Steam Engine Time

Featuring James Doig, Lyn McConchie, Gillian Polack, Barbara Roden, Frank Weissenborn, George Zebrowski and more!

Number Eight
May 2008

Table of Contents

Steam Engine Time No 8 was edited by Janine Stinson (tropicsf at earthlink dot net), PO Box 248, Eastlake, MI 49626-0248 USA and Bruce Gillespie (gandc at pacific dot net dot au), 5 Howard St., Greensborough VIC 3088, Australia, and published at www dot efanzines dot com . Members fwa. Print edition only available by negotiation with the editors; first edition and primary publication is electronic. A thrice-yearly publishing schedule (at minimum) is intended.

Next editorial deadline: August 10th, 2008.

Jan's editorial

"It's Just the Normal Noises In Here"

I could also have headlined this editorial "Welcome Back, My Friends, To the Show That Never Ends" — but the above quote floated into my brain first and, indeed, seems more suited to my topic, which is: it might look a lot different, at first, but it's not.

This is the first ish of SET for which I've done the layout design. Those of you not fainting dead away at the prospect will, perhaps, be pleased to see some of the stylistic habits I used in my fanzine *Peregrine Nations* make their way here.

The first, of course, being the loccol placement. The reaction to putting the locs first in PN was nearly unanimous in approval, and I believe placing it near the front in SET will be generally approved here for one reason: doing so picks up the 'conversation' where we left off in #7 (where the locs were at the end of the ish). This editorial is acting as a sort of preface to the design changes, which is why it appears before the locs in this edition; editorials in future editions may be placed elsewhere.

The second major change is the page design. Now that *SET* is primarily an electronic publication, page count is less of a consideration than is total file size. Thus, while the graphics will still be included on interior pages, we'll try to keep them as small as possible to facilitate shorter download times for those, like me, who still have to use dialup service for the Internet. It's a money thing, people.

I add my congrats to those of others for my co-editor's McNamara Award win; it'll go nicely in that display cabinet he has.

The featured article this time is George Zebrowski's rabble-rousing speech from the 2006 Campbell conference. You'll notice that great waves of change have spread over the publishing industry worldwide as a result of this speech. Not.

Bruce's editorial

Thanks

Holding the trophy: members of the Peter McNamara Award Committee, Swancon, Perth, Easter 2008 (l. to r.): Pat McNamara, Dianne De Bellis, and Justin Ackroyd. Missing: Mariann McNamara.

Thanks, Jan, for prompting the revival of *Steam Engine Time* (with No 4), and hence being an important part of the team of people who, over the years, have arranged that I should receive the nice awards. The latest, as you can see from the photo, is the Peter McNamara Award for lifetime achievement in Australian SF. It is named after a man who, with his wife Mariann, built much of the "Australian SF boom" of the eighties and nineties. Thanks to the committee for this year's award. Also much thanks to Elaine, who has put up with all this fanac for umpteen years, and all the people who have supported my magazines and writing since 1968. (A week after the photo above was taken, Justin presented me with the trophy at the April meeting of the Nova Mob.)

We Are Not Alone:
A Talk by George Zebrowski

[George Zebrowski is an award-winning novelist, story writer, essayist, editor, and lecturer, best known for his novels *Macrolife* and *Brute Orbits*, among many others. His new book is *Black Pockets and Other Dark Thoughts*, a *Publishers Weekly* starred title.

The following was delivered as the Keynote Address at the Campbell Conference, University of Kansas, July 6, 2006. Also available at http://www2.ku.edu/~sfcenter/Zebrowski.htm]

In the midst of a writing life which I still think of as "only so far," this talk is a kind of stocktaking, and also a belated alarm, since others have come this way before me; but this time these words and their supporting research are being sent to New York State's dedicated Attorney General and next Governor, Eliot Spitzer, who has said that he never hesitated to step into a buzz saw, and never asked whether an issue was large or small but only if it was right or wrong — and I take him at his word.

I want to thank James Gunn and this Center for the chance to present these comments in a serious forum.

Please keep in mind that I will be juggling what may seem at first to be two sets of differing problems — the writer's working conditions and the character of science fiction. They do intertwine.

I will abridge and simplify, because I have an hour gun to my head; but there will be some hope waiting as I hurry through what's wrong with contracts, royalty statements, with the dark castles of publishers' warehouses, and with the plight of writers, one part of which is the unsurprising victimization of SF.

The position of writers much more resembles that of "Bambi Meets Godzilla," than that of partners in an industry. Adapt or get squashed; usually get squashed, and contribute to the larger tally of a company's earnings even when your work is individually accounted a loss, or further enslaved when the publisher refuses to revert rights through the subterfuge of a token "in print" claim, to beef up the assets column, which includes losses.

"Publishers kill authors by creative bookkeeping," wrote Richard Curtis in his pioneering study of the 1990s. "By depriving authors of vital information about book sales, delaying disbursements interminably, obscuring the meaning of figures, manipulating collection dates of subsidiary income, and withholding excessive royalties as a cushion against returns, many publishers figuratively strangle writers and literally poison their good will."

Royalty statements are fictional because, as more than one accountant has noticed, the information provided tells you nothing beyond the fact that someone wrote it down and forces you to take his word for it.

I refer mostly to big publishing, which today is better at hiding its ways, not to the often brave small and midsized venture whose failings arise from having to share breath with T-Rex distributors who make and keep a dishonest environment encouraged by the big houses. The smaller houses are slowly taking publishing back to its roots, especially in science fiction, even as the big houses are seeking to sell off divisions and bury the records of a diseased past before it can be excavated.

The most surprising thing is how well known and uncontested the facts are and how little has been done to change them. Writers grow used to things and have to choose what to do first. Even if I could pay the legal costs, I cannot sacrifice the time needed to find out what happened to the "bragged about" last 300 copies of *Brute Orbits*, my 1999 Campbell Prize winner, or try to discover the why of the ever-receding earnout figures for my *Star Trek* novels, where the records probably no longer exist.

Publishing contracts are inherently one-sided, and illegal to one degree or another, because they fail to perform what is promised while saying that they will, by claiming in too many pages of non-English that they are not responsible for anything even when they are. Publishers get defensive toward protesting authors who point out this and other failings, even threatening them with "junk

publication" — a minimal edition, for show, which only claims to fulfill the contract, by putting them on an economic blacklist that amounts to censorship. These threats are well known even among authors who earn good money, so called in the allowed accounting, and is carried out in other contexts, as when a publisher wishes to downsize books from planned hardcovers to a smaller printing in mass paperback. This happened to a novel of mine, which subsequently made the *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year, which infuriated the editor, whose judgment and ulterior motives were suddenly exposed. The small printing, on the cheapest paper stock, was in fact the uncorrected proof, with some fifty errors, all corrected on time by me, left unfixed. The editors at Easton Press, a book club, made all the corrections for their signed, leatherbound hardcover first edition — of a mass paperback, which further irritated my editor, who had reverted the book club rights to me, thinking it a worthless concession that would shut me up. The downsizing was later admitted, with no sense of irony, to have been useless. The justice that comes to authors is much smaller than the original injustice.

The good faith clause was violated, since my novel was to have been a hardcover, but this provision is always violated in one way or another. It's not that more is done for one author's book over another, but that nothing or next to nothing is done for most, even as bookstores are paid to display certain titles prominently. Laws governing the conduct of contracts, rather than the contracts themselves, are routinely ignored. Take it or leave it. Don't bite the hand that feeds you crumbs--sometimes big ones, but not what is owed.

An editor can mislead a writer, even tell him in good faith how many copies were printed or how few remain in the warehouse, but this has no accountability because of the merely insisted upon whole-contract-and-nothing-but-the-contract wording of that illegal contract clause. An editor may promise you a contract, even tell your agent, then retract and say that his word is without contractual meaning, and claim to be the sole arbiter of that claim. The full law of contracts and the laws governing contracts disagrees, but they count on your being unable to fight the case, even with words on paper.

Slowly, contracts have been contrived to disable a writer's awareness of his protections, turning him into a leashed migrant--by denying the larger legally recognized relationship on which a contractee welfare depends, that of the implied contract built on the good faith clause. There is no such thing as a contract free of implied obligations, but they have striven to deny it, by omission and by blinding the author to available remedies with mere assertion, with the knowledge that he can't afford remedies; and if he can, then one case settled is merely the cost of doing business — a safe distance from class action cases, or even a larger number of suits; and a single winner can't possibly bring to court all the abuses that accountants, writers, editors, lawyers, and other whistle blowers have made known about the larger legal issues.

One point to keep in mind is the same as with the other big corporate scandals we've seen: they are not exceptions but endemic. This much has been admitted widely, to small effect, with the excuse that a full housecleaning would ruin us all.

More is done for the highly paid author than for a less well paid one; and sometimes even the opposite, which is just as un-contractual; but the fact to stress is not that more or less is done, but that for most nothing at all is done, because the fate of a book is decided long before its publication, sometimes even before it is written, by so-called cooler publicity and sales heads, well beyond the editor who accepted the book — who may even have picked the book for its merit.

A form of horse-race fixing gives all the push to the imagined winner, who cannot help but sell more--and that still may not be enough as the bar is raised higher by greed, so that fewer can leap it.

Since writers are not given print runs and accurate sales figures, they never know if the advance money was justified — earned out, or overearned. Unless print runs and sales are larger than we know (possibly as much as 2-6 times the admitted numbers), it's hard to see how the industry survives. One answer has been that even though most books are accounted as losses, it is the aggregate sales for a company that make groups of books or

particular categories profitable; another claim is that a house may lose money on a book that has earned the author's advance, and even make a profit on a book whose author has not earned his advance. Strange also is the fact that when half the author's advance is earned out the publisher is making a profit, but the author must wait for the earnout that may never come, and that seems to recede with each fictional royalty statement. Not to mention the subsidy given to the publisher who holds authors' monies for an annual or bi-annual statement.

I have already noted that it is no accident that royalty statements leave out key information — print runs and accurate sales — no accident that model royalty forms, long agreed to by publishers, are not used. I helped bring about such an agreement decades ago, and continue to run into stone walls when I ask why the model form is not used, why writers' organizations don't demand that the agreement be kept. They are not used because key information may reveal too much, give authors too much with which to hold publishers accountable, and reveal how the horseraces are fixed. If you lie once, you have to remember the lie. Therefore, royalty statements reveal only so-called sales, at the time of the statement. To change now might draw the interest of IRS and state authorities.

Unjustifiable practices involve reserves against returns. Publishers do get returns of unsold books from stores, and the idea is to guard against large returns and limit how much might be paid out to authors mistakenly. The problem arises when the reserves number is not removed from the statement, sometimes long past any reasonable time. The author cannot check these numbers, or have them removed; often he gets no answer to his queries. If he is owed money, he has loaned it to the publisher at no interest, and may never learn how much.

A PIN-accessible account for each author, with transfer of monies capability, would make a system of structural theft more difficult, and easier to prove. With no key information declared, a publisher can decide what figures he "needs." Telling how many copies were printed and sold would limit future lies, especially about how much a publisher pockets after the book is supposedly "out of print" but money keeps coming.

Year after year, I have found, older records cannot be retrieved, but they seem to surface on the author's rapsheet — a history of past sales, like a police record — used to limit future prospects, or even to shut the writer out of all new contracts. The sharing of these records among publishers sets aside considerations of merit; or if merit is obvious to a good editor, to keep down how much a publisher will pay for a new work. As one editor said to me, if they want your new book your rapsheet doesn't count.

Contracts are a labyrinth of evasions, contemptuous of authors' rights because openness would cost more. There is no obligation to even publish a book that has been paid for; failure to publish cannot be compensated for by the monies paid, because it tarnishes a writer's reputation, and if the balance was to be paid on publication, then even final acceptance means nothing. A writer and a publisher are not playing the same game; a writer and his editor may not be playing the same game, since an editor's job depends on guessing financial winners — always a slippery slope when winner is not the same as good.

"The merits of your book," one editor told me, "have nothing to do with whether we publish it. A million copies sold of blank pages would do just as well." I wanted to say that I had lots of blank pages at home.

I have attached two studies to this talk about contracts and royalties, much of which is unknown even to some editors, many of whom love their work but don't want to know what goes on in the kitchen, or find it difficult to find out. A major New York agent, Richard Curtis, President of Richard Curtis Associates, made these studies some ten years ago; they were published and reprinted, yet no publisher dared go to court to deny them. The reaction seems to have been: well, now you know that royalty statements are fiction and we know that you know, and since no author can do much about it, business as usual.

I turn now to the darkest castles of dread — the publishers' warehouses — where trusted managers bury and unearth books and records in advance of the accountants. The warehouses are instructed as to how many of each book shall live or die, how many

will be put on damaged and destroyed lists, how many remaindered and sold off, and how these numbers will be reported — and only a few know these peoples' names. One accountant once told me of errors programmed into the system, how much error was to be gotten away with, how much encouraged, how much might have to be "revised" if the numbers were not the "needed" ones, and how documents were to be lost and what would always be denied. If you imagined it all and made it all up, you could never equal the reality.

Just think how far we are already in these descriptions from any thoughts of literary accomplishment and skill. The cultural drug that business minds sell, they buy cheaply, because authors can't help writing and many would and do publish for nothing. Most who are "paid" do it for next to nothing.

These corrosive ways have long selected the editors we often have. Writers too are selected by this environment, but first the editors, because they help select the wordsmiths on whose blank pages they will encourage and discourage. Overworked, sympathetic to writers, often would-be-writers themselves, editors are drawn into behavior which some of them later despise. Endless delays due to overwork puts ever more of the editing burden on the writers, who in effect are asked to subsidize part of the cost of publishing; add to this the practice of "aging" payments to writers — first delaying, then letting the checks sit with their interest rate in the out-baskets until the last possible moment — puts editors in impossible positions, of going to superiors to ask about money for authors; many editors simply wait with the writers. Many who have quit say that they got sick of telling lies.

The web of behavior by which authors subsidize publishing is mostly concealed. As a young writer in the 1970s I would go and sit in one publisher's reception area until they paid what had been due months before. I was usually given a check by five o'clock, and whispered to by the receptionist that I got away with it because I was only one. Most would never show up, so the publisher let it go. I never questioned the accuracy of the check's amount.

Editors adapt or leave, regardless of larger concerns of culture and merit. Each choice is fraught with corporate dangers. You're an author's editor or a company person, suspect by both sides. Sometimes an editor can walk the line and get good work out through the cracks in the regime, when your books make enough money by the permitted accounting, and the extreme dilemmas rarely come up; but even then they can get rid of you for a younger, less expensive editor and point to the authors you herded who did not make money. Many editors side naturally with their authors in heart and mind, but the editor who gets too close to the work-place concerns of writers arouses suspicion. The central question that is unavoidable, for both writers and editors, is what are we part of? And the answer is — not what we imagined.

Look closely and the concealed problems proliferate. The degree of ignorance to be found in so-called acquiring editors, non-line editors, and packaging editors, whose failures are considered irrelevant unless they affect profits, and are never litigated, even though, along with editorial incompetence, they can amount to malpractice and even fraud, in a culture of greed that eats away at the foundations of its civilization, and produces fiascos like that of the young Harvard novelist/plagiarist, whose handlers tried to buy her a career. She may have thought that this was how it is done — and not been far wrong. She may well write a tell-all book about it someday.

People are sometimes baffled when I say that the act of writing is more important than publication. A reader asked me whether my *Star Trek* novels were my breakthrough works, and seemed puzzled when I told him that they were not well thought of by people I respected, much as I enjoyed crafting these books.

The true business model is the story of the goose that lays the golden eggs. Don't sustain the creature, kill it and get all the gold at once. For writers this means overproduction, underedited, under-revised novels and stories of mediocre prose (few notice prose — just get the drama and story, we've already bred readers who won't care). Few writers lead; they are taught to follow an ever-debasing taste, measured by untrustworthy sales. Good works are produced in any way possible, at great cost sometimes, to few rewards beyond occasion al praise.

Commerce requires that there be too much of everything —

yet another form of the goose-golden egg story. Don't kill the critter, get her to overproduce until she drops. It is gold, so how bad can it get?

Joseph Conrad, a poor man for much of his writing life, collapsed one day and lay under his table for some time, but finally got up and finished his novel; taking him to a hospital would have lost him that novel. His view seems to have been, let other things bring me down; I will not do it myself. I think that novel was called *Victory*. I would give much, if by some magic I could trade places with him under that table.

Choose — to write for a living, or not. Deal with smaller houses. Finish the work at whatever cost. Don't prejudge your work, especially if you are ambitious. A pragmatic philosophy works absent the extremes; pragmatism is unprincipled but principles may destroy you. Will principled choices always bring benefit? They may not.

This, and more, is the background against which most publishing exists, in which the corporates above the heads of editors think money first and let merit be only when it doesn't diminish money. It doesn't always and shouldn't. "You don't know how dumb they are out there," an editor once told me, and I asked, "who made them that way?"

Science fiction exists primarily as entertainment and children's fiction, in the pictorial pillagings of TV and movies — where serious elements have to be slipped in (perhaps to be discovered and censored later — i.e. the money-free socialist future of *Star Trek*, or the Wellsian reference to evolution as the savior of humankind permitted by Spielberg in his *War of the Worlds*). Economics raises the censorious fear of socialism and class warfare in America. I have often thought that SF is maligned not only because it often does not present the human mill in all of its repetitive glory, as good literature should in its acceptance of our changeless nature, but because it speaks of past and present critically. "Oh, my God, all we've done may become irrelevant and be swept away!" cry the voices that cling to the magnificent and true bogs of family feuding in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The fleeing past defends itself.

#

I want to say now why SF matters and why it should survive, but keeping in mind how the complaints collected here about publishing threaten that survival. No one denies that wealth is a necessary helpmate to all culture, but not a sufficient condition. Bricks are a necessary condition of a house, but the architect is the sufficient need.

Let's enter the labyrinth:

Does it ask the question too tightly — whether SF's soul belongs to money or to itself? One writer told me that he's in it for the money, not the art, so criticism from that quarter can't ever touch me; another very considerable writer said that he wrote it all for the money; and still another for the money so he could continue to write.

Now it would be strange to say that money and art are of equal stature; but this is not a simple contrast. A whore does it for money but may love a client. A commercial writer sometimes can't help but be good, and the dedicated artist may fail to create good work. Motive may contradict outcome. Only the realized work counts.

Still, motive may affect the outcome. Moneyed success remains a means, not an end. It buys power, which mostly preserves itself first, as with any organism. Means without more meaningful ends belong to a pragmatic philosophy, which by its nature is unprincipled. Some have tried to make pragmatism into a principle of flexibility, but that makes lying at some point inevitable; even the pragmatist must at some point balk and say what he will not do. Pragmatism can be defended with endless qualifications, but sooner or later reveals a hidden, unpragmatic principle, a value which does not contain a monetary profit but only a selfless, perhaps even lethal gain. Talk to a die-hard pragmatist and uncover a principle by getting him to admit what he will not do.

Some people make a lot of money, then set practicality aside. Others lose everything interesting about themselves in the time they set aside to be practical — a ballerina who starts too late

or the pianist who can't afford to practice. Pragmatism works best in mild circumstances; extreme ones reveal its weakness.

Be bad first — good later, when you can afford it.

I sometimes dream of a locked cell, where I can't escape my writing self, which I do escape much too often and take longer each time to return (especially if I fly through O'Hare). Some people think this sad. But Albert Camus imagined Sisyphus happy with his hill and rock. Science fiction lives for its merits in a sea of money looking to make more money. But what is to be done in science fiction?

I remember the thrill of having this question answered as a beginning writer, when I heard James Blish's call to ambition in a speech that was later published as "A Question of Content" in *The Issue At Hand* by William Atheling, Jr., Chicago, 1964. Ask of any work of SF, "Is it about anything? Nothing could be better for the health of our field than to let every science fiction writer know, beginning right now, that from now on there will be no escape from this question."

Works should reach beyond being about themselves only, to the provocative and threatening concerns that bedevil our human life; yet so many writers do escape the question Blish posed — and the result is a trivialization of SF's inherently critical nature, which says, even in its simplest works, that the future may be different, better or worse, and, most frighteningly, that futurity will judge the past. It is this intrinsic criticality of SF, born of what H. G. Wells called "The Discovery of the Future," that makes it such a diminished literature. Full tilt, it is revolutionary, doubting even of our traditional humanity. Commerce would rather have adventure fiction, with a little bit of sex, and a lot of violence — because the hierarchies need armies.

Pulp magazine SF could not avoid the critical nature of SF. Hugo Gernsback knew that knowledge and foresight were part of SF, which is why Isaac Asimov's candy store owner father let his son read the lurid magazines from his newsstand. But John W. Campbell championed the critical stance, which survives even when you knock the work down to action-adventure stories. A sense of change, that everything might be different, spooks readers, especially younger ones, who can't help but imagine.

The best answers to "What is there to do in SF?" have all tended toward the answer given by Blish. The question whispers in the commercial writer's darkened soul, as he stubs his toe now and then on the genuine thought that SF without thought is not worthy of the name.

Consider the meteoric passage of the beloved Stanley G. Weinbaum, whose stories appeared for only about two years from 1934 until his premature death in 1936. What is interesting today is not only the influence his graceful, often thoughtful work had on later writers, but — and this is less well known — how quickly his views of what he was doing pushed against commercial constraints, with the result that his more thoughtful works are not the popular ones.

Weinbaum wrote:

> "...most of our writers fail to take advantage of science fiction's one grand opportunity--its critical possibilities...it can criticize social, moral, technical, political, or intellectual conditions — or any others. It's a weapon for intelligent writers, of which there are several, but they won't practice its use.
>
> "For science fiction can do what science cannot. It can criticize because science fiction is not science. It is, or at least ought to be, a branch of the art of literature, and can therefore quite properly argue, reject, present a thesis, proselytize, criticize, or perform any other ethical function.
>
> "...it won't make a bit of difference to those readers (if any) who've plowed through to this point. The younger writers will stand by their guns--or purple rays--and the younger readers will take as much delight as ever in super-scientists, Earth-Mars wars, antmen, tractor rays, and brave heroes who save country, earth, solar system, or universe from the terrible invaders from Outside.
>
> "More power to 'em. I'd like to experience those same thrills again myself."
>
> But he no longer could.

The irony in these last lines are those of an author who knows that in time he won't fit into the food chain of formulaic, commercial writing, because he knows that would betray what is possible. It's there, but few go for it. He has discovered the classic

struggle of the serious writer with the demand to cater taught to him by profiteers.

It is unclear whether "An Autobiographical Sketch of Stanley G. Weinbaum" ever appeared in print during the author's lifetime. I came across it in the omnibus collection, *A Martian Odyssey and Other Science Fiction Tales: The Collected Short Stories of Stanley G. Weinbaum* (Hyperion Press, Westport, CT, 1974). It is a poignant testament of discovery by a writer whose tragically short life, and even shorter writing life, remains relevant but undiscussed today.

SF seeks to present dramatic stories that are linked, creatively, to reality, through our fallible human entanglement with a burgeoning knowledge. What this entanglement has brought us is an historical marriage between our biological evolutionary character and new means to express that character, good or greedy. The importance of a genuinely critical SF, as Weinbaum and others have glimpsed it, is that of a literature that explores this entanglement, as SF's major writers imagine ways out of the human maze that is so well exampled in our great literatures, which repeatedly bring us only to the point where we all came in. SF has only incomplete knowledge to work with, as it raises itself out of the hopes and fears that it provokes. It can be said that storytelling has given birth to a planetary literature, when SF lives up to the task.

One so often hears that there is nothing new to write about, when what is meant by this lazy way is that there is nothing easily worked outside of genre props. But the edge of the unknown is always a visible opportunity to be original, but the whip of commerce teaches us to avoid thought in favor of familiar easy reads that are quickly written and quicken money collection.

A view of SF's goals was stated with exactitude by the late Stanislaw Lem, as he stood up for John W. Campbell's vision of SF as a literature of new horizons and human involvement:

"...it isn't possible to construct a reflection of the conditions of the future with clichés. It isn't the archetypes of Jung, nor the structures of the myth, nor irrational nightmares which cause the central problems of the future and determine them. And should the future be full of dangers, those dangers cannot be reduced to the known patterns of the past. They have a unique quality, as a variety of factors of a new type. This is the most important thing for a writer of science fiction. But sf has meanwhile built itself into a jail and imprisoned itself within those walls, because its writers have not seemed to understand that the salvation of the creative imagination cannot be found in mythical, existential, or surrealistic writings — as a new statement about the conditions of existence. By cutting itself off from the stream of scientific facts and hypo-theses, science fiction itself has helped to erect the walls of the literary ghetto where it now lives out its piteous life." (From *SF: The Other Side of Realism*, edited by Thomas D. Clareson, Bowling Green, 1971).

Many a writer has come and gone since Lem wrote this in 1969, and he and others have noted the exceptions that seem immune to the finely made prison bars of commercial entertainment. We've had the non-fiction science writing renaissance of the last three decades, in books and countless articles of considerable literary elegance, in which waves of talented writers have redrawn the public's conceptions of who we are and where we are, based on the many edges of science, in ways once pioneered by SF. There is more science fiction, one scientist has complained, in today's science, perhaps too much. And less science in the books called SF.

Quite by accident, I opened a 1971 book entitled *For Freedom of the Imagination* by Andre Sinayasky, the once imprisoned Soviet writer, and read the essay, "No Discount (On Science Fiction)" with keen interest, since it addressed the issues of censorship, and I was reminded of the demand to be entertaining above all other values. The essay, now thirty years old, has not dated, and stands up for an independent science fiction:

"The development and character of our modern reality, the demands of the modern reader convince us that science fiction does belong among the phenomena of our time which are most viable and full of hopeful prospects. In order to enable this genre to take its rightful place one has to enhance its rights — and obligations. It means that one should boldly bring it to the level of the most genuine, the most worthy and greatest literature, and accordingly

require that science fiction give no discount to artistic backwardness."

Pretentious? You bet. Keep in mind that it has been done, here and there, in the now nearly two-hundred year history of the field's multilingual existence. The tyranny of money and mediocrity still fails. One cannot guarantee accomplishment, but the walls of tyranny have enough cracks to catch the grappling hooks of invading innovators — in contrast to those who are let in through the front gate by paid collaborators.

Ursula K. Le Guin once remarked, to those of us who complain about market censorship and profit and loss blacklists, that we still have the choice to do otherwise, that we can still say no and write what moves us. Some of us do so, and are even happily mistaken for commercially desirable products; others pay the price but still create their works. It's a hard prescription to follow — and more than one new Philip K. Dick walks amongst us. One left the field of battle a long time ago; another has just died; and yet another gets by and continues to create.

