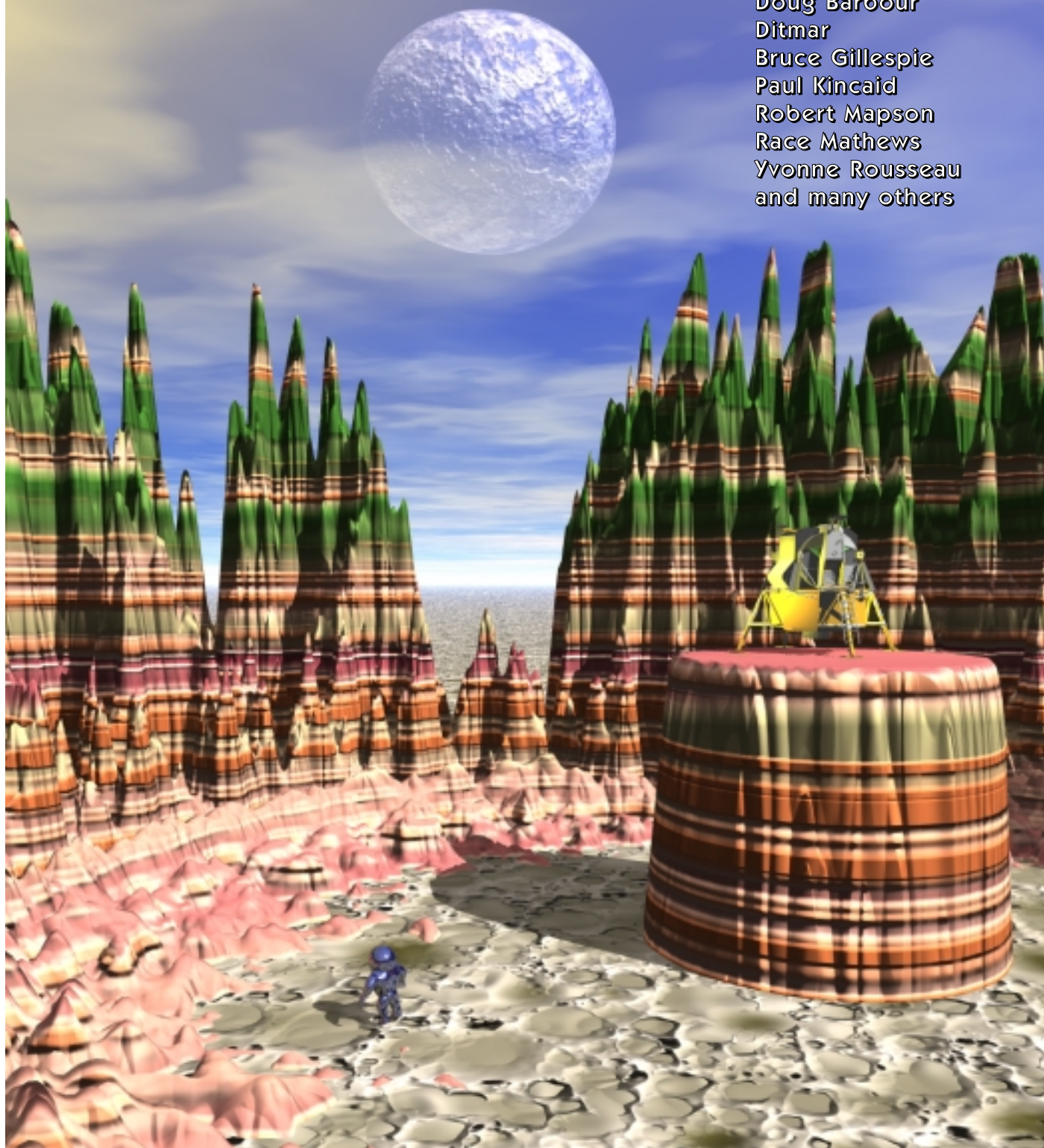


The Metaphysical Review 28/29

August 1998

John Bangsund
Doug Barbour
Ditmar
Bruce Gillespie
Paul Kincaid
Robert Mapson
Race Mathews
Yvonne Rousseau
and many others



ISBN 0814-8805

Graphic by Ditmar

The Metaphysical Review 28/29

August 1998

72 pages

FROM

BRUCE GILLESPIE, 59 Keele Street, Collingwood VIC 3066 Australia
(ph & fax: 61-3-9419 4797; e-mail: gandc@mira.net)
Printed by Copy Place, 136 Queen Street, Melbourne VIC 3000.

HOW TO GET IT

Available for letters of comment (if e-mailed, please also send your postal address), written or graphic contributions, traded publications, donations or subscriptions (\$30 within Australia: write cheques to 'Bruce Gillespie') (overseas airmail: equivalent of US\$40 or £20; please send your country's bank notes, or cheques marked 'Bruce Gillespie' already converted to Australian currency).

THANKS

Many thanks to financial help from **DAVID LAKE**, who made certain that this issue and No. 26/27 would be published.

DITMAR

FRONT COVER

THE EDITOR

3, 48 I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

Includes:

A SHORT AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF DITMAR

ROUSSEAU & 'TOMORROW & TOMORROW & TOMORROW'

DITMAR

YVONNE ROUSSEAU

LEIGH EDMONDS

TOM FELLER

DOUG BARBOUR

SIMON BROWN

ROBERT MAPSON

BRIAN ALDISS

9 IAN M. BANKS AND IAIN BANKS: SF AND NON-SF WRITER

Includes:

IAN M. BANKS: THE 'CULTURE' SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELS
and the economics and politics of scarcity and abundance

A TASTE FOR MAYHEM: IAIN BANKS'S NON-SF NOVELS

RACE MATHEWS

BRUCE GILLESPIE

DOUGLAS BARBOUR

16 MICHAEL ONDAATJE: History's indifferent indeterminacies

JOHN BANGSUND

19 ON LOOKING IT UP: A ramble on books and editing

PAUL KINCAID

30 BOOKS TO HAUNT US

PAUL KINCAID

32 I CAME UPON A CHILD OF GOD

37 Feature Letters: MORE BOOKS WE REALLY READ

JANE CARNALL
CHRISTOPHER PRIEST

RACE MATHEWS

WALT WILLIS

ROB GERRAND

CHARLES TAYLOR

PAUL ANDERSON

GEORGE TURNER

JOHN LITCHEN

KAREN JOHNSON

I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS

THE EDITOR
DITMAR
YVONNE ROUSSEAU
LEIGH EDMONDS
TOM FELLER
DOUG BARBOUR
SIMON BROWN
ROBERT MAPSON
BRIAN ALDISS

Welcome to *The Metaphysical Review*, the fanzine of People, Life, Events, Travel, the Vast Vortex of Human Excitement — and Gillespie Gloom and Doom, burglaries, illness and death, descending income, falling dollars, all set in Godzone Country, from which God has shambled off in a huff, muttering, 'I can't stand fish and chips.'

No! you say. No more *TMR* 26/27! We want the fun stuff. On with *TMR* 28/29.

I haven't changed my name to Pollyanna, but when flipping through the material for this issue I rediscovered all the things that make life worthwhile — books, music, computer art, and even a bit about films if there's any room. Plus more about People, Life, Events and Travel.

Computer graphics and Ditmar

Sitting in front of a computer screen takes up a fair slice of my time. The computer graphics that appeared on the back and front covers of *TMR* 26/27 were not, however, created by me (although I've had fun tweaking them in Quark and Photopaint). They were created by Ditmar.

Yes, the same Ditmar as the annual Australian SF Achievement Awards, the infamous Ditmars that cause much derision and wringing of hands each year, unless, of course, you win one. (For some reason I won one recently; thanks, everybody.)

Ditmar, the creator of computer graphics, is the same person who gave his name to the Ditmars: Martin James Ditmar Jenssen, usually called Dick Jenssen. A short biography appears in the box. Dick retired at the age of fifty-five. Since then (he tells us) he has been sitting in front of a computer, playing with programs such as Corel Photopaint, Paint Shop Pro, Vista Pro and Bryce 3D, and creating programs such as DJFractals. Since I am a Bear of Little Brain, I've learned only the rudiments of programs such as Photopaint. Elaine has explored some of the possibilities of DJFractals. Dick's and Elaine's computer experiments and Bill Wright's and my

A short autobiography of Ditmar

Martin James Ditmar Jenssen was born in Shanghai, China on 6 July 1935, of a Russian mother and a British father. For some reason he has always been called Dick. His family emigrated to Sydney, Australia early in 1941, and three years later to Melbourne.

After taking Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Science, and then a Ph.D., Dick spent two years as an Associate Professor at the University of Wisconsin before moving back to the Meteorology Department at Melbourne University, where he spent the rest of his professional life, and of which he has been Chairman. He has been a Research fellow at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, at the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, at the Institute for Alpine and Arctic Studies and at the Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Sciences, both at the University of Colorado. He has authored some fifty papers (mainly in the field of computer modelling of large ice masses such as Antarctica), co-edited a book (*Climate Change and Variability: A Southern Perspective*, Cambridge University Press), been a council member and Secretary of the Royal Meteorological Society (Australian Branch) and the Australian Meteorological Society, and editor of the *Australian Meteorological Magazine*. His main professional successes were performing the first computer weather forecast in the Southern Hemisphere, and pioneering the use of computer modelling of glacial dynamics and thermodynamics.

