is *subjective*. We may say, 'Shakespeare is a great writer.' This only means that a great many people (including myself) have thought so. Other people may hate Shakespeare. We cannot say that they are *wrong*. For them, he is bad; for me he is good. Period. Therefore all heated arguments which try to prove objective merit or demerit in (for example) books are a waste of time and temper. It's a good idea to train yourself always, in such discussions, to insert the two words 'for me.' For me, Proust is a boring old fart. For others, he is the master of all novelists. (There are *objective* features in Proust that turn me off, but some people on. It is fine to refer to these objective features, and then to differ as to their value.)

I am, therefore, not trying to prove now that the Harry Potter books are trash. I am sure some people read them twice or more, with pleasure. I only want to explain why *I* dislike Potter. I have read the first book, and then I said to myself 'never again'. I have seen three of the films (the last two, only because I was dragged to them by friends). But I am not a film buff. I go by the printed word: and I dislike Rowling's printed words.

Let me say that I have had deep exposure to the classics of fantasy, magical fantasy, from the age of four to my present age of seventy-eight. I love good fantasy, and re-read 'children's books' even now with pleasure. For me, the great fantasy authors are Edith Nesbit, C. S. Lewis (sometimes), Tolkien (sometimes – but his prose is plodding), and Ursula Le Guin. But (most people don't know this) Lewis was heavily influenced by Nesbit – and so was I, at a very early age – so I will begin with her.

Edith Nesbit was a Fabian friend of

H. G. Wells who wrote fine children's books in the decade 1900–10. Some of these are straight mundane; but most are magical. For me, the best are *Five Children and It*, *The Phoenix and the Carpet*, *The Story of the Amulet* and, above all, *The Enchanted Castle*. This last I first read in the 1930s, and I have re-read it countless times, including last year. In this story, a small group of children go *through a tunnel* and emerge upon a wonderful country house (or 'castle') with large beautiful grounds filled with statues of classical gods. It is a real country house in *this* world, but (with the help of a magic ring) strange things happen there. By moonlight, the gods come alive, and near the end there is a gathering of gods of all the world, who welcome the children to their moonlit feast. (I have been prejudiced in favor of classical art and polytheism ever since.)

One rule Nesbit always observes: magic must be unobtrusive on our mundane world. Usually the grown-ups don't notice it at all; or if they see something odd, they think they are hallucinating. And all goes back to normal at the end of the story. Also, *there is no denigration* of ordinary, non-magical people.

C. S. Lewis, in his Narnia books, makes his magic happen out of this world, in the separate world of Narnia (which is a flat earth with a celestial rim). The children get there through a wardrobe or by magic rings – as in Nesbit. I don't like all the Narnia books – some are too blatantly Christian for my stomach. But I have re-read with great pleasure *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* and *The Magician's Nephew*. (This latter is heavily indebted to Nesbit's *Story of the Amulet*, and Lewis makes a sly acknowledgment of this by referring to Nesbit's Bastable family.) Again, the separation between the ordinary mundane world and the magical Narnian world is (very nearly) complete.

Le Guin's Earthsea trilogy solves

the problem of magic by putting it in another, very Earthlike, world where magic works. But there are strict limits on what magic can do. Some young people have the magical gift, but, like Ged, they must be trained. But ordinary unmagical people are not denigrated. Ged generously helps his ordinary 'parishioners' against a dragon.

There is just a touch of 'school story' – or rather, university story – in *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Ged challenges his fellow student Jasper to a magical duel, with disastrous consequences. But the story passes well beyond the Mage School on Roke to most of the other islands of Earthsea. Ged grows up.

Another point: Nesbit, Lewis and Le Guin are brilliant *writers*. For me, at least, they have vivid and beautiful styles.

Now – Rowling's style seems to me as flat as a plastic-covered table. And she has magic pretty well ruling the very world we know. It is obtrusive on mundane reality. (There is a Ministry of Magic in Britain.) Since we all know that magic doesn't work in our world, this sets up a violent clash in the mind of at least this reader.

And Rowling horribly denigrates ordinary people, by calling them Muggles.

She makes a bastard cross between the school story (Billy Bunter and all that) and the magical story. This is not like Le Guin's College for Mages, which is in another universe, and is sketched lightly. I don't like school stories. I read them when I was a schoolboy, especially those in the *Gem* and the *Magnet*, but I have no desire to re-read them. Schools are things to get *over*. Nesbit does not write school stories, and I can re-read her for ever.

In the end, it comes to this – for me, Nesbit, Lewis and Le Guin create beauty, and Rowling does not.

– 6 August 2007

aware, Hawking has never worked privately, with private funding to underpin him; thus Janine is not comparing like with like. A like-for-like comparison suggests that only James Lovelock (private money-private laboratory) might be a modern match for the lone geniuses of yesteryear.

In her second comment, Janine responds to my statement that governments are unwilling to spend money on space exploration by observing that 'governments have spent plenty on space exploration . . . but the majority of it seems to have gone toward non-manned exploration', that 'the Bush administration has started talking up building a Moon base for humans and sending people to Mars', and that private enterprise and commercial interests will substitute for governments 'once the financial costs are outweighed by the potential gains'. To take these points in order: the 'plenty' spent on unmanned space exploration since the end of the 1960s is a mere fraction of a percentage of the amounts of money that would be required to realise anything like the science fiction dream of the conquest of the high frontier. The additional amounts of money allocated by the Bush administration to new crewed expeditions to the Moon and Mars is not regarded by serious scientists or policy administrators as remotely sufficient to achieve the stated results, and even if it were, the funding isn't ring-fenced: a future US administration (perhaps even the one to be elected in November next year) could cancel the whole program without a second thought. Finally, the suggestion that private enterprise can substitute for governments is just wish-fulfilment, because (as I said) the time horizons required for any return on the investments made would be so lengthy (and the investments so enormous) that no board of directors which proposed such expenditure would remain in office for very long. The fact that one company has won a prize for making two trips to 100 km up in a single week means nothing — 100 km isn't even suborbital, and to get anything substantive to Earth orbit will require a far larger investment than hitherto . . . which clearly isn't forthcoming. Instead, we have proposals by Richard Branson to use Burt Rutan's vehicles to take paying passengers on half-day trips to view the curvature of the Earth — and what could better demonstrate the fundamental triviality of the whole venture than that?

The awful truth (for those still wed-

ded to the science fiction dream) is that the space age is over before it ever really began, killed off by its own huge costs and the unwillingness of governments to meet them. Robot exploration of the solar system is all we'll ever know; the rest is fantasy.

2 August 2007

[JGS: A summer fanzine pubbing lull seems to me to be more prevalent in the UK than in the US. Reading happens where you make it happen, I've found, and though I've also seen a decrease in my own reading speed, when I designate a day for reading, I can get through at least one 300-pager in about 16–18 hours. It all depends on one's priorities. You're certainly entitled to your opinions about what's been spent in money so far on space exploration, and I'm entitled to not agree with them; I see no point in continuing the discussion, for that reason.]