One might rephrase the question, "What is to be done in science fiction?" with "What does an SF writer do?" In his introduction to Cyrano de Bergerac's *Other Worlds* (Oxford, 1965), Geoffrey Strachan writes that Cyrano's originality "was not that of the scientist or philosopher. It was that of a poet who listened to their talk and used it for his own ends, that of the science fiction writer." An SF writer will not violate what is known unless that is the point of the story, or for dramatic ends, as in Wells's *The Invisible Man*, where invisibility only serves an ironic visibility.

It has been a fashion among critics to remain agnostic about ever finding a good definition of SF, but this reluctance is laziness at worst and romantic grail seeking at best, and has contributed to a wretched understanding of genuine SF — as a fiction, in Clarke's words, "about what might reasonably happen." Few writers worry, for example, that a novel overstuffed with novelties can easily hop the tracks and become a fantasy novel by default, when restraint might have made a more artful, and a more significant use of a novel's ideas. Here again, the market puts a premium on extravagances that really don't fit together — even as the finished work lacks nothing in skill.

Asimov's definition, properly put, does it all:

SF is fiction about the human effects of future changes in science and technology. The human effects, including other forms of intelligent life, fictionally presented, make it literature, when it also delivers writerly virtues; the future changes in science and technology, without which the human effects would not happen, makes it uniquely SF. Now watch this: remove future and science and technology from the definition, substitute "changes"—whether past, present, or future, and the work can still be SF, if cast in a critical visionary way. We can see such "bits" of SF in many works of fiction — in Thomas Hardy, Herman Melville, Richard Llewellyn, James Hilton, and others. It's a rising awareness breaking through into our storytelling from an evolving, self-correcting scientific culture that brings us dangers as well as hope, and seeks expression in a literature that belongs to that new, still struggling culture that is not an enemy of the past, but of the past's errors and confusions.

When he was an old man of seventy-nine, in 1945, H. G. Wells sat in his high-backed chair in his London house, where he had spent the war, refusing to leave for safer places, and drifted in and out of wakefulness. Years earlier he had complained about how reality had "taken a leaf from my book and set itself to supersede me," in the wars he had predicted, in his glimpse of nuclear fission in 1914's *The World Set Free* — where he coined the term "atomic bomb" and foresaw an arms race. Today he might sit up and shout, "Look what you have done with SF! How shameful that you have taken a critical way, blazed by Swift and myself, and have made it into so many pointless adventures and games. I liked games, mind you, for the very young, but never to the near-exclusion of far-seeing."

The issues raised by SF's very existence have been collecting for well over a century; these confrontations, which began with the questioning of a "literary sport" to be tolerated on special occasions, now cut across cultural, historical, philosophical, and commercial realms, where they raise reactions of shame, disdain and denial, are poorly understood, and are rarely collected in one basket, as I have tried to here.

The value of genuine SF, as eloquence and influential insight into unique, possibly inevitable changes, to the very question of change, is inestimable, and poorly encouraged.

The dollars don't care. They make of SF what we have today, and to one degree or another have always done so, by putting a premium on what can be written quickly and in quantity.

So it is up to the writers to resist by sticking to merit. That's hard to do when you want to make a living — but if it means enough to you, you'll do it, eyes open to the fact that the condition of the writer has both an external constraint and an inner one, one to blame and one to tame.

The importance of SF as a literary strategy is one that maps out possible repairs to our human history, even our given human nature, indicating hopes to seize and dangers to avoid, in the explanatory form of a story, which is the paradigm of all human explanation; even a physics paper is a story, though they try to conceal it.

And what does unbridled business do with this unique impulse, but saddle it with a feudal economic past and rides it to the bank on a wagon pulled by writers and editors who, with all the love of what they nurture, do double duty by wearing blinders and pulling an oversold, overloaded wagon.

#

Many author–editor–publisher quarrels seem to have no remedy because the author does not have a corporation behind him, and also involve confusions about editorship's social status — important to those underpaid editors who wanted to be writers. An editor once told me about a picture he saw of some well-known writers, and how he longed to have been one of those writers at that table. Moved, I wanted to put him in the picture with PhotoShop, thinking it might encourage him, but I didn't because I knew he did not really want to pay the price of being a writer.

It is no accident that nearly all the editors who created SF as a publishing category were writers, who were gradually eased out of corporate positions. Fredric Brown once warned of the demise of genuine editors, when writers would fall into the hands of fan readers, who could be better controlled by their bosses.

"I'm not a line editor," we hear these days. An acquisitions editor does not edit text, which means he is not an editor, but a person trained by his corporation to pass judgments on all that does not belong to a work's intrinsic merits. This is a fan, or the reader that movie producers once asked to read a book and tell them about it.

#

Part-time writers don't face such issues often, since they don't feel the pinch. They concentrate on their work as best they can. Full-time writers have to be more productive, and are often more desperate. The abuses that each accepts to get work done help to subsidize publishing. They are poorly rewarded, powerless participants in a business, most of them and even the finest, consoled by the fact that their work is published, and even well recognized by awards and good reviews.

This is how SF is sidetracked, nearly derailed, into skilled adventure fiction. Real work takes too long. Good SF is the strange workhouse of shared, hand-me-down ideas encouraged by money, the good wishes of some editors and the dedication of serious authors, but existing only for the money in the eyes of the publisher. Merit that makes not money is not wanted, even though they make mistakes about that and let some merit through. Thank a good editor somewhere.

Paul Gauguin, when he expressed his disdain of Parisian painters, and was asked what he did like, picked up a lone Van Gogh and cried out, "See! Owes to no one. Has something to say and says it!" And never a penny earned.

#

A truthful presentation would be a phone book sized directory of publishers' abuses — of talent, of small bookstores, and even each other. Successes that reveal the incompetence of editorial judgment calls do not count (which of the dozen or so

house editors who rejected Harry Potter puts that on their résumé?).

I have been warned over the years of being the slave who hangs himself in the master's doorway, because the master will merely shrug on his way to the market, wondering what he'll have to pay for a new servant. Maybe he can find a real deal.

But today you can say what you please and it won't matter, as long as you can't do much about it. We make publishing possible, cry the publishers, even as they diminish what they are given. Half-truths we know, but quarter truths, or ten percent truths, are a deeper innovation.

#

Good does break out in bits and pieces everywhere. I reduced "good" to "some good" as I learned more; "less" came next; and "next to nothing" waits up ahead. Midlist books are taken from their authors as the newborn of slaves were taken and sold off. Is your life that bad? I have been asked. Well, no — but does that diminish principle? Do right and wrong have to cower in the shadows, afraid to confront one another?

Most writers, when a tally is made of their lives and what it cost to do good work, end up having either given it away, or made less than minimum wage — even the very best. (Who knew he was going to be Philip K. Dick?) "Consider it a contribution," I once heard said, accepting that we do live in a rob Peter to pay Paul physical universe, in which counting all the costs of doing anything would not even break even, due to inefficiency. Profit is an accounting artifact which works by what it leaves out; the reality is that wealth flows from the very many to the very few and fewer. How did that happen? Some claim it is deserved. Someone has to run things, but they could at least not take so much and leave a humane bottom, still well short of justice but good enough.

The just answer is that all who are born into our world deserve a fair share, as affirmed by the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed by all, and whose language was drafted by SF's own Shakespeare, H. G. Wells. But market economies say you're deserving if you work, with the irony being that those who work hardest live poorest, and if you don't or can't work, you perish.

At this lofty point, let me say that the position of writers is not the most important problem in our world, yet writers clearly give a lot and get among the least.

Remedies for writers wait on legislation, and later on safeguarding all efforts to subvert gains. Class actions are the new union movements (without unions much of social justice would not have been won — a fact denied only by amnesiacs even as they reduce the gains). Writers need a contractual recognition of the fact that the inequalities of wealth and the power between a writer and a publisher must give way to equal, verifiable protections.

Many writers, even the finest, have simply tightened their seat belts and done the work they loved, leaving practical matters to agents, who, like the police, can fix symptoms but not underlying disease. My friend Isaac Asimov, who rarely had an agent, told me, in the last decade of his life, that he just signed all the contracts. They could steal what they wanted as long as he had enough and was left alone to work. Later he realized his bad example, and that publishers used his name to justify "what Asimov signed." Then he spoke out on just about every point I have raised in this talk, to no great effect. In fact, most writers speak up at one time or another. I have done so. I got along too long.

It is laughable that we have to argue for the abolition of intimidating publishing contracts and concealing royalty reports.

Here is the core of a contract, routinely ignored:

Contracts are the minimum conditions between parties, the laws that govern contracts state, but publishers have made their contracts the maximum conditions beyond which nothing else is required of them, while everything is asked of talent. And they enforce this with mere insistence, unchallenged, from an economic high ground.

"It's our money!" cry the corporations.

"And our lives," say the authors.

But it's not even their money, because no one earns it all alone. No one accomplishes anything alone. It's the publishers who

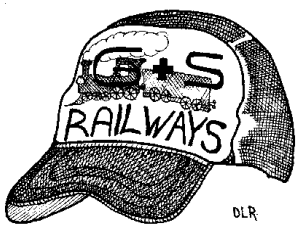
are at odds with talent, because money and power can ignore the truth when it goes against them.

Two ways lie ahead: Publishing as a playpen, where talent tries to contribute as artfully as it can in the time it has; or an industry in which the best editors have gone freelance, to smaller houses, and thrown in their lot where it has always belonged, with the writers. Both exist, with shame in one and hope in the other.

References:

"P & L." From *Mastering the Business of Writing* by Richard Curtis. Note: this was written when book prices were lower. http://www2.ku.edu/~sfcenter/PL.htm

"Royalty Statements." From *How to be Your Own Literary Agent* by Richard Curtis. http://www2.ku.edu/~sfcenter/Royalty-Statements.htm



Letters of Comment

LLOYD PENNEY, 1706-24 Eva Rd., Etobicoke, ON CANADA M9C 2B2

Time to attack another large zine, one that always provides the challenge to write something interesting, entertaining and coherent. Sometimes, I get one out of three, not bad!

On *Steam Engine Time* 6:

Here's the advantage to .pdfing zines ... marvelous full color covers that cost nothing extra to supply.

Sydney Bounds was a name I saw in many Australian fanzines, including *Busswarble*. So many familiar names continue to pass away, but fans who participate in fanzines and fandom in general, deserve the recognition of their peers, and while some like Bob Tucker and Lee Hoffman readily get the recognition, Syd Bounds was not the extrovert the others were. Still, Syd deserves our thanks and attention to his fannish career.

I haven't read a C.J. Cherryh novel in a very long time. I wasn't even sure she was still writing, which may be more of an indication of how far out of the SF loop I am. I think I'd very much enjoy the collected short fiction book; just as I enjoyed her company the few time we'd met at conventions.

Ditmar's essay on the elements of reality, and how they might change reflects one thing I liked about SF from the 50s to 70s. Today, we demand complete reality and factuality in our science, which, IMHO, makes it a little difficult to write science fiction. Yet, I don't mind if what might be considered the laws of physics might be a little different or tweaked a little to make things a little surreal in the story. Good enough plot twist for me. But, if we keep exploring the nature of reality, the elements we discover may sound SFnal all by themselves.

Yvonne Rousseau describes a panel discussion version of a fanzine loc. Maybe that's the best way to do it. At least you'll know that everyone has read the zine, and a discussion group will wring more comments out of the group than they might give you individually. True, the average *Star Wars* viewer does not extrapolate from what they see, but there have been many novels and other writings that add bits of colour here and there on Lucas' large canvas, and the active viewers, namely the fans, have done some extrapolation in the form of fan fiction and other writings. I have never been a fan of military science fiction, but still enjoy deep space SF with exploratory missions on large starships. Perhaps it's the level of military or para-military in my SF, or perhaps the level of American imperialism in the story, whether the starship drops scientists or American GIs in fatigues. There's a fine line there for me.

The implausible science in Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* may bother David Lake, but I'm fine. I don't mind slightly different scientific constants or a tweak in the laws of physics to add a different twist to the story at hand. I'll happily take a little fictional science in my science fiction. In *LHD*, the ansible is more of a plot device to make the action go a little faster, and to make

the fiction take precedence over the science, like warp drive or transporters, perhaps. They enable the action without having to think of how they work, or why they shouldn't. I definitely prefer SF to fantasy, but I do also prefer a wide imagination.

After hearing the threat, "I'll hit you so hard, when you wake up, your clothes will be back in style," that person should be dressed in Darrell Schweitzer's t-shirt before they wake.

Good to see Chris Garcia here; I read all of Frank Herbert's Dune books, but never thought to read his son's books; I think Brian put out more Dune books than his father did. But, I am pleased with Frank's works, and for me, the Dune story is complete.

Jeff Hamill does remind me to reveal one website I visit most days, and that is Cartoon Brew (www.cartoonbrew. com), created by Jerry Beck and Amid Amidi. Lots of news about animation projects, and tributes to animations past. Not only do I like cartoons, and am looking to create a career in voicework, but I know the folks at fps Magazine in Montreal, which caters directly to the animation industry. Later today, I start four days of trial employment with Publicis/Optic Nerve, the Canadian branch of a large French-based advertising agency. If they like what I can do, and I like doing it there, I may have full employment for the first time in four years, and I can resume my regularly scheduled life.

August 23, 2007

[*brg* Your loc on *SET* 6, welcome as it was, arrived a day or two after I tied off the letter column and sent the whole thing to Jan to do her final editing and reply to letters. This was about three weeks before most people received their copy of *SET* 7.

Thanks for all your comments about true SF. There's been lots of commentary on the internet lists about Doris Lessing's Nobel win. She has had a mighty career, with many different types of fiction, and I've read little of it. The named SF novels, the Argo in Canopus series, sounded so boring ('novel-length expository lumps', as Damien Broderick has described them) that I never had the courage to read them. However, some of her earlier books, especially *Briefing for a Descent into Hell* and *The Four-Gated City*, already had a reputation as proto-SF, or slipstream, or whatever. *Descent* is one of my favourite novels read during the 1970s. The interesting thing is that, in post-Nobel interviews, she is very strongly defending the influence of other SF writers on her work. A bit different from Margaret Atwood's 'my stuff can't be SF because it has real ideas in it' flummery.

I think Lem should have won the Nobel in the 1970s. Maybe if he had lived to 88, like Doris, he might have scored The Prize eventually. Ballard might still get there if he lives long enough.

On *SET* 7:

I understand Dick Jenssen's feelings completely. There's new books to read, and I am woefully lacking in that department, but taking down a Simak or Asimov or Kuttner off the shelf to enjoy again brings me back to the heady days of an exciting read. At least, it tries; you can't go home, and you can't go back. The ol sensawunda, she ain't what she used to be. I do want to return to the days of BEMs, heroes in deep space and exploration out on the Rim, time machines and sympathetic robots and FTLs into the unknown. If only I had the time: the books directing me there are waiting for me on the shelves, and it will probably be a long wait.

[Re:] Doris Lessing, she led the flock of people who asked, how the hell did THAT happen? She figured she'd get it just before she died; I hope she's wrong about that. She also reportedly, as soon as she found out she'd won, said she didn't give a fig for it. That begs the question — should we?

Yvonne's mother is experiencing some health problems, sharp drops in blood sugar, followed by two small strokes. Gabrielle is 84, and has been in good health up to now. She now has a pacemaker, and the next few months will be a time to watch her to make sure she doesn't fall over any more. She's just been given an electric scooter to get around with, and Yvonne checks in with her when she can.

Awards are marketing tools for some, or a way to build up your friends, or given to a select few. And yet the awards I have won have symbolized fleeting feelgood moments that mark

achievement of one kind or another. I shan't be giving them back any time soon. This coming weekend is the Canvention in Vancouver, and I won't be able to go, but I was on the final ballot for the Auroras, and I might pick up another one. I think we shall all regret the day when the last paper fanzine is published; who knows, it might never come, but when it does, I think we will continue our fanzinish ways in downloading them or finding them online, reading them, and perhaps responding and contributing to them as if nothing untoward had happened.

Perhaps if SF wasn't so universal, we'd get our sensa-wunda back. SF took us to impossibly distant and improbable places, and showed how impossibly improbable beings would act in those improbably impossible situations they'd get into. The disappointment would be in the closing of the book at the end, and there'd we be, back where we started. Awww, jeeze!

I can't help but agree with Ray Wood's conclusions about fandom hurting SF, but I won't assign all the blame to fandom. The publishers often want something just like the last book any given successful author wrote, and that's what they buy.

Editors trim down, carve out whole chapters, and tend to follow successful formulas. The blame for the current state of SF must be spread about. That's why I think a modern version of Earl Kemp's Who Killed Science Fiction? would be so valuable. If the blame must be placed somewhere, the authors would be best equipped to do so, and they wouldn't hesitate, if asked.

I hope there will be happy news from Scarborough, England soon. Mr. Jeeves deserves much more than his current state of health. Our thoughts are with you, sir, even if you never see these comments. Be well, and stay that way.

Both Yvonne and I are now working full time. Me, with the Canadian National Institute for the Blind in their e-publishing department, and Yvonne with Diageo Canada in their accounts payable department. Diageo distributes and markets Tanqueray gin, Johnny Walker, Guinness and Baileys Irish Cream, among others. Books and booze; heaven for many people I know. We are relieved, and Christmas this year should be very good indeed.

GREG BENFORD, Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of California, Irvine CA 92697-4575, USA

Another good issue. I was struck by Ray Wood: "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."

I'd say, because the writers are doing what Ray wants to do — figure out the rest of the story. So they do. Then publish it.

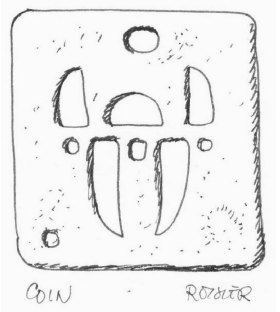
I started writing what became my Galactic Center series, six novels in all running maybe 750,000 words — all because of a few short stories written in the early 1970s: "Icarus Descending" and "In the Ocean of Night." But the ideas wouldn't leave me alone, and five years later I finished the novel *In the Ocean of Night*.

Authors are readers, too. We enjoy the same mental exercises. So his rules: "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" don't take into account the very pleasure of writing. I, like many writers, do not write for money — I enjoy it. That it's brought me far more money than I ever thought is a side issue.

By the way, so glad Melbourne is bidding for the 2010 worldcon. I'll be there!

9 September 2007

BRAD FOSTER, PO Box 165246, Irving, TX 75016, USA



It's especially nice getting a real paper-and-ink zine. Getting tougher to get these days. Indeed, I see from your editorial in No. 6 you're having to bow to the pressure of bucks to limit the amount of paper copies you do. I'm sure a lot of zines, great ones, from the past ended due to financial

problems and, if the editor had the option we do now, might have gone on to publish much more great stuff.

On your questions/comments relating to my little *LOCS* zine. That was pretty much a one-shot project. I hadn't planned on going beyond this one, just a fun idea worth seeing if I could pull together. I'll save the info on the artists you mentioned if I come up with something else down the line. For now, I've a few copies left, but hoping to sell those to some of the folks outside fandom who like some of my weird little pubs, and see if I can recoup the costs of printing and mailing.

The pieces of art by David Russell in the latest issue are really cool, and I will *definitely* want to get him involved if I come up with another project for artists later.

9 September 2007

NED BROOKS, 4817 Dean Lane, Lilburn, GA 30047-4720

[*brg* There was a lot of discussion of *Red Shift* in *SF Commentary* and other Australian fanzines when it was first published. Andrew Whitmore (local fan, now disappeared) decoded the endpaper of *Red Shift*, and I have a copy somewhere. *Red Shift* is dense, I agree, but readable. I'm not sure about *Thursbitch*, which seems to take the style of *The Stone Book* and squeeze it even further. I suspect I'm just getting lazy — although most of my irritation is directed toward books that are far too long, rather than super-short books such as those by Garner. At least publishers keep reissuing Phil Dick's books, which at 80,000 words are the perfect length for an SF novel. Also, Dick Jenssen just lent me the reissued Fredric Brown crime novel, *To Light a Candle* (1950), which is also the perfect length for a novel.*]

Red Shift just didn't hold my interest. I have read much more difficult things, but there seemed some reason to press on — *A Voyage to Arcturus*, the Zimiamvian trilogy, etc. P.K. Dick just seemed to me to be an awkward writer, whose ideas did not usually justify inflicting such prose on myself. I rather liked *Galactic Pot-Healer* and *Counterclock World*. I don't think I ever saw a copy of *To Light a Candle*.

10 September 2007

[*brg* Readers of *SF Commentary* during the 1970s will remember with great affection the name of Barry Gillam, one of the magazine's very best writers during that era. Unfortunately, we lost contact with each other during the 1980s, and it's only because of the Internet and New Yorker Tim Marion that I was able to find Barry again. Barry was always a fine writer about cinema...*]

BARRY GILLAM, Bronx NY 10475, USA

Your package arrived safely, though how the mailman managed to squeeze it into my tiny apartment mailbox is a mystery — almost as great a mystery as how I got it out without shredding it.

Just at a glance, I'm impressed by the layout and the illustrations, the photos in particular. I don't remember *SFC* in quite this way. Looking at the back cover of *The Incompleat Bruce Gillespie*, I recognise the bloke on the left more than the one on the right. But you won't be surprised that I'm also no longer a stripling. My vows to get more exercise remain just that and I can never pass up a *mousse au chocolat*.

Since I last wrote, I've spent my annual week in LA, visiting my sister (which is always a pleasure) and attending Cinecon, an annual film-buff gathering which shows fifteen hours a day of movies that for the most part have never been and will never be available on DVD or television. And almost all in 35 mm. Highlights this year included a charming rediscovered Colleen Moore silent, "Her Wild Oat," and a lively Universal B musical with the Andrews Sisters, "How's About It?" They also came up with movies that don't exist on imdb, including a Buster Keaton short. Another feature is to stock the dealers' rooms with interesting material, which is not easy in the eBay era.

The week sped by, what with some wonderful restaurants,

time catching up with friends I only see at these shows, visits to LA's premier used bookstore, Acres of Books, and ditto its music/used CD/DVD store, Amoeba Music, which occupies an entire city block. The Getty Center had a good Edward Weston retrospective (my sister wasn't familiar with him but emerged a fan) and the LA County Museum of Art featured an exhibit on Latin American art of the colonial period, when native artists infused Catholic imagery with their own sensibility and heritage.

But as I get older I find it harder to switch gears. The vacation part is easy but shifting back into work mode — and a workaday schedule of early to bed/early to rise — was difficult this past week. I found myself getting in to the office on two hours sleep, which does make the day a challenge.

10 September 2007

DAVID JACOBSSON, c/o Pernilla Nilsson, Clemenstorget 6, 222 21, Lund, Sweden

I just finished reading the introduction of the latest *Steam Engine Time* and your article on Garner. I was sorry for you to hear that your mother has passed on — I hope you are doing well.

Congratulations on the award!

I read Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* around the age of fourteen and really liked them. I think I reread them when I was about twenty and really liked them then too. The article's description of the other books he has written made me very eager to try to hunt them down . . .

I noticed that he has used for *The Owl Service* the same myth (*Blodeuwedd* — the flowermaid that turns into an owl) for one of his stories as I am using in a tale for my sisters. It will be fun to read his story *after* I've finished the tale. I have a feeling making a comparison with Garner may be somewhat destructive while writing.

11 September 2007

TARAL WAYNE, 245 Dunn Avenue, Apt 2111, Toronto ONT M6K 1S6, Canada

The overview of Alan Garner: I actually read *The Stone Book Quartet*. Sublime might be the word for it, if by that we mean a subtle and almost evanescent quality. The first book was something like a traditional story and I enjoyed it quite a bit. The other three seemed pretty much like "non-stories" in which little happened, and if the characters underwent any change in their spiritual state, they seemed rather prosaic ones. (I guess I'll become a mechanic. Or maybe I'll join the army.) It didn't seem a "great" book, only a "gentle" one.

[David J. Lake] : I notice he spent more time talking about other books than Rowling's, and had only read the one, so had to have totally missed the gradual growth of the author's skills. Though, admittedly, she never writes poetry, just work-aday prose. What he mainly seems to say is that, because Rowling doesn't write about a magic realm that's "somewhere else" and has problems fitting into the real world, the books aren't very good. And that because there were books about British schools before, Harry Potter is just a re-tread. Seems a very superficial judgment to me. I'm sure I could say a great many more interesting things than that about the Potter books, whether I liked them or not.

For instance, J. K. Rowling must have been near starving most of her childhood. While she imagines wealth, magic, fame and other fantasies through the eyes of Harry Potter, her imagination fails her utterly on the subject of food. Whenever a meal is described, it's inevitably potatoes, common boiled vegetables and roast beef or perhaps bangers. Yorkshire pudding is mentioned perhaps once in the first four books, as well as steak one one occasion. Not even the English diet is this unimaginative. What about local cheeses? Seafood in rich sauces? The different game fowl traditional to rural England? Meat pies? Curries! Fer Chris' sake, the English have been gorging on curries from the day the wrested the last acre of India away from the Portuguese! But what does J. K. Rowling imagine as the *ne plus ultra* of meal fantasies? Mashed potatoes. (She mentions them again and again.) Now isn't

that curious?

12 September 2007

[*brg* I think David Lake was just poking a stick into the collective nest of fandom to see what the reaction would be. At the age of seventy-eight, he feels he doesn't have to worry about other people's reactions, pro or ante. Besides, I think he would be just as pleased to read in *SET* a really good article about Rowling/Potter as I would. The stuff in the general press has not been very informative.*]

Very probably fandom needs a balanced (or at least interesting) article on the Potter books. I'm even tempted, but I've too much on my plate right now, alas. Maybe someday . . . a bit sooner than when J. K. Rowling writes an eighth book to the series at least.

I don't either love Garner or hate him. As I said, I enjoyed the first "book" of the *Stone Quartet*. It just got too nebulous after that. The local dialect was occasionally a bit puzzling, but by and large it wasn't a hard read. Not even dull, in the sense that I felt *Dubliners* become dull very quickly unless language alone entertains you. (In my case it does not. Language is a tool, not a finished living room coffee table.) I've read *The Owl Service*. It struck me as a good fantasy, but not terrifically memorable.