Dick has been retired for six years, and has discovered that there is a limit to how many laser discs he can watch, how many books he can read and how much music he can listen to before glut sets in. His professional life (since 1957) was intimately connected with computers, and so he now spends some considerable time trying to fan what little artistic talent he may have (which clearly is minuscule) by generating computer graphics which may have some aesthetic merit.

Some fifty years ago his school friend Race Mathews introduced Dick to SF, gave him his first magazine (*Astounding*, Sept., 1950), and a novel which has remained his most often read and second favourite (*The Ship of Ishtar* by A. A. Merritt). Race also discovered, and brought together, a number of SF fans at about this time, and the group quickly formed itself into the Melbourne Science Fiction Club, of which, naturally, Race and Dick were of the founding members.

In 1968 Dick was a member of the committee that was organising an SF Convention at which the first Australian Science Fiction Awards were to be given. This committee met on a particularly stifling summer's day in the clubroom's oppressively hot confines. After a protracted, and meandering, discussion trying to fix on a popular name for the awards, Dick's frivolous nature erupted and he facetiously suggested they be called 'Ditmars'. To his surprise, this found favour.

When reviewing his life, Dick sees only two events of which he is proud — in the sense that he would not want his life to be without these. The first is quite personal, and possibly somewhat maudlin, and the other is having his name attached to the Australian Science Fiction Achievement Awards. Nothing else is of much importance.

remorseless greed for fanzine art have led to the production of some interesting pieces.

Not that this nice stuff is reserved for Bill, Elaine and me. Anybody who is interested can get in touch with Dick at PO Box 432, Carnegie VIC 3163, Australia, or by e-mail at ditmar@c031.aone.net.au

You will see from the colophon that Elaine and I have finally chained ourselves to the Worldwide Web and the Internet. This has been mainly a disappointing experience. Timebinders, the only chat group to which I belong, has its moments, especially when I get in contact with one of those many overseas SF fans who doesn't write letters but with whom I like to natter. I expected to find a vast treasure trove of stuff on Web pages, but instead find mainly catalogues and advertising. There is supposed to be good writing on the Web, but all I've found so far are a few sites such as John Bangsund's, David Grigg's, Dave Langford's and Ali Kayn's *Festivale* Web reviewzine. So far I've found only a few of the fanzines that are distributed on the Web, such as *Ansible*, Cheryl Morgan's *Emerald City*, Tommy Ferguson's *Tommy-World*, Ted White's new fanzine *Spam*, and Victor Gonzalez' *Squib*. All highly recommended, but I hope there are a few more Out There Somewhere.

I refuse to read any of this stuff while it's flickering away on a computer monitor. I've used far too many of Elaine's printer cartridges downloading material I'm not sure I'll keep anyway. E-mail messages are no substitute for meaty letters of comment; and to publish a fanzine on the Web is to strip myself of most of the improvements in layout and typography that computers made possible in the first place.

What I've been publishing while I haven't been publishing

The great pleasures of life remain reading books, listening to music, watching films, and discussing these activities in fanzines. Since I can rarely afford the money to produce issues of *Metaphysical Review* and *SF Commentary*, I've been publishing mainly in two apas (amateur publishing associations): ANZAPA and Acnestis.

ANZAPA, as the initials imply, is the Australia and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association. Leigh Edmonds began it in 1968, but hasn't stayed around for its mellow, glorious years, illuminated by the writing of such people as Leanne Frahm (this year's Ditmar winner for Best Fan

Writer), Bill Wright (producing great stuff after more than a decade away from fanzine publishing), David Grigg (who was also absent for too many years), Marc and Cath Ortlieb, and many others. However, as far as I know no member of the apa is now under thirty, and ANZAPA faces no competition from rival apas run by the under-thirties.

When writing for ANZAPA, I find I can write about anything, but recently I've found myself waxing grumpy about economics and politics, fghodsake! Still, the things we were arguing about five years ago are now at the centre of the national stage, so perhaps John, Tim and Kim, not to mention Pauline, should join ANZAPA to find the Answers to Everything. I prefer to write about books and music, but find few people in the apa who share my interests in music. Computers and computer programs are another constant topic of conversation, along with travel, illness, condolences, cats, and pretty much the stuff you'd find in a bumper issue of *TMR*. ANZAPAns sometimes talk about SF TV shows, but I avert my gaze when they do so.

To join ANZAPA, write to Marc Ortlieb, PO Box 215, Forest Hill, VIC 3131, or e-mail him at mortlieb@vicnet.net.au. Overseas members are welcome, and fans under thirty are very welcome.

I don't feel free to give details for **Acnestis**, since it has a very low turnover of members, and I'm the only non-British member. It is for Fans Who (Still) Read Books, and is notable for the average quality of the writing of the members. Most of them also write for the best British fanzines, especially the British Science Fiction Association's publications *Vector*, *Focus* and *Matrix*, act as judges for the Arthur Clarke Award, and provide much of the energy that drives British fandom. The Acnestids' all-inclusive enjoyment of literature, music and art has been an inspiration to me during recent years, when I haven't been sure that I would ever produce another general fanzine. Publishing *The Great Cosmic Donut of Life* for Acnestis and **bvg** for ANZAPA have provided me with scratchboards to work out ideas that would otherwise have gone unwritten . . .

Frinstance, the following piece, which was first written for Acnestis, and later appeared in Eva Windisch's *Tira Lirra* (PO Box 305, Mt Evelyn VIC 3796) in 1995. Here's my Reader's Credo. I forgot about it until recently, but find to my great relief that I still agree with myself.

BOOKS OF REVELATION

The most exciting event in my life occurred some time during 1951 or 1952, before I learned to read. Because the shop was advertised on radio station 3DB's children's session, my mother took me to visit Tim the Toyman, Melbourne. This was a vast toyshop that ran the length of Regent Place. Both the lane and the shop have long since been destroyed to make way for Melbourne's City Square.

The premises of Tim the Toyman had been built by knocking doorways in the side walls of a long line of shops, thus allowing the dazzled child to wander from one room of toys to another. That's if he or she was interested in toys, which I wasn't.

Already bored by the sight of the parade of toys, I wandered through one further door, and found paradise. The final shop was a children's bookshop, called Peter

Piper Books. My astonished gaze discovered a room whose entire walls were lined with books by my favourite authors, especially those of Enid Blyton. I pulled books from their places. I leafed through them. I marvelled that so many books existed. I wanted them all. My mother said that I could pick one of them. That would be my next Christmas present.

Not even our first visit to the Claremont Library, in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern, stays in my mind with that same ecstatic clarity. The Claremont Library was one of the last of the old-fashioned private lending libraries that littered the suburbs until the arrival of television in 1956. My Auntie Betty, who borrowed books from the Claremont Library, told my mother about it. When we (my mother, two sisters and I) visited, we found an old-fashioned, musty

room filled with books that looked the worse for wear. We launched ourselves at the children's bookshelves, and found huge numbers of Enid Blyton books. Another paradise.

From our point of view, the Claremont Library's greatest asset was its proprietor. The little old lady who sat behind the counter was indulgent to book-addicted children. She let us borrow up to ten books at a time, and never charged late fees, although we were always late returning books. My mother wondered how the little old lady made a living.

How did I become a book addict?

I was afflicted with this condition before I could read. I must thank my parents, although I'm sure they never meant me to be a book maniac. My parents read to me and my sisters from when we were very young. I became an addict of good stories before I realised they sprang out of books.

My father bought shellac 78 rpm children's records that were stored in huge leather-bound albums. Each side of a record played for about four minutes. Excerpts from *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* were highlights of the collection.

The essential quality of a good story was that it described events that could not happen to oneself. They belonged to The Other, that exciting world that was the opposite of one's own dreary existence. In one world I existed; in the other world, my imagination existed. I wanted always to escape from the small, cramped, ineffectual world into that spacious world in which anything was possible. Until I was well into my twenties, those two worlds rarely met. In the mundane world, I was no good at anything much; in the imaginary world, people of rare resourcefulness went on grand adventures, and I went with them.

At the same time that I became addicted to stories, I grew to love books themselves. I ran my fingers over glossy papers and avoided books printed on pulpy paper. I opened each book and rubbed my nose over them. Some of the world's most beautiful scents emerge from book paper. At an early age I recognised the idea of 'type face'. Although I could not describe the differences between them, I felt drawn towards books printed in some type faces rather than others. I found that some books were sturdy in the hand, and others cracked down the spine.

My parents had little money, but somehow they bought us a few picture books that quickly wore out and had to be sticky-taped back together. Before I learned to read, I would sit at the table and pretend to read out loud every word of any one of the 'Thomas the Tank Engine' books, reciting from memory what had been read to me many times.

This was merely a shadow of the reading experience I saw before me, but I was not able to teach myself to read before I went to school. During our first week of school, we received our copy of *John and Betty*. Letter by letter, we went through the alphabet. Okay. How do those letters fit together into words? Okay, I see that. But what can 'ing' mean? There are no words in which you say 'nnn' and 'guh' together. That doesn't make sense.