**DAVID LAKE
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I was a bit shocked when Jan admitted on page 5 that she hadn't read any Philip Dick!

I think arguments about what is central in SF are a waste of time. SF is a device that can be used for many purposes. If anyone is central, I would say it is Wells.

28 July 2007

[JGS: I was surprised, myself, when I realised it; I suspect I felt I had read at least a bit because I'd seen so many film adaptations of Dick's work. Still intend to set that straight, but you should see the book stacks I have (one for personal choice, one for review, and the books can and do move between the two rather often).]

**YVONNE ROUSSEAU
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Adelaide SA 5000**

Roman Orszanski turned up at Critical Mass on 1 August, as predicted: an ex-boss of his ate with him at the cafe beforehand, and accompanied us to the Critical Mass meeting (apparently he's mildly interested in SF, and he said afterwards that he rather enjoyed the discussion — during which, I'm sorry to say, I cried 'Spung!' when people were edging around the question of what was wrong with the Heinlein novels that weren't marketed as juveniles). I was able to hand over SETs (with each of which I included a photocopy of the write-up for your

A. Bertram Chandler Award — lest any of them were ignorant of Oz fandom) to Zoran, Roman, Jacq, Neil and Brian. I handed the copies for Adam and Ian to Steven Clark, who apparently teaches them both (but who says that Ian has not been at all well lately). And today I posted the eighth to Jeff Harris. Nobody complained of misrepresentation, and several exclaimed at the evocative excellence of the solo photo of Zoran.

2 August 2007

**REMY LECHEVALIER
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I went to eFanzines.com and read not only your Stapledon article, but also issues 1 to 3 of *Steam Engine Time* (I'm beginning issue 4 at the moment). I'm delighted, particularly by the analyses on British and Australian science fiction, and the historical background it provides, for while my knowledge of the latter is still very limited at the moment (Erle Cox, then Greg Egan . . . I'm missing a lot of things in between!), I'm quite interested in discovering its specificity, its authors and history. I've started to make a list, from the Australian books commented on or cited in *SET*, of those I have to find (and some I already have, since I actually had this idea of exploring Australian science fiction in the back of my mind for a while already). I'll read through *SET*, then *SF Commentary*, *Metaphysical Review*, *Scratch Pad*, etc. with great pleasure.

Reading *SET* struck another chord for me, as I'm in the process of launching (or rather re-launching) a French critical fanzine, that will be called *Nous les Martiens* (*We, the Martians*, from the magazine serial title of Dick's novel *Martian Time-Slip*). I hope it will be a focus for serious thought about both the literary aspects, and the craft of science fiction, from a French point of view. And that it will provide a window for us to the rest of the SF world, as we don't have, I think, a clear view of what's going on beside the US scene, and to some extent the British.

Back to Olaf Stapledon: reading your essay made me go back to my bookshelves and pick out Stapledon's books. They're now in the 'to reread' pile . . . An amusing synchronicity here: one of the contributors to a future issue of *Nous les Martiens* will offer a piece on Stapledon, as we both think he's much overlooked in France, though his works were well received

when first translated, in the sixties and seventies. I wasn't aware of the Robert Crossley biography, I will mention it to my friend who's working on the Stapledon article.

Now, one last question which you probably heard zillions of time: is there any copy left of Greg Egan's *An Unusual Angle*, by the defunct Norstrilia Press?

29 July 2007

[BRG: I have a few copies left of the paperback. Carey Handfield and Rob Gerrard, the other members of the long-defunct Norstrilia Press, might still have some. *An Unusual Angle* was written long before Greg's successful books, and has quite a different style, but does show that the very young Egan was already an excellent writer.]

TIM MARION

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No real comments on *Steam Engine Time 6*, except for minor quibbles, as opposed to taking issue (or agreeing) with many of the thoughts and ideas expressed.

The word 'dolphin' is an ambiguous example to use for something that is perceived visually one way and described verbally another way, as there actually is a fish called the 'dolphin'. It's green, about three feet long, and is related to the mackerel. I also just found out that the mammals porpoises and dolphins are similar in appearance but unrelated; they belong to two different families.

That photo next to Darrell Schweitzer's letter doesn't look like him at all, so I assume it's supposed to be a joke. The Darrell I remember (whom I have not seen in four years, admittedly, but I did once live with him, long ago) doesn't have quite such a sharp chin or narrow face. The hair does look similar, though, I admit.

4 August 2007

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

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Steam Engine Time 6 arrived, complete with that shocking photo of myself that will doubtless deprive many readers of many nights' sleep and/or smooth digestion.

But what brings me to the keyboard right away is that there's an extraordinary typo in my second letter. I have got the wrong Pierce. John R. Pierce, whom I never met, wrote for

Analog under his own name and as 'J. J. Coupling', which is apparently an engineering pun. John *Jeremy* Pierce, his son, a.k.a. J. J. Pierce, whom I have known for many years, is the person meant. He is the one who started the Second Foundation anti-New Wave movement about 1968, and who rather foolishly published some Schweitzer juvenilia in its official organ, *Renaissance*. He himself could be an erudite and forceful writer. He later went on to become an expert in Cordwainer Smith, the author of three books of SF history (published by Greenwood Press and not, I suspect, widely read because they were expensive books that sold only to libraries), and for a short while the editor of *Galaxy*. He published an article about his editorial experiences recently in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, entitled 'A Year of Torment'. He wasn't merely making bricks without straw as editor of *Galaxy*. He was making bricks without mud. That he produced anything at all under the circumstances was remarkable.

As for *Orbit* and the New Wave, your remarks caused me to get out *Orbit 6* and look at it. This is indeed a strong volume. Contains 'The Asian Shore' by Thomas Disch; 'Entire and Perfect Chrysolite' by R. A. Lafferty; two Gene Wolfe stories; and 'The Chosen' by Kate Wilhelm. But it also contains an opaque dribbling by James Sallis and 'A Cold Dark Night With Snow' by Kate Wilhelm, which is simply an unremarkable mainstream story chopped up and sliced together out of sequence to make it 'experimental.' Aye, there's the rub.

This is the sort of thing that brought the Golden Age of the Original Anthology to a rapid close. The problem was that anthologies like *Orbit* tended to be more noted for their worst than their best, and their worst was worse than anything found anywhere else.

I repeat an edifying story I brought up on the discussion group Fictionmags. Maybe ten or fifteen years ago, when I was selling books and magazines, I happened to show a lady a copy of Scott Edelman's *Last Wave*. The lady in question is about a decade my junior, and therefore not old enough to remember the great New Wave War when it was actually happening. She is, however, a long-time fan. Her father published SF stories in the pulps in the '30s and '40s. So she knows the field. But when I showed her *Last Wave* and told her, 'It's an attempt to revive the New Wave', her face showed an

expression of disgust and disbelief and she said, 'Why?' Knowing that the term 'New Wave' is notoriously fluid, I asked her, 'What does "New Wave" mean to you?' This was in the early to mid 1990s, mind you. She said, with equal emphasis, 'Those awful *Orbit* stories.'