[*brg* With Garner — you either love that very tight prose, with almost everything left out, including the essentials, or you don't. I wouldn't claim that sort of prose easy to read (and *Thursbitch* so far has stopped me in my tracks), but there is a richness of associations that goes beyond the mere surface story. I like Garner for contracting his prose tighter and tighter, because all the heroic fantasy writers just waffle on and on, sometimes for hundreds of thousands of words, saying nothing more than Garner does in a few pages.*]

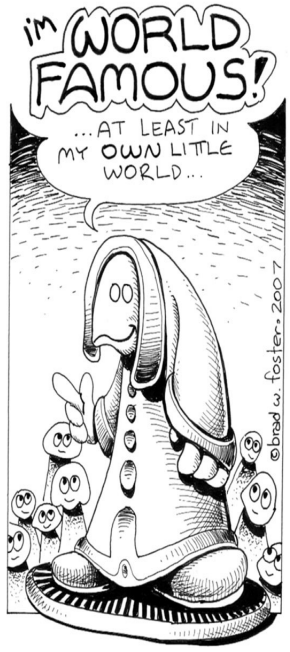
Did you ever read the article I did on "Red Dwarf" that was in *Banana Wings*? It took a lot of work, but it's one of the things I'm most happy to have written.

12 September 2007

[JGS: I read it, and enjoyed it; "Red Dwarf" was a favorite of mine — silly and knowing at the same time.]

[*brg* Taral has issued a DVD of all the fanzines by Mike Glicksohn, one of the two major Canadian fanzine publishers during my time in fandom. Mike Glicksohn and Susan Wood (the other major fanzine publisher of the era) were the Fan Guests of Honour at Aussiecon I in 1975, and *Energumen* won the Hugo for Best Fanzine in 1973. The CD-ROM contains PDF files of all the issues of *Energumen* and *Xenium*, plus quite a bit of extra Glicksohn-related material. CAN$15 from Taral Wayne, at the address above.*]

AMY HARLIB, 212 West 22nd Street, Apt 2N, New York NY 10011-2756, USA



Thanks for *SET* 6. A beautiful looking zine — what a cover! And it's filled with interesting stuff: commentaries on Raymond, politics and SF, Heinlein and Le Guin — all stimulating and provocative to this lifelong SF addict!

Appreciated the reviews too — I love Yarbro also, and I also agree with the other favorable opinions. Seems like Jan and I have similar taste, although I enjoyed *Quag Keep* a bit more than she did. Do please let me know when *SF Commentary* and *Metaphysical Review* get revived.

14 September 2007

Thanks for *SET* No. 7, gorgeous cover and all. I really appreciated the

article about Alan Garner, author of some of my favourite books. "The Iceberg Symposium" was fascinating and provocative. I tend to prefer novels to short stories, but Jack Vance's never disappoint. He should be on a ten best list. I wish he was on the Most Popular list.

I enjoyed Matthew Davis's Howard Waldrop article. He's another writer who can write great short SF. "Night of the Cooters" is one of my favorites of all time. Appreciated David Lake's opinions, even if I don't think Rowling is as bad as he does. I love Mr. Lake's books. Wish he'd write more.

19 October 2007

DARRELL SCHWEITZER, 6644 Rutland Street, Philadelphia PA 19149-2128, USA

I hope you will be able to continue *SET* on paper in at least a very small run, simply so that copies will survive. It would be a shame to see such a fine publication become so much electronic vapor in a few years.

[*brg* But that comment still avoids the point: I can't *afford* to print more than a few paper copies of my fanzines from now on. My income has disappeared. Jan is doing her best to survive financially. If we produce fanzines for efanzines.com, we keep going. If we don't, we don't.*]

A quick comment. What my old pals Tim Marion and Ben Indick curiously do not seem to mention in the "joke" photo are the *horns*. I do not believe I manifested horns the last time I saw either of them. Or did I? An unconscious mistake like forgetting to wipe dandruff from one's shoulders?

About *Orbit*, I emphasise (or weasel out of) the point by insisting that I am talking about how the New Wave is remembered, not what it was. "Those awful *Orbit* stories" the lady decried is an example of historical distortion. Then again, some people didn't understand the "good" ones either, such as "The Fifth Head of Cerberus." An editor has to take risks. If he publishes a story more ambitious than anything anyone has seen before, he genuinely risks losing his audience. But Damon Knight was more than risk-taking; he was reckless. He *did* lose his audience. I can remember being the only person I knew who still read *Orbit*, and that was because I was getting them for free as a reviewer.

Another factor is economic. In those days it was assumed that an original anthology published as a hardcover book was going to be something special, like the Star SF series or *Dangerous Visions*, rather than another digest magazine in hardcover form, costing ten times as much (circa 1970, about 50 cents versus $5.00). Therefore readers would be more forgiving of bad material in a 50-cent magazine than in a volume of *Orbit*. It took Roger Elwood to convince us that a hardcover anthology should not be expected to be any better than an average issue of *Amazing*. Then his books stopped selling. But we had higher hopes for Knight.

Actually after I wrote that last letter, I went dipping into my own collection of *Orbit*, reading some of the stories I didn't recognise. There was still some remarkably bad material. The reason *Orbit* is remembered the way it is, is because it not only had higher maximum standards but lower minimum standards. It could be *spectacularly* bad, rather than just dull, like most issues of the late Campbell *Analog*. This also causes historical distortion, because we don't remember mere mediocrity. To apply the same principle a bit further back, the reason the early 1940s is remembered as The Golden Age of SF is because the entire contents of most of the magazines of the period have been totally forgotten and the Campbell *Astounding* gets all the attention.

[*brg* In the above comment, and that below, Darrell reminds me that the economic circumstances of *Orbit* changed abruptly after No 13. Darrell reminded me that I have Numbers 14 to 21 only because Harper & Row sent them to me as review copies. He's right; *Orbit* could not be bought in Australia after No 13; until then, Space Age Books imported the paperbacks of the Berkeley editions.*]

Were there British or Australian paperbacks of *Orbit*

[volumes] 14–21? There were not in the US. These became pretty much library-only items, because not a lot of individuals bought them. Berkley-Putnam dropped the series with volume 13. Harper & Row editions never got a paperback. I think the Post-Elwood Depression was in full swing by then, so few publishers wanted one more paperback anthology. However, *Orbit* commanded a certain prestige, so Harper & Row kept with it anyway. At that time H&R was making a concerted effort to be *the* No 1 SF hardcover publisher. They also brought out *The Dispossessed* about then, along with numerous books about SF. There is nevertheless this exaggeratedly negative memory of *Orbit* out there, not necessarily among the complete yahoos either.

As for all-original anthologies: I have now edited and published *The Secret History Of Vampires* (with Greenberg) for DAW, and seem to be about to sell another. The premise of the book is a collision between a Tim Powers secret history novel and *Dracula*; that is, that the real inner workings of history has vampires in it. I am of course trying to establish a post-*Weird Tales* editorial presence for myself so I can have room to get a little more creative. But that needs clout.

21 September 2007

[*brg* Somewhere in this email correspondence I mentioned that Peter Weston had written in a fanzine that he had solicited stories for *Andromeda 1*, his British original paperback series in the 1970s, received hundreds of entries, and accepted none of them. In the end, he wrote to twelve of his favourite authors, and received a publishable story from each of them.*]

How did Peter Weston put together the *Andromeda* series? I have a story in volume 3, and I was hardly solicited, or worth soliciting at the time. It is not an outstanding story, and is certainly overshadowed by the Niven and Leiber stories in the same volume, but it is one of those stories of precisely the sort *Orbit* lacked — adequate, not bad enough to make the reader feel burned.

In any case, it's a different world now. Publishers want anthologies on a theme they know how to sell, by writers they know how to sell. You can sneak a few new writers in there, but the editor is often contractually obligated to deliver the big names promised. This started in the horror field. For the longest time it was impossible to sell a horror anthology without delivering one of the "big four," King, Koontz, Straub or Barker. Hardly anyone does open-submission anthologies anymore. Something like *Orbit* would not be possible today. That kind of editing is done in small-press magazines like *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet* or *Postscripts*.

As for collecting *Orbit* in hardcover — the hard one to get is No 1. I have that only in an ex-library copy. I started getting them for review about Volume 5.

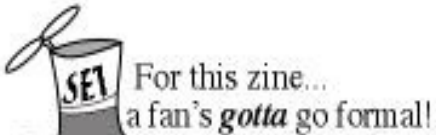
22 September 2007

[*brg* I took many years to obtain *Orbit 2* in British paper-back. *Orbits* 1, then 3–13, could be easily obtained through Melbourne's Space Age Books.*]

CY CHAUVIN, 14248 Wilfred, Detroit MI 48213, USA

Thank you for publishing the comments and tributes about Syd Bounds. I still feel amazed that a writer in England would choose to write Westerns (would they have some detectable mild British flavor?), but as he wrote science fiction to begin with I imagine he was used to creating imaginary worlds.

I think that Patrick McGuire is the most wise and sensible of the letter writers, when he writes that it isn't possible to really prove Eric Raymond's points one way or the other because they are so vague. But Zoran Bekric, in part of his reply to Raymond, changes the terms of the discussion without warning when he writes that films and media have taken over as the "mainstream" of science fiction, since those outlets have much larger audiences. But the discussion before has been about the creators and creation of science fiction, rather than just its audience; and there are still more writers than screenwriters or directors, and more science fiction is still published than filmed, and what originality there may be in the genre is within the written form. It probably always will be that case simply because it is so much easier and simpler to



write SF than it is to film it (and that's why it is "mined for a few wild ideas").

Zoran's suggestion that among "Campbellian, Futurian, the New Wave writers and cyberpunks . . . the competition was entirely commercial, not political or aesthetic" is so silly I can hardly believe it. It was entirely aesthetic: no one who lived through those times could think of it as commercial competition. Why would writers deliberately introduce new work that broke new ground and was often rejected or sold to marginal markets if their intent was entirely commercial?

[*brg* An excellent point that got lost in the discussion. Apart from some of Heinlein's novels, which racked up huge sales over a long time, no SF novel entered the New York Times bestseller lists until Isaac Asimov's *The Gods Themselves* in 1973. Almost no SF writer earned anything more than the equivalent of a basic salary from writing until the mid 1970s. However, "commercial considerations" were still important in the forties, fifties and sixties, because a writer who could not sell stories to *any* of the main editors had *no* income at all. If you don't look at efanzines.com, you won't have seen Earl Kemp's fanzine el (which is only available there): he gives details of how writers survived during some really bad patches, such as the middle 1950s.*]

David Lake expresses his frustrations in some of the flaws he sees in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. I think it is great that he chooses to re-examine Le Guin's novel: it's easy to see his love for it. His reservations about Le Guin's use of the ansible "because it violates Einstein's theory of relativity" should not be a worry: even James Blish said that "the most valuable scientific content in science fiction are the impossibilities" because they suggest "new paradigms" in science.

But the idea that Gethenians and all humans are really Hainish colonists planted long ago is a different type of impossibility, and not one that offers that possibility of a new scientific paradigm. It seems to be a leftover from Le Guin's previous novels (set in the same universe), but any number of other writers have used a similar idea, even though we all know it's not true. (Although I do not think that science had that DNA evidence in 1969.) But could gender blurring aspects of Le Guin's novel exist without the close similarity between Genly Ai and Estraven? It's similar to the idea often stated in science fiction of a certain era that the human form is a natural one for intelligent life, so that parallel evolution might occur on different planets, resulting in intelligent humanoid-shaped aliens elsewhere. Yet that seems so unlikely to me.

Regarding his discussion of Genly Ai's "normality" — perhaps the average intelligence of people in the future may become [greater] than what is normal today. Certainly the culture will change; and even intelligent people have blind sides, and make mistakes. I think that only a very extraordinary person would make the trip that Genly Ai does, and leave behind all family and friends to cross light years and become a type of diplomat on an alien planet. Perhaps even the criticism that science fiction deals too much with heroes or extraordinary people overlooks the many extraordinary situations (from our point of view, at least) that people might have to face in the future.

Certainly Winter's incest laws and customs seem unusual: but it is an alien planet. Le Guin has sufficiently distanced the inhabitants from Earth. Isn't Lake being rather restrictive on how customs might evolve on another planet?

Lake's suggestion that Le Guin wrote "a variation on the story of Christ" is interesting, too; years ago, Samuel R. Delany thought *The Left Hand of Darkness* was an example of the "doomed homosexual" plot! Alexei Panshin explained that the parallels we continually see in science fiction novels are created by the readers: "When I began *Rite of Passage* in 1961, a parallel between the basic situation of powerful scientifically advanced ships and powerless retarded Colony Planets that I had premised, and the Have and Have-Not nations occurred to me. When I gave the book to Chip

Delany to read in the summer of 1967, however, the parallel didn't occur to him. He thought it was 'too obviously' about the blacks and whites in America. Some six months later, when I was proofreading the galleys of the novel at the time of the Tet Offensive, it struck me that anyone reading the book would necessarily think it was about the U.S. in Vietnam. Finally, when the book was published, one of the first reviews of it I saw said, 'In reading *Rite of Passage*, I was reminded of the Sephardim and Ashkenazam in Israel. I wonder if Panshin had this in mind?' " ("SF in Dimension," *Fantastic*, Feb. 1972, p. 97).

17 October 2007

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

Thank you so much for sending an actual copy of *SET* 7. I'm feeling a bit burned out after thirty years of zining, wondering if I'll pub my ish again (the thought of scanning some highlights from old zines is tempting), and it's good to see a fellow veteran still producing at a high level.

Ray Wood begins his article, "I'm not sure why it is that SF writers explain too much," and later in the zine Darrell Schweitzer instances the *Orbit* series as all that was wrong with the New Wave. Perhaps a useful way of looking at *Orbit* is as a response to the assumption that SF explains too much. *Orbit* stories deliberately avoid that; they are oblique, indirect, minimal; [re:] accounts of being edited by Damon Knight, authors (such as Silverberg on "Passengers") report being instructed to tell less. That highlights the genius of Gene Wolfe (who has said that Knight grew him from a bean); indeed, one could almost define *Orbit* writing as "doing what Gene Wolfe does." Kate Wilhelm, Gardner Dozois, James Sallis, et al. (perhaps in descending order) did the same.

Like David J. Lake, I was greatly influenced by C. S. Lewis's *An Experiment in Criticism*, and I like to look at the way things are read, and try to refrain from judging those. *Orbit* stories are for readers who like to engage the texts, to wrestle with them to try to extract meaning. SF readers have tradition-ally been those who like to be told a story clearly and straight-forwardly, and then wrestle with its implications. The idea that readers who want new SF ideas should be equally eager for new storytelling methods is a non sequitur, rather like assuming that anyone who seeks out exotic foods should be equally desirous of extreme sports.

The August 1970 *Galaxy* is one I specifically recall, as it came early in the pivotal period when I moved from reader to fan. I fear that you have misremembered one detail about the Blish: *The Day after Judgment* was a sequel to *Black Easter*, not another name for it. I likewise was appalled by *I Will Fear No Evil*, but I did not abandon Heinlein. I wonder about that alternate universe where he was healthy enough to edit it, as he had edited all his previous books. And "About a Secret Crocodile" has one of the truly great openings ("There is a secret society of seven men that controls the finances of the world. This is known to everyone, but the details are not known. There are those who believe it would be better if one of the seven were a financier") and one of the truly dumb endings.

22 September 2007

ROBERT ELORDIETA, 20 Custer Circle, Traralgon VIC 3844

As far as I know, "Seeker" is the only film that is based on the Dark Is Rising novels. I don't know if there will be other films based on the series. It was by mere chance that I saw the trailer for it, and when I saw the re-released novel, I realized that it had been made into a film. I had a feeling that you might have the Dark Is Rising novels. I hope that you enjoy them.

Did you enjoy the His Dark Materials trilogy by Philip Pullman? It would be great if they make the trilogy of novels into a trilogy of movies. Do you know if the Dark Materials trilogy by Philip Pullman are still available [here] to buy in paperback size?

[*brg* The trilogy has been released in Australia in one volume.*]

It is a pity that the two films based on Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea series didn't go well. That Ursula suffered because of those two films wasn't nice. I saw some of the live action version

on free-to-air TV once, but I didn't see all of it. I must admit that it got me interested in Earthsea. I ended up buying a omnibus, with four novels of Earthsea in it. I just haven't had the chance to read them yet. It is a pity that the Studio Ghibli Collection stuffed up its version of *The Farthest Shore*. Like you, I like Miyazaki's work. The father, I mean.

That is fair enough that the Armageddon convention didn't sound like your sort of thing at all. Like yourself, I'm more interested in literature conventions than media conventions these days. When I first started to go to cons I went to media ones only. I had no idea that there were literature cons too. I went to my first media con in 1999. Continuum 1 was the first con that I went to that was more focused on literature than media. I had never met a book author until that con. I didn't know what I was missing out on until I went to a lit con. Media cons don't have discussion panels, only Q&A sessions. I haven't been to the last couple of media cons that have been held in Melbourne and Sydney. I've missed out on some great cons that you have been to because I wasn't born or I was a baby. That, as they say, is life. At least I now know that there are lit cons out there. It is also great that through these lit cons, I met you. I still haven't met such luminaries as Race Mathews, John Foyster, Merv Binns, Dick Jenssen, Ian Gunn and Bill Wright.

I have read the Blackfords' reviews and articles in your fanzines. I haven't read Van Ikin's *Science Fiction*. I also haven't read such overseas magazines as *Foundation*, *NY Review of Science Fiction* and *Vector*.

I haven't been to a Worldcon. I would love to go to it if it comes to Melbourne in 2010. I missed out on the last worldcon in Melbourne; I heard later that you were the Fan Guest of Honour at that [one].

22 September 2007

DAMIEN BRODERICK, San Antonio TX 78212, USA

Enjoyable and bracing as it is, Ray Wood's "Imagination and Science Fiction" has the misfortune to ground its argument on an ahistorical goof. In 1948, in Broken Hill, Australia, the twelve-year-old Ray "discovered *Astounding*," and then *Galaxy* when it started a couple of years later. How the hell did he manage this trick? The magazines were still not exactly thick on the ground in Melbourne a decade later. I found the magazines in secondhand swap shops — mostly UK *Astounding*s, and later some *Galaxy*s, maybe UK editions as well. I didn't see a US *Analog* until about 1962 or later. I read mostly the Nova magazines and a few of their large clumsy paperbacks of novels like *Jack of Eagles* and *Weapon Shops of Isher*, found in newsagents but too expensive for a kid from Reservoir. I had to wait until they percolated down to swap shops.

Ray Wood's imagination was galvanised by the November 1953 *Astounding*, where, he supposes, Blish's "Earthman, Come Home" burst unheralded and with wonderful concision upon the world. Later, led astray by Campbell, James Blish retrofitted and expanded tiny jewels of Okie history, given in three paragraphs of that story, into bloated and unsatisfying sections of the consolidated fix-up novel of the same title.

The problem with Ray's exemplary case of a fall from pristine grace is that it just didn't happen that way. Blish started this narrative with "Okie" (*ASF*, Apr 1950), and then "Bindlestiff" (*ASF*, Dec 1950), which told the story of the spindizzy-propelled planet He. This was followed by the pulpishly titled "Sargasso of Lost Cities" (*Two Complete Science-Adventure Books*, Spring 1953), its crass title surely echoing Poul Anderson's "Sargasso of Lost Starships" (*Planet*, Jan 1952), and only then "Earthman, Come Home" (*ASF*, Nov 1953), which perforce summarized these years of accumulating backstory into the brusque paragraphs young Ray read with his heart pounding and his eyes popping out of his head and now recalls as the essence of science fictional artistic brevity and tact.

Luckily, not all his examples are so vulnerable to the reality principle ... For what it's worth, I tend not to agree with his general case; I enjoy recursive elaboration, backstory, embroidery on a bald and unconvincing narrative. But by dog, he's right about those greedy, feckless oafs who have done what they can to destroy

Frank Herbert's Arrakis universe.

22 September 2007

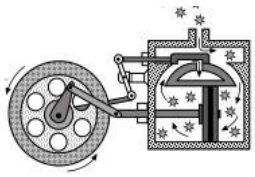
Just wrapping a package up even as we speak: *Year Million; Science at the Far Side of Knoweldge*, due out July 2008 from Atlas Books in NY. It's a gathering of commissioned essays by a mix of science and sf writers.

26 September 2007

CHRIS GARCIA, 1401 North Shoreline Blvd., Mountain View CA 94043, USA

I loved the opening cartoon. There's a lot of those questions to be asked. What about Flying Belts? Or Meals in Pill form? Or dream-sculpting? These are things that fanzines should feature, aren't they?

I watch the Nobel Prizes a lot. I am the guy who frequently discovers people walking around Berkeley or Palo Alto who happen to have the prizes themselves. I'm always the one who recognizes them, and sometimes I say hello. On my computer at work, I have photos from most, though not all the ceremonies. The Literature one is the hardest one to make sense of. Sometimes they give it to folks who are international in scope (Pearl Buck, Nadine Gordimer, Solzhenytzen, etc.) and sometimes they give it to people who are completely regional (Steinbeck and Toni Morrison come to mind) and once in a while, they give it to people like Churchill, which was just crazy. Missing Proust, Joyce, Twain and Tolstoy were big misses, though Vonnegut was very close more than once to getting the prize. The same goes with, of all people, Philip Roth and Thomas Pynchon. It's a weird world.



On the matter of epubbing: I'm a huge fan. I've never really done a zine that was just for print (that wasn't for an apa), and I really do love the capabilities that the net provides.

There's a copy of *The Owl Service* at my local used bookstore. I saw it and I said, 'What the heck is that doing here?" I didn't buy it; they wanted six bucks for it and my money of late has been tight.

I read a lot of short stories. My top five includes "Flowers for Algernon," "Houston, Houston Do You Read?," "The Nine Billion Names of God," "The Word for World is Forest" and "If All Men Are Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister?" Yeah, pretty conventional, I know, but I really do love those stories.

I love Harry Potter. Most children's stories annoy me, but Harry Potter is wonderful. It's not the characters, or the writing style, or even the world; it's the sheer crazy way in which she writes. At no time do I feel like she writes hard. She just has her story down and writes it like she's telling you something you already know. And all of her characters feel the same way, save for Harry. It's a brilliant technique that allows us to sympathise with a total prat of a character!

23 September 2007

[*brg* As I've written, Rowling's writing reminds me of that of 1940s/1950s English super-selling children's writer Enid Blyton. Indeed, better than any individual Enid Blyton book. Blyton was famous for saying that she wrote her stories as if they were revealed to her like movies unrolling before her eyes.*]

TERRY JEEVES. 56 Red Scar Drive, Newby, Scarborough YO12 5RQ, England

Many thanks for sending the latest *Steam Engine Time* with a superb cover, worth framing and putting on the wall. The whole issue is well worth an award, but it is a shame to think of putting it on the Net. I just can't watch a screen for that long.

Congratulations to you on reaching 60, and may you see many more. On October the 1st, I hit 85, and don't I know it.

I enjoyed immensely the discussions on short stories, which set me thinking of my own favorites list, which matches the SFWA list very closely, except I can never remember which stories are short or which are long. I remember "The Gentlest Un-People" in *Galaxy* and several van Vogt yarns. Once started, the memory went

into overdrive. Clarke and Eric Frank Russell are among my favorites.

24 September 2007

PETER SULLIVAN, 1 Englemann Way, Burdon Vale, Sunderland SR3 2NY, England

I am more than happy to download your fanzines from efanzines.com — there's no need to send me paper copies. As you've noticed, I'm not really producing much in the way of paper fanzines myself at the moment, but will continue to send you stuff if and when I do — but as one-off samples rather than trades.

Actually, I was going to write to support your decision in *SET* 6 to go virtually electronic, but never actually got around to it until *SET* 7 was already out. But I still think you are absolutely right to do so — even more especially if it means a potential revival of *SF Commentary* and/or *The Metaphysical Review*.

Interesting to see Jan 'fess up in the latest *SET* that she doesn't think that she's ever read any Philip K. Dick. My (comparatively meagre) SF reading for the last twenty years has pretty much been nothing but PKD. Does this make me the "mirror-universe" equivalent of Jan? Do I have to wear a little goatee beard? Will we cause a matter/anti-matter explosion if we ever meet?

But then one of the key roles of *SET* in my fanzine reading is to remind me regularly how little SF I've actually read, and that, even if I don't quite end up being classified as a fakefan, there's an awful lot of SF out there that I still need to read. I try, I really do. I bought *The Difference Engine* last year, but couldn't summon the enthusiasm to finish it. Not sure why — it just seemed very heavy going after I'd taken on board the basic concepts.

24 September 2007

[*brg* Thanks, Peter... that settles a few questions. It's just that we were exchanging letters quite a bit about a year ago, then I didn't hear from you. I'm pretty sure I sent you **brg 49 (my Anzapazine) which has a letter of comment from you. So I have you down as a Downloader from now on, and I'll email you as each magazine comes out.**

With that new set of novels from Gollancz issued to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Dick's death, I'm about to become acquainted with his top novels all over again. I re-read *Crap Artist* recently after nearly 30 years, and was startled at how good it is, so I'm looking forward those in the new set.

I read all the magazine and original anthology short fiction from about 1963 to about 1976, but then it became too much for me. Most was read while I was commuting, which I haven't done for years.*]

MARK PLUMMER, 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, England

Like Steve Jeffery, I am a non-linear reader. I actually started reading *SET* 7 with Bruce's editorial and then [his] Iceberg Symposium piece, and I only turned to the two contributions from Ray Wood after seeing how his "Imagination and Science Fiction" was vexing Niall Harrison and Graham Sleight at Zara Baxter's "returning to Australia" open house the other weekend. (You should have Zara back now, and shortly our Geneva will be following her. British fandom is even now preparing retaliatory action).

I think that on balance I prefer your version of grumpiness, Bruce, to that of Ray, who manifests his inner grump by expanding fairly basic truisms into whole articles. A worked example of his own critique of SF's tendency to expend more wordage on an idea than is entirely justified, perhaps?

I don't know how many awards exist in the mystery genre, but I can tell Ray that there are at least thirty for science fiction and fantasy novels in the English-speaking world. However, relatively few have entirely overlapping eligibility. Some are awarded to works published in certain countries, others to writers of certain nationalities, others still for books that address certain themes and subjects. It is theoretically possible to win them all, but it would require a very specific profile to do so (you need to be a black Australian/Canadian now resident in the Pacific Northwest

whose first published work is a juvenile libertarian romantic alternative history novel with an Inklingesque vampire who explores issues of gender and race in a positive way to homosexuals in a novel that contains SF, fantasy and horror elements and which appears simultaneously in Australia, the UK and the US as a paperback original) such that realistically it's nothing more than a theoretical possibility.