A great revelation of my schooldays was being told how to pronounce 'ing'. My entire life had changed. I discovered that English doesn't make obvious sense — instead it is a dazzling playground of contradictions. I felt as if I removed the top from a pickle bottle only to find it to a treasure box. Now all the stories in the world were available to me. Now I need not be bound within the endlessly boring world of Ordinary Existence. What a wonderful aspiration! What a futile hope!

I skipped through the set readers while many of the other kids were still staggering through *John and Betty*. Every new word I met went straight into the brain. I could spell any word. Where could I find more books?

As I've said, I discovered Peter Piper Books, whose treasures remained unavailable because of the high price of books, and the Claremont Library, which my sisters and I raided every month or so. Its greatest treasures were books by Enid Blyton.

A few years ago I bought new paperback copies of some of the Blyton books I had enjoyed during childhood. Why had they worked so well? Enid Blyton wrote stories in which not only the events in front of you are interesting, but they offered a promise that the events to follow would also be interesting. Who cares that the adult reader might think their style a bit flat? When I was a child reading these books in my head, I injected style into the prose; Enid Blyton gave me the events that I could never have imagined or experienced for myself.

When Enid Blyton wrote about secret islands, mountains with rivers running through the centre of them, voyages to the Shetlands, and insoluble mysteries, they seemed more real than anything I had encountered in real life. Blyton's characters seemed alive to me. When they spoke, they didn't speak to me in squiffy British tones (as Australian librarians of the 1960s claimed) but in down-to-earth Australian tones, because that's how they spoke in my head. By contrast, the characters in most of the other children's books I tried reading had no life in their voices.

My mother bought for me a weekly children's magazine called *Sunny Stories*. Printed in tiny type (no pandering to children's eyesight in those days), it featured advertisements for Cadbury's Bourneville Cocoa on the back and in the main published stories by Enid Blyton. When *Sunny Stories* folded in 1954, the same company began *Enid Blyton's Magazine*, which proclaimed on its banner 'The Only Magazine I Write'. Still in her prime, Blyton wrote an entire magazine per month, plus many books per year. Later pundits scorned this achievement, claiming that Blyton hired ghost writers. (This claim, which disgusted Blyton, was given a kind of sad credence only because the declining quality of her work during the late 1950s. But that was after I had read all her best books two or three times.)

If I write much about the works of Enid Blyton, it's because the experience of reading them remains the model for what I seek in good fiction. A good book should be exotic: it should offer an experience beyond that of one's own circumstances and capabilities. A good book should be astonishing: at some point in a book one's jaw should drop and you should feel that you had just dropped three floors in a lift. At its best, a book, whatever its ostensible subject matter, offers you an entire world other than your own. You enter it; it makes you its own; you make it your own; the book becomes the world you really would like to inhabit.

If this seems like a theory supporting escapism, so be it. Ordinary existence is boring, dull, stupid, drab and limited; the author offers the Other.

My parents did not share this theory of literature. They encouraged our love of books because books offered Moral Improvement and people who read books came top of the class. Our bookshelves at home were filled with dull books based on a particularly puritanical version of the Christian religion; with books offering great gobs of information (I enjoyed the books that showed pictures of galaxies and trains); and with some books of fiction that were supposed to be Good For Us. Fortunately there was also *The Children's*

Treasure House, the Hornby Model Train Catalogue for 1930, and several books about Australian trains.

But I sought wonderful fabrications; and the source of wonderful fabrications is the mind of an Author. I realised this as early as 1953, and began writing stories. Many of the other kids, I felt sure, never quite realised that books had authors. For me authors, Enid Blyton chief among them, were the great magicians of the world. They were the people who turned dross into gold. I wanted to be one of them.

That I've never become a writer of fiction is the failure of my life. I don't find inside my own mind the magnificent riches that I find in other people's books. Fortunately I can dig out other people's riches, polish them, and put them on display; I became a reviewer and critic.

In 1973, after I had typed, duplicated, collated and stapled 250 copies of one of my magazines, the small son of a friend of mine walked into the room and said, 'Look, mummy, he's making a book!' The success of my life is that I have always been able to earn my living by making books: editing, typesetting, laying out, or even taking part in the production process.

While I was at primary school I read large sections of *Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia*, and anything I could find about astronomy and atomic bombs. Without realising it, I had become addicted to science fiction in 1952 (a year before I learned to read) when I had heard G. K. Saunders' radio serial *The Moon Flower* on the ABC's Children's Session. I found few written examples of 'space fiction' while I was a primary school, but I did find in the children's section of the Claremont Library the 'Mars' books of Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Edgar Rice Burroughs is not much praised these days, because his books are labelled as 'sword and sorcery'. Indeed, on Burroughs' Mars the warriors always reached for their swords instead of sitting down for a chat. The endless action was not what attracted me. Burroughs' acute visual sense gave me a Mars of dry ocean beds, canals, isolated cities under domes, princes and princesses and large green creatures. More importantly, the Mars books (compared to the same author's Tarzan books) were littered with science-fictionary ideas, including invisible rays, creatures whose heads could leave their host bodies and trot around on little legs, and, most memorably, the vast wall of living, growing flesh in *Synthetic Men of Mars*.

I no longer merely sought the exotic. I wanted ideas as well.

I was the kid who carried a book around in his pocket. Whenever I could find some spare time during lunchtime or playtime, I would drag out a book to read a few more pages. I was quite incompetent at all forms of sport and games. Worse, I kept coming top or equal top of the class.

I've heard of children who loved books who managed to keep their addiction secret. I've heard of unpopular children who protected themselves by telling funny stories. I had no such defences. The more isolated I was seen to be, often bullied and ostracised, the more isolated I made myself. I knew no other kids who admitted to reading books for pleasure. Even my parents, who more anybody else were responsible for my love of books, always wanted me to 'play outside' when all I wanted to do was read. One part of the world was me and my books. The other part of the world was everybody else.

At the age of twelve, in 1959, I felt abruptly that I was no

longer a child. I stopped buying and reading comics. I stopped reading Enid Blyton books. I had already read all of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars books three times. One day when our family was visiting the Claremont Library I stepped deliberately out of the children's section, crossed the passage, and borrowed a book from the adults' section. The first adult book I borrowed was from a bookcase marked Science Fiction. It was Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids*. It was so astonishing, so far beyond any experience I had found in books until then, that I decided to track down as many science fiction books as I could find. Too bad that thirty-six years later I realise that *The Humanoids* was one half right-wing crap (Williamson's far-future world is hell because well-meaning robots will not allow people to harm themselves) and the other half scientific hooley (the rebels are people with psionic powers). What I remember with great pleasure was Williamson's fevered, even hysterical pleasure in dumping me, the reader, into the middle of his far-future world and keeping me there from the first loony page to the last.

Books, isolation, pleasure and sickness make up a consistent pattern during my teens. When I began secondary school, I found that sport took up an even greater part of the curriculum than it had at primary school, and that I was even worse, relative to every other kid, at all sports than I had been.

Fortunately a series of illnesses gave me an excuse to avoid sport during my first three years at secondary school. During Form 1 (now Year 7) I developed papillomas on my feet: nasty warty growths that would not go away. The local doctor sent me a specialist in St Kilda Road. To reach the specialist I had to take the train from Oakleigh to Flinders Street Station (the centre of the Melbourne suburban network), then catch a tram down St Kilda Road to the specialist's office. What better day of the week to make such a visit than sports day? I would take the whole afternoon off. But I had never been to the city by myself before. My parents sat me down in front of a map of Melbourne, showed me where the streets are, and said: you're on your own.

The specialist's appointment took no more than half an hour on each afternoon. Back in town, although my feet were sore, I began to explore the streets near Flinders Street Station. In this way, I discovered the bookshops of Melbourne many years before I might otherwise have done. Cheshire's (long gone), McGill's (now in a different location), Angus & Robertson (now a mere shadow of its former self) and the various Collins Book Depots offered me the same Elixir of Book that I had discovered years earlier at Peter Piper Books.

Many of the bookshops included the overseas science fiction magazines in their racks. What to buy with my small weekly supply of pocket money? Paperback books were 5/6 each, but the British *New Worlds* and *Science Fiction Adventures*, each edited by E. J. Carnell, were 2/6 each. The first issue of *New Worlds* I bought included the last episode of *Time Out of Joint* by Philip K. Dick. Philip Dick has since then been my favourite science fiction author.

In Form 2 (Year 8) I was affected by another medical condition that allowed me to skip sports days in order to visit yet another specialist in St Kilda Road. It was Sherman's disease, the back condition that I still suffer from. For nearly two years I wore a brace on my back. I spent more happy afternoons scouring the bookshops of Melbourne. I yielded to temptation and bought *Galaxy*, which cost 5 shillings. Such extravagance was well rewarded. *Galaxy* was the first science fiction magazine to be printed offset. Fred Pohl, just

taking over from H. L. Gold as editor, used the process to feature magnificent page-wide half-tone graphics, a great stylistic improvement on the crude black-and-white illustrations of many earlier science fiction magazines. In that first issue that I bought, a page-wide illustration showed fronds of limbs joined together, with faces and other limbs emerging from the fronds. It was Virgil Finlay's art for Cordwainer Smith's 'A Planet Named Shayol'. From then on, I was a fan of the stories of Cordwainer Smith and the art of Virgil Finlay.