I know someone else (who is old enough to remember the whole business) who refuses to believe that 'New Wave' refers to a time period at all. To him the term means 'The use of avant-garde techniques to hide the fact that the author has nothing to say'. He cites 'A Cold Dark Night With Snow' as a prime example. He further goes on to say that any story, regardless of when it was written, if sufficiently incoherent, qualifies as 'New Wave'. Thus it is an entirely negative term. This, I suggest, is not very perceptive or very useful, but the notion is widespread.

Such usages may tell us nothing about what actually went on in the New Wave Era, but almost forty years later, the term 'New Wave' still has strongly negative sales value. (I can tell you from my eBay experience that if you want to sell a book, do not mention the N. W. words.) At the time, its effect was to drive the Brits from the American market until the mid 1980s, when they returned with a new kind of space opera, typified by the work of Iain Banks. It caused a major shift in cover design on American books. The surrealist/swirly Paul Lehr/Richard Powers look was out. Rowena Morrill and the Brothers Hildebrandt were in. Books sold as a function of how far they could be distanced from the New Wave. Larry Niven won. James Sallis and Langdon Jones lost. The anthology market, with undeniable help from Roger Elwood, crashed and burned. When it recovered, *New Worlds* and *Orbit* were replaced by Jim Baen's *Destinies* and *New Destinies*.

I'm not talking about the New Wave but about how the New Wave is remembered, which is of course a distortion, even as that lady's memories of *Orbit* were a distortion. I think there is an idealistic half-truth at work here. We want to believe that the really good stuff in *Orbit*, such as Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights' or 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus,' would have been eagerly snapped up by the editor of, say, *F&SF*. This fails to give credit to Damon Knight for nurturing his writers, giving them suggestions, and otherwise exerting his editorial influence. Possibly Wolfe would not have written those stories but for the presence of

Damon Knight.

But the worst of *Orbit* seemed really unique. It wasn't, admittedly. You could find stuff just as bad in *New Worlds* or *Quark*, but those weren't as widely read. *Orbit's* empty opacities are remembered. They dragged the whole series under. In the last couple volumes you can see Knight clearly trying to change course, but it was too late. An interesting corollary is that if you question someone like the lady I was talking to further, they don't even remember the writers, just how bad the stories were. That is because, to them, one 'New Wave' story was very much like another, and to be avoided.

At the crudest level, you could say that a New Wave story is any story the reader didn't understand. But this also suggests that an old-time, failed New Waver, if he'd learned to write actual coherent narrative in the meantime, could start over in SF. No one would remember his previous work.

What I learned from *Orbit* and applied to my own editorial career is the need for minimum standards. If you publish 40 per cent brilliant masterpieces and 60 per cent outrageous garbage, you will be remembered for the garbage. Sad but true, if you publish 10 per cent brilliant masterpieces and 90 per cent pretty-good stories, you will probably survive. Minimum standards may even be more important than maximum standards. Every story must satisfy the reader at least somewhat, so he doesn't go away feeling burned, as *Orbit* readers did. The ideal, of course, is to have as many brilliant masterpieces as possible without having any garbage, to be as good as *Orbit* without being as bad as *Orbit*.

I think one reason that, for example, Terry Carr's *Universe* survived a bit longer is that Carr came close to achieving this. *Universe* was a lot more even in quality, almost as good as *Orbit*, but nowhere near as bad as *Orbit*.

3 August 2007

[BRG: So you're going to talk about 'standards', are you, Darrell? Why do you think the New Wave came into existence? It's because in the 1960s science fiction published in the magazines had reached its lowest standard since the 1930s.

Take *Orbit 6*, for instance. According to the little note in my copy, I bought it on 26 August 1970. According to the ratings I gave at the time, *Orbit 6* has two four-star stories, Thomas Disch's 'The Asian Shore' and Carol Emshwiller's 'Debut'. I gave Kate Wilhelm's 'A Cold Dark Night with Snow' three and a half

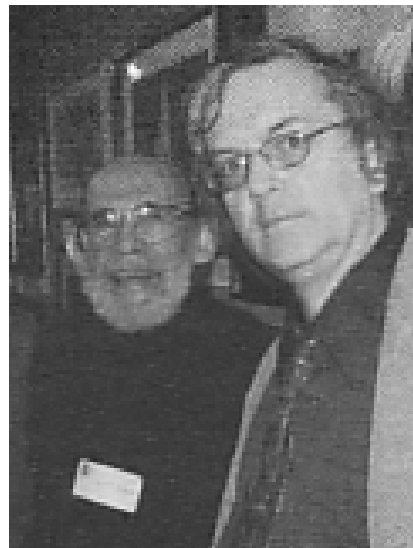
stars, although I don't recall the story's contents. I've reread/reviewed 'The Asian Shore' more often than I have read any other piece of SF/fantasy — at least five times. The same issue contained two one-star stories, 'Sunburst' by somebody named Roderick Thorp, who disappeared, and 'Where No Sun Shines', by Gardner Dozois, who didn't.

Take the SF magazines, other than *New Worlds*, for the same month, August 1970. *Galaxy* was edited by Ejler Jakobsson. Many people consider that it went into steep decline after Frederik Pohl left. Jakobsson had done his best, but the August–September issue was the first time since 1968 that *Galaxy* had been forced to return to bimonthly publication. The August–September issue contains one top story, the James Blish's novella 'The Day After Judgment', renamed *Black Easter* in the novel expansion. The same issue contains the last episode of *I Will Fear No Evil*, the serial that stopped me reading Robert Heinlein; 'About a Secret Crocodile', a very ordinary R. A. Lafferty story, and two one-star stories, 'Power Play' by Dannie Plachta, and 'Moon Heat' by Ernest Taves.

The August 1970 issue of *F&SF* contains no four-star stories. As I remember the magazine from that time, most issues were only fair-to-average quality. I gave three and a half stars to the first part of Thomas Burnett Swann's serialised novella 'The Goat Without Horns', but remember nothing about it. The only other story that might remain interesting today is Raylyn Moore's 'Out of Control'. The same issue had two one-star stories: 'The Self-priming, Solid-state Electronic Chicken' by Jon Lucas, and Maureen Bryan Exter's 'The Goodbye Birthday'.

As I remember *Amazing* and *Fantastic* in the early 1970s, they improved greatly under Ted White's editorship. There was no August 1970 issue, but I'm surprised to find in the September issue a straight slate of one-star stories: Philip Jose Farmer's 'The Oogenesis of Bird City', Christopher Anvil's 'The Low Road', Bill Pronzini's 'Dry Spell', and the first episode of Piers Anthony's *Orn*. The August *Fantastic* does somewhat better, with the first appearance of Ursula Le Guin's 'The Good Trip' (to which I gave only three stars), and 'Music in the Air', a satirical pastiche by Ova Hamlet (Richard Lupoff).