Ray says, of the Elliot Perlman's award-winning backlist, "how many readers would know the parameters of all of those seven awards?" Not many, I'd say. There are, I suppose, three kinds of book-buyers who might be influenced by the decorations a book wears: those who have some knowledge of the eligibility criteria and the selection mechanisms; those who don't really know how these awards are derived but are at least familiar with some of their names and track records; and those who don't know anything about them at all and see only "winner of ..." emblazoned across the book's cover.

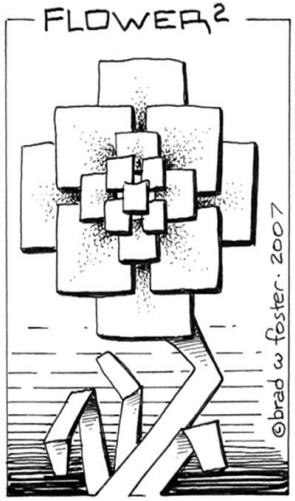
Of that latter group, I doubt there are many people who would buy a book solely because it proclaims itself to be the "winner of ..." something or other, any more than there are people who buy books because somebody has been quoted on the jacket as saying that it's jolly good. If you're that easily influenced then you'll be buying every book that's published as most carry some kind of endorsement from somebody. As Ray suggests, an awful lot of books can claim to have won some-thing so the mere fact of being an award winner doesn't actually do all that much to make a particular book stand out from the herd. I don't know, but I'd imagine that simply plastering "Winner of the [something previously unheard of that the publishers have just made up] Award" is unlikely to have a significant impact on sales.

There are people who buy books because they have won specific awards, and they do so because for them the award is at least a reasonable indicator of worth. They may know nothing about the way in which the award winners are chosen — whether they're selected by popular vote, or by a jury, or are given solely at the behest of some individual — or indeed what the eligibility might be, but they have nevertheless come to accept the specific acclamation as some kind of badge of merit: they've read books that pronounce themselves to be, say, "Hugo winner" or "by Hugo Award-winning author" and have found that they're generally pretty good. And if that works for such a reader, great. As Ray says, there's an issue here around publishers who use these labels in a way that's misleading if not out-and-out untrue — I've recently read a book which says on its cover "The Hugo Award Winning Novel" when it's actually nothing of the sort — but that's one for the advertising standards people, if anybody can be bothered to take it up.

And if you do know something about what these awards actually mean ... well, you know what they mean. Personally, I pay specific attention to the works that are short-listed for the Arthur C. Clarke Award because I know that it's a juried award where a selection of judges have read and considered a large percentage of the eligible books — science fiction novels published in Britain — and so I consider that they're likely to make informed and intelligent choices even if they are also sometimes wrong. I also know that the jury will range over a number of works that have been published in and out of genre, and thus they may be able to bring my attention to books that I might otherwise have missed. To a lesser extent, I also at least note what's winning and being shortlisted for most of the other significant awards in the field, in that the results contribute a further data point — alongside reviews, personal recommendations, author track record and so on — to my unstructured evaluation of what to buy and/or read next. And the data point may be a negative, because there are some awards that I personally don't regard as being any sort of indicator of quality at all. It's like reviewing really. I know some reviewers like the stuff I like and that makes their reviews informative, while other reviewers have tastes almost entirely opposite to mine and that makes their reviews informative too.

In summary then: Are there too many awards? Probably. Does this do any harm? I doubt it. Does it do any good? Probably.

Turning to Ray's symposium piece and his comments on story length, yes, there are short stories that have not benefited from subsequent expansion to novel length; yes, there are books that have spawned unnecessary sequels and prequels and sequels to



prequels; yes, there are ideas that don't justify the wordage that their creators have expended on them; and, yes, the science fiction and fantasy field has more than its fair share of these. Howard Waldrop — notice slick link with Matthew Davis's piece there — once remarked that whenever he has a novel-length idea he lies down for a bit and it turns into a novella; whenever he has a novella-length idea he lies down for a bit and it turns into a novelette, and so on. Howard Waldrop is not a typical science fiction and fantasy writer. It is also, I think, widely recognized that he is not exactly one of SF's top earners.

The examples cited are to some extent, as Ray says, a matter of personal taste, although I really don't understand the relevance of the few paragraphs at the end of section IV which talk about the appearance of the character Dawn in the fifth season of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer." Sure, suddenly Buffy has a teenage sister and everybody on-screen acts as if she's always been there while all of us in front of the telly know that she wasn't there before and wonder what on earth it all means, but exactly where the character has come from is a central plot point of the season and is entirely explained. I'm prepared to accept that there are other pertinent examples in "Buffy," but I'd rather be told what they are than be pointed at something that's not germane.

I wouldn't have selected James Blish's *Cities in Flight* as an illustration of a work that outgrew its premise either. I don't know; I didn't read "Earthman, Come Home" in *Astounding* in 1953. I came to the Okie stories in the mid-eighties in four Arrow paperbacks which I read through in order (I actually bought the second volume first, without noticing it was a second volume, and then spent some time tracking down *They Shall Have Stars*). I liked them then and now. In fact, I reread the single-volume SF Masterworks edition a few years ago, and it remains one of my personal core SF texts. When read in order, the stories expand in scope, initially confined to Earth and our solar system and opening out across the galaxy to the whole universe and beyond. Now maybe I would have felt differently if my first exposure had been to the "Earthman, Come Home" novelette, and obviously I can't know one way or the other, although I would note here that while this story was Ray's first encounter with the milieu there was already a body of published Okie stories at that point with "Bridge" (1952, later incorporated into *They Shall Have Stars*), "Okie"(1950) and "Bindlestiff" (1950) preceding it. But for me coming at it in the mid-1980s — and again now — it worked and works as a whole. I also remember, though, that when I first read the novel form of *A Case of Conscience*, slightly before *Cities* and at a time when I knew little about the way in which SF novels had often been published as fix-ups or expansions of short stories, it was extremely obvious to me that the second half read like a bolt-on, some later addition that wasn't entirely necessary. Why, it was almost as if the first part had been written as a self-contained story . . .

So, if we accept that many SF stories don't justify their length, who's responsible for this? Ray says he doesn't consider himself to be a fan and hasn't attended any SF conventions. As you know, I do, and have, but I'm not 'enraged' by Ray's conclusion that all this expansion and extension of science fiction story ideas is somehow the fault of fandom. I think he's wrong, but I'm not enraged. That may be, though, because we're not necessarily talking about the same thing. I don't think any sane SF writer seriously thinks that his or her readership is SF fandom and tailors his or her writing accordingly, not least because there really aren't enough of us to keep all the SF writers in tea and potatoes. Not that I've come across that many fans who are agitating for writers to revisit their past glories anyway.

Maybe by "fandom" Ray means "the readers," in which case, yes, I suppose it is their fault if they're uncritically demanding long books and sequels and More Of The Same, because we can hardly blame the writers for producing what their paying audience seems to want. Ray himself admits to being part of the

problem by seizing "with glee" on the sequel to the "breathtaking" *Legacy of Heorot*, although maybe it doesn't count if you simply eagerly await and fall upon these sequels without actually asking the authors to write them. People are often undemanding, uncritical, crave the familiar, whether it's TV soaps, pizzas or science fiction. We all know that.

If what Ray is saying, then, is that SF needs a more critical readership, perhaps he is also saying that it needs more people to be reading *Steam Engine Time*. Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to be saying how we might achieve this, but if he could come up with answer to *that* it could probably keep the two of you in tea and potatoes and maybe much else besides.

At the moment the award I'm most curious about is the John W. Campbell Memorial Award — not the new writer one — which seems to be pursuing a path of selecting as winner the least likely book on its shortlist. Maybe I'm missing some-thing, because I'm far from up to speed with modern SF novels, but I do at least have an idea where the critical opinion lies. The 2006 list had a reasonable array of acclaimed novels like *Spin* by Robert Charles Wilson, *Accelerando* by Charles Stross, *Counting Heads* by David Marusek and *Learning the World* by Ken MacLeod, yet went to *Mindscan* by Robert Sawyer.

This year's list was odder. [The] shortlist included M. John Harrison's *Nova Swing*, James Morrow's *The Last Witchfinder*, Justina Robson's *Living Next Door to the God of Love*, Karl Schroeder's *Sun of Suns*, Charles Stross's *Glasshouse*, Vernor Vinge's *Rainbows End*, Jo Walton's *Farthing*, Peter Watts' *Blindsight* . . . I've not read most of them, I confess, but they're books with a reasonable amount of critical backing behind them. And the winner is ... Ben Bova's *Titan*.

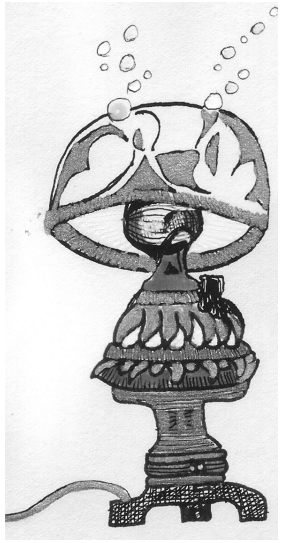
[*brg* This is certainly the kind of long and crunchy letter of comment that we used to have before the Internet. Well, that's a bit unfair to everybody else — I already feel the full force of the mighty Patrick McGuire intellect working away on *SET*s 6 and 7, although his letter hasn't arrived yet.

I think Ray is very good at being drily funny about other people's pretensions. Certainly the array of book awards in the smallish Australian literary pool does inspire snickers. For many years there was one award — the Miles Franklin Award — for Australian novels. George Turner won one once, back in 1962. Then there was The Age Book of the Year Award, starting in the early seventies. It's not clear why this enraged state premiers, but suddenly there was a Premier's Award for every state, starting in Victoria. It's notable that Australian SF art luminary and nice bloke Sean Tan won two of the Premier's Awards this year — SA and NSW — for his book without words, *The Arrival*.*]

DAVID J. LAKE, 7 8th Avenue, St Lucia QLD 4067

I realize that the short story is especially well suited to the "one gimmick" idea in SF (not at all, I think, in magical fantasy). But still . . . that is why I have written more novels than short stories.

I was amused to see that only one guy remarked on my "Grouches on Gethen": E. B. Frohvet. I was even more amused to see that Frohvet, though "attacking" me, almost entirely agrees with me. Yes, I know about friars: and that exactly is what Genly is — a friar, a missionary (as I said in my essay). But I have a lower respect for friars than Frohvet has. I don't think they are a higher kind of human, pursuing "individuation" (a term cribbed, I presume, from Jung). I think they are very far from the human norm — either asexual, or sexually "perverted" — not that I mind perverts, but that is what they are. A friar would be a very bad representative of normal *Homo sapiens*. But Ursula realized that herself — as I said, in her short story "Vaster than Empires." People like that are nuts. I have a staunchly Christian friend who tells me flat out that St. Francis — the original friar — was a nut and a fanatic. Do



we really want a nut or fanatic to be our envoy to a new planet? I don't think so.

Perhaps I do want *LHD* to have been a different text. No, not really . . . I did suggest a story set a few centuries back in our world, such as the then wilds of America. But in the end, I love *LHD* the way it is. Just as I love *Oedipus Rex* the way it is, improbability and all.

27 September 2007

I have now managed to get all three of the Pullman books and finished them. Perhaps you might like to hear my initial reactions.

First, His Dark Materials is not a trilogy. It is a single novel in three volumes, like Tolkien. Well over 1,000 pages, and the books are not self-contained. So you have to start with *Northern Lights (The Golden Compass)*, and plough on to the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, which I have now done. I now call it a book.

It is not a book I would give to a 12-year old child, still less to a younger one. It has many really horrible sequences, such as torture or murder of children. I think it has literally given me bad dreams. If I had read this as a child, I am sure it would have given me nightmares.

It's basically a thriller. I don't much like thrillers. I had to put it down from time to time just to recover from horrors. At the same time I was laughing inside, because the ontology is really over the top. A mishmash of magic fantasy, science fiction and very supernatural fantasy: artillery and angels, armored intelligent bears, and ghosts. A visit to Virgil's after-life, complete with the boatman Charon (who is left unnamed). As H. G. Wells once said, "When anything can happen, nothing remains interesting." And in His Dark Materials anything can happen at any time. Helicopters and angels. Really!

I suppose it's better than Rowling. And I agree with Pullman's (anti)theology. But I wish he had stuck to something more unified.

As a matter of tactics, I agree with Phillip Adams — better not to insult all Christians, but to work with the moderate ones. Kicking Christianity now is not a very good idea. If Pullman were a Muslim, and had done a similar job on Islam, he'd be dead. We are in fact at war, now, and we have to choose our side. I know which is the more dangerous religion. Christianity to me smells bad, but at least it's our bad smell.

I don't at all mind Pullman hating Christianity, and especially the myth of the Fall from Innocence. I hate those things too. But I find his plot basically incredible. Why should a twelve-year old girl and boy, nowadays, falling in love be a world-changing event? Lyra seems to be a female Christ, in a second coming. And at the end, both the Authority and Metatron are dead, yet England seems basically unchanged. All that happened is that the Church has become more liberal.

If the work shocks Christians, it ought to shock atheists too. People seem to have souls (daemons, dust) and ghosts, neither of which I believe. It's all too supernatural. I see the influence of Le Guin in the world of the dead, but again, Le Guin's world of the dead is too supernatural for my liking. Both are modelled on the Classical Hades.

Of course, the work has many powerful scenes, and original ideas, which I won't be able to forget. I like the Knife best. I wish I had one. I'd love to live in a different universe, especially one with an improved human race. But I think Evil is as natural and necessary as Good; there's no escaping it, and all utopias are eventually corrupted. Get rid of all religions, and evil would still creep back. This is one of the biggest mistakes in Christianity: the idea that the first people were created good. They weren't. Early humans were vicious murderers from the beginning of high intelligence; every tribe made war on every other tribe.

You are right that Tolkien has also written a thriller. But it has not nearly such horrifying scenes as in Pullman. And the pace of the violence is much slower in Tolkien, with longer intervals of beauty and comfort. I can re-read Tolkien, but I don't think I'll want to re-read His Dark Materials.

All of this is just my immediate reaction. And as I've said before, I don't believe in objective merit in literature. There are certain acclaimed kinds of books I always avoid — including

thrillers, murder mysteries; I avoid all that on TV too. I don't need to be told that the world is full of horrors.

20, 22 October 2007

[*brg* The essence of the thriller and crime mystery novel is solving the puzzle, the mystery — or multiple mysteries. The central mystery of the His Dark Materials books is the nature of Dust, and hence the nature of the three universes that form the trilogy's stages, each linked by this sub-stance but affected differently. Most characters are introduced ambiguously, so the reader wants to find out who they really are, and how they are linked.

None of this would mean much if Pullman were not such a visual and energetic writer. Energy ripples from every sentence, compared with the sentences of Tolkien and his followers, which seem designed to put me to sleep. I remember individual scenes from Dark Materials, rather than the whole plot. Maybe I can work out the story the next time I read the books.

I bought the Dark Materials books some time ago, prompted by the enthusiasm of the British fans with whom I was corresponding at the time. Perhaps some of them could explain why, as the Dark Materials books appeared during the late 1990s, they seemed very much better than anything else in the fantasy field.*]

E. B. FROHVET, 4716 Dorsey Hall Drive, No 506, Ellicott City MD 21042, USA

Dick Jenssen's exegesis of the origins of his cover is interesting. I am tempted to point out that, for example, Anderson and Dickson's Hoka stories are the exact inverse of his description, in that the humans were exploited for figures of fun, being unaware of how they were being made fools of by the Hokans. I am not sufficiently sure of the fine points of the Kuttner–Moore collaboration; my impression was that "Vintage Season" was primarily a C. L. Moore story (and was published as such in the DelRey *Best of C. L. Moore* collection). I thought of *Fury* as mainly a Kuttner work. The only case I am certain of involves the Gallagher stories, published in the Lancer paper-back as *Robots Have No Tails*, because in the introduction of that edition, Moore pointedly disavows any participation in their writing, ascribing them solely to Kuttner.

Guest editorial: this topic has been discussed, specific to SF, elsewhere. Yes, there are too many awards. The titles of real books are amusing. I think I've actually skimmed over *Salads with Edible Flowers* in the library.

Having said "There are too many awards," would it seem hypocritical of me to offer congratulations on your Chandler Award? I am not familiar enough with its criteria to express any opinion on it.

[*brg* The Chandler Award began, I think, in 1989, and hence predates and puts into perspective the 1990s SF explosion in Australia. It is given to a person's lifetime achievement in the SF and fantasy fields in Australia, and includes both fans — who, after all, kept the SF field alive here during periods when little SF was being published — and pioneering pro writers.

There is no similar award elsewhere; if the USA had a similar award (let's call it the Jack Williamson Award), it might well be given to pro writers such as Gene Wolfe, Greg Benford and Ursula Le Guin, long-time fans such as Steve Stiles, Arnie and Joyce Katz, and Geri Sullivan; semi-pro publishers such as Andrew Porter and Charles Brown; and prolific academics such as Gary Westfahl and Fredric Jameson.*]

It may be ill done for me to shoehorn my response to John Purcell's LOC into a brief thought on the two articles about Alan Garner, except as thematic overlap. Naturally, my piece on Heinlein's *The Star Beast* presupposed that readers would have read the book. Personally, I regard anyone who is not familiar with Heinlein as science-fictionally illiterate. (I do not thrust that label on John, who says he has read many Heinlein books, just not that one.) But if you haven't read the book, then yes, the article would not mean much; much as the pieces about Alan Garner attract only

superficial attention from me, since I am not acquainted with his works. If the authors wish to dismiss me as "magical fiction illiterate," well, I've been called worse.

Heinlein used, and expanded on, the word "xenology" in *The Star Beast* (1954). Hal Clement used the same word in *Cycle of Fire* (1957). Given the amount of SF being published in the 1950s, they certainly were aware of each other. I don't know whether Clement picked up the word from the Heinlein book, found it somewhere else, or made it up independently.

I agree with Ray Wood that authors tend to explain too much. I have been inclined to ascribe this to one of two problems: 1) an error of inexperience, AKA the "C. J. Cherryh wannabe" problem (the author lacking confidence in his or her ability to tell anything by indirection, desperately shows you every nail in every board in the scaffolding of the story); or 2)
an error of excess creativity, AKA "kitchen sink problem" (the author having worked out the background of the piece in excruciating detail, can't bring him or herself to leave any of it out, whether or not it advances the story). Textbook example would be Tolkien shoving Bombadil and Goldberry into *Lord of the Rings*, a tale in which they have no place and make only a cameo appearance, because he had them lying around and couldn't bear to leave them out.

As a "lifelong SF fan," more or less, I will take the road less travelled and agree with Mr. Wood that the high level of interaction between SF writers and readers, which in general we take as a good thing, has its downside also, which he describes acutely — Anne McCaffrey being an excellent example.

Uh, there was no presidential election in the US in 1942. Had there been, we were already deeply involved in the war by then, and probably the electorate would not have "changed horses in midstream." I also think it's a little harsh to call Charles Lindbergh "pro-Nazi." He was certainly isolationist; whether he was more racist/anti-Semitic than the norm in America at the time, is for history to judge.

[*brg* Roth makes out a pretty good case that a Lindbergh win would have made America an ally of Germany, and would have unleashed the destructive wolves of anti-Semitism that can often be heard snuffling away in America's political cellars.*]

From your listings of favorite short stories, I deduce that we don't have much overlap in taste. Which is fine.

It seems almost too easy to admit David Lake's denunciation of Harry Potter. In an (unpublished) article, my principal objection was that mundanes like Harry because, not having read much non-realistic fiction, they are bluffed into the false sense of a unique reading experience. Surely I can't be the only one who sees the bad-imitation-Dickens angle?

Well, nice to know that I inspired Greg Pickersgill to laughter, even if that wasn't my intent.

With all due respect to my friend Janine, it strikes me as quite natural to give up on a writer if one book fails to interest me. So many books, so little time; and then there are the good books (and even the enjoyably mediocre ones) I wish to re-read. I started David Brin's much praised *Startide Rising* twice, just could not get into it, and have felt no impulse to read further Brin books since.

27 September 2007

[jgs: Funny you should mention that particular book. The first Brin book I read was *The Postman* (long before the film version was made) and I loved it. Thinking I'd like anything Brin wrote, I then tried *Startide Rising* and had the same problem you did; for me, the way the dolphins "spoke" kept tossing me out of the story because it just didn't "feel" right. Never read anything else by him. The point being, you might like *The Postman*, too, if you tried it. Or maybe not. As you say, there are plenty of other books to read.]

JOHN LITCHEN, 3 Firestone Court, Robina, QLD 4226

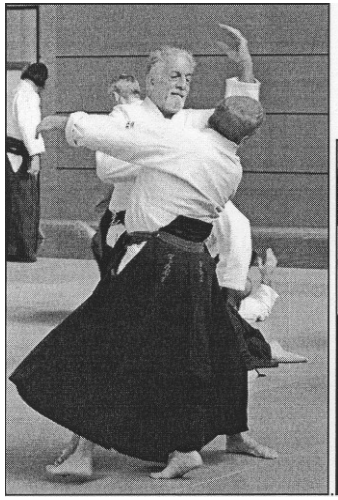
I understand how expensive printing and postage is because I publish a biennial newsletter magazine for Aiki-Kai Australia, I deal

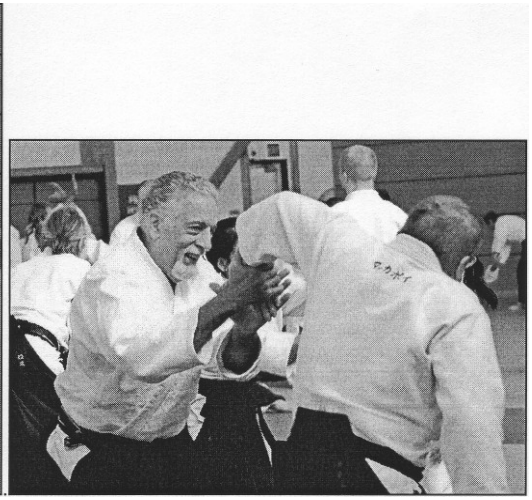
with printers and the post office, and everything they do is expensive. Fortunately Aiki-Kai pays for it. I just contribute the time to do it all.

I have been busy with various things (none of which makes any money) and the newsletter magazine for Aiki-Kai is an ongoing thing.

I recently helped organise a winter training school on the Gold Coast for Aiki-Kai. This was quite successful, with 150 people attending and training. I took over 1500 photos for use in our newsletter, and spent a lot of time sorting these out and correcting them for colour, exposure, etc.

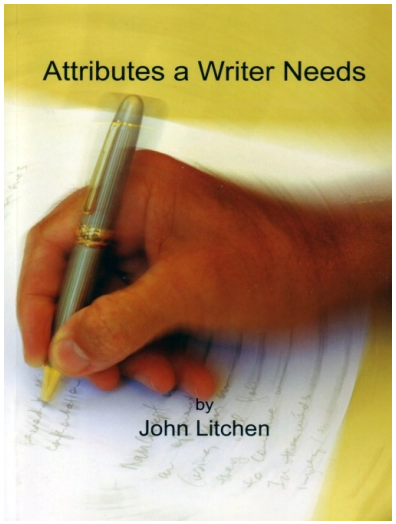
Here are two shots of me in action at winter school, so you see I am still active:





I have just finished publishing a small book, *Attributes a Writer Needs*, basically aimed at members of the Gold Coast Writers' Association and perhaps the Brisbane Writers' Group. It was self-published, because trying to find a publisher for this type of book seems almost impossible.

I did it all; cover design and photography, internal layout, all that stuff. I'm quite proud of it actually. It has in total 96 pages, and does what I hope it says in the above advert.



My Aikido book continues to sell an average of 15 copies per quarter in the U.S. mostly, and a few locally as new stu-dents come into the dojo, but it will take a few years yet to get back what it originally cost.

What it all comes down to, though, is I am still living on the age pension, and will never make much money from writing or photography, but it is an enjoyable pastime.

On the age front: congratulations on passing 60. It looks as if you had a great time. I'm currently finishing my 67th year (68 next April), and this is the first year I've had sufficient aches and pains in the joints to remind me I am not as young as I used to be. But we can't let age stop us, or we wouldn't do any bloody thing.

I also completed two novels, which are at two different publishers currently in their slushpiles, so who knows what will eventuate from that.

30 September 2007

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

Many thanks for *Steam Engine Time* 7, which I was pleasantly surprised to see so soon after the last number. Janine asks what sort of books I like when I mentioned that there aren't that many big books about the future, novels that seriously try to predict what the world will be like in 2032 or 2057. To my mind, some of Norman Spinrad's later novels qualify, including *Little Heroes* and *Russian Spring*. I also consider David Brin's *Earth* part of this category as well. And of course John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar* and *The Sheep Look Up* are classics of this type.

Of course these writers make errors. *Russian Spring*'s premise is the breakup of the Soviet Union— in 2010! *Earth*, like most of Brin's novels, is at least 100 pages too long, and while Brin saw some of the future clearly (his prediction of Internet life and etiquette was pretty good for a novel written in the late 1980s) he thought that the world of 2040 would have an intact Soviet Union and a South Africa still controlled by white racists. In addition, *Earth*'s central mystery is who is creating miniature black holes and using them to threaten the world, and the revelation of the black hole creator is so mind-numbingly stupid that the last five chapters are a chore to read. Still, Brin and Spinrad at least tried to predict the future. I don't know who is trying these days.

[jgs: Readers who read SF to find "novels that seriously try to predict what the world will be like in 2032 or 2057" will, I think, always be disappointed at the lack of same. In *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (St. Martin's Press, 1993, with 1995 update), for the entry "Prediction," Peter Nicholls wrote: "The most widespread false belief about sf among the general public is that it is a literature of prediction ... None of this has prevented sf fans from crowing with delight when an sf writer has made a good guess, and the mythology of sf is full of such examples." For overviews of prediction in sf (among other areas), Nicholls lists two books: *The Shape of Futures Past: The Story of Prediction* by Chris Morgan (1980), and *Facts and Fallacies: A Book of Definitive Mistakes and Misguided Predictions* (1981) by Morgan and Dave Langford.

I disagree with David Lake about Harry Potter. I've read and enjoyed all of the Potter novels. In fact, I finished *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* on a train from Chicago to Seattle where at least four other people were reading the book! No, Rowling isn't a great artist, but she's a good storyteller who got better as she went along. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* may have won a Hugo, but in my opinion it is the weakest book of the series. I don't normally read bestsellers, but Rowling is a good entertainer and I thought the series worth my time and money. But I don't have to re-read Rowling any time in the future, and although I enjoyed Dave Langford's funny *The End of Harry Potter?* I don't feel compelled to read any other books about the Potter phenomenon.