My reading life floundered for some years, mainly because I rejected the notion of reading the Classics (that is, teacher-approved books), but thanks to a Fourth Form assignment, I discovered a yen for critical reviewing. Not that I had ever heard of such a term. I loved writing, but I wrote little fiction. I could write opinionated essays for English, but had not yet discovered my subject matter. Our English teacher suggested that we write a long book report on any novel that had not been set as a compulsory text. I chose Neville Shute's *A Town Like Alice* because it had a reputation at our household of being an 'Australian classic' although Shute lived here for only the last ten years of his life and wrote only a few books set in Australia. As I found out quickly enough, *A Town Like Alice* is no classic. Shute's reputation is based more on the movies made from his books than on the books themselves. After writing several thousand words about this awful book, I realised that I had nothing good to say about it, but I did not have the words to say exactly what I disliked about it. This was frustrating, and I don't think I received a high mark for the assignment. But the practice of writing the assignment showed me that somehow I would find the right way to say about books what should be said about them.

In 1963 I discovered that books could be as useful for stimulating thinking as for providing entertainment and information. Until then thinking had been a painful exercise useful only for passing exams. In 1963 I read *Atlas Shrugged*, a super-technicolour widescreen baroque utopian science fiction novel by Ayn Rand.

We all know now that *Atlas Shrugged* is the arch-right-wing tome that has provided the blueprint for much that Newt Gingrich's mob are trying to do in the American Congress at the moment. Many would put it beside *Mein Kampf* on the bookshelf.

But for a sixteen-year-old in 1963 *Atlas Shrugged* was a wonderful intellectual adventure, the story of heroic industrialists who were bucking the system (when all along I had thought rich industrialists were the system we were trying to buck) and trying to establish an ideal community. Rand's rhetoric is lavish, and her visual sense acute. For a thousand pages or so, the reader lives inside her paranoid vision.

I realise now that Rand, like Heinlein before her, succeeded by feeding the redneck prejudices of people who knew nothing about economics or politics. Rand's strength was in not caring a damn about her audience. She had no time for conventional religion. *Atlas Shrugged* was the book that weaned me off religion at one hit, although I continued to go to church with my family for some years. Rand had no time for conventional right-wing pieties. Her heroine, Dagny Taggart (I can still remember the name after thirty-five years) uses and discards one lover after another. 'Greed is good'; Ayn Rand said it first.

Not that I believed all of this stuff. The book was important because it alerted me for the first time that a person's political and economic beliefs were connected, and that they are important. This was first step in connecting my

reading experiences and my real life. Within a year I had taken giant steps towards a viewpoint that is the exact opposite of Rand's, but that didn't matter. That one book had kick-started my naive mind into holding everything up for examination and re-evaluation.

At the end of my teens, I had still not entered the true world of books. I can only thank the people who set the courses for Matriculation Literature (1964) and three years of English at Melbourne University (1965-68) for doing that. By now I was commuting daily by train from Bacchus Marsh (a country town about fifty kilometres from Melbourne) to the university. This gave me a total of two hours' reading every day. I gulped down James's *Portrait of a Lady*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Forster's *A Passage to India*, Flaubert's major novels, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, several Balzac novels, Borrow's *Lavengro* and Eliot's poems. And that was just in First Year. I had entered Paradise.

Or had I? The road to paradise is narrow. I might well have read hundreds of books and still failed to achieve my half-glimpsed aims.

In First Year, for the first assignment we were handed a duplicated collection of passages from poems. We had to read the passages, 'comparing and contrasting them'. I had no idea what to do. I read the bits of poetry. And re-read them. No ideas came to mind.

When the day came to hand in the assignments, I had written nothing. I turned up at the tutorial, to be met by a chain-smoking woman in her forties. Mrs Scoborio put us at our ease. She didn't seem too terrifying, but she had a clipped way of speaking that showed she knew what she was talking about. She was unconcerned that I had not yet written my assignment. She handed back the others' assignments. We looked at the passages. My mind was still blank. She took us through the first passage. She offered no comments of her own. She asked questions. 'What is the author doing in this part of this sentence? What is he or she really saying? Why has the author used this rhythm or cadence in this particular place?' As she coaxed us into teasing apart each sentence, I began to see the point she was making. During school English, the teacher always showed us what a story or poem 'meant', and we used bits from the piece as evidence to make general statements. Bit by bit, Mrs Scoborio showed us how to do the whole thing for ourselves: to read every bit of book, story, play or poem carefully, to listen the sound of each line or sentence, then make general statements only after detecting particular patterns in what we read.

Of all the revelations described in this article, this is the most important: that no reader need depend on professor, tutor, theorist or dogmatist to find the value of any piece of creative work. All you need to do is read carefully enough, and the whole picture will be revealed to you. I'm not sure whether this was the viewpoint of Melbourne University's English Department as a whole, but it was Mrs Scoborio's, and it remains mine.

The English Department was described as 'Leavisite' in those days, but neither I nor anybody but serious Honours students read much of F. R. Leavis's work. He did believe that the reader, by examining passages of prose or poetry carefully enough, could 'prove' that one was 'better' than another, and as a result formulated the notorious Great Tradition of Leavis-Approved Novels. I don't think he would have liked my central discovery that criticism is essentially a do-it-yourself subject, and hence every reader formulates his or her own Great Tradition of favourite works.

I floundered through English, and did much better at History, and emerged in 1968 from Melbourne University having read many of the books that remain my favourites.

In 1968 I walked for the first time into a private living room that was lined with books. The living room was that of John Bangsund. From then on, I wanted to own at least as many books as I had seen on John Bangsund's shelves that day. Little did I know that, without really trying, one day my collection would fill a house.

By 1968 I owned enough books to cover a few shelves in a wardrobe. They included some cheap science fiction paperbacks, a few other paperbacks, and the novels, plays and books of poetry I had bought for my university courses. I had used libraries for many years, but now had no access to them. In 1969 I received my first real salary. When I travelled into Melbourne, I roamed the secondhand bookshops that I had discovered years earlier during my visits to specialists. For my twenty-first birthday, my father built me a large bookcase that was meant to hold all the books I would ever own. This aim had failed by the end of 1971. Books were beginning to spill out all over my room. In 1973 I moved for the first time into my own flat. Bricks-and-board bookcases (an idea pinched from John Bangsund, who often moves house) enabled me for the first time in some years to put all my books on shelves.

When Elaine and I got together, we put together our book collections. When we moved into our house, we had built floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that covered four walls of the house. During the last 15 years we've had to add ceiling-high bookshelves on three more walls. We've run out of wall space, and books are now sitting in boxes.

Most people, when they enter the house, ask 'Have you read them all?' John Barnes endeared himself to us when he asked 'Where did you get that marvellous shelving?' Only

one person has ever asked the sensible question, 'What is your favourite book of them all?'

Nobody ever dares ask: 'Why do you collect books?' The answer's easy: so that I can be surrounded by my friends. Barry Oakley, Australian novelist and commentator, speaks of having his books sitting as friends on their shelves, speaking to each other above his head. I have my friends sitting beside me, and around me, and above me.

Books don't let you down. Even the worst book includes something of value. If a book proves to be crummy, it never reaches the main shelves, or it is sold to a secondhand dealer. Books remain a sensuous delight to me: their dust-jackets, their scent, the feel of good paper, the appearance of an attractive type face.

But are books worthwhile? I've spent most of my life out on a limb because I value books more than most other things in life, such as sport, car, holidays or having children.

Do I still think that books are valuable because they provide an escape from the mundane? Yes, sort of. The mundane, I feel more and more, is a weird plot hatched by evil and stupid people to prevent the rest of us enjoying the life of the mind. If you step inside your own mind or that of the author you're reading, people accuse you of stepping outside mundanity. The world of the mind is interesting; mundanity isn't.

Did I ever find a point when the worlds of life and books joined together? For years my favourite novels had described scenes of love, lust or passion. I didn't believe that such an alien experience could never happen to me. In 1972, at the unlikely age of twenty-five, I kissed a girl for the first time. I realised then that the events described in all those books could happen to me. Revelation! Paradise!

— Bruce Gillespie, 17 May 1995

THE BEST OF EVERYTHING

Since I enjoy nothing more than *Vast Generalisations* and *Astounding Revelations*, I'd like to be able to say that I've made great discoveries in books, films and music during recent years. But I cannot lie. The general flow of my reading, watching and listening continues much as ever. Great discoveries are small discoveries, unexpected lines of inquiry rather than astounding revelations.

I rarely have the opportunity to watch the kinds of **films** I really like: black-and-white Hollywood and British films of the late 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s. They've disappeared from free-to-air TV screens in this country (but, I'm told, occasionally can be found on cable TV), and are rarely shown at cinemas. Cinema during the 1990s is thin gruel, so I list the best of what I find. I've discovered a few other gems at a monthly gathering at which films are shown from laser disc and (as from next month) from DVD.