An extensive archaeological dig in my study failed to unearth the August issue of *Analog*, the best-selling US magazine in 1970 and for many years after. As I remember the period, it would have contained the usual



Ben Indick and the real Darrell Schweitzer, November 2006. (Photo: courtesy *New York Review of Science Fiction*, January 2007).

indigestible mixture of Anvil, Reynolds and other stock Campbell authors. (Australia's own Jack Wodhams provided the only light relief in *Analog* during that period.)

You talk about standards, Darrell! Standards in the SF magazines were appalling by the time *Orbit*, *Universe* and (later) *New Dimensions* arose in the firmament. Every magazine and original fiction anthology had its clunkers, but in the early 1970s only the anthologies were providing the stories we still remember. To repeat what I said last time: I love my set of *Orbits*, and most of the original fiction anthology series of that period. I've kept the American magazines from the late sixties only because I've never found anyone who takes them off my hands.]

BEN INDICK

**428 Sagamore Avenue,
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Thank you for *Steam Engine Time 6*. It is characteristically handsome and filled with good thoughtful stuff, which I will leave for others to discuss. In deplorable contrast, I offer you the most recent issue of *Ben's Beat*. It does have some nice things about my old friend Hannes Bok, long gone now, and, more recently, my dear buddy, Paul Walker, dead at only 64 and much missed by me.

The issue has a reproduction of a photo from the *New York Review of Science Fiction* of the true, genuine and original Darrell Schweitzer. None of this baloney such as you innocently printed on page 27 of this issue. Jason was having fun, but he used an old photo he had of Satan instead of his Schweitzer photo! I've known Darrell

too many years to be hornswoggled that way. Not even *he* can do it to me!
2 August 2007

JEFF HAMILL
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I just received *Steam Engine Time* 6 yesterday. The cover and layout look very good. I haven't had a chance to really read any of the articles straight through yet, but I did notice the 'Gillespie Fanzines Go Electronic' box above your editorial on page 3. Add me to the 'Official Downloader' list.

My health is about the same as when you last heard from me — no better, no worse. I have been making a half-hearted effort — is that too obvious a pun? — to get some freelance work doing copy editing, and I've succeeded here and there in little bits, but my main interest right now is in learning more about book design and production. Not that I'm likely to get any sort of job there, but I find the whole process of production of books, from typography to printing, a particularly fascinating one. I could have worse hobbies.

I am in the middle of reading Iain M. Banks' novel *Excession*, which I like rather more than his *Player of Games*. I found his website, downloaded and skimmed through his essay, 'A Few Notes on the Culture'. Once I've re-read it more carefully, I'll send you — and him — some comments. I find the Culture to be fairly plausible overall, economically and politically speaking. Banks's statement 'The Culture, in its history and its on-going form, is an expression of the idea that the nature of space itself determines the type of civilizations which will thrive there' I find questionable, but his conviction 'that a planned economy can be more productive — and more morally desirable — than one left to market forces' is the core of socialism, in a sense, and I fully endorse it. Banks is envisioning a society in which the need for law — and any material forces of repression, such as the police — has long since vanished: 'The Culture doesn't actually have laws; there are, of course, agreed-on forms of behaviour; manners, as mentioned above, but nothing that we would recognise as a legal framework. Not being spoken to, not being invited to parties, finding sarcastic anonymous articles and stories about yourself in the information network; these are the normal forms of manner-enforcement

in the Culture . . . In a society where material scarcity is unknown and the only real value is sentimental value, there is little motive or opportunity for the sort of action we would class as a crime against property.' I find these ideas not only believable (remember, we are talking about the future, not the present), but, at some point in human history, inevitable. I don't believe that there is any such thing as 'human nature' — people are not innately greedy and selfish, if given a chance, and in an enlightened post-scarcity society they will have that chance.

Where Iain and I would disagree, I suspect, would be in our answer to the question, How do we get there from here?

I glanced at my own letter and some of the others, and I have a comment for Janine.

In my letter, I mentioned that 'the only well-known SF writers who I would be willing to call Marxist were the Strugatsky brothers. Maybe.' Janine then added, in brackets, 'There are different definitions of "Marxist", too.' I didn't elaborate on my definition of Marxist (which I use interchangeably for 'communist' — notice the lowercase 'c' — when speaking of a political movement) — and in fact I didn't offer any definition of 'Marxist' at all, but I find Janine's comment annoying. My point was that about writers who I — and not somebody else — would be willing to call Marxist.

It is trivially true, on the one hand, that everyone defines any given word in his or her own way — no two people have exactly the same mental image of 'dog' — and, on the other hand, that people must have some idea in common when they try to use these words to communicate; otherwise, no communication would take place. In politics, more than practically any other sphere of human activity, words and their definitions are commonly used for deception, evasion and mis-education. What some call 'democracy' others call 'imperialism'. What meaning such words have depends on the context in which they are being used, who is using them, and what associations and traditions such words have.

As concisely as possible, here is my definition of Marxist. Communism is the political expression of the common interests of the working people (and especially of the industrial working class) of the entire world. The best-known communist of the nineteenth century was Karl Marx. A Marxist is a

person who agrees with the body of the ideas of Marx — which form an integral but not static whole — and acts accordingly. (So one could be a communist without being a Marxist — which is possible but unlikely — but being a Marxist without being a communist is not possible.)

Ordinarily, I use 'Marxism' as a rough synonym for 'socialism' or 'communism' — it depends on the context. As I view it, virtually no 'Socialist' party in the world is socialist, and virtually no 'Communist' party is communist, because the parties using those names stopped representing the interests of ordinary working people long ago. For example, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had ceased in any way representing the majority of the working people of Russia — much less the rest of the world — by the 1930s at the latest. What is important is not what a party or group or individual calls itself, but *what it does*, what the reality is, who it acts for. And in that sense there very few Marxists, or communists, in the world today. The only political parties that I would call Marxist are the Socialist Workers Party of the United States, and the Communist Party of Cuba. (There may be individuals and other organisations here and there that I don't know about, of course.)

4 August 2007

[BRG: I replied to Jeff that one really should have read Marx before calling oneself a 'Marxist', and I haven't. I have read Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, which described modern communist governments as instruments of 'state capitalism': they operate under the same principle as Western capitalism, except that the state reaps the benefit of workers' labour instead of the corporations. It's theft, either way. Somebody else once said that the most Marxist question a person can ask is: 'Who benefits?']

Communism — like any other political grouping or party or organisation — corresponds to the economic (and ultimately political) interests of a distinct social group in the modern world. This social group is the modern working class — generally, people who are paid by the hour. There are, of course, many exceptions and borderline cases and so on, but the important thing to realise is that we are talking about hundreds of millions (at least) of people of all nationalities who live throughout the world. These are real people, living in the real world.

As the *Communist Manifesto* says, 'The communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only: 1. In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. 2. In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole . . . The theoretical conclusions of the communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.'

And, of course, any political movement whatever must be judged first of all not by what it claims about itself, but by its actions, by what it does. That is why the Communists — that is, the official parties of the former Soviet Union and of present-day China (and the other parties that depend on them), who are what most people think of as the Communists — that is why the Communists are not communists. According to Marx and Engels, no less.