I wonder why, if you love short stories, Bruce, why don't you read the prozines? I was very happy to reconnect with *Fantasy and Science Fiction*. It's the sort of magazine Darrell Schweitzer describes in his comments about original antho-logies: I like 80–85 per cent of it, as well as its wide range of fiction and generally high quality. I'm also happy that *F&SF* introduced me to writers (such as Kelly Link) that I would otherwise never read.

1 October 2007

[*brg* The short answer is that I stopped buying all the prozines in the late 70s because I realized that I had stopped reading any of them in 1975. I kept buying *F&SF* much longer than the others, but in the end realized that I was never going to catch up my reading. I still buy the occasional special issue of *F&SF* from Slow Glass Books, as the magazine is unavailable elsewhere in Melbourne.*]

[jgs: Bruce, I think you could satisfy that "catch up" itch by reading one or two of the best-of collections for the last 5 years. You certainly won't get all the flavors available by doing so, but it'd at least give you a starting point, if you were interested in getting into short fiction again. I don't read a lot of short fiction because I prefer novels.]

BILLY PETTIT, 3747 Oak Brook Ct., Pleasanton CA 94588, USA

[*brg* Any fanzine put up on efanzines.com comprising scanned pages (rather than OCR) will be too large for most of us to download. One cannot scan a page at less than 72 dpi without the print itself becoming very 'lossy'. So for me, a scanned fanzine would have to be available on CD ROM for me to be able to access it. :: By the way, did you get the fanzines I've sent you recently? I haven't heard a word, not even a response to the Trip

Report, which Robert Lichtman certainly sent you.*]

Two good points, Bruce.

First, scanned pages can easily shipped via a CD. I've sent out many over the last few years. In fact, it is strongly recommended that an archive of multiple CDs (or DVDs) exist. The server files are always at risk of normal aging. I have been writing an article [on] how more than 60 per cent of my reference URLs are no longer working after only two years. And the data on them is no longer available. So copies *have* to be made, and hard drives are not permanent enough. Digital data is extremely transient compared to paper.

You say that "most of us" cannot download large files. I know there are some extreme limits on bandwidth in Australia. But I would say that, based on eFanzines' hit rate, most fans can download large files. Certainly, I could be wrong — is there anyone else reading this who cannot transfer files off eFanzines because of their length? I really don't think we should limit archive resolution because of technology limits in some countries. The largest amount of data possible should be saved. Technology will catch up quickly.

Second point on the recent fanzines sent: I did email you a long letter of comment on the preliminary trip report that you sent me. I've not had time to read the final hard copy. It came while I was in the process of retiring and moving. I put all my fanzine mail together and will be going through it and commenting once I get partially unpacked. And sort out the various problems of Social Security, Medicare and pensions.

[*brg* I received only a few letters of comment on my BBB Fund Trip Report, *American Kindness*, so I'm publishing them all in **brg 51, my latest fanzine for ANZAPA. In turn, they will turn up as an issue of *Scratch Pad* on efanzines.com.*]**

Alas, for me, fanzines like *Steam Engine Time* are very hard to comment on. I love them and read them religiously. But the articles are so erudite and well researched that it is hard to say anything. And I'm not a scholar. I read science fiction because I enjoy it. But I don't know how to analyze a good book versus a bad one. All I can do is say why I like or dislike it — and that sounds very foolish when commenting on an analysis that one of your writers spent months preparing. My reading is for the joy it brings. My small comments can't compare with your critical critiques of authors, though I really find them interesting works.

The Pleasanton address is still valid.

3 October 2007

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

Steam Engine Time 7 was again a very stimulating issue, I enjoyed especially your guest editorial, "Book Awards" by Ray Wood. Those hypes are very amusing. It was for me also always fascinating to see American literary agents at work, how they praised their offerings and spoke of strengths of characterization etc. that you couldn't find with a microscope. I wonder whether editors are really taken in by this sort of praise? I myself always tried to be as neutral as possible, and indeed, when I once met the American publisher Peter Jovanovich, he remarked that I didn't behave like a literary agent. But it is still possible to achieve something if you know what is possible and what not, and can present literary worth realistically.

So you presented my small dacha to the world! I must send you some photos of the interior, especially my library. On the right side of the photo is my library; the floor with the balcony is the English-language room, where I have my British and American hardcovers and lots of paperbacks (the magazines are stored elsewhere); and above that I have a much smaller collection of German books — and lots of books on science fiction and fantasy in various languages.

It looks like there will be a

number of possible blockbuster films from Russia based on Strugatsky novels (*Hard To Be God* and *The Inhabited Island* aka *Prisoners Of Power*), by Aleksei German and Fyodor Bondarchuk, and I hope that these will fan interest in the Strugatskys' books. They were always created under much more difficult circumstances than those of, say, Lem, and the Strugatskys are much more interested in social concerns. You might look up http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/newslworldl europelarticle2507971.ace or the various entries in Wikipedia on Aleksei German.

3 October 2007

[*brg* I keep hoping for a revival of the fortunes of the Strugatskys, especially as I bought nearly everything that was translated in the seventies (but never caught up on reading it all). I find their idea of humour fairly hard to take, but it does feel like a good time to return to reading and writing about their realistic SF. I just hope there are more Strugatsky-based films coming up. *Hard to Be a God* would be ideal for adaptation by, say, Michael Winterbottom (whose *Code 36* is one of the very few interesting SF films of recent years). I didn't see *Stalker* at the cinema, and have just bought the DVD. I hope it's a decent print. Everything by Tarkovsky is around somewhere, although the print I have of his *Solaris* could hardly be called a 'remastering'. At best it could be called a decent copy of a reasonable, but faded print.

To answer your question — well, I did answer it in my editorial in *SET* 7. I'm earning very little — very little work around. Now that I've turned 60, somehow I have to survive until 65, when I can put my hands on the relatively small amount of pension fund that's been building up. I do have some money from the sale of my mother's flat (she died in March, which is also mentioned in the *SET* editorial, although I think I sent you **brg 49 as well), but without other real income from actual work, it doesn't amount to much. In my editorial, all this was preparatory to saying that I will definitely be going all on-line after *SF Commentary* 80. It's only a sizable gift by a Melbourne fan, Thomas Bull, that has enabled me to publish *SET*s 6 and 7 and **brg** 49 as paper-and-post fanzines.**

Things are so bad in publishing that for the first time in many years Elaine does not have any freelance editing work. As one of the few editors with a maths/science background, she's usually fighting 'em off, but nothing seems to be happening at the moment. 2007 was a bloody awful year.

Congratulations on retiring successfully. If ever you feel like sending me a review for *SFC* or *SET*, do not hesitate. I always enjoy everything you write.

Things in publishing are also getting worse, but I have been lucky all my life. Some translators that I know that were highly sought-after are now out of work, and generally there are fewer paid opportunities. Many publishers that were once independent houses have been swallowed up by Bertelsmann or some other conglomerate, fantasy is dominant and SF has all but disappeared or is being published only by small publishers that can afford to pay very little or nothing at all, and editions are quite small. Most of my work was writing reports for publishers; few now give such work to outside readers, most have their secretarial staff doing it. But the German book market is still the most open in the world, with lots of translations still coming out. But the backlist has all but disappeared as has the SF story. Ten, twenty years ago, there were lots of anthologies, and some were quite successful (my *Slaying of the Dragon* did much better in Germany than in the U.S.A., the same for *View From Another Shore*), but now anthologies are published only by very, very small publishers which cannot pay their authors.

But in Austria, pensions (as are normal salaries) are paid 14 times a year, and since I continue to do some work I now actually make a bit more than in my active time. I continue to write reviews for some German reference works, and for these there is also money from library and photo-copying use from Author's Lending and Collecting Societies which amount to a couple of thousand dollars a year.

I hope that things will improve for you and Elaine. I will let

you know what happens with the Strugatskys. Unfortunately, Boris's health is poor, and he is moving in and out of hospitals. I hope that there will be a couple of new translations. At least the non-humorous work is more accessible to non-Russian readers, their humour depends to a great deal of your knowledge of conditions in the Soviet Union.

Some day, when I think of it, I must make some photos of my library and send them to you.

November 5, 2007

JERRY KAUFMAN, 3522 NE 123rd St, Seattle WA 98125, USA

Another entertaining and challenging issue of *SET*? Yes, why not? I appreciate them — I'd even like them without colour covers on slick stock. (Would that cut your costs, Bruce?) With your announced change to PDF format only (except with negotiation), I've been worrying that I wouldn't be able to print your funny foreign-sized fanzine on my 8.5" × 11" American paper. But it finally dawned on me that rather than bust your chops about this, I could check efanzines.com and see for myself. It appears that Adobe will shrink the zine to fit "letter-size" paper.

[*brg* "Letter-size" paper is known throughout the rest of the civilized world as A4-sized paper, which is the fourth size down from A1-sized paper — 1 square metre.*]

Ray Wood is a good addition to your list of contributors. He's literate and full of ideas. I find the ideas a mix of sharp thinking and possible wrongness. That is, I found his concerns jibed with mine, but some of his conclusions were different. I too think that there are far too many awards being given for books these days. Every time I open an issue of *Locus*, I find one or two more. Ray's article focuses on awards in general, for "mainstream" books. I wish he had written more about awards specifically in the science fiction and fantasy genres, but I think he doesn't know much about them. His comments about how the Hugos and Nebulas are awarded shows just how unfamiliar he is, since neither award is selected by judges. Essentially these are both popular awards, though the voters are narrow subsets of the readership, but as such they can give a typical SF or fantasy reader some guidance. Those with more selective taste might not agree. (Note: I wrote this paragraph before going back through Ray's article — he addresses this but I don't want to toss out my own thinking.)

I was curious about the impressive list of writers who were not given Nobel Prizes, and have just looked at an article on the Nobel Prize website summarizing its history. Damn, wouldn't you know? The criteria for winning have been interpreted in a number of ways over the years, and moving literature in an "ideal direction" as stipulated in Nobel's will has been a key factor in the considerations. Many of the writers on Ray's list were considered and rejected because they were thought to be too radical or not ideal enough — with a con-servative definition of 'ideal'.

I agree most heartily that the number of very specialized awards we now have, some created to honor the memory of a beloved author, others to spotlight some aspect of geography, philosophy, social injustice, etc. dilutes the value of awards generally. (To name some specific awards I'm referring to: The Endeavor Award is given to highlight the best books by a Pacific Northwest writer; the Prometheus Award, the best book of a libertarian nature; the Carl Brandon Society gives out two awards, the Parallax (best speculative fiction by a person of color) and the Kindred (best speculative fiction dealing with racial and ethnic issues, no matter who created it). Each one is fine on its own, but along with dozens of others, it's just too much.

But do these awards actually drive readers away rather than attracting them? Ray says, "Does anyone else see this plethora of awards as one reason why people turn away from reading?" That's an interesting speculation, but one I think would be extremely hard to test. My gut reaction is, "No, the awards — except for the best best-known ones — don't affect people's thinking about reading, either in our favorite genres or books in general." I have been known to laugh at awards and read the books anyway. (I've read a very enjoyable series of mysteries by Eric Mayer and Mary Reed, and at least one volume won an award for the best mystery written

by a New Mexican or published in New Mexico. A quick Google search failed me — I couldn't find the award listing to see which book or what year and have passed the books along to others.)

Individual responses obviously will vary greatly, but I wonder if there's been any research done on why people read or don't read. I've seen recent polling on how much people read and who reads — or doesn't — but the causes seem to be mysterious. However, I'd be happy to be corrected and steered to sources that would explain changes. Most of what I've seen on the subject has been, er, subjective.

Please ask Ray Wood to continue to contribute. And please don't ask me to defend my generalizations with detailed supportive material. I'm just a fanboy spouting off — since when do I need to know what I'm talking about? If I could support all my gibbering, I'd turn pro.

7 October 2007

[jgs: But you *did* provide supportive material. :)]

ERIC LINDSAY, PO Box 640, Airlie Beach QLD 4802

In 555 addresses on my computer, 66 have no email address. Many would never have been on my fanzine circulation list, as they are mainly convention fans. Despite this, there are still a lot of fans who resist being assimilated into email. As you know, I pretty much gave up on paper fanzines somewhat before you were forced into such a dire decision. I do sympathise with you.

Thanks for the notes about Sydney J. Bounds. It is frightening how tight a life many authors must have, attempting to live on such low and irregular incomes from their writing. However, reading the reviews following the editorial, I am reminded once again why I don't buy much SF these days. Not that I am seeing many candidates to buy.

Thanks to the contributors for the lengthy comments on Eric Raymond's ideas of SF. On the basis of the comments, I suspect he is spending far more time contemplating software than SF, and both from a libertarian viewpoint. However a libertarian approach to software, while not a total failure, has not exactly been an outstanding success either. Jean would doubtless be very pleased to find most people used Linux, as she does, and wrote using Open Office, a product whose manuals she often edits. However that isn't happening. I don't think it is happening in SF either, despite the Prometheus awards.

7 October 2007

[jgs: Jean may be pleased to know that this SET was designed and edited in Open Office, which I've come to love a lot more than Word thanks to Chuck Connor and Dave Burton, who both have high-speed Internet connections and so were able to download and burn onto CDs copies of OO for me. Thanks, guys.]

ANNA DAVOUR, 17 Van Order Drive 7-204, Kingston, ON K7M 1B5, Canada

I'm Swedish but in exile in Canada. I'm glad that my accent doesn't shine through that much in writing :-) I'm very much a reader of ideas myself. I love things that make me think (do you remember the essay Carl Sagan wrote about science fiction?). But at the same time it's an effort to think, and that's why I don't read more short stories.

The article about Howard Waldrop, and to some extent those about Alan Garner as well, reminds me of what happened once when a friend of mine enthusiastically told his sister about a movie he liked. He focused on all the interesting details, how the little things related to the larger picture and how he noticed new things when he rewatched the movie. The sister listened and got more and more interested in seeing this masterpiece. Then my friend told her the name of the movie. "What!" she exclaimed. "I have seen that one, and I didn't like it at all!"

This is why I love discussing books and stories, and why I like reading what others have to say about them. There is always more to discover, and someone else might see things I would never have noticed.

I haven't read anything by Howard Waldrop, and I'm not convinced that I would like his stories, but I'm certainly inter-ested

in trying. I get the impression that it could be hard work — but it might be worth it. And Alan Garner. If I have the patience.

You see, I have the same problem as many others nowadays, and that is that I have limited energy and mostly want reading to be relaxing. This is also why I'm reading far fewer short stories than I would like to.

I often hear the argument that the short story should be the perfect medium of literature for the modern lifestyle. Lit-erature in single serving packages, perfect to read on the commuter train in the morning. But it doesn't work that way. A collection of short stories is much more work per page than a novel of the same length. Every time I start a new story I need to go uphill until I know what the story is about. Many good short stories are only uphill, and then the ending. A novel takes some effort to get into, but then I can read one page and put the book down to take it up again later without starting over with something new. This is the long slope downhill, where I can just take it in and relax. It's much easier to read a novel in very small time slots than to concentrate on short stories — which I might not have time to finish, and then have to start over to remember what it was about.

I think this is why many prefer reading very watered-out stories. You can follow the story line without being concentrated all the time, and if you nod off and don't remember the last two pages when you wake up you can continue anyway. It's sad, but this is the reality of reading when you are busy with Other Things. I like short stories, but I often pick up a novel instead because I'm just too tired.

Your Iceberg Symposium reminds me of my project to read more short stories. More effort, higher reward!

16 October 2007

[*brg* Before she moved from Sweden to Canada, Anna was a GUFF candidate, but was beaten by Ang Rosin. It was great to meet Ang for the first time, but as usual I wished that each of the four candidates could have made the trip to Australia. Let's hope you stand again, Anna, this time for DUFF, and win.*]

JOHN PURCELL, 3744 Marielene Circle, College Station TX 77845, USA

I gotta tell you two that *SET* No 7 is a lovely, lovely fanzine, starting off with that marvellous cover. It has been a long time since I've seen a cover by Dick Jenssen, and it's good to see him still producing marvellous work. Methinks, he needs to send something equally cool my way for a future issue of *Askance*. (Man, I'm not subtle, am I?)

A couple things of note struck my fancy, beginning with Ray Wood's editorial about the plethora of writing awards. The science fiction community has spawned a multitude of awards in the past fifteen years that I've never heard of until recently. Of course, my family-and-career-induced exile didn't help, but I had no idea until earlier this year that I began reading about all of the various awards in science fiction and fantasy. I guess once I finally write that great novel burning somewhere inside me — probably my bowels, but we won't go there, will we? — then there's a good chance I'll win some kind of writing award. With my luck it will be something like the Arthur Leo Zagat Memorial Award for Achievement in Stfnal Obfuscation. That would be right up my alley. In any event, there are too many writing awards nowadays, so I think I will just stick with reading what interests me and hang the critics. So long as it is an enjoyable and thought-provoking novel/story, then I'm a happy camper.

The other thing that sparked my stunted synapses into action was Bruce's editorial. I may not be 60 years old yet, but I'm getting there. Only seven more years to go. But I completely understand Bruce's decision to forego footing the postage on paper copies of zines in favor of utilizing the electronic format to disseminate zines. It works for me. If I want a hard copy of a zine, I can always print it out. Not a problem. In fact, lots of zines get that treatment. As a result, my stack of fanzines is growing, and that's a happy problem. Even so, there are folks who still produce Dead-Tree fanzines on a regular basis — such as Mark Plummer and Claire Brialey with *Banana Wings* and Joseph and Lisa Major's *Alexiad* — that are welcome visitors to my mailbox. Doing electronic fanzines

is so much cheaper, and I think it is just as much fan to produce since you can play around with the graphics, layout and so forth with the technology. I enjoy it a lot. And it certainly looks like you two do, too, judging how beautiful *Steam Engine Time* is every issue.

By the way, Bruce, congratulations on receiving the Chandler Award. You deserve it, my friend. It is representative of your years of devotion and contribution to science fiction and its fandom, and it is definitely a worthy addition to your mantle. (You do have a mantle for displaying it, don't you? Everybody with an award must have a mantle!) As you said, the best years are ahead. I am looking to them, and it certainly sounds like you are too.

As for the the articles in this issue, I enjoyed them. Sad to say, I have never really read much Alan Garner before, even though I once had *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *The Moon of Gomrath* and *Elidor* in my collection. I am not sure if I ever had *The Owl Service*, but it certainly sounds familiar. That's what I used to do: buy books that were recommended and then never get around to reading them. Many thanks for these excellent articles about Garner and his work. You have me interested in dredging up these books and reading them.

The Iceberg Symposium articles were solid, too, but I am unfamiliar with many of the books Gillian Polack discusses. Ray Wood's article I could relate to, since I've read nearly all of the books he mentions. Once again, here's some more reading material to peruse in the future. At the rate this is going, I'll be reading well into the afterlife.

[*brg* Thanks for the congratulations. I hate to destroy your week, but I can't resist telling you that the blue bowl does not need a mantle, because a few years ago Elaine bought me a glass cabinet in which to house all the Ditmar Awards. The blue bowl (Chandler Award) and the citation plaque have been placed among the many Ditmars, some of which have strange shapes and sizes.

The trick is to stop the cats playing games on the shelves and knocking the lot to the floor. (At our house in Collingwood, the Ditmars did have a mantle shelf, and one of our early cats, Ishtar, did manage to sweep a few of them onto the floor with her magnificent tail.)

The worst of the plethora of book awards in SF is that *Locus* has long since stopped explaining what they are for, and usually I have no memory of the institution of each award. I know that if it has 'Philip K. Dick Award' on it, the book is usually good, but that no longer applies to the annual Campbell Award (not the one given at the Hugos). The old-guard hard-SFers seem to have captured the judging panel for that one. The Aurealis Award (Australian jury award) was a good guide to the best Australian fiction until a few years ago. Now it is even more unreliable than the Ditmar Award (popular award) for quality of Australian fiction. Probably most real readers do as we do — ignore all awards, leap on the latest book by one of our favourites, and taste a few of the newer authors when we receive their books as review copies.*]

You bastard! You have a Glass Cabinet for your awards. That's even more ostentatious. But very cool, I must admit. I have no idea how many Ditmar Awards you have, but I do hope none was broken when Ishtar swept them onto the floor way back when.

I love that cat's name, by the way. Our Maine Coon cat, Riley, has a full, magnificent tail, too, but he doesn't jump up onto things — except Penny's bed when it's nap time, or bed time, or simply time to kick back and watch the world go by. Breakable things in our house are more likely to be the victims when two of our other cats, Toulousse and Diphthong, get to ramrodding through the house. It's a zoo here, I tell you, a zoo.

Lately I have been ignoring award-winning books and stories, instead just randomly picking a book off the shelf simply because I haven't read it yet or it's been a while. The most recent novel was Doc Smith's *The Galaxy Primes*. Terrible book, but I finished it. Now I'm re-reading *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (it's been over thirty years), and enjoying it immensely. The good ones never lose their magic.

27 October 2007

GILLIAN POLACK, Chifley ACT 2606

Your Chandler award was much deserved. I don't see a problem in you being awarded for something you enjoyed doing. Life is seldom full of such neat happinesses and you should enjoy this one. If you stopped putting out fanzines because of the award, then that would be immensely wrong. In fact, I think we should expect more from you, simply because you now know that we know how very good your work is.

Some comments on *SET* 7:

The Guest Editorial was interesting, in that it brought together a lot of ideas about awards that I've been hearing other people voice. I'm not sure that all those ideas actually fit together, though. I started reading the article as an Aurealis judge, and I became full of thoughts of how we work very hard to make sure that our judgment is as good as it can be, under the circumstances. We don't judge for fifty years' time, how-ever. We can't know the taste and situation of readers in fifty years' time, though I like to think that some works leap out at us and make us believe they will last forever. Aurealis awards are for that book, at that moment, competing in that particular field.

The awards system isn't nearly as tightly linked to the PR of publishers as Ray Wood's article seems to suggest. The whole PR spin on jackets has nothing to do with the award-giver, except that some recipients of some awards get sticky labels that they can put on their books if they want — the ACT awards include some sticky labels, for instance. Their use, though, is very much dependent on the writer and the publisher and how the publicity is configured.

This means that the awards are mostly independent of what the industry chooses to do with the glitter once it has been bestowed. The big exception to this is the Booker Prize, where publishers are committed to spending significant amounts of money if any of their entered works win.

I really loved the Alan Garner article. Alan Garner is one of my favorite writers. He's one of the reasons I'm so firmly addicted to fine young adult fantasy. *The Owl Service* has haunted me since I read it the very first time, way back when, and I really wish I could write like that. I especially like the layering of issues and how the mythic turns out to be an aspect of everything from the class system to falling in love.

I still look at *The Grinding House* in wonder (just to change the topic). Kaaron Warren would have been noticed widely sooner or later, simply because her writing is so good, but it was very cool to be a small part of the group that made that recognition happen fractionally sooner.

30 October 2007

[*brg* Thanks very much for getting back in touch, Gillian. The main problem of ConVergence for me was that I failed to catch up a whole lot of people... and then to find out a few weeks later when I looked at Helena Binns' photos to find you had been there!*]

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

Thanks very much for SET 7, which arrived before I'd read 6, which I probably forgot to thank you for. Nice looking magazine with some interesting articles, kind of *SFC*-lite, which is just about my speed these days given how little SF I actually read.

I especially liked your response to Darrell Schweitzer, a usually interesting and fair-minded writer with a complete blind spot on the subject of New Wave. He didn't bring up the "non-functional word patterns," or at least I didn't notice it this time, but otherwise I must have read this same screed half a dozen times. What Darrell doesn't seem to get is that the whole point of New Wave was to try some new things, not all of which actually worked — but as you point out, a lot of it did.

I never read "Earthman Come Home" as a short story, so I can't compare it to the experience of reading the novels, but Blish is one of the last writers I would accuse of over-explaining. It's many years since I read the Cities in Flight saga, and I have no plans to re-read it now, but what im-pressed me then was the way that Blish kept on upping the ante. Where lesser writers would have

made a whole career out of the adventures of his flying city, Blish just keeps pushing right on to the cosmic overwhelm of A Clash of Cymbals.

The novelisation of "A Case of Conscience" is probably a much better illustration of Ray Wood's argument, but then again the second half was pretty interesting, and who knows how well it would stand up today.

Good to see you still doing what you're so good at, and I look forward to seeing a new SFC one day, whether as PDF or print artefact.

November 15, 2007

FRED LERNER, 81 Worcester Ave., White River Junction, Vermont 05001

In "Back to the short story", the sources you cite trace the origins of the short story to the early 1800s. I once ran across a book that finds its origins a century earlier. When I read a review of *A Guide to Prose Fiction in* The Tatler *and* The Spectator by James E. Evans and John N. Wall, Jr. (New York : Garland Pub., 1977), I was surprised to learn that the anecdotes in Addision and Steele's *Spectator* — I had read through an antique edition that collected all 555 issues of the magazine into eight octavo volumes — were fiction rather than nonfiction. *The Tatler* was founded in 1709, and *The Spectator* was published in 1711-1712; if Evans and Wall are right, the English-language short story is a lot older than the received wisdom would have it.

November 19, 2007

[*brg* Thanks very much for your comment on SET 7. I presume you are publishing a paper about your discovery somewhere! All the sources I could find agreed that the short story doesn't much predate the nineteenth century, and only really developed with people like Poe. Please keep me connected with anything you write about the history of the short story — I thought I would find clear information about its origins, both historic and artistic, but such information seems fairly vague. However, you might have come across some recent book that clarifies such matters.*]

DOUGLAS BARBOUR, 11655—72 Ave. NW, Edmonton AB T6G 0B9 Canada

Steam Engine Time 7 has been quite the delight to read, although the grammarian in me was somewhat bothered upon occasion.

That Guest Editorial has its points, but I wonder. Of course, the Nobel crew has mucked up far too often, & it could almost be seen as an honour to have not won, but I think Ray Wood misses two points. One is that people who do take awards (somewhat) seriously take great pleasure in arguing about them, how this one missed the boat, how the short list was pretty good, but the final choice (almost always a compromise; I know having served on some juries) was wrong, how could they leave such-&-such off? The other is that awards do offer some recognition of merit to certain kinds of works. In Canada, we have a number of provincial awards, as well as country wide ones, as well as one, The Griffin Poetry Prize, that awards both a Canadian and an International book. I am often upset by the choices made, but it almost always makes for interesting discussion & can be really good for the book in question. CBC Radio has a small series, 'Canada Reads!'. in which five well-known people choose a book (published some time ago) to defend, and then spend a week discussing them & slowly dropping one by one till a winner is declared.