Only a small number of people share my tastes in **music**, so I will take the excuse of overcrowded *TMR* pages to leave out my CD Top Twenty lists this time. Apologies to Robert Mapson and the other interested readers; if I catch up in some apazine I'll send it to you. I'm running further and further behind in listening to all the CDs released in any particular year. Until a few years ago my rule was to listen

carefully to at least one CD per day, but that rule has been buried by the general helter-skelter of life at the Gillespie & Cochrane powerhouse. When I looked at my 1994 and 1995 lists, they were riddled with CDs that either I have never played, have played and have totally forgotten, or of which I've played only a few tracks.

In pop music, the people whose CDs I play as soon as I buy them include Iris DeMent, Nancy Griffith, Victoria Williams, the Jayhawks, Wilco, Gillian Welch, Laurie Lewis, Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Tom Russell, and the now-dead Townes Van Zandt — a musical map line that runs from Seattle to Nashville, centring on Austin, Texas. They're called the 'No Depression' performers, after *No Depression* magazine, which is the Bible of the field. I called their music 'country punk' in the eighties. Anybody but me remember Green on Red and the Long Ryders? Some call this 'Alternative country'. Many of the No Depression people seem to have been punk rockers who discovered country music in their early twenties. The main musical influence is early seventies Rolling Stones crossed with REM, the Byrds, bluegrass and western swing. It's a big field, although almost none of these people reach the Top 100.

In classical music I find much slimmer pickings. For most of my favourite pieces of music, I own my favourite

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

IAIN M. BANKS AND IAIN BANKS: SF AND NON-SF WRITER

Race Mathews & Bruce Gillespie

IAIN M. BANKS: THE 'CULTURE' SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELS and the economics and politics of scarcity and abundance *by Race Mathews*

Papers delivered for the Nova Mob by Race Mathews and Bruce Gillespie, 6 November 1996.

In 1993, the American scholars Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky made a much-discussed contribution to futurology with their book *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil*.¹ Their theme is the economics and politics of scarcity. The book argues that it will be roughly another hundred years before science and technology reach a point where the world's consumption requirements can be satisfied. Throughout the intervening period, the globe will be divided into zones of peace and zones of turmoil. The zones of peace will be those areas — roughly corresponding to the current developed world — where conditions of relative abundance take the sting out of social frictions and enable democratic institutions and relative social harmony to be maintained. The zones of turmoil are the rest of the world — roughly corresponding to today's lesser-developed countries — where life continues to be dominated by the struggle for scarce resources among individuals, interest groups, social classes and nations. Singer and Wildavsky argue that the challenge for policy-makers is how to contain and quarantine the tensions in the zones of turmoil so that the zones of peace can as much as possible get on with developing the scientific and technological know-how which will ultimately — a century from now — enable us to come together as a unified and harmonious planet-wide social order.

Objection could be taken to this view on the grounds that it is — among other things — unoriginal, superficial, immoral and at variance with such observable facts as that the increasing aggregate wealth of the prospective zones of peace is not so far resulting in any appreciable diminution in the struggle for resources within them, or enhancing either democratic institutions or social harmony or prevent-

ing the emergence of an under-class whose deprivation in many cases is as great as could be found, for the most part, in any zone of turmoil. Science fiction readers may well suspect that social and political pathologies will result in a global future that more closely resembles the world of Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* than John W. Campbell Jr's *Forgiveness*.

What is also apparent from the science-fiction perspective is that we have been here before. Singer and Wildavsky are one more instance of science playing catch-up with science fiction. That problems arise where societies characterised by abundance co-exist with those characterised by scarcity has been a science-fiction trope for as long virtually as the genre has existed. Moreover, it is in science fiction that the consequent moral and political complexities of the juxtaposition have the more successfully been identified and explored. For example, to what extent is quarantine or containment either a moral or a practical option? Is there an obligation on the part of societies characterised by abundance to assist those which are less well off, and, if so, to what extent and by what means? Where does alleviating scarcity leave off and intrusion by the donors on the cultural and social integrity of the recipients take over? Can intervention in the interests of averting loss of life and suffering be reconciled with respect for the independence of the society where they are being experienced and the need for it to make mistakes in order to learn from them, and, if so, what are the limits of intervention?

These and other related questions have nowhere been more effectively posed in science-fiction terms than in the work of Iain M. Banks. Banks's intellectual stock in trade in key respects resembles that of Singer and Wildavsky, albeit restated against a galactic backdrop. The major preoccupation of his science fiction is with whether — and, if so, on what terms — societies characterised respectively by abundance and scarcity can co-exist. Unlike Singer and Wildavsky, Banks also has interesting things to say about the advantages and disadvantages that living in an abundance

1 Singer, M. and Wildavsky, A., *The Real World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil*, Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1993.

economy and a utopian social order might be found to have. He is in every respect a more readable, engaging and thought-provoking writer than Singer and Wildavsky. Cynics might go so far as to say that his extrapolations are no less likely than those of Singer and Wildavsky to come true.

The Culture

The pre-eminent social order of Banks's universe is known simply as the Culture. Its inhabitants are human, albeit of non-terrestrial origin and in key respects genetically enhanced. Their homes are predominantly the General Systems Vehicles — planet-size spaceships — in which they move between the stars:

General Systems Vehicles were like encapsulated worlds. They were more than just very big spaceships; they were habitats, universities, factories, museums, dockyards, libraries, even mobile exhibition centres. They represented the Culture — they were the Culture. Almost anything that could be done anywhere in the Culture could be on a GSV. They could make anything the Culture was capable of making, contained all the knowledge the Culture had ever accumulated, carried or could construct specialised equipment of every imaginable type for every conceivable eventuality, and continually manufactured smaller ships. Their complements were measured in millions at least. They crewed their offspring ships out of the gradual increase in their own population. Self-contained, self-sufficient, productive and, in peacetime at least, continually exchanging information, they were the Culture's ambassadors, its most visible citizens and its technological and intellectual big guns. There was no need to travel from the galactic backwoods to some distant Culture home-planet to be amazed and impressed by the stunning scale and awesome power of the Culture: a GSV would bring it right up to your front door.

The ships are operated — and society more generally is largely administered — by Artificial Intelligences known as Minds.²

John Clute's entry on Banks in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* rightly notes that: 'There are no Empires in the Culture, no tentacled Corporations, no Enclave whose hidden knowledge gives its inhabitants a vital edge in their attempts to maintain independence against the military hardware of the far-off Czar at the apex of the pyramid of power.'³ Abundance born of science and technology has long since made redundant the need for the population to compete economically with one another. Inasmuch as the Culture has a political philosophy, it loosely combines the better elements of anarchism, socialism and communitarianism, in a manner broadly reminiscent of William Morris and *News from Nowhere*. 'The Culture', says Banks, 'is my idea of Utopia':

Or at least as close as you can get to Utopia with what we regard as recognisably human stock. I'd love to live there, and that's been the guiding principle behind the whole thing. Not that it always comes out that way in the books, because I'm trying hard not to make it look wonderful and goody-goody and all the rest of it.⁴

2 Banks, I., *Consider Phlebas*, London: Orbit, 1987, pp. 220–1.

The Culture's preferred relationship with other species and societies is one of peaceful co-existence, tempered by the need to fend off such military challenges as may occasionally arise, and the urge to intervene — some within the Culture might call it meddle — where the predicament of local populations is felt to be intolerable. Intervention is the business of a Special Circumstances agency, which is frequently violent and unscrupulous in meeting its objectives. The activities of the Special Circumstances agency are what much of Banks's writing is about.

'The State of the Art'

The core Banks issues are posed in simplest and starkest terms in the novella *The State of the Art*, from Banks's collection of short fiction of the same name. The year is 1977. A General Contact Unit from the Culture — a spaceship of massive size and awesome capacities, but in turn only a minor component of the infinitely larger General Systems Vehicle which Banks describes casually as currently 'tramping a thousand years core-ward' — stations itself in the vicinity of Earth. The purpose of the visit is to enable the ship's Mind — and the wider community of Artificial Intelligences of which the Mind belongs — to assess whether mankind is at a point where contact should be initiated. Crew members travel widely on the surface to observe human behaviour at first hand and experience human society. One of their number is seduced by the relative variety and unpredictability of what he is seeing, opts to stay behind when the GCU leaves and goes so far as to have the Mind strip him of his genetic enhancements in order to approximate more closely to the race he proposes to join.⁵ At the same time the Mind is concluding that mankind is not yet ready for contact, and that the Earth should be categorised as a control world in a wider process of observing whether certain social pathologies inevitably cause the societies which exhibit them to self-destruct.

The downside of the Culture — the tug of decadence — is hinted at by Banks's description of an Earth-style banquet which takes place on the GCU. It reads in part:

Li walked purposefully to the head of the middle table, tramped on an empty seat at its head and strode purposefully on to the table top, clumping down the brightly polished surface between the glittering place settings (the cutlery had been borrowed from a locked and forgotten storeroom in a palace in India; it hadn't been used for fifty years, and would be returned, cleaned, the next day . . . as would the dinner service itself, borrowed for the night from the Sultan of Brunei — without his permission), past the starched white napkins (from the *Titanic*; they'd be cleaned too and put back on the floor of the Atlantic), in the midst of the glittering glassware (Edinburgh Crystal, removed for a few hours from packing cases stowed deep in the hold of a freighter in the South China Sea, bound for Yokohama) and the candelabra (from a cache of loot lying under a lake near Kiev, sunk there by retreating Nazis judging from the sacks; also due to be replaced after

3 Clute, J., 'Iain M. Banks', in Clute, J. and Nicholls, P. (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, London: Orbit, 1993, p. 88.