If you want to read something by Marx, you can't do better than to start with the *Communist Manifesto*. Follow it up with the Fred Engels' pamphlet, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Save *Capital* for later.

I might mention that Marx and Engels (as well as Lenin, Trotsky and many others) used the word 'communist' to refer to two distinct things: (1) the present-day political movement that corresponds to the interests of the working class; and (2) the society of the future in which all economic activity is socialised and private ownership (of economic units, not personal effects) is a thing of the distant past; in which such things as the police, army, courts, laws, money and government itself have disappeared, as there is no longer a need for them. Iain Banks's *Culture* more or less corresponds to this latter state of affairs.

This does not mean that Iain is a Marxist, although possibly he may consider himself to be one — I have no inside information there, of course. All it means is that, so far as I am concerned, he has a relatively realistic view of what the future may offer. So, yeah, at some point I will write an

article on Iain Banks for you to use. But I had better read some more of his work before then, so it won't be any-time soon.

The 'Who benefits?' question is a good starting point. And Marx himself would be first to point out that asking the question isn't enough; you have to answer it, and act on the answer.

I don't object to anyone being liberated — so long as no one gets hurt by the result — so a liberated Gillespie would be fine by me!

5 August 2007

[JGS: Thanks for the definitions, Jeff, I honestly appreciate the clarity you provided with them; your elaboration on your initial point is a fine example of what I meant by different definitions of Marxism, and what I hoped to elicit by making the comment. I have a really, really big pet peeve: it's 19 feet tall and weighs 80 tonnes, named Sweeping Generalisations, and I try to stay as far away from it as I can, which is why I'm always asking loccers here and in my own fanzine to define their terms and provide examples. I also try not to assume I know what someone else means when they use a malleable term, and asking for a definition is in no way intended as a verbal weapon, but as an information-gathering device.]

TERRY JEEVES

**56 Red Scar Drive, Newby,
Scarborough YO12 5RQ, England**

Many thanks for sending me a copy of *Steam Engine Time*. I'd like to loc it in full, but my health says no. I am receiving treatment for prostate cancer and Parkinson's disease, and can no longer handwrite or walk more than a few paces using a frame. Typing is very hard, so please drop me from your mailing list. Sorry old chum, but thanks for thinking of me.

6 August 2007

[JGS: I wish you all best, Mr. J., and hope the treatments work well and swiftly for you.]

[BRG: Also best wishes from me. And thanks for all these issues of *Erg* over the years.]

GREG PICKERSGILL

**3 Bethany Row, Narberth Raod,
Haverfordwest,
Pembrokeshire SA61 2XG, Wales**

SET 6 showed up here this morning, so thanks very much. Looks like the usual expected Gillespie polished product — i.e. a joy to behold. Mind you, I'm not

instantly drawn to the content — an article titled 'Jurisprudential Difficulties in Heinlein's "Star Beast"' actually makes me laugh and think of *Foundation* at its worst (which could be at any time in the last ten years really . . .). However, do not be downcast; that's just a first frivolous reaction, and I am sure I'll derive as much interest and pleasure from this as any previous issue.

Your accompanying note questions whether I'm still interested in your fanzines. What an idea. Of course I am. I rate you very highly indeed. I think you have been spending too much time on email lists populated mostly by boring Americans — the kind I am not a member of. (Oh hang on, the Wegenheim list seems populated mostly by boring Americans too . . . must do something about that.) Anyway, despite my absence from what Ted White probably thinks is the mainstream of fandom I have not in fact gafiated. Think of it as internal migration.

Alas I am in no position to subscribe to *SET* at the moment. We're having a number of problems around here that are soaking up all the loose cash. However, I will get back to you on that at some point in the future. Probably before the next issue . . . (Actually I didn't even know I *had* a subscription. Are you sure?)

Don't put me down as a Downloader; I can't stand reading any laid-out-for-print material online, and I don't have adequate printing facilities to produce a satisfactory copy locally. (When will the Dickian age of the true homeopape arrive? — we need a new generation of printers before that, I think.)

Anyway, it is a shame that we don't seem to interact in the same arenas anymore. Must do something about that. I'll have an idea in a minute.

7 August 2007

[BRG: In an email reply, I asked Greg in which arena we *would* interact these days? I depend on the fannish internet newlists for my lines of communication. I can't imagine Greg as a blogger; and I'm baffled by LiveJournal and can't even get into my BlogSpot blog.

I don't make distinctions between fans based on nationality. A fan is a fan is a fan . . . it's all of us against the rest of the world. Some of the e-lists seem Americanocentric, but I've heard that InTheBar is just as parochial in favour of the British point of view.

Greg, you did actually send a twenty-

quid note a few years ago, believe it or not. When I begin to publish everything only on-line, we must negotiate.]

STEVE JEFFERY

**44 White Way, Kidlington,
Oxon OX5 2XA, England**

You could persuade Chuck Connor to include your fanzines on his CD-ROM zine, *Phlizz*. Do you know about this one? — it touches on various comments about the notion of resurrecting Acnestis as an electronic apa. Chuck's done something similar with the inaugural issue of *Phlizz*, putting a bunch of stuff from his own archives, scans and downloads from efanzines onto a small format (three-inch) CD, which he posts to people on his mailing list. He even bundles some free open source software in case you don't have PDF readers/writers of your own. Interesting concept, though I've not fully worked how you respond to something like this rather to a single fanzine, or an apa. If you're interested, you can contact Chuck at chuck.connor@blubottle.com (mail to: chuck.connor@blubottle.com). That was the last address anyway; he's changed it at least once due to a spam-flooded inbox.

12 August 2007

[JGS: *Phlizz* is very much to my liking, and I've read both issues (which is all that Chuck's pubbed so far). The mini-disk is formatted so that, if one has a CD-RW burner on one's computer, one can add to the disk and send it back to Chuck. I plan to archive *Phlizz* via burning copies of it onto larger CDs to keep at home. Then, as Chuck suggested to his readers, I'll see if I can return to him something similarly designed in the way of a reply. A fancy loc, one might say. I also love the free software and the fanzine downloads, especially since I'm still on dialup and getting the larger fanzines online is time-consuming as a result. If Bruce doesn't mind, I could certainly ask Chuck about including *SET* on future *Phlizz* disks.]