Sales of the five books soar (& this year, with one of the five books being little NeWest Press's *Icefields*, by Thomas Wharton, we are looking forward to some needed sales [being a small press, in the richest but most arts averse province in the country] [I should add that I am the President of the NeWest Board, an all volunteer group]). That is certainly one reason for awards, & some actually do achieve this end (the Booker, for example, as well as Canada Reads!). I agree that too many (non)books are published, & that, sadly, far too few people read real books, but even that small percentage of the population (apparently around 5%) adds up to enough to keep us publishers going, with some help from the

various public funding agencies (absolutely necessary in a country, like ours, like yours, with such a small population).

Indeed, as a fanzine editor, you of all people would, I think, understand this. I think the world wide web will prove helpful, & I will sign up (as if I have the time to read more fanzines on line along with the poetry zines, like the very best, Australia's *Jacket*, & certain newszines). And by the way, I'm not really 67, either. We were told by our elders that we would feel this way & most of us didn't believe it; now we know.

I recently started re-reading Alan Garner, so re-reading your article & reading Robert Mapson's proved interesting, & useful, in that I hadn't even heard about the new novel, *Thursbitch*, which seems to underline the point about how little his work is advertised, etc. I'll look for it, or track it down, & keep slowly making my way through the others to get up to it. Although you both tend to dismiss the first 3, even they are sharp, sudden in their turns, & written in a terrifically stripped manner, no extra verbiage, at all.

It's obvious that Ray Wood sees himself as something of a provocateur, & there's a part of me that agrees that repetition of kind in writing can undermine a writer's growth. And, yes, I was captured by big vision, even with rather poor writing, in my early reading (Way Back Then), but he seems unwilling to grant the imaginative & stylistic growth in the field in recent decades. Quite simply, the best SF today (& fantasy, too, but I know you aren't that interested in it) is far better written than in the past. To put that sentence in perspective, that 'best' today is I would say around 10% rather than Sturgeon's 5%; of course, there's an awful lot of crap, which I try to ignore. But the imaginative reach of that Best is huge, & the 'science' of science fiction is far better integrated into the fiction. I'm still enjoying that Best a lot.

As for short stories, well I like them too, but I wouldn't necessarily trade them for any number of fine novels. Still, again those Best of the Year collections usually provide me with enough. I just don't have time for more than that. I do enjoy reading your (& any others') lists, however; keep them coming. And, of course, as Matthew Davis's nifty little article on Howard Waldrop makes clear, some writers just work best in that form (you know all too well about one of Canada's finest writers, Alice Munro, perhaps the finest short story writer of her generation, maybe in English of the past half century).

Your letters column is always a delight, & so I hope I make it in with this one.

December 6, 2007

TIM MARION, c/o Kleinbard, 266 East Broadway, Apt 1201B, New York, NY 10002, USA

The article on Alan Garner in Steam Engine Time 7 seems a bit familiar, and indeed, seems to repeat an error regarding *Moon of Gomrath* which I recall not only seeing in one of your fanzines before, but correcting as well. It is true that the two books, *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *Moon of Gomrath* feature child protagonists who become swept up with, rather than seeking to control, magical events, however what they end up inadvertently releasing is called the "Old Magic," not the "Old Evil" as erroneously mentioned in the review. What further makes these books unusual is that there is no clear distinction between good and evil presented — instead everyone and events around them are presented in shades of gray. The "Old Magic" is not necessarily "evil";
just more chaotic and harder to control; more willful. (I could be remembering incorrectly here, but I would be surprised if so.)

Thanks for reminding us that *The Owl Service* is a re-telling of a story from *The Mabinogion* — the story of a wizard who is called upon by a young man to create a beautiful woman to end his loneliness. The wizard is so successful with his creation that he falls in love with her himself, creating a triangle. This triangle has been repeated in film in "The Bride of Frankenstein" and at least one episode of the original Star Trek ("Requiem for Methuselah"). In *The Owl Service* , the eternal triangle falls on three young children, only one of whom may understand what is happening to them. The ending, if I interpreted it correctly, is a peaceful, harmonious one, despite the internal strife. (There has

also been a TV series adaptation of *The Owl Service* which I have never seen. Reportedly it was minimally budgeted.)

Fascinating material on Garner by Robert Mapson. I quote: "...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... dislocation from that [his ancestral home] culture... both part of and exiled from his heritage..." Good grief, no wonder I like Garner's fiction so much! We're obviously kindred spirits!

But good grief again, that Cheshire dialect! Surely the extracts from *The Stone Book Quartet* that Mapson quotes are enough to discourage me from attempting the mass (almost said "mess" there). I have no idea what those characters are trying to say. Not meaning to be too secular here (and no doubt succeeding anyway), but is it easier for natives of Australia to tell what those characters are on about?

As much as I enjoyed Mapson's piece, it helped me to firmly make up my mind not to read any more of Garner's fiction. I would like the first few novels I've read to remain fondly in my memory; that memory might become tainted by trying to read language I can't understand in later novels. It may not make Mapson happy, but I am like most readers who, altho not necessarily lazy, definitely wants the story to make sense on the first pass-thru, as opposed to being, as Mapson declares, an "onion" whose layers one has to slowly keep repeatedly peeling.

December 07, 2007

Ray Wood pleads to the readers, "but do you agree that my point may perhaps be generally true?" No, 'fraid not. I think Ray Wood speaks, for the most part, only for himself when he complains about the details being filled in the genre classics he remembers. Science fiction and fantasy readers are usually the first to complain when a world or milieu is not fully realized. Ray also seems to confuse a writer's body of readers with "fandom" as a disorganized entity. Not so; the responses a writer gets on the internet to his queries regarding his works need not be answered only by those who read fanzines and/or go to conventions (which is how one generally defines "fandom").

Ray makes yet another mistake when he insists that "fans" are "fanatics" and are therefore unreasonable (altho I'm sure he is being a bit tongue-in-cheek there). "Fan" can also stand for "fancier," which is a much more reasonable appellation. Wood makes his point that sequels can be done to death, however, and to the detriment of the original story.

December 08, 2007

I can understand why David J. Lake doesn't like the Harry Potter novels for the reasons he listed. Reminds me of my mention of Torchwood in a previous letter to you. It's not just that the sight of two men snogging for over a minute made me feel uncomfortable, it also took place in the middle of a 1941 ballroom with a man who had to lead his men into aerial combat the next day (a captain in the RAF, in other words). Now that's real science fiction!

Fascinating letter from Darrell Schweitzer where he actually tells me something I didn't know — that the infamous J.J. Pierce was the son of a writer named John R. Pierce! But Darrell doesn't mention that both he and I encountered this elusive JJ Pierce at a LunaCon just a few years ago, so he's obviously alive and well (or at least, was then). Of course, I've often said that "new wave" describes some nebulous nonsense that I've been trying to understand for as long as I've been in fandom (37 years or so) and that the "real" definition of such is entirely subjective.

And I've often asked — I tried to read *The Day of the Dolphin* by Robert Merle when I was a kid, but quickly gave up due to the lack of quotation marks to differentiate the dialogue amongst the characters. Was this a "new wave" technique? The novel became a best seller and then a movie, somehow. I would have thought the lack of quotation marks would have bothered other readers as well.

December 11, 2007

[*brg* *Strandloper* has special interest to an Australian, but whether an American would get through it ... The story of William Buckley, upon which it's based, is reasonably well known in Australia, but it would be hard for someone unfamiliar with the geography to get one's head around the basic concept of *Strandloper*. You need to look at a map of Port Phillip Bay, which is the bay that Melbourne is the head of. Buckley is landed on the east coast of the bay, with the other convicts. He escapes. He knows he is headed north, but he thinks he is on Australia's east coast, and therefore if he walks long enough he will head north to China.

Instead he heads north along the bay coast, which gradually circles around and comes back in a circle. He finished up on the west coast of the bay, among the Aboriginal tribes that once inhabited the Bellarine Peninsula around Geelong. At one point he sees the convict group he escaped from — he can stare across the bay and see from the west coast (Point Nepean) his group packing up and going home (on the Mornington Peninsula, across the bay).

Buckley (his real name; I forget the name that Garner uses) then became a part of the local tribe for thirty years — which is when Garner's book becomes really interesting.

But I don't know the Cheshire area that Garner uses for *Thursbitch*, so I was brought up short by that book. In Australia we're much more used to English dialects than you are, but ABC TV often runs BBC TV shows, some of which are not afraid to feature various British Islands accents.

I must go back to *Owl Service* and *Red Shift*, though — it's over thirty years since I last read them.*]

RAY WOOD, Quorn SA 5433

Thanks for putting my pieces into the last issue, and for the illustrations to "Imagination and science fiction." I've always felt that John Schoenherr's illustrations to Herbert's Dune books were perhaps the finest SF illustrations I've ever seen, and that the cover pic of the Arakeen worm the best of those. (Did you notice the hilarious parody of that worm in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Season 7, Episode 2, "Beneath You"?) But I was always disappointed in that illustration of an Okie City, and think that it's one of those SF subjects that's beyond the power of illustration, and that it should have been left alone.

I was most interested in your comments on the SF short story in your part of "The iceberg symposium", and especially what you say about "the failure of recent novels ... to satisfy this particular Grumpy Old Reader." I've been thinking for some time now that I've myself not been finding any really worthwhile novels for quite a time simply because I've read too many through my life, that in other words it's the result of no more than growing old.

But I'm beginning to suspect something else. I'm 72 now, and am very much aware that my mind is growing more feeble, and that when I read a novel my mind hasn't the same ease in holding the entire scheme and complexities of it for the duration ... And reading a short story is easier simply because I can hold on to those things right through to its end.

I've been noticing this recently in myself, too, in writing full-length books. (I've written books almost every year since I was eight, but for a long time now only for myself: I am my only reader, the only person I'm interested in entertaining.) I can no longer retain overall mastery of writing a full-length book — I reach a point where suddenly I realize that the entire thing has partly slipped out of my mind. But in writing short stories I find that I can still retain this hold over them to their very end. So I do wonder if the novel is a young person's game, and the short story is more for your old age. Could it be as physiologically simple as that?

But as well, I have a small suspicion that the 20th century isn't really an Age for the Novel: I too well remember the tremendous power of 19th-century novels that impacted upon me when I read them, and feel that especially the last fifty years could be called the Age of the Failure of the Novelist. There hasn't been the same power and scope that the 19th-century novel had. Why? — well, I don't really know. Postmodernism hasn't done the novel much good, of course. And film has possibly attracted the attention of the best creative minds of the 20th century away from writing

novels. (And I feel that for a long time now the novel has become too cerebral.) When Dickens and Tolstoy wrote novels they knew beyond any doubt whatsoever that they were writing for everyone: their readership was all humankind. No writer today believes that, but today, film-makers do. So perhaps the reason may be simply a historical one, that just as the epic poem and the poetic drama have passed into history, so has the novel.

Then I also wonder about the ever-widening split between genre and mainstream novels, that possibly the reason is no more than a technical one, Although there were specifically genre writers in the 19th century, most of whose books disappeared long ago, the great novelists of that century over-rode any distinction between the two, and were both main-stream and genre simultaneously in most of their novels. I think that today writers themselves may be at fault in casting themselves too much in the role of either mainstream writer or genre writer, and therefore unconsciously adopting too many restrictions for them to be able to emulate those great 19th-century novelists.

I wonder if the reason is mainly a technological one. I think that there was also an immense turning point in human confidence in the middle of the 20th century that may be responsible. Those 19th-century novelists had an unlimited confidence in humankind's possibilities — to them the human was still a gigantic figure in a tremendous and exhilarating adventure. The 1st World War was the beginning of the end of that confidence, but the advent of the 2nd World War truly shattered it. And if any event could be labelled as crucial to this loss of confidence, I reckon it'd be the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima. That single event, I feel, is when it became suddenly all too obvious that we humans had lost control of our destiny, perhaps that we in reality had no destiny, and probably never had. The 1969 Moon landing was just the 19th century's last gasp, a hangover from before Hiroshima.

So I wonder if the failure of novelists to any longer write great novels is no more than that humankind has finally turned its back on any possibility of a great destiny, and has engaged itself in a last party before the end. (I'm not saying that this is what's in fact the case, but suggesting that perhaps there's been an unconscious failure of nerve that's too deep down to be really noticeable.) So perhaps the reason is a psychological one.

I could probably come up with other possibilities as well as those four. But one of the luxuries of growing old is that you're happier to simply ask questions without bothering yourself too much with finding answers to them. Or even that you don't really believe in answers much any more. Finding great and spectacular answers is something for the young. Anyway, thanks for the entertainment.

[*brg* I was getting very worried about you... no reply to *Steam Engine Time*, and a bounce to a later email. So thank you very much for writing back, especially with so many interesting opinions, many of which I agree with.

In a recent interview, Joanna Russ confessed that physiologically — not psychologically — she was no longer up to writing fiction, especially novels. But then, she has had acute back problems for more than twenty years, and she's well into her sixties. Disappointing, though, that a great voice is stilled, although her book of essays about SF has finally been published by Liverpool University Press, and the best of her essays are as brilliant as I remember them when they appeared in the sixties and seventies.

The nineteenth-century novelists were great because they saw themselves lifting the whole world onto their shoulders and carrying it (like Atlas, before he Shrugged). I don't think any novelist today would want to take on any part of the world except either his or her own bit; or just a well-chosen bit. The last big, big novelist was Solzhenitsyn, but I confess I haven't ever joined him for the ride.

Anyway, I'm glad that you're there, still writing your book a year. Good (or at least very much improved) health to you, Ray.*]

WAHF: **DORA LEVAKIS**; **IAIN EMSLEY**; **KEV McVEIGH**; **IAN COVELL**; **PAUL VOERMANS**; **SHERYL BIRKHEAD**; **NED BROOKS** (again); **ROBERT ELORDIETA** (with news of a new fantasy [apparently] film

called “Seeker”); **EDWINA HARVEY**; **JEFF HARRIS** (with a correction for the name of David Lake’s story: “Re-deem the Time” not “Re-deem the Night,” and DNQs what is otherwise an interesting letter, in which he suggests that Matthew Davis look at the work of Kim Newman alongside that of Howard Waldrop); **BERND FISCHER** (thanking Bruce for more than thirty years of receiving Bruce’s fanzines, and asks to become a Downloader, although he still has quite a substantial credit balance on his subscription); **STEVE JEFFERY** (with a long riff on “*the* Dave Gorman” of more general note, from television); **JERRY KAUFMAN** (on *SET* 6), **BILL BURNS** (“Ray Wood may be interested to learn that Sir Paul McCartney holds the Guinness Record for holding the most Guinness Records”); **MIKE SCOTT** (with some important corrections: *Elidor* is set in Manchester, not Birmingham, and the setting of *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomrath* is not moorland; it’s mostly dairy pasture with one hill); **GINA TEH** (Singapore); **CASEY WOLF** (has had a low-point year, and is still writing fiction).

Literary Censorship in Australia and Stapledon’s *Sirius*

by James Doig

This article transcribes documents and letters from correspondence files of the Literary Censorship Board relating to Olaf Stapledon’s 1944 novel, *Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord*.[1] *Sirius* has become something of a modern classic, and was recently reprinted in the Gollancz Collectors’ Editions. However, from its earliest drafts the book has not been without controversy.

Robert Crossley, in an article for *Science Fiction Studies*, revealed through a study of the original manuscript of *Sirius* that Stapledon’s editors ordered the excision of parts of the text that were anatomically explicit and morally subversive.[2] This did not ease the book’s reception in Australia, however, and in the year after its publication a copy was seized by the Comptroller General of Customs and sent to the Literature Censorship Board for review.

The Literature Censorship Board was established by the *Customs (Literature Censorship) Regulations* 1937. The function of the Board was to determine whether any imported literature sent to it by the Comptroller General of Customs or the Minster for Trade and Customs was blasphemous, indecent or obscene. The Board consisted of a Chairman and two members; the first members appointed to the Board were Dr L.H. Allen (Chairman), Professor J. F. M. Haydon and Kenneth Binns.

Dr Allen is represented at length in what follows and it is worth providing a short biography derived from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Leslie Holdsworth Allen (1879-1964) was born in Maryborough and educated at various schools in Sydney. He studied English and classics at the University of Sydney (B.A., 1904; M.A., 1920). He won a postgraduate scholarship and completed his doctoral dissertation on the personality of Shelley at the University of Leipzig in 1907. In 1931 Allen accepted the post of sole lecturer in English and classics at the new Canberra University College. Next year his wife died (she was tubercular); their only son had died in childhood. He published a wide range of scholarly articles, translated German plays for Dent’s Everyman’s Library, and wrote several volumes of poetry and a book of children’s verses. He died at Moruya, New South Wales, on 5 January 1964, survived by his only daughter. The Haydon-Allen building at the Australian National University is in part named after him.

I will let the records speak for themselves, and have transcribed them here as they are given without any attempt at emendation.

1 National Archives of Australia, A3023, Folder 1945/1947.

2 Robert Crossley, “Censorship, Disguise and Transfiguration: the Making and Revising of Stapledon’s *Sirius*”, *Science Fiction Studies* (#59, 1993).

****

20th September, 1945

Dear Dr Allen,

I forward herewith a publication entitled "Sirius — a Fantasy of Love and Discord", by Olaf Stapledon, for favour of the opinion of yourself and colleagues of the Literature Censorship Board, as to whether the work is a prohibited import within the meaning of Section 52(c) of the Customs Act.

Yours faithfully,
J.J. Kennedy
Comptroller General

****

25.9.1945

Stapledon, Olaf *Sirius* Secker and Warburg, London 1945

This is the story of a dog bred by scientific methods to the attainment of human intelligence. The idea is used partly for satirical reflections on human society, partly for constructive suggestion. The "blurb" states that the book "shows us the world as seen through the eyes of dog"; but this is not strictly correct. It is rather "a view of humanity from outside humanity, from the point of view of another of God's creatures, and one that both admires and despises us" (p. 136). In this way the book links with Swift's Houyhnhnms, Peacock's *Melincourt* (the story of Sir Oram Hautton, the humanized ape), Voltaire's Micro-mages (humanity viewed by a being from another planet), and even Voltaire's *Huron* (civilization criticized by a savage).

The main influence, however, is Wells' *Island of Dr Moreau* in which a number of beasts, semi-humanized by the Dr's surgery, eventually succumb to the animal instincts and destroy their creator.

This story must be read as a symbolical fantasy. If read prosaically it is merely a Mother Hubbard jumble; if understood as the author meant it, it is an attempt to find some nexus common to man and the rest of creation. For *homo sapiens* is viewed frankly as a super-ape who has evolved by the assertion of the stronger over the weaker.

This nexus is defined as "the spirit" and is given in these words :- "He [Sirius] had a kind of inner vision of all living things, led by man, crusading gallantly against indifferent or hostile fate, doomed in the end to absolute defeat, but learning to exult in the battle, and snatching much delight before the end" (p. 76). Thus man becomes the ally of creation. A dog is no longer a dog, but a "spirit" (p. 82). However far apart man and animal may be, they are "in essential nature identical" (p. 85).

For this reason, though Plaxy, the scientist's daughter, with whom Sirius is reared as one of the family, is, humanly speaking, poles asunder from the dog-man, yet by reason of the spirit, the life-bond (*anima mundi*) (possibly an adaptation of Shaw's *life-force*), they are "eternally together" (p. 116). The spirit-nexus demands "love and intelligence and strong creative action in its service" (p. 155).

Such is the basis of the story. Complications arise in the attempt to sketch the atmosphere of the conditions inherent in the rearing of a super-dog and a human being together, with as little distinction as possible between their essential natures. The sketch begins from infancy in which appear certain spontaneous, if unconsciously frank, instincts (pp. 23-24, 38). As maturity appears, the divergence between human and canine nature begins to show (p. 73). The result is that between the two there are intermittent attractions and revulsions (p. 52, and passim). This is based on the idea that man and animal are double-natured, each partaking of the other, yet divergent (pp. 144-145, 197). In the end Plaxy responds to humanity, and marries the narrator of the story, while Sirius reverts to the animal, and is shot for murdering a man.

In working out this theme the author becomes involved in contradictions, for while tracing the "spirit" in the dog, he has to

do this mainly through a dog-world approach (as the "blurb" states). This means translating phenomena through scent rather than vision, a method which involves much that is distasteful to modernity (see 45, 51, 65, 105, 116). Because the sex-instinct of his dog-life is entirely spontaneous and a-moral, it is treated with scant reserve (49, 67, 108).

The relations between Plaxy and Sirius are complicated. She claims that she loves Sirius "super-humanly" — i.e. according to the "spirit", yet there are passages when sexual consciousness occurs of an unpleasant nature (pp. 144, 155, 173). That there is a basic physical difference between them appears on pp. 183-184. In this somewhat parlous part of the theme the author seems to indicate that while the "spirit" prompts what might be called cosmic love, it does not interfere with the ordination "in the beginning" that we are made "after our kind".

There is, however, another view of the matter, and one on which this sex-complication rests. This is, that symbolically Sirius is the type of the genius. Like Blake he is born "with a different face," not like "the rest of his race." He is beset by loneliness like the poet in *Alastor*. Sirius is reminiscent of the monster, created by Frankenstein, who demanded, what his creator dared not grant, a mate to allow him expression of his own creative instinct. "Why did you make only one of me?" he asks the scientist. "It's going to be lonely being me." Like Carlyle (in *Sartor Resartus*) he has a moment of illumination (a discouraging mixture of the Everlasting Nay and the Everlasting Yea) (p. 76). The dog-song which he sings (p. 136), and which enthrals his listeners, even though they can't understand it, is symbolic of the voice of genius, uttering new things, often un-understood, often misunderstood. Plaxy's attachment thus becomes the feminine devotion to genius. This misunderstanding leads to the catastrophe (pp. 175ff.). The relations between Plaxy and Sirius are interpreted by the conventional as unnatural, and persecution follows. This is a satire on the persecution of genius throughout the ages, the persecution, for instance, which regarded Dr Faustus as in league with the Devil, and suspected any outspoken, but unorthodox, intellectual, as maintaining a "familiar" (which often took the shape of a black dog, as in Goethe's *Faust*).

There re other satirical touches, the Swiftian note, e.g. that animals are better than men (pp. 88-89, 111).

There is one passage (p. 132) which the religious-inclined would most probably find offensive (Sirius' "libation"). This is not meant offensively. It should be linked with the satiric study, *The Lamp Post*, (p. 105) and is part of the attempt to translate emotion through the dog-sense.

This somewhat lengthy report has been made because, for the understanding of a considerable amount of unconventional element in the book, it is necessary to stress a philosophic and symbolic basis. I do not think the author has mixed his ingredients well. Complete consistency cannot be expected in tales of this sort, but one might reasonably have expected smoother artistic finish. The style, too, is without vigour, and the narrative somewhat flat. This, however, has nothing to do with the question of decency or indecency. If the book be read according to the author's intention and spirit, it is not indecent. It is a book for thinkers, and in no way calculated to attract the pornographic mind. Pornography-hunters would soon tire of it. For thinkers there is food for thought, though the book could scarcely be regarded as profound.

I should, therefore, advise passing it.

L.H. Allen.

I have read this and entirely agree with it and his recommendation.
Kenneth Binns

****

SIRIUS By Olaf Stapledon

The author of this book appears to have a symbolic and possibly satirical purpose behind his story; but he has, in my opinion, vitiated his work by deliberate indecency. For instance, reference to sociable urination, which might pass muster when indulged in by a very small girl and a dog, becomes definitely

indecent in the case of a male dog (who is half human in feelings) and an adult woman, as in the incident towards the end of the book, where the woman, feeling the need to "relieve herself" (sic), crouching down on the moor to do so, at the same time calling upon the dog, in song, to join her in the operation.

As indecency is sufficient cause for prohibiting the importation of a book, I unhesitatingly recommend that "Sirius" be placed on the list of banned books.

J.F. Morrison Haydon
9/10/1945

****

21st November, 1945

Dear Dr Allen

I refer to the report of the Literature Censorship Board submitted by you on the 16th October, 1945, relative to the publication "Sirius" — A Fantasy of Love and Discord", by Olaf Stapleton (sic).

I have given careful consideration to the book in question and to the Board's report of its review of the work, and wish to state that I am not prepared to agree with the opinion expressed by the Board that the work should be passed.

In my opinion, the publication is a useless and degrading effort and I consider that its importation should be banned completely, on the grounds that it is indecent within the meaning of Section 52(c) of the Customs Act.

I feel that the Board has been far too tolerant in its review of the work in question and I should be glad of your further advice in the matter, particularly so as to the grounds on which the Board reached the conclusion that the book is not indecent.

Yours faithfully
R. V. Keane
Minister for Trade and Customs
****

25.11.1945

Dear Sir

I have received your letter of the 21st inst, and have given it considerable thought.

You ask me to state "the grounds on which the Board reached the conclusion that the book is not indecent."

I submitted a lengthy and detailed report in which I attempted to give the literary associations of a book of this kind, and an interpretation of its meaning. The citations were copious, and I can add little in the way of exposition. In this way, therefore, I have already given the grounds for which you ask.

The decision of the Board was a majority one. I state this in fairness to yourself and the dissenting members.

I conceive that a censor's duty is to be, as far as possible, objective and impartial, and to tolerate the free expression of ideas as long as they are not subversive of public morality.

There are cases in which the verdict is quite clear. The Board, for instance, was unanimous in condemning *Forever Amber*, which was low in conception and meant to appeal to pornographic taste[3]. It had also no hesitation in condemning *God, Church, and Bible* as being a deliberate insult to Christianity, in which the legal limits were exceeded.

Only these books have been forwarded to the Board which allow reasonable doubts as to their indecency or blasphemy. When *Sirius* was submitted, therefore, I took it that its peculiar character had raised such doubts. I therefore endeavoured to explain the book according to what I believe was the author's intention.

How sharply opinions can be divided on questions involving anything abstruse is shown by the recent Dobell case.[4] It might seem an elementary matter to decide whether a picture is, or is not, a portrait, or whether it is a morbid caricature; yet opinions

3 Kathleen Winsor's blockbuster historical romance, *Forever Amber*, was banned in Australia between 1944–c.1958. See Dr Nicole Moore's lecture on *Forever Amber* and censorship in Australia at http://www.naa.gov.au/about_us/nicolemoore.html

4 William Dobell's prize winning portrait of fellow artist Joshua Smith, which controversially won the Archibald Prize in 1943.

were so contentious that a law-suit was involved.