4 Banks, I. M., Interview with Stan Nicholls, *Interzone*, No. 86, August 1994, p. 22.

5 Renunciation of the Culture is also the theme of Banks's short story 'A Gift from the Culture'. See Banks, I. M., *The State of the Art*, London: Orbit, 1991, pp. 10–28.

their bizarre orbital excursion) until he stood in the centre of the middle table.

The passage continues a little later:

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Li said, standing with a bowl in one hand and a silver fork in the other. 'A little taste of Earth . . . no; more than that: a chance for you to participate in the rough and tumble of living on a squalid backwater planet without actually having to leave your seat or get your feet dirty.' He stabbed a bit of the meat, put it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. 'Human flesh, ladies and gents; cooked muscle of *hom. sap.* . . . as I suspect a few of you might have guessed. A little on the sweet side for my palate, but quite acceptable. Eat up . . . I had the ship take a few cells from a variety of people on earth. Without their knowledge of course. . . . Most of you over there will be eating either stewed Idi Amin or General Pinochet Chilli Con Carne; here in the centre we have a combination of General Stroessner Meat Balls and Richard Nixon Burgers. The rest of you have Ferdinand Marcos Saute and Shah of Iran Kebabs. There are, in addition, Fricaseed Kim Il Sung, Boiled General Videla and Ian Smith in Black Bean Sauce . . . all done just right by the excellent — if leaderless — chef we have around us. Eat up! Eat up!'⁶

The novella ends with the crew member who has decided to stay behind dying in a back alley brawl, and the departure of the GCU from the solar system. Observation machines have been put in place, but mankind is to remain undisturbed and free to work out its destiny for itself.

'Consider Phlebas'

Conflict between the Culture and another space-faring species — the Idirans, who see the 'repressive tolerance' of the Culture as a threat to their independence and religious faith — is the backdrop to Banks's first Culture novel, *Consider Phlebas*, which appeared in 1987. The spaceship of a recently created Mind is destroyed by more numerous Idiran forces, so obliging the Mind to take refuge on a nearby planet to which access has been generally closed-off on instructions from the Dra'Azon, beings so superior to — and remote from — either the Culture or the Idirans as to be regarded by both as to be given a wide birth and on no account provoked. Recovering the Mind becomes the task of Bora Horza Gorbuchul, from an endangered species known as Changers, who trade in impersonations on the basis of their ability to physically alter their appearances. Banks sees *Consider Phlebas* as having 'distinctly yarnish tendencies':

I mean, when you come down to it, that was a story about a ship-wrecked sailor falling in with a gang of pirates and going in search of buried treasure.⁷

In fact, *Consider Phlebas* has far more to it than Banks's flippancies allow. As Banks elsewhere acknowledges, one of the ideas behind the book is that 'What usually happens is that people suffer and die and get involved in all sorts of mayhem and catastrophe and it doesn't make that much difference in the end':

There's a big war going on in that novel, and various individuals and groups manage to influence its outcome. But even being able to do that doesn't ultimately change things much. At the end of the book, I have a section pointing this out by telling what happened after the war, which was an attempt to pose the question 'what was it all for?'⁸

Consider Phlebas is also notable in at least two other respects. Banks's drones — autonomous air-borne minor artificial intelligences tasked to serve and protect citizens of the Culture — are a major addition to the long line of memorable alien lifeforms created by science-fiction writers, from Stanley Weinbaum's ostrich-like Martian, Tweel, to the Moties of Larry Niven's *The Mote in God's Eye*. Some drones are the pure stuff of P. G. Wodehouse humour, reminiscent in particular of the greatest of all Wodehouse's characters, Jeeves, but also of servants more generally as Wodehouse contrasts them with the lotus-eaters of his effete and ineffectual aristocracy. Others are arch-manipulators in the tradition of Machiavelli. 'It's wonderfully easy to get into the machine's mind,' says Banks. 'I think my best characters are actually machines.'⁹

Banks similarly is into *homage*, notably — if sometimes tongue-in-cheek — to the tradition of space opera pioneered sixty and more years ago by E. E. Smith. Space warfare as described in *Consider Phlebas* evokes nothing so powerfully as classic passages of space opera overkill such as in Smith's 1934 novella *Triplanetary*, which reads in part:

Far below, in number ten converter room, massive switches drove home and the enormous mass of the vessel quivered under the terrific energy of the newly-calculated, semi-material beam of energy that was hurled out, backed by the mightiest of all the mighty converters and generators of *Triplanetary's* superdreadnought. The beam, a pipelike hollow cylinder of intolerable energy, flashed out, and there was a rending, tearing crash as it struck Roger's hitherto impenetrable wall. . . . And speeding through that terrific conduit came package after package of destruction. Bombs, armour-piercing shells, gas shells of poisonous and corrosive fluids followed each other in quick succession. . . . Thus it was that the end came soon. A war-head touched steel plating and there ensued a space-wracking explosion of atomic iron. Gaping wide, helpless, with all defences down, other torpedoes entered the stricken hull and completed its destruction even before they could be recalled. Atomic bombs literally volatilized most of the pirate vessel; vials of pure corrosion began to dissolve the solid fabric of her substance into dripping corruption. Reeking gases filled every cranny of circumambient space as what was left of Roger's battle cruiser began the long plunge to the ground.¹⁰

Few readers will doubt that Banks's inspiration owes something to Smith's example. As Clute points out, *Consider Phlebas* exposes the reader to a number of sly ironies, in that the losing Idiran side, which Gorbuchul initially supports, is remarkably similar to the standard backdrop Galactic

6 Banks, 1991, pp. 180–1.

7 Banks, 1994, p. 23.

8 Banks, 1994, p. 22.

9 Banks, I. M., Interview with Alan Stewart, *Ethel the Aardvark*, No. 94, March 1992.

10 Smith, E. E., *Triplanetary*, 1934, British edition: London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1971, pp. 222–3.

Empire found in routine space opera.¹¹

'The Player of Games'

From the Culture locked in conflict with its enemies, Banks now moved on to intervention by the Culture in the affairs of the more unattractive of its neighbouring civilisations. Jernau Morat Gurgeh — the protagonist of *The Player of Games* — has become bored with defeating his competitors. His request for a greater challenge results in his being sent on a 100,000-light-year-journey to the Empire of Azad, where the Culture wants to bring down an exceptionally cruel regime. The nature of the Empire's unpleasantness is revealed in part when a drone attending Gurgeh — Flere-Imsaho — taps into an Imperial communication channel:

Gurgeh watched the screen. Flere-Imsaho watched Gurgeh. The man's eyes glittered in the screen-light, unused photons reflecting from the halo of iris. The pupils widened at first, then shrank, became pinpoints. The drone waited for the wide, staring eyes to fill with moisture, for the tiny muscles around the eyes to flinch and the eyelids to close and the man to shake his head and turn away, but nothing of the sort happened. The screen held his gaze, as though the infinitesimal pressure of light it spent upon the room had somehow reversed, and so sucked the watching man forward, to hold him, teetering before the fall, fixed and steady and pointed at the flickering surface like some long-stilled moon. The screams echoed throughout the lounge, over its formseats and couches and low tables; the screams of species, men, women, children. Sometimes they were silenced quickly, but usually not. Each instrument, and each part of the tortured people, made its own noise; blood, knives, bones, lasers, flesh, rip-saws, chemicals, leeches, fleshworms, vibraguns, even phalluses, fingers and claws; each made or produced their own distinctive sounds, counterpoints to the theme of screams. . . . 'This is no special night, Gurgeh, no festival of sado-erotica', explained Flere-Imsaho, 'These things go on every evening. . . . There is more, but you've seen a representative cross-section'.¹²

There is a conspicuous echo here of Li's banquet in *Consider Phlebas*.