SET 6 is also an object lesson in not to read fanzines backwards, which is a bad habit of mine. Doing this, I was struck by the rather snappy tone of a couple of editorial comments in the letters column, and wondered if someone had got out of bed the wrong side in the morning. For instance, the comeback on Steve Sneyd's comment on Libertarian power fantasies. Well, OK, but elsewhere in the same column there are several letters (Frohvet) and

even an editorial comment (from BRG, at the end of Joseph Nicolas's letter) that make the same point. In fact, Bruce uses almost the same phrasing — 'Raymond's "Libertarianism" is, to me, just a variation on the adolescent wish-fulfilment fantasy structure that has dominated SF from its genre beginning until now' — that Janine jumps on Sneyd to back up with supporting facts. Or just how significant are those single quotation marks Bruce places around the word Libertarianism? Frohvet points out an overlap between Libertarian thought and fanatic anti-government zealotry; Zoran (in the Critical Mass debate [err, I've realised how that sounds]) describes it as rampant individualism where everyone has guns and hates the government, and the Ayn Rand Institute apparently thinks it's a good idea to nuke people they don't like. This sounds more like rampant nihilism to me, or a tool-ed-up version of Aleister Crowley's 'Do What Thou Wilt Shall be the Whole of the Law' crossed with *Taxi Driver's* Travis Bickle. It's certainly not any 'core SF' that I recognise. I had always assumed that Heinlein was a libertarian, but it doesn't seem to fit. Heinlein certainly championed the idea of the competent man, but most, if not all of, Heinlein's competent men also had some notion of social responsibility, even leadership. (A philosophy of armed rampant individualism doesn't appear to lend itself very well to the notion of leadership, at least not for very long.)

And I'm sure there's an exchange in one of Heinlein's books where someone makes a dismissive remark about politics, to be slapped down with a sharp response along the lines: 'Don't ever denigrate politics. It's evolved as a the best method for people to get what they want without having to kill each other for it.' That doesn't sound like the sort of libertarianism that's being discussed. (On the other hand, my memory being what it is, this half-remembered quote may not be from Heinlein at all. It's decades since I've read any of his books, after throwing *Friday* across the room in irritation. Can anyone place it?)

Martin Morse Wooster comments: 'Stephen Baxter is a popular writer with a PhD in hard science who produces novels that are scientifically correct but very depressing.' This propensity for depression is presumably why one of Baxter's latest works is titled *Exultant*. Also, I'm not convinced that some of Baxter's wilder specula-

tions, in works like *Raft* or *Vacuum Diagrams*, could really be described as 'scientifically correct', although they do fall into the category of classic sfnal 'what if' thought experiments.

The other point on which Janine chides Sneyd for lack of 'supporting evidence' is Steve's comment that 'the loner "mad scientist" trope hardly accords with the way big science is actually done'. Now on this one (as a working scientist in a biggish corporate multinational), I want to turn the tables and ask Janine to identify those loner mad scientists responsible for the Apollo space program, CERN and similar 'big science' projects. While I don't doubt an increasing involvement of private enterprise and equity, I'm not aware of the world of science being dominated by people like Lex Luthor, Captain Nemo — or even Wallace and Grommit — building spaceships and cyclotrons in their back yards.

A very thought-provoking issue. It certainly sparked some interesting debate, even if the general consensus seems to be that Raymond is wide of the mark, or is building his argument from a Humpty Dumpty set of definitions that only work inside the context of his article.

13 August 2007

[BRG: I explained to Steve that, by necessity, Jan and I, working half a world away, must provide individual comments on letters (JS for Jan's, and BRG for mine), and that these comments need not add up to one combined editorial front. Jan provides her comments first. I put in mine second. By the time I'm adding my comments, usually the space available for letters is nearly full, so I delete some of my own comments, and even some good letters.]

[JGS: Please see my comment after Jeff Hamill's second letter in this column on *Sweeping Generalisations*. Steve Sneyd wrote, 'The Libertarian viewpoint supports readers who are seeking a power fantasy.' I didn't see why he would say that, and so asked for some supporting facts. The same was true for his comment about the 'mad scientist' trope being inconsistent with how 'big science' is conducted. I'm not a scientist, I've never had the opportunity to see scientists at work in a lab, so I have no firsthand information on it. However, I've read at least one book that described the work of a particular scientist who allegedly was too busy hogging the media spotlight and trying to be the first man in to understand

that collaboration was more important in what he was trying to do than getting his name in the papers and on TV. The book was *And the Band Played On* by Randy Shilts, and the subject was the onset of AIDS and the medical researchers who were instrumental in finding treatments for it. If you or others can recommend books that you feel are more accurate in their portrayal of how 'big science' really works, I'd be glad to have them. My point is that making comments without providing something for the reader to investigate amounts, in my view, to so much hot air. I felt that what I wrote in reply to Steve Sneyd's letter was enough on the subject, and I knew others commented on the Raymond article in letters after his; you admitted you read the loccol backwards. And Sneyd isn't the only one I took to task for making Sweeping Generalisations (see p. 37, column 3, of SET 6).]

Yes, I did realise you and Janine signed your loccol comments with your initials. And the fact that you both respond to the same letters suggests you didn't split the letters between you before compiling the column. Which makes some of the inconsistencies even odder, where a couple of people get jumped on for stating opinions that go without comment (sometimes when even more forcefully put) in other places.

Re *Phlizz*, you wrote: 'Chuck wasn't actually in Acnestis at any stage, so he would wonder who I was.' It's a poor sort of fan who compiles CDs from efanazines.com and won't recognise the name Gillespie, I'm thinking. *Phlizz* 2 turned up on its baby three-inch CD in today's post. Not yet had a chance to fire up the thing and have a look.

I'm going to have to have another go at Barnes's *Gaudeamus* (re Jan's review column in SET 6). I don't quite know why I gave up on it the first time. Perhaps it was more a case of the wrong book for the time. It happens sometimes. I have a host of Al Reynolds books on the shelves. I enjoyed (or was certainly intrigued by) the first few, but I need to be in a certain mood now for widescreen hard SF. I also need to get back to Paul Park's *The Tourmaline*, which is parked half finished on the bedside table. And *The Carpet Makers* sounds intriguing. I'll have to make a note of that.

14 August 2007

[JGS: I had the same problem with the Gormenghast trilogy in high school; I had to wait twenty years before I was able to appreciate it, and now it's one

of my favourite series.]

GREG BENFORD
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Astronomy, University of California,
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Good issue, especially Ditmar's artwork and Yvonne Rousseau's article. Alas, politics through SF is mostly a loser path. We all have political opinions, are packed with theory, but none of us is a pro — and the pros are mostly crowd-pleasers who have little or no theory, and don't care. Intellectuals in politics had a rotten record in the twentieth century, mostly from their love of abstraction — recall 'scientific Socialism'? The era of utopian schemes is long gone.

When Yvonne says 'Raymond mentioned approvingly the role of libertarian SF authors in Ronald Reagan's 1980s Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and named Robert Heinlein and Gregory Benford. Jeff pointed out that Jerry Pournelle also played a prominent role', I wonder if they actually know much about the point of SDI — to alter or even bring down the Soviets, by changing the balance of power in the Politburo? I worked on that in policy and on the ground in the dear old Soviet Union, and it's a complex tale that's mostly about getting things done, not lofty theory. The SF element was the sizzle, but real power politics and artful manoeuvre, including disinformation (from knowing how the Soviets worked, an area I spent a lot of time on) was the steak. SF ideas just opened the door and made the threat plausible. The Soviets were convinced that if the USA set out to do something, it could — because it had. My job was to make that plausible, since I had the credentials. The Soviets didn't give a damn about my being a part-time SF writer.