Similarly, in the library world, *Ulysses* has caused the most heated debate. It has been as stoutly defended as attacked, and the defence as well as the attack has been conducted by men of acknowledged position in the intellectual world.

I have regarded *Sirius* as being of the psychological type, and not to be understood literally. A dog-man who studies at Cambridge is as fantastic as Swift's horse-men. Swift must be understood satirising humanity, still far removed from the ideals of prophets; Stapledon is trying to find a new psychological path which leads to a common element between men and animals. This is akin to anthropological examination of myths, which traces the origins of human thought as embodied in stories seemingly crude and repulsive — e.g. Leda and the Swan, Pasiphae and the Bull, Olympias and the Snake.

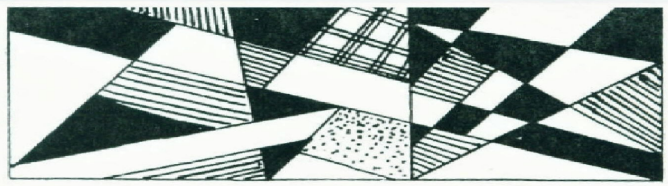
I realised the "excretory" passages would give difficulty. In these parts it must be remembered that the author is attempting to introduce the element of the scent-world, which is the main one for a dog, whereas a human being lives mostly in vision-world. To animals scents, repulsive to us, are not merely inoffensive, but also serve as a means of recognition. I therefore viewed the matter from the "aspect" of atavistic psychology. From this aspect, i.e. that of a psychologist, there is really less offence in *Sirius* than in, for instance, the 13th and 17th chapters of the first book of Rabelais. Yet Rabelais is lectured on in Universities.

The story is *not* that of a sexual love-match between a human being and an animal. Sirius is *not* a dog, but a fantasy creature. In the same spirit a primitive Greek might have said that the Swan was not a swan, but a god. Further, Stapledon, after tracing his steps, as far as possible, to the common elements of instinct, comes back and marks the divergence between man and animal. Plaxy swings along the evolutional path to humanity; Sirius degenerates to the mere animal.

Needless to say I respect and understand your attitude, and recognise that your verdict is to prevail. At the same time I hope that this book will not be denied to students of psychology, psychiatry, and kindred subjects.

Yours faithfully.
L. H. Allen

The Literature Censorship Board passed Sirius into general circulation on 16/10/1945. The book was subsequently banned by the Minister on 22/11/1945. The book was released in a general review of banned publications on 24/04/1958.



Reviews section

Colored New World: Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red, Green & Blue Mars*

by Frank Weissenborn

[First delivered as a talk to the Nova Mob, Melbourne's science fiction discussion group, June 2006. Frank Weissenborn is a Melbourne-based writer who has self-published a number of novels and short stories, most notably *Chocky's Come Home*.]

Introduction

If I had been born in the year 1980, a year that would have made me a teenager of thirteen in 1993, the year of the publication

of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, and having coming upon the book and read it, I would be a NASA astronaut today. As it happened, this was not my destiny. Born in another year, I can now only dream of astral travel, of seeing first hand, the universe and its wonders.

It is science fiction which images the possibilities of inter-planetary adventure, and to my knowledge, no other work has given view to such dreams on the grand scale, with as much imagination, and with such encompassing vision — asking of our place in the universe, and of what home we should make for ourselves, than Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red, Green & Blue Mars* trilogy.

Why Mars?

Named after the Roman god of war, earliest observations of the planet identified it as a fiery red star that followed a strange loop in the sky. Curious enough. It was, however, the Dutch astromer Christiaan Huygens who, in his publication of *Cosmotheros* in 1698, first speculated on Mars as a source of extraterrestrial life. From that day on, our imagination has never let go. Sadly, to date, no life has been found on Mars, with perhaps the exception of one or two Elvis sightings made by the *National Enquirer*, and David Bowie having found a home there for a group of rock musicians. This then, leaves open the possibility of terraforming Mars as a second earth. This is the story of Robinson's *Red, Green & Blue Mars* books.

Red Mars

Red Mars sets the stage.

It is 2026, and the first 100 colonists, mostly Russian and American, plus one stowaway, Coyote, a type of anarchist-revolutionary and Gypsy joker in one, arrive on Mars. Robinson begins:

> "And so we came here. But what they didn't realize, was that by the time we got to Mars, we would be so changed by the voyage out … We were on our own; and so we became fundamentally different human beings."

These are the words of John Boone — the first man on Mars, giving an inspirational address, a celebration of the first Mars landing.

John can be viewed as the Daniel Boone of the new frontier, a charismatic and charming leader we would all want to follow. But John Boone is more than just a figure in a raccoon skin cap and doe skins. He is also an idealist, and this sets him at odds with the co-leader of the Mars Mission, Frank Chalmers. Frank listens in on the address.

> "All lies, Frank Chalmers thought irritably … Not only had they not become fundamentally different beings, they had actually become more like themselves than ever … "

Politician and diplomat, Frank knows fully well the foibles of mankind. He knows them because he sees them in himself, and this night, Festival Night, he is to kill John Boone. Thereafter, Frank remains in a daze.

His motives for the murder are not entirely clear. What we know is that John and Frank share a lover, Maya Toitovna, the leader of the Russian contingent. This would obviously be the cause of some bitterness, but their conflict goes deeper. Frank sees John as a threat to his own more cynical view of human nature, and the way a future Mars society should evolve. Frank wants to run things, only like most of us, he questions whether he is fit for the job.

And so opens the story of *Red Mars*. Brother has killed brother. Frank plays Cain to John's Abel. In this respect, *Red Mars* is near to biblical in theme, and in fact, extended as a trilogy, *Red, Green & Blue Mars* can be seen as one long parable, the lesson that economics should not mean exploitation of man and the land. We must rethink our position — find a better way, eco-economics as Robinson calls it.

And the three books are biblical again in that they are equally about the frontier and the Promised Land — the wagon trains of America's Manifest Destiny, having rolled not only onward

and outward, and over the Pacific, but onto the stars themselves.

Essentially, however, the Mars books belong to that genre of fiction known as utopian. It is Huxley's *Ends & Means*; how to build a more ideal world, and the trilogy can be considered a thought experiment to this end.

It is this question, that of knowing ourselves, and building on that knowledge, that is the most stimulating aspect of Robinson's trilogy. This is heady stuff. Not easy for anybody. And certainly not for Robinson's protagonists.

Argument and debate runs rife throughout the trilogy, but centers around two polarities, to terraform, or not to terraform, or perhaps red Mars, or Mars of better homes and gardens, daisies included. And if this isn't hard enough to decide upon, the argument is not only about whether to terraform, but how to. Robinson knows his stuff here.

Terraforming could take thousands of years, or just hundreds. Robinson chose hundreds, and you can feel him pitching in with the shovel. He's determined to work the land. He's together on this with John Steinbeck. There's a dustbowl to be managed.

Mars lacks atmosphere and warmth. The two conditions for terraforming are linked, and both need to be introduced simultaneously. Robinson goes through the process at length. He brings in an orbiting solar mirror to heat the planet from space, explodes the polar ice caps, introduces simple life forms to break down the rock to soil. And this only where he starts. It is global warming as we know it on earth — business as usual, except that on earth we could argue as to which creature constitutes the simple life form. Chief amongst the terraformers is Sax Russel. Arch antagonist is Ann Claybourne.

Ann can be seen as the John Denver of Mars. Listen on a windy day, and you could hear Ann yodelling over the mountains, singing life is everywhere I believe it, even in the long dead rocks. To Ann, Mars must remain Mars — as we found it.

No-one can quite agree on what to do.

Certainly Earth wants change. In Robinson's future history, earth is a dying planet, over populated, and with resources and climate threatened by global warming. The metanationals — corporations extending across nations — would like to have Earth's burdening populace emigrate to a terraformed Mars.

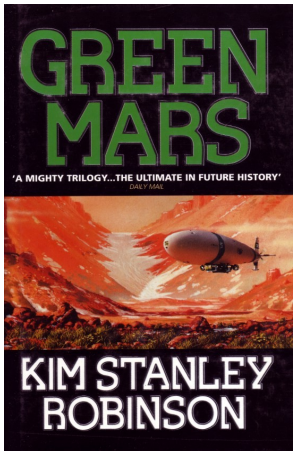
Who is right about the direction Mars should take?

We already have murder as an attempt to settle arguments. And in 2061, we have revolution. War rages between the various factions.

A primary target of the war is the space elevator, seen as link to old earth, a strategic jumping off point to Mars. Descending from a captured asteroid, the elevator travels a wound cable, finding its hub in Mars bedrock. The cable is exploded, and falling from space, wraps itself around Mars like the angry, flaying umbilical cord of a mother strangling her rebellious child.

Robinson has Mars whipped in space, and you can hear him crying rawhide. This causes tremendous upheaval to the planets burgeoning new ecosystem, particularly flooding. The walls of newly created seas are breached, and the face of Mars is changed forever.

One victim of the revolution is Frank Chalmers. Perhaps wanting to address his guilt and give up the role of Cain, he is swept away in a flood while attempting to save the lives of Maya and others, fleeing the devastation in a Mars rover. And so Frank and what he represents is gone. We learn that change cannot come from the way politicians would have it. Give it the right spin and it's done. Maybe Frank thought he was playing at twister, landing his hands and feet where he could, tying the planet and himself in knots.



Green Mars

Green Mars explores the shattered stage.

While terraforming accelerates, the following dialogue takes place between Ann Claybourne, terraforming's chief opponent, and Sax Russel, its chief advocate.

She looked at him. “What do you think science is for?”

Sax shrugged … “To figure things out,” he said.

“But terraforming is not figuring things out,” Ann countered.

“Terraforming isn’t science. I never said it was. It’s what people do with science. Applied science, or technology … The choice of what to do with what you learn from science. Whatever you call that.”

“So it’s a matter of values.”

“I suppose so … Science concerns itself with facts, and with theories that turn facts into examples. Values are another kind of system, a human construct.”

“Science is also a human construct.” … Ann insisted. “We talk about theories with power and elegance, we talk about clean results, or a beautiful experiment. And the desire for knowledge is itself a kind of value, saying that knowledge is better than ignorance, or mystery. Right?”

You can hear Robinson making his arguments. He struggles along with the rest of us. But there are new voices to be heard. There are the second generation Mars children.

We learn of the existence of Zygote, an ice dome under the south pole. Built by Hiroko Ai, she and her extended family of genetically engineered ectogenes find shelter there from the strife that is tearing Mars apart. Robinson begins *Green Mars* with the children at play.

One day the sky fell. Plates of ice crashed into the lake, and then started thumping on the beach. The children scattered like frightened sandpipers. Nirgal ran over the dunes and burst into the greenhouse, shouting, “The sky is falling, the sky is falling!”

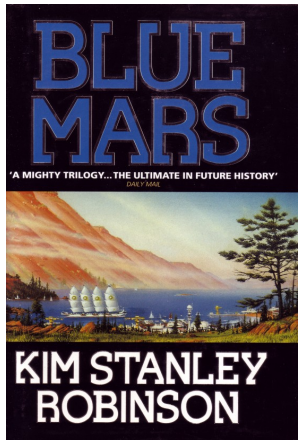
These children are different from us — long of limb and easy of breath, they take in the thin Martian air with a relaxed lung-gom-pa motion of the lungs. Martians.

Nirgal — named after the Babylonian hero — is uncle to Jackie, and Jackie, the grand-daughter of John Boone. Both it seems, have a great grandmother in Hiroko.

Hiroko can be understood as a type of Mars earth mother. She offers another solution to the problem of terraforming. Viriditas. It can be understood as a type of hocus pocus green that draws energy from the planet itself, and in this respect, Hiroko gives voice to a philosophy that attempts to unify microcosm and macrocosm, a type of universal unity as answer to conflict.

But new philosophies are not easily arrived at. Nirgal and Jackie prove exceptional, but also troubled. They are innocent of old earth and innocent of Mars. The sky that Nirgal thought falling was actually the roof of their home. But they grow, Jackie to later become the leader of the Free Mars Party, and Nirgal the center of a Mars cult. And there is every reason for the children to grow. Civil war threatens, and there is mounting tension with an increasingly belligerent and desperate earth.

Blue Mars



Blue Mars rebuilds the shattered stage.

Robinson understands that in *Blue Mars* he must find a road ahead for the planet. It is not easy. There are twenty-one political parties wanting to be heard. Meetings are decided upon with the frequency of exploding popcorn, and are about as useful. The meetings become not so much Camp David accord, but camp run-a-muck. Little is agreed upon. Nevertheless, one of the most important developments from this period of separating the corn from the husk is the election of the first Mars president. It is to be the engineer Nadia Cherneshevsky, one of the first hundred. She is well suited.

A true Russian, her love for Mars is about land, and it is significant that Robinson makes Nadia the first president of Mars. She is an engineer. She can mold the land to her will. This is an example of how Robinson employs multiply points of view to shape his trilogy. It is one of the strengths of the work.

Red, Green & Blue Mars is Robinson’s big picture. He wants every point of view heard with equal voice, and with *Blue Mars* he

throws down the debate on terraforming with broad strokes of the pen, or, as some would argue, with rather too many strokes of the pen. In one of the most poignant scenes in *Blue Mars*, we hear, for instance, from Sax Russel and Maya Toitovna, sitting one day overlooking the sea.

Robinson writes:

> The sunset flared to an unusual lavender brilliance, and Maya said, "I wonder what that color is," and Sax had ventured "Lavender?"
>
> "But lavender is usually more pastel isn't it?"
>
> Sax called up a color chart he had found long before to help him see the colors of the sky … And after that they had a little hobby … They made up names. 2 October the 11th Orange, Aphelion Purple, Lemon Leaf, Almost Green, Arkady's Beard … Then one winter evening they were sitting on the westernmost bench, in the hour before sunset … Maya looked up … and clutched Sax by the arm, "Oh my God, look," … Sax swallowed … "Ah," he said, and stared. Everything was blue, sky blue, Terran sky blue, drenching everything for most of an hour, flooding their retinas and the nerve pathways in their brains, long starved no doubt for precisely that color, the home they had left forever.

Robinson shows us something beautiful here. Two people, lifelong friends, living through the genesis of a new world, and finding something of the old in the new.

Sax and Maya ask the question everyone is asking of Mars. Is Mars red, green or blue? They are not sure they have the answer, and seek solace in each other against the uncertainty. The journey for them has been a long one. Both have borne many tribulations. After being tortured for information regarding the rebels during the second revolution, Sax is left brain damaged. And Maya, already having lost John Boone and Frank Chalmers, loses her final lover, the troubled and homesick psychologist Michel Duvall.

Each of the first hundred have been able to live long lives. This has been enabled by a longevity drug known as the gerontological treatment.

Discovered by a team of scientists led by two of the first hundred, Vlad Taneev and Marina Tokareva, it is a means to extend life via repairing and reinforcing DNA strands during cell reproduction.

Given frequent enough injections of this wonder drug, life spans can be expected to last hundreds of years, maybe even as much as a thousand. But the treatment is imperfect, particularly when not taken early enough, such as in childhood or adolescence. This is the case with the surviving first hundred.

Aged well over a hundred, they slowly begin to die, or suffer mysterious ailments. Sax, for instance, suffers from short term memory loss. Maya from a type of mental disturbance that kaleidoscopes events past and present.

Sax, as scientific genius, investigates, and gets close to the root of the problem on several occasions, then forgets. It is clear that memory is important and that this issue must be solved first before the larger concerns of senescence. Finding focus for their test tubes, the scientific community discovers an experimental cure about which little is known, only that its effectiveness is reliant on the evocation of place. The remaining first hundred therefore journey to Underhill, the sight of the first Mars settlement, for drug trials. But not Maya. It is perhaps too much to relive the lose of three principal lovers — Frank Chalmers, John Boone and Michel Duval.

The memory cure works.

Imagine a life time of memories, 150 years for example, coalescing on you all at once. This is what happens. It is both enlightening and frightening. Sax Russel and others, stumble around Underhill, reliving their lives. What is learnt? Does remembrance of things past bring clarity and wisdom? Does it help the dilemmas Mars is facing? It is uncertain. The story of Mars is complex, but Robinson must wrap up his story.

What do we learn of the other protagonists?

Hiroko has disappeared. She has gone poof. Up in smoke with perhaps the same hocus pocus she practices. More realistically, however, she is rumored to have been killed in the second Mars revolution, fleeing an attack.

Coyote has become less the coyote of road runner and more a hero to the revolution.

Ann and Sax become lovers, a sign that even two people

with diametrically opposed viewpoints can find resolution, even if the issues never entirely go away.

Robinson keeps the reader active, and so at the end of *Blue Mars*, a third Mars revolution goes by almost unnoticed.

And the Martians?

They have a world of oceans, forest and sky. They rejoice. And just as the umbilical cord of old mother earth once whipped around the planet, Nirgal, on extended legs and with the lung-gom-pa of his race, races around the planet.

Robinson hits his stride here along with Nirgal. He has the Martians circumnavigate and conquer the globe each year in a running race. Nirgal wins seven years running. But others would rather fly.

Flying has become a popular pastime.

Strung beneath the wings of gliders, the Martians soar the skies as wind spirits, free, and at play. All seem happy. Except Jackie.

At 100 years old, and wearied of politics, she and others leave Mars for another planet discovered beyond our solar system. She has outgrown Mars, or Mars has outgrown her. Who is to say? The Martians — perhaps feeling a touch arrogant and a touch superior, able to live a thousand years, still need to find their feet.

This, of course, begs the question of whether anyone finds their feet. Robinson's protagonists do a lot of walking. Not an inch of Mars is left unexplored, and one feels Robinson walking along beside them.

It is Robinson finding his feet as he attempts to bring answers to his thought experiment. But he never makes us feel he has them. This is not Robinson grown weak at the knees, unsure whether to go green. He has his shopping jeep and green bag. It is Robinson leaving the question up to us, though perhaps it is not up to us either.

It is up to the little red men, possibly the planet's ancient ancestors, mischief makers, and perhaps linked to viriditas, out there somewhere with Hiroko, working hocus pocus.

But the story of Mars is not answered here.

Conclusion

With *Red, Green* and *Blue Mars* Robinson has written close to the order of three quarters of a million words. But what type of words?

Robinson writes as a journeyman; clean, honest sentences that speak to us truthfully. As science does. Given that we define science fiction as science put to storytelling, the Mars books are a testament to clear and concise thought, equally as much as it is a testament to beautiful storytelling. It is science fiction made real, vividly remembered. And it is for the thinking reader, not those grown up on disco go-go biscuits.

What does the work teach us?

Yes, *Red, Green & Blue Mars* confronts us, but not in the way of Martians pointing ray-guns, but Martians bearing a thought experiment and a possible blue print for a future world. It is life on Mars not so much as we know it, but as we could come to know it.

It is clear that mankind must mature, and as children, we must learn when our nappy has been changed. But maybe we think ourselves mature?

The Dada movement was meant to teach us that we are not, poking fun at our culture, our pretensions of high attainment. We must understand what Charlie Chaplin understood. Slapstick is simply us laughing at ourselves because we know we can do better. We have treated earth with the fumbling effort of a child. But the fun is over. It has been over for a very long time. There is an episode of the original *Star Trek* to watch. It is called "The Squire of Gothos." In this 40-minute teleplay, a child from a vastly more advanced race than ours is given a planet to play with. Needless to say, the child makes a hash of it. I make this analogy because this is the way I see Robinson's Mars books.

As children, we have played with earth. And Mars has been the plaything of an adolescent. Let us hope that in finding another world, we can approach it with maturity.

We read S-F for the possibilities it offers us. Yes, some of us read to escape. But escape to what?

There is no escape. No exit. No *Logan's Run*. We have come

to understand existentialism. We cannot run from ourselves. There is only one alternative for a better and more just world for everyone. It is in progress. It is in the colors red, green, blue, the progression from earth to grass to sky – a sky open to the universe and its wonders. We are all part of the same stuff. The universe is both within us and around us. Let us go forth and explore.

In Fury Born by David Weber

Baen, August 2007

Reviewed by Lyn McConchie

This is an interesting book for reasons other than the obvious fact that it's one of David Weber's militaristic SF volumes. Back in 1992 Baen produced a book by David Weber entitled *Path of the Fury*. I, and many other readers, preferred the main character of that book to that of Honor Harrington. Yes, I like Honor and have all the books as "keepers," but Alicia DeVries of the *Fury* reached out and hauled me into her life and her world with even more power.

I found the background of the book with the other characters strangeness/differences engrossing and fascinating and I wanted more. It was a source of annoyance that Alicia never became a series as I felt that it would have been even better than the Honor Harrington books. In fact, when I met David Weber at the mass signing at Wiscon in 2001, I said this and he replied that a lot of others had said the same.

Then this year I saw that a new book was due to appear. At first I assumed that the long-hoped-for series was about to eventuate but found I was wrong. I was then reluctant to buy the book that looked as if it was no more than a rewrite of the original, but heard from a friend that it was more. So in the end I ordered a copy.

As I said, it's an interesting book. On the back it says that it: "contains a revised and expanded version of *Path of the Fury* and its novel-length prequel." I'd dispute the "revised and expanded" bit. By my count that portion is now some thousands of words shorter — but they have added a list of characters that wasn't in the original volume so maybe that's the "expansion." It may also be revised but if so any revision is unnoticeable without minute scrutiny. Reading it normally I saw no changes.

There is a genuine novel-length prequel. That's the problem. It leaves you with a massive 850+ page volume to read, and a real wrist-ache. I'd have liked to see that prequel published separately but I expect that Baen felt it wouldn't sell that way. So you have two books of around 400+ pages each packed into the one volume, the first, the new book, being Alicia's life up to the beginning of the original volume.

In some ways it isn't a single book either. It comes as a series of episodes, something that's made clear by being split into 'book one and two' to start with. They are also split, not so much in specific layout, as in stories. There's no indication they were ever published in other markets, but I wondered when I read them if they may have been written for that before being put together and published here. That doesn't detract from them, but it does feel that way.

With the book being so much larger the print is smaller which for us who are getting older is not a plus. And fatter books like this don't hold together so long, they tend to fall apart, losing pages a lot earlier than thinner volumes.

That said this is a terrific book. It explains Alicia's background. You now understand why the murder of her entire family was so devastating, and how come they were all out on a frontier planet in the first place. You learn what was really behind her resignation from the Cadre and where her friend Tannis and her superior, Uncle Arthur, fit in.

It widens and deepens her personality and when I finished reading I was disappointed all over again — even more so — that the author does not seem to be intending other books about Alicia, and her soul-sisters, Megaira, and Tisiphone.

So what is the story? It begins with a fourteen-year-old Alicia, high IQ, loving family — and a grandfather who was military and tells her stories. Not the glory and excitement of battles, but the real down and dirty, mud, blood, and guts of war. Her father

comes from a line genetically altered to be rational, logical, and mostly pacifist. Alicia is spotted about this time as a possibility for the Cadre, a special unit of 40,000 soldiers who are the best of the best in the Empire.

The new prequel tells how Alicia at seventeen joins the military, and of the planets on which she serves, the friends she makes, and the wars and conflicts that blood her. I have always liked David Weber's military SF. His writing is great, he can catch you up in his characters, plot, and battles, and he gives the impression that when the future arrives it's going to be *just* like that. But above all, he does not put a pretty gloss on war.

War is not the silver sound of trumpets, the glory of charging cavalry, the excitement of engaging the enemy. It is horses screaming and thrashing with their legs blown off. Your best friend landing back in the trench beside you with his brains over your boots. It's the knowledge that you could die very unpleasantly any time mixed with a prolonged acid boredom that can make you so careless you die because of it. And Weber, like Elizabeth Moon, manages to convey that to the reader.

(How do I know? Not because I've ever been to war, but a friend of mine for many years was in the English Commandos through WWII. Through the 1960s Warwick told me many tales of that time and it was the loss of friends and throwing up after cutting an enemy throat that he remembered. Sneaking through long grass waiting to die at every moment and the boredom of waiting hours for someone to arrive. And hoping it would be the right person and not the enemy who'd stand you against a wall, *after* they'd tortured you for everything you knew — that he talked about.)

Alicia learns. She starts out as bright, the sort of child you is so intelligent that she coasts past others who must struggle to achieve. But she finds that book knowledge isn't the same as experience. Still she's listened to her grandfather long enough to know it's best to shut up and learn from others and she does. She survives, grows into her command and is finally chosen to join the Cadre. Yes, you knew that would happen all along, but the journey there is interesting anyhow.

But partway through the book there is a mission. Several hundred of the Cadre are to land on a planet and rescue 600 hostages. But something goes wrong, a real SNAFU and, faced with huge odds and superior weaponry, they're dying. Alicia takes charge of the handful of survivors and against incredible odds manages the rescue. For this she receives the highest honor that the empire can bestow, the Banner.

Down the track after another mission however she finds that her people were betrayed, sold out by an intelligence Officer that is on the current mission as well. Alicia talks her way into his office and beats him almost to death. He lives and she then finds that the Empire is not going to execute him. In rage and disgust she resigns from the Cadre and retires with her extended family to Mathieson's World. This is a Empire frontier planet with dangerous predators, but where her service bonus will allow Alicia and her family to own a large amount of land for ranching megabison.

At this point we move into the original book which begins with a massacre of stock and people. Alicia who has been hunting returns to find her mother and sister raped and slaughtered, the remainder of her kin dead although both her grandfather and father have killed some of the invaders. Alicia is augmented with implants which as a Cadre member who honorably resigned and moved to the frontier, she was entitled to retain.

She moves into killing mode, activating her battle computer and 'the tick' — a drug that speeds up mental processes. She kills the invaders but is mortally wounded herself and is dying — until something speaks in her head offering her an alternative and a chance to live. Crazed with rage and grief Alicia accepts and survives to find that she has made a pact with something that is neither corporeal nor human.

With Tisiphone, last of the Furies of ancient Greece, Alicia sets out to find where the murderers of her family came from and why they acted as they did. Along the way she adds a third to their pairing, Megaira, an altha synth, an intelligent computer/space ship. Together the three set out for vengeance — and find that there is far more behind the death of Alicia's family than she had ever considered.

The Empire itself is in deadly danger and all that stand as a shield against the death of millions are an intelligent computer, a Greek myth, and a madwoman with a "shoot to kill on sight" order against her. I have to admit that when I first read the original book I was unable to read straight through. Halfway I turned to the end to make sure Alicia succeeded. I did it again with this new version, just in case something had changed there. It hadn't and I heaved a happy sigh and went back to the middle again.