Elevation to the office of Emperor of Azad goes to the winner of the game of the same name. That Gurgeh is victorious — that the regime is destroyed — is due in part to the Special Circumstances agency. Gurgeh returns home, troubled by a feeling of having been manipulated which he can neither explain nor dismiss. Banks has the doomed Emperor, Nicosar, speak for critics of the Culture whose outlook is less benign:

'You disgust me, Morat Gurgeh', Nicosar said to the red glow in the west, 'Your blind, insipid morality can't even

account for your own success here, and you treat this battle-game like some filthy dance. It is there to be fought and struggled against, and you've attempted to seduce it. You've perverted it; replaced our holy witnessing with your own foul pornography. . . . 'Repulsive' is barely adequate for what I feel for your precious Culture, Gurgeh. I'm not sure I possess the words to explain to you what I feel for your . . . Culture. You know no glory, no pride, no worship. You have power: I've seen that; I know what you can do . . . but you're still impotent. You always will be. The meek, the pathetic, the frightened and the cowed . . . they can only last so long, no matter how terrible and awesome the machines they crawl around within. In the end you will fail; all your glittering machinery won't save you. The strong survive. That's what life teaches us, Gurgeh, that's what the game shows us. Struggle to prevail; fight to prove worth. These are no hollow phrases: they are the truth'.¹³

'Use of Weapons'

Banks stays with the theme of manipulation in *Use of Weapons*. Deziet Sma — a Special Circumstances controller — has recruited and trained a brilliant agent in Cheradenine Zakalwe. Zakalwe's warrior skills are used repeatedly to further the agency's projects. As often as his assignments result in his death, the agency resurrects him. As often as he is resurrected he resumes duty. He is also increasingly a prey to self-doubt: 'The Culture', he reflects in the aftermath of a significant intervention, 'would take him away from here, and put him down somewhere else, and this adventure would collapse with the rest into meaninglessness, and nothing very much would be left, as he went on to do roughly the same thing somewhere else'.¹⁴ In time, Deziet Sma discovers that she has known less about her agent than she has supposed. A replacement for him is selected, and the cycle of intervention is resumed.

Conclusion

Substitute for the Culture any of the major developed nations, either singly or aggregated as in the United Nations, and for Azad Somalia, Zaire or the former Yugoslavia. Banks is a richly talented writer, whose science fiction entertains while at the same time raising serious issues of public policy. How those of us who inhabit Singer and Wildavsky's prospective zones of peace conduct ourselves towards the prospective zones of turmoil whose inhabitants are in every respect less fortunate is a question which we can neither on moral nor practical grounds afford to ignore. What is needed in part is for us to better tolerate ambiguity and disappointment. That Banks makes the task easier — that he encourages us to care and think — sets him apart decisively from science-fiction practitioners of lesser stature.

— Race Mathews, 1996

11 Clute, 1993, p. 88.

12 Banks, I. M., *The Player of Games*, London: Macmillan, 1988, pp. 209–10.

13 Banks, 1988, p. 283.

14 Banks, I. M., *Use of Weapons*, London: Orbit, 1990, p. 253.

A TASTE FOR MAYHEM:

Preliminary notes on IAIN BANKS'S NON-SF NOVELS

by Bruce Gillespie

The legend

Banks, Iain with or without a middle 'M.', is the stuff of legend.

The legend runs that he had published three novels before someone told him he was an SF writer and dragged him along to a convention. The legend adds that he decided to join the SF community and write real SF books when he discovered the capacity of the British fan for putting away booze at conventions.

The legend hints that he absorbs as much booze and illegal chemicals as he ascribes to his characters. This can't be true, or he'd be dead by now.

Another legend has him abseiling the outside wall of a hotel during a convention, an adventure that he ascribes to a character in *Espedair Street*.

Are these legends true? Iain Banks confirms some of them in an interview with Alan Stewart (*Ethel the Aardvark*, March 1992). The story of the wall-climbing incident is even weirder than the legend:

It used to be when I got drunk I loved climbing things like buildings and bits of industrial plant and machinery: that sort of stuff. I promised my girl friend I'd stop doing it, but then I was standing on the outside of the Metropole Hotel chatting with Tony Roxborough who's editor at Ventura. It was part of a suite of rooms with this enormous gigantic bedroom and I was standing at the end of this balcony after an enormously long party — about 5 o'clock in the morning — the sun was just coming up. I spotted that this other balcony outside the sitting room was only about six or seven feet away so I handed my drink to one of the people (I think they were from Andromeda Bookshop in Birmingham) cause I'd spotted a loophole, you see, because I wasn't actually climbing. This was about the third or fourth storey, and it was actually a traverse; I wasn't actually gaining any height. So I did this, but unfortunately at the same time as this there was a burglar taking things next door and the suite adjoining that, which was part of the convention where they were getting together the daily newspaper. This person appeared and walked off with some jewellery and a camera and other bits and pieces. Fortunately the lady who was asleep in there got a glimpse of him and he didn't look at all like me. He had short hair and no beard — at the time I had much longer hair — and he didn't have a Scottish accent.

About half an hour later I was sitting talking to this totally young-looking policeman who looked like he shouldn't be out on the streets at that time of night, saying, well, actually I was staying at the hotel. They didn't even take my name, let alone take a statement

from me.

After about four hours' sleep, myself and John Jarrold, my science fiction editor for Orbit, went down to the bar and found out what exactly had happened. At ten o'clock in the morning we were there for a morning hot starter as it were, and I was ordering John's gin and tonic and my bloody mary when this American guy came up and said 'Hey, they let you out'. I didn't believe him, and said, 'What are you talking about?' 'Why aren't you in jail or prison?' he wanted to know. I'm still asking him what's he talking about.

It seems that this rumour had started up instantly that I was a cat burglar, an international jewel thief, and that either I'd been abseiling down from the top of the hotel dressed as an SAS, you know anti-terrorist squad, with the balaclava and all the rest, dressed in black, or that I was dressed in a Spiderman outfit. Several people swore blind they'd seen all this happen. One and a half thousand Americans left that day to go back to the States and they all left believing this had happened.

When Banks was in Melbourne, although he was not allowed by his Penguin minder to meet the SF fans, he was interviewed on radio by Terry Lane. During that interview he confessed to a 'taste for mayhem'.

In talking about the main character of a much later novel, *Complicity*, Banks said of him: 'A deeply unpleasant character. My hope and expectation was to offend as many people with *Complicity* as I did with *The Wasp Factory*.'

Is the legend true?

Mayhem? Offensive? All part of the legend, no doubt, but the secret of Banks's success is that he never offends, no matter what his characters do. His style is chatty but always precise and vivid, funny without being wildly grotesque, visionary without being pretentious. In short, Banks is not 'the artist as public nuisance', as Robert Hughes described the visual artist of the late twentieth-century, but the artist as private charmer. This is art that hides art, delicious to read, but difficult to talk about.

Banks can write well because he's had lots of practice. In the *Interzone* interview (No. 86, August 1994) Banks says that he wrote and submitted, during a period of 16 years, six novels before he had anything accepted for publication. Also, he wrote *Consider Phlebas* before *The Wasp Factory*, his first novel, was published.

Double career?

Banks has surprisingly little to say about the nature of his double career. 'I definitely feel more at home with SF because you've got far more control . . . But by a degree,

fraction, writing mainstream fiction is more rewarding, simply because you feel you've achieved more having had to wrestle with reality as well as with your imagination.'

The dividing lines between Banks's SF and his non-SF are thin. The first three novels purport to be founded in 'ordinary' reality, but it's a rickety foundation. *Walking on Glass*, for instance, is divided into three sections, seemingly unconnected. In the most typical section, a young man on the loose — not at all sure of his place in the world — falls in love with a delectable young lady, but is in turn betrayed by the delectable young lady and his best friend. This becomes a familiar theme in Banks's non-SF books. In another section, two people sit playing impossible games in a tower that looks out over a bleak landscape. They cannot remember how they came to be in the tower. They will be allowed to escape the tower only if they think of the right question, not the right answer. This 'fantasy' section proves to be a connected part of the whole story.

In *The Bridge*, as we are shown at the beginning of the novel, a car accident has pitched the main character into a self-constructed alternate reality. In this alternate reality, a city exists on a bridge that stretches in each direction to the horizon. Its pylons are anchored in a line of islands that stretch across this huge stretch of water. A train service provides transport along the city, and all human activity, including work, entertainment and living areas can be found on the bridge. In the book's last pages, the main character awakes after many months in a coma. It has all been a dream, not a separate fantasy world.

'The Wasp Factory'

Banks's first great success, the book that created the Banks legend at one go, was *The Wasp Factory*, a bizarre concoction that seems to surpass all barriers of good or bad taste. As the uniquely icky character says of himself: 'Two years after I killed Blyth I murdered my young brother Paul, for quite different and more fundamental reasons than I'd disposed of Blyth, and then a year after that I did for my young cousin, Esmerelda, more or less on a whim. That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and don't intend to ever again. It was just a stage I was going through.'

The Wasp Factory's main character is an isolated chap who spends most of his time on an island that is barely joined to the mainland by dunes. He has set it up as a private fortress. His father has allowed him to miss school altogether, and he has constructed around himself a primeval world of signs, portents and warnings that keep everybody at bay except his father. The book begins as the boy's father warns him that his psychotic brother Eric has escaped from custody and his heading back home.

As I've said, Banks confesses to an enjoyment of mayhem. 'Mayhem' is a mild word for what happens in *The Wasp Factory*, which is narrated by a very unreliable witness. The thesis of Kev McVeigh, a British critic and editor, is that not only has Frank not killed his brother, sister and cousin, but that they probably never existed. Mad Eric might not exist either. If that is the case, who is Frank's father, and what does he believe is happening when Frank purports to take phone calls from the crazed Eric? And what happens at the end, when Eric does seem to put in an appearance?

The power of this book is in its tone of cheerful malevolence. A tale told by a funny, articulate murderous paranoid is a lot more interesting than the biography of John Q. Citizen. Here, more than anywhere else in his work, Banks uses the power of seemingly simple language to make the most unlikely events seem inevitable.