13 August 2007

[JGS: Thanks for providing that bit of 'insider' history; I was working in US Army intelligence during the 1980s and, since the work was compartmentalised, there were nooks and crannies I never got to explore during my time of service.]

JOHN BAXTER
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Paris, France 75006

Thanks too for *Steam Engine Time* 6. I will be sorry to see the print version disappear, though well understanding your reasons for going 100 per cent

electronic.

About the history of my relocation in Britain, now unfolding at a snail's pace in your letter column, it's hard to see that it would matter much to anyone after all this time — or even then — but I actually left Australia at the fag-end of 1969, though arriving in the UK in 1970, those being the days when the cheapest method of reaching Europe (except for the freighter-to-Yokohama, then-cross-country-to-Finland-via-TransSiberian-Railway Route) was the month-long boat ride on one of the pre-World War II liners refurbished by the Greek Patris Line, and described so well by Clive James in *Unreliable Memoirs*. He shared a cabin with six Rugby League players and the crankshaft and so little floor area that, if one person wanted to get out of his bunk all the others had to climb back into theirs. My girlfriend of the time and I were luckier, sharing a two-berth cabin that was actually above the waterline, but it was a long, slow trip — which, for most of us, made the arrival in Britain that much more exhilarating.

Pace Lee Harding, but it isn't true that my publisher of the time, Peter Cowie, 'promised me digs' in London. Peter, who is currently, I think, managing editor of *International Variety*, is and was a very austere individual, much under the spell of Scandinavia — he wrote a biography of Ingmar Bergman — and lived in some luxury on a park on the outskirts of London. We lunched there one chilly day shortly after we arrived. The park was blanketed in snow, and we ate boiled white fish and potatoes in a white sauce off white china and drank white wine . . . I don't believe that, even had he offered, we could have lived in such Bergmanesque surroundings for very long. Fortunately, my friend knew the Perth novelist Randolph Stow, who lent us his cottage in the East Anglian village of East Bergholt while he went off on a residency in Canada. We ended up spending three years in the village.

Lee is right that Phil Harbottle (using Ron Graham's money) did commission a novel from me for *Visions of Tomorrow*, and that the book, called *The Meadows of Capricorn*, was never published, since *VoT* expired almost as soon as I arrived in the UK. However, it's not entirely the case that the novel is 'lost'. The ms passed to Ted Carnell, then my agent as well as editor of *New Writings*. He failed to sell it, however, and it remained in his files until he

died. His business passed to one Leslie Flood, who subsequently closed it down — not before, however, selling off, with debatable legality, all Ted's papers, including *Meadows of Capricorn*. It was bought by the SF collector and dealer George Locke, who asked me to annotate it with an account of its spotty career. It reposes in George's collection, documented in one of his *Spectrum of Fantasy* volumes.

In taking me to task about the operations of the rare book business, Patrick McGuire shows a want of understanding of the free market. A book, like a cow, is only worth what you can sell it for. No book — or cow or house, or gram of gold — has an abstract 'value'. Booksellers have always bought for between 30 and 50 per cent of retail — quite generous, if you consider, say, the clothing trade, with its mark-ups in the 100s of per cent. Before the Internet, nobody thought this very surprising. However, the advent of net sites like ABE Books created a false 'stock market' of values. A dealer arriving at a prospective sale these days will often find every book interleaved with a printout of the ABE listing, showing the highest price at which that book is on offer. Sellers are taken aback when the dealer just leaves. 'But that's what it's worth,' they protest to the departing back.

When *A Pound of Paper* was published, the UK publishers suggested, as a publicity gimmick, that I track the first edition of one of their books through the market, and show how its value had soared. They suggested Louis de Berniers' *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* — first editions of which, it was true, were priced as high as 1800 pounds. However, a little research showed that those copies had been listed for years at that price, with no buyers. The cheapest collectible copies on offer were closer to 700 pounds, with nothing much below that — for the obvious reason that they had all been sold. So the true market value of a first edition of this book was more like 500 pounds — which means that a dealer, in order to make any profit, would probably offer 200 or 300 pounds. Still a pretty good return for the seller on a book that retailed for 14.99, wouldn't you say? And keep in mind that the writer only got 10 per cent of even that 14.99 . . .

So just where do these transaction begin to be 'unethical'?

14 August 2007

I don't mind McGuire's comments. It's

a not-uncommon reaction from people who don't have much to do with buying and selling. He should read a recent article in the *New Yorker* about the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, Texas, now the repository of a vast archive of original letters and manuscripts. It describes with glee how the current director haggled with an old friend of Graham Greene's to acquire a collection of correspondence at a bargain price.

16 August 2007

JOHN PURCELL

**3744 Marielene Circle,
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Yvonne Rousseau's contribution made me more interested in researching Libertarian politics. It is sad to admit that this American does not know much about the Libertarian Party, except that it seems to have rather conservative leanings. Maybe if I knew more about its philosophical underpinnings I could get the connections more about the various texts the members of Critical Mass referred to in this article. At least you editors (and Yvonne) accomplished something good here: you got me interested into doing some informational digging. That is A Good Thing.

Of all the Heinlein books that I've read — which is a fair number — I have never read *The Star Beast*. The legal angles that E. B. Frohvet discusses are thus lost on me, and, quite frankly, don't make me want to go read this book. As a matter of fact, I found Frohvet's writing style a bit awkward in spots, almost as if his thoughts and observations needed more transitions to smooth out the flow. Of course, without my knowing the story at all, that probably is one reason why I found this a bit hard to read. But then again, when Frohvet plunks down a little paragraph like 'There's a general precedent, quoted in Chapter 10, so basic it's taught to school children', it would be nice if he at least quoted that precedent for the members of the reading audience who may not know the reference. Sad to say, not all of us SF fans have read everything published in the science fiction field since 1900. This is a bad assumption for a writer to make about his or her reading audience, and that needs to be taken into account.

15 August 2007

E. B. FROHNET

**4716 Dorsey Hall Drive,
Apt 506, Ellicott City MD 21042, USA**

I regret that Syd Bounds was little known to me, for much the same reason he may have been little known in Australia: if any of his works were published here, I was not aware of them.

Of the books reviewed by Jan Stinson, I have read only two: *Quag Keep*, which fans of Andre Norton would mostly agree was not one of her better efforts (should anyone care to brush up on their Norton I can easily recommend a dozen better books); and *The Carpet Makers*, which struck me as not merely stupid, but cruel. Of course I may have misread it entirely, some subtlety having been misplaced in translation. John Barnes has forfeited my readership, for about the same cause; I doubt if he worries much about that.

In 'Critical Mass versus Eric Raymond', I found myself in agreement with Roman Orszanski, that Mr Raymond's article was 'powerfully wrong, but interesting in all sorts of ways'.

The presentation of my article was excellent. Thank you.