This is a stunning book about a flawed and very human woman and her odd, fascinating friends. If you like any of David Weber's other militaristic work, you'll love this. And like me, your most likely complaint is going to be that there aren't more books about Alicia, Megaira, and Tisiphone scheduled.

Simon Brown: An Overview

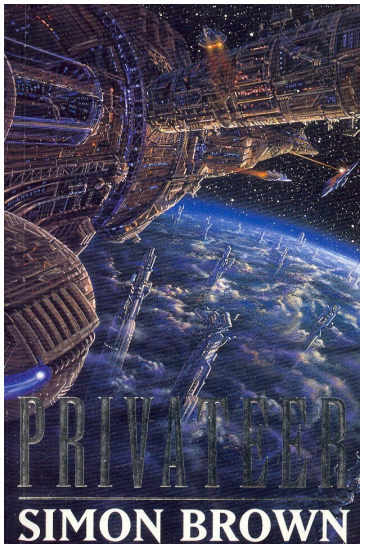
by Gillian Polack

Privateer, HarperCollins, 1996
Winter, HarperCollins, 1997
Born of Empire, (Chronicles of Kydan v. 1), Tor 2004
Rival's Son, (Chronicles of Kydan v. 2), Tor 2005
Troy, Ticonderoga Publications, 2006

Simon Brown has a solid reputation as an Australian speculative fiction writer. He is a good instance of an Australian writer who is known by everyone but not noticed as a big author. I was curious to see his strengths and weakness over a few books and over a long period of time. The five books I have used as a base for this analysis are *Privateer*, *Winter*, the first two books of the Chronicles of Kydan (the final volume of the trilogy not yet released at the time of writing) and his anthology of short fiction *Troy*. These books take us through both his science fiction and fantasy writing, and from his first novel to his most recent.

One thing that is immediately apparent on reading these works is that Brown is a careful and good technician. He always has been. "In Troy", a very early publication is inserted as an Afterword. Brown argued against its insertion (see p. 190). "The Return of Idomeneus" however, demonstrates that from very early in his career, Brown understood the craft aspects of writing. It lacks the depth and maturity of the best of his other short stories, but it is well balanced and well told: it shows us that these skills are fundamental to how Brown writes.

He understands the accepted parts of the genre. The openings of his novels, for instance, are impeccable. They set up the reader for the novel that is to follow. The first words of *Privateer*, for instance, "The only occasions Aruzel Kidron regretted being a spacer were when his ship *Magpie* slipped between normal space and hyperspace." almost shout "space adventure starring Aruzel Kidron." His short stories equally set the reader up for the exact type of tale that follows. "Why did she leave me? Well, it was ten years." In "Why my wife left me and other stories by Diomedes" lets us know that the core of Diomedes' story is the personal and intimate and the revelation in the tale is just how wide the implications of the personal can be. In "The dreaming seas beneath Cassandra" the opening lines read "The first thing Cassandra Gibson noticed when she reached the dive boat's anchor was that pig blood looked green twenty metres down." This doesn't give us an indication of the story to come so much as ground us in the character of the most important player in that story. Brown's openings give us the thread to follow through his tales, whether they be long or short. They are an important guide in how to read them.



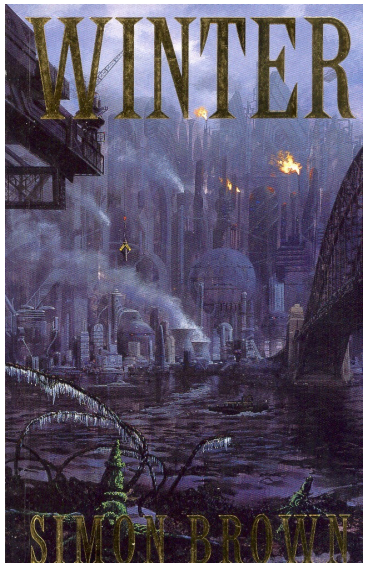
This competence has both positive and negative implications for his writing.

On the positive side, his writing never distorts his novels into narratives that feel stretched and

impossible to the reader: everything he writes is readable and entertaining. There are no lurking disasters and boredom is never incipient. This is partly because of that sense of having a guide to take us through the stories.

To balance this, it sometimes feels as if he is putting restraints on his writing that prevent it from achieving everything it could achieve. Perhaps his close following of genre restrictions holds him back from becoming the writer he could be. This is evident in the Chronicles of Kydan in particular, where there is a much greater work half in hiding than the one I was reading, held in thrall by the expectations of publishers and maybe the current demand for a certain type of fantasy narrative.

I suspect that the reality of Brown accepting restrictions on his writing is market driven: in order to make a living as a writer he must follow market expectations, and market expectations are more comfortable with a Big Fat Fantasy (standard variety) than with glints of something more exciting. Whatever the cause, however, Brown has significant gifts that can be underused.



Of the four books, *Winter* stands out. It comes closest to demonstrating Brown's potential. It has none of the flaws of the other books (very few flaws at all, in fact) and gently explores a host of deeper questions through a blood-spattered and political thriller of a plot. It is closest to the intimate tone expressed in his short stories, which is also interesting. His characterisation in the short stories is sharp and immediate and the main characters (as I intimated in earlier) serve as guides to lead us into Brown's new worlds. This is exactly what the main character does in *Winter*. His personal life and the world of *Winter* are inextricably intertwined, so where one leads the other follows and the reader is never lost or engulfed.

Love and trust and friendship are crucial to the book. It also contains fundamental questions of when one can retire, when work finishes and leisure begins, and how much you can give to a job and still remain a human being. The different layers are very firmly connected to the plot and to the adventure tale. This is important. To me it shows that *Winter* is not a one-off: all of Brown's work has the theoretical capacity to be this good, and the reasons why it can fall short are worth exploring.

Brown gives us a strong thread to take us on a journey through a dark Sydney. The society of Sydney is hemmed in by rules, restrictions and a society half way between Orwell's 1984 and the old, violent New York. This thread is his main character, Harry Beatle. Beatle is the great strength of *Winter*, leading us into our dark near-future and enabling us to deal with its bleakness.

We need this strong guide, because some of Brown's world-building is oddly incomplete. For example, Fortress Sydney is quite hard to imagine given its current multitude of roads and waterways. How Sydney can be inescapable is never explained. Likewise the political ramifications of the nuclear winter are explored very nicely at the Sydney-level and at the personal, but the attempts to explain why Sydney was spared are unnecessary and show that this angle has not been developed sufficiently.

It is in the big picture development, therefore that this novel has a weakness. It is not an important weakness in context, because Brown explores the world of *Winter* through the lives of ordinary-sized people. In other words, the book does not need the big picture to work, for it to grip the reader. In fact, Brown avoids the vast plot escalation of a lot of big-picture environmental novels. Everything returns to the personal, every single time. Every opportunity the plot has an excuse to escape and escalate, Brown gently reins it in.

One important side effect of the reining in is that the whole scenario becomes remarkably plausible. Not cheerful, because the world of *Winter* is not a cheerful world. Plausible — easy to feel that this could happen and to place oneself in the middle of it.

As I said earlier, *Winter* highlights what Brown is capable of, as do his short stories. He does not always produce his best work, unfortunately. The gentle plot control of *Winter* is lacking in the Chronicles of Kydan.

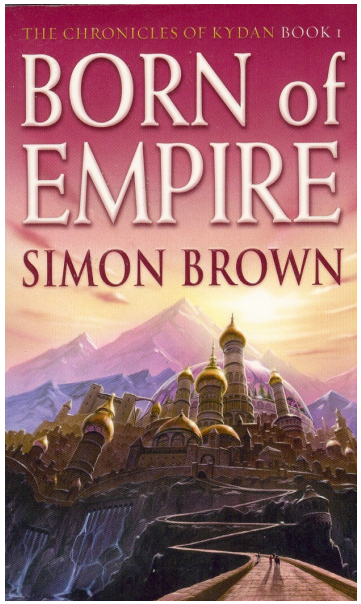
Perhaps the biggest single flaw is that the golden thread of characterisation is missing. The Chronicles of Kydan series has continuing characters and they are important to the plot and not uninteresting as people, but they are not so closely interconnected to the major themes to provide the reader enough guidance through the world and through the plot.

Each element of connection helps bring the world of Kydan close to us, but the stories of the people involved in this steam punk fantasy are just not as personal as those in Winter. The larger scale design, and the 'fate of nations' scenario distances us from the plight of individuals. For instance, even though Brown tries to anchor us with the character of Heriot, we know more about her big choices than her daily struggle. The links between us as readers and the characters in the book are more distant than they are in *Winter*. His craftmanship still shows, and so it is a better-than-average fantasy trilogy, but it lacks the immediacy and strength of Brown's best work.

The world construction is also a bit shaky. My favorite moment in this regard was when the Ambassador to wherever found all his communications home cut off. Why? Because the carrier pigeons were being picked off. Why use carrier pigeons and not couriers when countries are contiguous and the communication confidential? In a world that has railroads and steamships, why not use telegraph? Either courier or telegraph could still be ambushed, and would have made more sense than carrier pigeons for anything confidential.

This is one of several mysteries that mostly arise from the canvass being drawn with too broad a brush. Brown appears to be at his best, in other words, when he focuses the reader on fine detail and the mundane and uses his characters to lead the reader through his worlds.

Returning to *Privateer* might help elucidate why *Winter* is so superior to the Chronicles of Kydan. I know it is abnormal and strange for an article begin at the middle of someone's writing career and then finish with the writer's first published book, but there is a particularly good reason for me having chosen to do so in this essay. If Brown's inhibition of his own particular strengths is because of market forces then his first book should show those elements, either in full flight or as nestlings. By examining his work out of chronological order, we get a better sense of what his natural gifts are and why he has chosen to take them in certain directions.



Privateer starts off as an old-fashioned space adventure. Not an excess word, not an excess idea. The set-up is obvious and the reader is pushed into assuming that the book will be an entirely standard space-adventure. Even the plot rewards that expectation initially, as it contains an over-adventurous young man going too far and being rewarded with the dangerous job of his choice.

The first half of it is good according to these lights. The use of stereotypes makes everything a bit predictable (even to the lone privateer who sees that there is something wrong and will valiantly fight it despite the idiocy of the authorities) but the writing is good and the structure is taut enough. I wish I could say the same about my first book.

About half-way through the tone changes. There is a wholly unnecessary information dump as our adventurous young man learns about aliens and then we are suddenly allowed more knowledge of the private lives of key characters. We even get to see alien motivations, so they cease being the 'enemy out there' and start being characters in their own right. The aliens aren't that alien and the humans aren't that individualized, but the fact that Brown

changed direction this way is interesting. It is as if there suddenly came a point when Brown cared what would happen to his characters and he had to communicate that to his readers. It is this caring that marks *Winter* and makes it such a good book. It is the insufficiency of this caring that leads to the Chronicles of Kydan (while still technically good) to be less than it could have been.

I have my own theories as to a reason why the emotional attachment is there at some times in some books and not in all. One thing that marks Brown's writing is his attention to the genre norms. He respects his readers and tries to cater to their expectations. One way of catering to reader expectations is to listen to the voices of the famous on how one should write.

Envision a writer who listens to all the strictures and is professional in following them and who writes a tight narrative. Who excludes the unnecessary and who makes everything essential to action and plot. Pretend for a moment that this writer has a natural strength at character building and that this strength requires breaking those strictures. It requires asides and thoughts and insights and history that jar with current wisdom.

So many writers are being told that every word has to be plot-related, and that all scenes have to move the plot forward. It is a rare writer who can construct plots completely around characters and make every action illuminate the person underneath without showing their thoughts or their private selves.

In my opinion, Brown is not that writer: Brown's strength is in the inner life of characters, not in complex and distilled plotting. *Winter* and the stories of *Troy* work because the reader really wanted to know what decisions each character would make and why, not the action and the pacing (though I have few complaints about either action or pacing).

I suspect that when character-building talent doesn't fit the style of plotting and world-creation then there will be a gap that will cause the reader to disassociate a little. If the gap is too big, then the book gets dumped entirely. Some writers can build breathy non-stop action *and* give a sense of the people involved; others have to work on presenting other facets of the characters than appear in the plotlines.

I think that the gap between Brown's strengths and the codes Brown is using to produce a section or a chapter or a novel creates the potential for problems in his work. They reduce, for instance, the emotional link with the reader when they cause a character to lack depth (most of the characters in *Privateer*, for instance) or when an action plot is stopped midway for an information dump after which the pace is changed. Simply put, they lead to lack or depth or to internal inconsistencies. But these are the products, not the cause. And that they are frustrating, because Brown is capable of remarkable work. These are the flaws, not what he is capable of doing.

Where Simon Brown gets things right, his worlds come together with an addictive charm and resonance. Where he follows some other guide — whether it be the market, or writing advice, or his perceived plot demands — his prose comes across as well-written but lacking warmth. At his worst, he is a good writer: at his best, he is addictive and challenging.

The Terror
by Dan Simmons

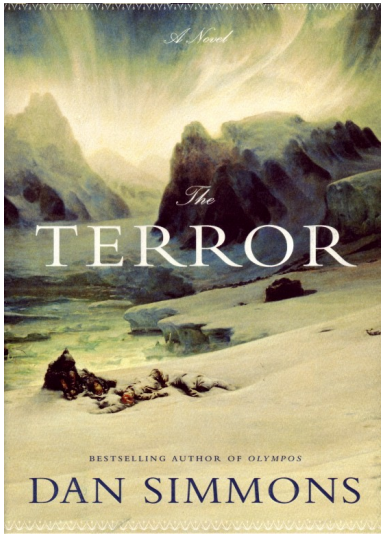
Little, Brown, 2007; 769pp; hbk; US$25.99/Cdn$32.99; ISBN 978-0-316-01744-2

by Barbara Roden

On 26 July 1845, Sir John Franklin and the 128 men aboard HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* sailed out of sight of the western world and entered the realm of legend. They were charged with discovering the fabled Northwest Passage, the northern sea route that was thought to link the Atlantic with the Pacific and which was the Holy Grail of northern Arctic explorers. To the man who discovered the Northwest Passage would accrue honour and glory beyond his wildest dreams; or, in this case, to the man who commanded the expedition which found it, for this was firmly Sir

John Franklin's show, known as 'The Franklin Expedition' before the ships had even set sail. On paper, Sir John may have seemed a likely candidate to lead the project — he had already led three expeditions to the north — but in hindsight his qualifications were less than stellar. None of his previous expeditions had been a success: indeed, the first one, in 1819, had led to Franklin being known throughout England as 'the man who ate his boots', a nod to the privations the group suffered (it now seems certain that others in the group ate something worse than their boots), and Franklin never entirely shook off his reputation of being a capable duffer who achieved the heights he did through connections and the influence of his indomitable second wife, Lady Jane Franklin, rather than through any innate ability or qualities of leadership.

For these we must look to the expedition's second-in-command, Captain Francis Crozier, in charge of the *Terror* and a far more accomplished Polar explorer, sailor, and leader of men than Franklin could ever hope to be. Crozier, an Irish Presbyterian, had repeatedly seen other men — less qualified, but more "acceptable" — promoted over him, a point that festered; and while he was almost certainly looked on as the leader of the expedition by the men under him, it would have been Franklin who received the plaudits and attention, and whose name was forever attached to the expedition. A pity, that, for if it had been "the Crozier expedition" it might well have had a very different and much less tragic outcome; much the same way that if another real life drama involving cannibalism which unfolded at almost precisely the same time had been : "the Reed party" rather than "the Donner party", tragedy might have been averted altogether.



Erebus and **Terror** had been outfitted as state of the art icebreakers, utilising the most up-to-date technology available at the time, including engines to drive the ships, with their specially reinforced hulls, through the ice. The ships were also provisioned with enough food to last them three years on full rations and up to five years on half-rations, a luxury achieved through the use of that innovation, tinned food, supplied by a provisioner named Goldner whose bid was so low, and promises regarding quality and delivery time so grandiose and optimistic, that warning flags should immediately have gone up. As it was, the provisions were delivered so late that the ships had to be largely unpacked so that the food could be stowed, and there was no time to inspect the provisions for quality, a factor which contributed greatly to the tragedy which was soon to unfold.

What we know about this tragedy firsthand is rather sketchy. As with a tragedy which occurred thirty years later, albeit in a very different setting — the massacre of General George Custer and his troops at Little Bighorn in 1876 — there were no white survivors to tell the tale, and native accounts were contradictory or vague or both. It was not until 1848 that the first search parties set out in search of Franklin and his men, and the first traces of the ill-fated expedition were not discovered until 1854, when John Rae met with a party of Inuit who had relics which could only have come from Franklin's party. The story they told was of a forlorn and desperate group of kabloonas — white men — who had staggered out of the north, leaving a trail of dead behind them, along with evidences of cannibalism. Rae took his findings back to England, where he was roundly denounced, most vocally by Charles Dickens; but in 1859 another search party found remains which showed unmistakable signs of cannibalism. This same party also discovered the only written record left behind by the party: a document stored in a cairn, which contained two messages, one written in 1847 indicating all was well, and another written around the margin a year later stating that Franklin and more than twenty others were dead, and that the survivors were heading south. Ironically, the search teams looking for Franklin and his men succeeded where he had failed: not only was it established that there was no direct Northwest Passage, but the remaining blanks on the map of the Arctic were filled in for once and all.

Another similarity that the Franklin expedition shares with the Custer tragedy is that the bulk of what we now know about the two events has only come about in the last two decades or so, using modern forensic techniques. In the case of Custer, a fire that raged across the Little Bighorn site enabled scientists to uncover a wealth of previously hidden evidence, and thus piece together exactly what happened. In the case of Franklin, a scientific team led by Dr Owen Beattie exhumed the remarkably preserved bodies of three early casualties of the Franklin expedition, buried on desolate Beechey Island near the start of the voyage, and discovered astonishingly high levels of lead in the men. This, in turn, led to an investigation of the tins of food taken on the voyage—abandoned tins from the Franklin Expedition may still be found in the Arctic—and the discovery that they were soldered with lead on the inside, thus allowing the lead to leach into the food over the course of the voyage. Writer Scott Cookman took this a step further in his book *Ice Blink*, showing that the provisioner, Goldner, not only failed to ensure that the tins were soldered completely, thereby allowing bacteria into the tins, but that the food was inadequately cooked prior to delivery, thus making sure that thriving colonies of bacteria were present in many of the tins.

Dan Simmons acknowledges his debt to Cookman's volume at the end of *The Terror*, a masterful look at, and reimagining of, the expedition and what happened. It begins in 1847, at a point when Sir John Franklin is already dead, and then switches back and forth in time, now recounting the origins of the expedition and the histories of some of the men involved, now shifting to the present, when the men are already starting to show signs of that most dreaded of sailor's diseases, scurvy. The ship's medical crew know that for some reason fresh food — particularly lemon juice — is an effective antiscorbutic, but their lemon juice has lost its efficacy, and there is little fresh food to be had, the men relying more and more on Goldner's tinned food, which they have little means to heat thoroughly. Thus the men are now dying of lead and food poisoning, neither of which would have been understood by the medical men. In addition, both *Erebus* and *Terror* have been frozen in the same spot for more than a year, with no hope of escape in sight; both ships are being relentlessly ground to pieces by the ever-moving ice packs; the temperature dips as low as -100º F, and the men have no way of getting or keeping warm, or of drying out their sodden, frozen layers of wool clothing; Franklin, their leader, is dead; the men realise that there is so little hope of rescue from outside parties that they might as well be on the moon; and when the food runs out they face the very real prospect of having to eat their dead.

For most novelists all this would be horror enough, and Simmons superbly evokes the despair and misery of the increasingly tortured survivors who, under Crozier's lead, abandon their ships to the ice and set out on a journey across the frozen wastes which would have taxed even healthy men on full rations, and which takes its inevitable toll on the diseased and starving men. Some of the most horrific passages in the book detail exactly what happens to the human body when scurvy takes hold, or how best to dissect a human body so as to get at the flesh and fat, and Simmons brilliantly describes and evokes the tortuous passage of the men across the ever-shifting ice, man-hauling sledges which weigh more than half a ton each:

> Somehow Des Voeux had kept them moving to the northeast, but every day the weather worsened, the pressure ridges grew closer together, the necessary deviations from their course became longer and more treacherous, and the sledge sustained serious damage in their Herculean struggle to haul and shove it over the jagged ice ridges. Two days were lost just repairing the sledge in the howl of wind and blowing snow.
>
> The mate had decided to turn around on their fourteenth morning on the ice. With only one tent left, he gauged their chances of survival as low. They then tried to follow their own thirteen days of ruts back to the ships, but the ice was too active — shifting slabs, moving bergs within the pack ice, and new pressure ridges rising in front of them had obliterated their tracks. Des Voeux, the finest navigator on the Franklin Expedition except for Crozier, took theodolite and sextant readings in the few clear moments he found in the days and nights but ended up setting his course based mostly on dead reckoning. He told the men that he knew precisely where they were. He was sure, he later admitted

to Fitzjames and Crozier, that he would miss the ships by twenty miles.

On their last night on the ice, the final tent ripped and they abandoned their sleeping bags and pressed on to the southwest blindly, man-hauling just to stay alive. They jettisoned their extra food and clothing, continued to man-haul the sledge only because they needed their water, shotguns, cartridges, and powder. Something large had been following them for their entire voyage. They could see it through the spindrift and fog and pelting hail. They could hear it circling them each endless night in the darkness.

The Thing on the Ice, as the men call it, has been dogging the expedition since its first icy winter, and in the beginning the men view it as simply a large Arctic bear of the sort they have been encountering throughout the journey. However, the Thing rapidly proves to be more than a bear: it has certain physical similarities to, but is far larger than, even the largest polar bear, and possessed of a keen intelligence and the ability to materialise out of nowhere and disappear as suddenly. At first it confines itself to picking off men who are unfortunate enough to be on the ice on their own; but in one terrifying set-piece it gets into one of the ice-bound ships, leaving a trail of death and devastation which continues above decks, where Ice Master Thomas Blanky takes refuge in the spars and sails and then tries to elude the creature among the pressure ridges and seracs on the ice, desperately searching for a space large enough to hide in yet small enough that the Thing cannot follow.

Later, as the survivors press on by sledge, they are aware of the creature always following, yet the attacks cease — for a time. When they resume, it is with a ferocity that shakes the survivors to the core, as they wonder what will kill them first: the cold, starvation, the diseases wracking their bodies, or the malevolent creature dogging their trail. Following the committal to the deep of three of the party — or at least as much of their bodies as have been found — the surviving medical officer, Harry Goodsir, writes:

All of us, I believe, were Thinking that these words were a Eulogy and Farewell for each one of us. Up until this Day and the loss of Lieutenant Little's boat with all his men — including the irreplaceable Mr Reid and the universally liked Mr Peglar — I suspect that many of us still thought that we might Live. Now we know that the odds of that had all but Disappeared.

The long awaited and Universally Cheered Open Water was a vicious Trap.

The Ice will not give us up.

And the creature from the ice will not allow us to leave.

The novel is written in a series of chapters told from the points of view of a large cast of characters, and it is to Simmons's enormous credit that each of these men has an individual and distinct voice. From the bare facts known of these men — many of whom are, at this remove, merely names on a muster roll — he has created a series of fully rounded characters, taking the barest of clues and hints and suppositions and spinning them into something wholly convincing.

For example, Scott Cookman writes, in *Ice Blink*, that one of the bodies, that of a steward, was found years later with a pocketful of possessions, including a notebook belonging to Petty Officer Harry Peglar. Writes Cookman, 'Peglar, starving, had either died on the march or been left at Erebus Bay and entrusted the book to the steward who, despite his own sufferings, tenderly carried it homeward, intent on delivering it to Peglar's relatives.' Simmons has expanded on this brief reference and the word 'tenderly' to build up a wholly convincing friendship, bordering on love, between Peglar and Steward John Bridgens, whom he posits met on the voyage of the *Beagle* in 1831; these references to such contemporary people and things as Darwin, telegrams, and Poe (one brilliant section owes much to "The Masque of the Red Death") remind us that while these men were stuck in a featureless landscape at the top of the world, life continued, however impossibly far away. Surgeon Harry Goodsir begins the book as a rather comical figure, inclined not to be taken seriously by anyone, yet over the course of the book he grows into a strong and dignified

man who has earned the respect of the survivors. One by one Simmons does this with many of the characters, showing how extreme hardship brings out the best — or worst — in humans: characters who start out as seemingly honourable are shown to harbor a darkness within them which is even more terrifying than the malignancy of the creature stalking them, while other men, like Goodsir, rise to the occasion, and become, almost in spite of themselves, better.

Nowhere is this more marked than in the case of Crozier, who begins the novel as a bitter man who is seldom sober, and who decides that when his private supply of whisky is exhausted he will take his own life, rather than face the horrors around him without the numbing effects of drink. By the time that moment arrives, however, Crozier finds that the flames of life and responsibility burn too fiercely for him to give up, and that the man he has become will not allow him to throw his life away while there remains a hope of survival. To that end he endures a nightmarish withdrawal scene which leads him to the brink of death, and also lays the seeds for the revelations of the book's final 100 pages, where all the threads are drawn together into an ending which is as strangely beautiful, yet horrifying, as it is right.

Simmons has also managed brilliantly to work within the known facts of the expedition, finding explanations which fit logically and seamlessly into his interpretation of events to answer some of the anomalies which still puzzle Franklin experts. Why, for example, did the men abandon ship yet drag with them so many articles — Bibles, novels, writing desks, china — for which they had no practical use? Why was one of the sledge-mounted boats found, with two skeletons — one intact, one in pieces — miles away from where the survivors are known to have gone, and facing in the wrong direction, that is northwest towards the abandoned ships and not southeast towards their hope of escape? Why did the officers on board both ships suffer a disproportionately large number of casualties early in the expedition? And what of the reports of some Inuit that one of the men survived, and spent the rest of his life living in a native village? All of Simmons's explanations fit perfectly, as does his only significant addition to the known cast of characters: an enigmatic Inuit woman known by the crew as Lady Silence, who many are soon convinced is a Jonah, or witch, and who may be in league with the Ice Creature.

The Terror is a superb book, and that comparatively rare beast, a historical novel that does not ring false at any point. It is also a terrifying novel of the supernatural, with more than a few echoes of Algernon Blackwood. Its length may seem daunting, but make sure that when you start reading it you have a few days clear: for once you pick it up, you will not want to stop until the story ends.