The highlight of the issue, for me, was David Lake's piece 'Grouches on Gethen'. For the most part I agreed with the premises put forth by Mr Lake; it was his conclusions that troubled me. Of course the text includes absurdities: this is the nature of science fiction. The criticism of Genly Ai as improbably 'saintly' bothers me. Does Mr Lake know something we don't about Genly's early life, to complain that he abandoned his parents? People do that sort of thing all the time, and for less reason: psychology calls it 'individuation'. And people commit their lives regularly to 'higher causes'; should Mr Lake care to visit me, I will gladly show him the Franciscan friary in my neighbourhood. Of his (Genly's, not Mr Lake's) sex life, again, we don't know whether it is Ekumen policy for the Envoys to remain celibate.

Of Karhide, I found no inconsistency between its quasi-anarchic state and the King's banishment of Estraven. The King has limited powers; when he chooses to enforce them, most Karhidiers go along because (1) the King's decrees are rare enough that there's a presumption of importance, and (2) most people don't really care, because their principal loyalty is to the

Hearth rather than to the nation.

Presumptuous of me, to be sure, but I fear Mr Lake is objecting not to the text that *The Left Hand of Darkness* is, but to the text he thinks it ought to have been. The curious comparison that comes to mind is James H. Schmitz's *The Witches of Karres*: no, it doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's not the point. Parsing some texts for sense will destroy their fragile charm.

Darrell Schweitzer: There are forgotten minor figures from the 'New Wave'. That is true of any era in SF. It does not diminish Ellison, or Zelazny or Delany.

Harry Buerkett: If your perception of SF is still 'gosh-wow! whiz-bang! sense of wonder', I am tempted to conclude that you have not read much SF.

Chris Garcia: If *Dune* doesn't work for you, then it doesn't work for you, and you should read something else. I generally have faith in my own taste; it's very rare a book utterly fails to interest me on first reading, yet 'clicks' on a later reading. (For whatever help it may be to anyone, Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* is one of the few exceptions.)

Heinlein's perception of legal proceedings appears to have been whatever he needed them to be for plot purposes at the moment. For an equally gruesome botch, see the hearing in Chapter 13 of *I Will Fear No Evil*, during which the presiding judge:

- openly refers to spectators and the media as 'cattle'
- serves intoxicants while court is in session (even if it's a preliminary hearing being conducted in chambers, it's explicit that court is in session)
- Tells a party with a clear privy interest in the case that she is present 'only by courtesy'
- And finds 'persuasive' evidence in the fact that a party nominally unknown to him knows his secret fraternity handshake.

10 August 2007

[JGS: I don't understand the impulse to abandon reading any other works by a writer due to encountering one book by a writer which is not to a reader's taste.]

MARTIN MORSE WOOSTER
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Many thanks for *Steam Engine Time 6*. I wondered what else I could say about Eric Raymond, but Bruce's comment at the end of Joseph Nicholas's letter

where he says that most modern literature (including modern SF) has less of the sense of 'the organic and historical nature of societies that one finds in (say) the major nineteenth-century European novels' prompted the following. I spent a great deal of my fiction-reading time from May until July reading *Bleak House*, and I found that I enjoyed it much more than contemporary SF. The reason, to me, is that Dickens was a master world-builder, able to combine tragedy and satire (his portraits of shady lawyers and flighty do-gooders are very accurate) and producing a world with much more density than anything SF can do. To my mind, this craving for solidly constructed imaginary worlds is one reason why fen prefer Patrick O'Brian to Michael Flynn. Maybe I'm just a crabby middle-aged guy, but SF today seems a lot thinner than in the past, as writers fail to describe the future with boldness and confidence and retreat into solipsism and self-referential pastiche.

[JGS: 'To my mind, this craving for solidly constructed imaginary worlds is one reason why fen prefer Patrick O'Brian to Michael Flynn.' May I recommend *Idolon* by Mark Budz (Bantam Spectra, 2006)? It's a recent example of a solidly constructed, imaginary world on the order of your description of *Bleak House*. Maybe I'm just a crabby middle-aged guy, but SF today seems a lot thinner than in the past, as writers fail to describe the future with boldness and confidence and retreat into solipsism and self-referential pastiche.' Can you provide some examples of what you've read in the last few years that gives you this impression? We're obviously not reading the same books, and SF is a large enough publishing category for that to easily happen. Unlike you, I find encouragement in the work of certain writers (bang the drum again, it's Elizabeth Bear and Peter Watts) that SF hasn't nodded off just yet.]

Joseph Nicholas's comments about space exploration remind me of a science-fictional moment I had last year when I visited the annex to the National Air and Space Museum. There, in one corner was a Concorde – and, in another, a space shuttle. There I was, having outlived supersonic flight, and seeing a shuttle that was irrevocably as much a product of 1970s technology as eight-track tapes. I had outlived both of these tech-

nologies! But then I saw the Gossamer Condor and other parts of private spaceflight and I cheered up. Government spaceflight seems to me to have entered its calcified phase; the press is only interested in astronauts if they're drunks or diaper-wearing angry women. While it's true that private efforts have only gotten as far as NASA has gotten in 1960, at least they're *trying*. Has NASA made *any* progress in 20 years?

Patrick McGuire's comments about *Wikipedia* remind me of the time I spent looking up their entries on science fiction fandom. It's true that *Wikipedia* has entries on some of the prominent fanzines of the day. But its coverage of older fen is spotty. Richard E. Geis, for example, only has a two-line entry. Meanwhile, obscure media fen have very lengthy entries, for reasons that are known only to the senior mandarins of *Wikipedia*. *Wikipedia* is a wonderful resource, although of course all references should be supplemented with a second source whenever possible, given the capacity to instantly rewrite anything. But it would be nice to have someone with leisure time and a desire to write on-line history do lengthy biographies of, say, Victoria Vayne, Don D'Amassa, Donn Brazier, and other important fanzine editors of the past.

13 August 2007

WE ALSO HEARD FROM . . .

CLAIRE BRIALEY AND MARK PLUMMER (Croydon, Surrey, England); DORA LEVAKIS (currently in Northern Territory); JAMES ALLEN (Gladstone Park, Victoria); BILL WRIGHT (St Kilda, Victoria); ROBERT ELORDIETA (Traralgon, Victoria); ROBERT DAY (Fillongley, Coventry, England); STEVE SNEYD (Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, England); COLIN STEELE (Hawker, ACT); MURRAY MacLACHLAN, Editor, *Ethel the Aardvark* (Melbourne Science Fiction Club, Victoria); ALISON SCOTT (London, England); MURRAY MOORE (Mississauga, Ontario, Canada); A. L. SEARLES (Bronxville, New York, USA); JULIAN FREIDIN (East St Kilda, Victoria); GEORGE ZEBROWSKI (Delmar, New York, USA); MOSHE FEDER (New York, USA); JAMES DOIG (Palmerston, ACT); DOUG BARBOUR (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada); DAVID JACOBSSON (Sweden); RALPH ASHBROOK (Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, USA); ALEX SKOVRON (Caulfield North, Victoria).

– 24 August 2007