'The Bridge'

The Bridge, on the other hand, is not completely satisfactory, because its intensity is undermined by its 'He woke up and found it was all a dream' structure. It is given validity by Banks's down-to-earth style. While the main character is living within the Bridge world he really tries to adjust himself to the shifting expectations of the other inhabitants. Why, for instance, is he given a luxury apartment in what is otherwise a rundown, rather seedy world? Why is he given an allowance that enables him to dress well and make friends? He doesn't question the world itself because it is completely lived in. Banks shows us that the elements of this world are skewed artifacts of the main character's Scotland: a world of bridges, lakes, trains, rundown apartments, old lifts, stone rather than concrete. Each major section of the bridge seems to him like a fortress, and the image of the castle/fortress remains central to Banks's later novels. This is warm, user-friendly Kafka; skewed, but not alienating.

'Espedair Street'

I read Iain Banks's next non-SF novels, *The Crow Road*, *Espedair Street* and *Canal Dreams*, in that wrong order, which proved to be a disservice to *Espedair Street*. To read *The Crow Road* after the first three novels is to see a pupa, the amusing, twisted entertainer, replaced by a glorious butterfly, a major artist. To travel backwards to *Espedair Street*, as I did, is to find a novel halfway between the two states.

Espedair Street first. It seems to have no fantasy elements, except that it is based on one of the most luscious of modern fantasies: what it would be like to be a rich, popular and talented pop star. Banks asks: what it would it *really* be like? Why are all those fabulously successful pop stars often struck down by ghastly events?

The only person who could tell you if Banks has guessed right would be some rich, popular and talented pop star whose success peaked in the late 1970s, only to find the members of his band dying like flies and his own desire to go on perform extinguished.

Is this self-pitying stuff? Tragic? Not a bit of it. Daniel Weir, the pop star and song writer who tells the tale, is self-pitying, but Banks has no pity for Weir's self-pity. At the moment of his first great success, Weir has this moment of revelation:

I remember taking rather a lot of drugs that autumn, staying in that grand, impressive house. Once I climbed a tree and reclined on a long oak bough, quite at my ease, head buzzing, while watching a juggler on the gravel path beneath me. I lay there, elbow on branch, head in hand, looking down at the circus juggler, and watched the Indian clubs whirling up towards me and then back down, and thought that there was something quite profound and remarkable about watching juggling from above, especially when the juggler was too intent on his skill to notice the observer. It was one of those perfect metaphors one only ever experiences under the simplicities of a drug; at the time it is both obviously unique and impregnably apt, and — afterwards — utterly unfathomable.

And several times, in those balmy autumn days, I thought, *This is the life*.

Do you blame me?

Banks is in all his work trying to capture an experience that is 'both obviously unique and impregnably apt', yet his comic spirit rebels against mysticism. He gives his characters

wonderful moments of intense experience, but drops clues that they presage disaster. This reminds me of Jonathan Carroll's propensity for allowing his characters delirious happiness the moment before dropping them through the trapdoor to hell.

Banks's characters meet the hard realities of life, all right, but the attractiveness of Banks's work is that his characters savour their disasters. His life having ground to a stop, years after his great successes, Daniel Weir sits feeling useless in a giant mausoleum of a house in Edinburgh. In one of Banks's funniest scenes, two friends drop in, accompanied by a gigantic, stupid and slobbery 'dug'. The dog commits Banksian mayhem throughout the house.

Espedair Street is about Weir slowly awakening from his mood of despondency.

I left the flat depressed but, as I walked down Espedair Street, back into town under a glorious sunset of red and gold, slowly a feeling of contentment, intensifying almost to elation, filled me. I couldn't say why; it felt like more than having gone through a period of mourning and come out the other side, and more than just having reassessed my woes and decided they were slight compared to what some people had to bear; it felt like faith, like revelation: that things went on, that life ground on regardless, and mindless, and produced pain and pleasure and hope and fear and joy and despair, and you dodged some of it and you sought some of it and sometimes you were lucky and sometimes you weren't, and sometimes you could plan your way ahead and that would be the right thing to have done, but other times all you could do was forget about plans and just be ready to *react*, and sometimes the obvious was true and sometimes it wasn't, and sometimes experience helped but not always, and it was all luck, fate, in the end; you lived, and you waited to see what happened, and you would rarely ever be sure that what you had done was really the right thing or the wrong thing, because things can always be better, and things can always be worse.

Then, being me, I felt guilty about starting to feel better, and thought, *So, you've heard a little bit of home-crocheted philosophy, and seen somebody worse off than yourself; is this all it takes? Your revelations come cheap, Daniel Weir; and your soul is shallow . . .* but even that was part of the experience, and so explained, and expiated, by it, and under that startlingly gaudy sky — like something from one of my ma's Woolworth's paintings — I walked, and felt I could be happy again.

This passage, showing Banks at his best, revels in the ecstasy felt by his character at a particular moment, but laughs at the idea of ecstasy arising out of simple revelation.

'The Crow Road'

In *The Crow Road* we find a vast elaboration of all the themes from earlier Banks non-SF novels, combined with a swagging mastery of the novelist's craft.

As in *Walking on Glass*, *The Bridge* and *Espedair Street*, the main story-teller, Prentice McHoan, is surely a version of how Banks sees himself: a bit awkward and shy, a youngish man who keeps failing in great enterprises; desired by every girl but the one he worships; a chap who ingests lots of grog and illegal substances; whose fate works out for the best, no matter what mayhem he wreaks on himself and others.

But Prentice only appears to be the main character of the novel, since he is the story-teller of large sections. Much

of it, however, he could know nothing about. The complex structure of the book, telling the story of three generations, gives importance to every member of the McHoan family.

The book begins with the explosion of Prentice's grandmother, Margot McHoan, at her funeral. Somebody forgot to remove her pacemaker before she was cremated. When Banks takes us back in time, we find that Margot McHoan is one of the most attractive characters in the novel.

At the beginning of the novel it seems that the main family problem is Prentice's split with his father Kenneth. This impression is subverted when Banks takes us back twenty years into a world in which Kenneth is a young man about to meet the woman who will become his wife. If Prentice is self-pitying and self-destructive, Kenneth is a much more attractive character: a man of honour and humour who becomes a successful writer of children's stories. His relationship with his brothers and cousins and his own sublime final act overshadow Prentice's continued petty attempts at self-destruction.

The telling of stories

The Crow Road is essentially a novel about the telling of stories. In one of the flashbacks, Kenneth takes his kids up into the hills, and tells them about the 'mythosaur'. Accompanying them are Prentice's cousins, including Ashley Watt, the little tomboy who later becomes Prentice's confidante. Kenneth assures Prentice that the mythosaur is just a story, but this episode is contrasted with an episode in the childhood of Rory, Kenneth's brother. Rory is too scared to sleep one night after being told stories of dragons. He is reassured that dragons don't exist, but discovers many years later that they do. In *The Crow Road*, even the simplest story has treacherous possibilities.

Rory disappeared ten years before the main action of the novel, but Banks makes him its pivotal character. Rory is somebody who passionately believes in stories; his only real success in life has been as a travel writer. His mistake is to winkle out some true stories about members of the McHoan family.

Super plotter

But that is to anticipate the last quarter of the novel, which I leave for you to discover. I mention it because it shows one of Iain Banks's great skills: plotting. This takes the form of misdirection. For two-thirds of the novel's length we believe that it is just a funny and vivid old-fashioned family saga.

As I've said, the central story seems to focus on the split in the McHoan family caused by Prentice's unwillingness to talk to his father. Their dispute seems to be about religion: Prentice's father is fanatically against it; Prentice is sort of in favour of it. His protestations of mild agnosticism enrage his father; his father's rage enrages Prentice. Prentice refuses to take money from his father for his university fees, then proceeds to drop out.

While this story rolls along, Banks constructs an entirely different story, placing little clues seemingly at random throughout the narrative. This is the story of Prentice's missing uncle Rory and his relationship to two of Prentice's other uncles, Hamish and Fergus. Banks makes the last quarter of the book into a murder mystery without disrupting the rich pattern of the rest of the book.

Banks's passion

But careful plotting is not enough to make a masterpiece, and *The Crow Road* is, so far, Banks's only masterpiece. The main quality in the novel — in fact, the only quality that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 18

DOUGLAS BARBOUR wrote an early version of this review when *The English Patient* was first published. A somewhat different version appears as an Afterword to his critical study *Michael Ondaatje* (Twayne, 1993).

MICHAEL ONDAATJE:

History's indifferent indeterminacies

by Douglas Barbour

Reviewed: *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje
(Bloomsbury; 1992; \$Can26.99)

It has been five years since Michael Ondaatje's last book, that richly evocative novel of Toronto in the twenties and thirties, *In the Skin of a Lion*. For most of his readers that seems too long a wait, until we remember the care he takes with his books, and the delight and wonder with which we have read each of his earlier novels. Not to fear: although Michael Ondaatje may have given us his blandest title yet in *The English Patient*, he once again offers us the real thing in a novel whose sensuous prose and poetic perceptions seduce us thoroughly.

Despite its 'local' and defiantly Canadian concerns, *In the Skin of a Lion* gained for Ondaatje perhaps the widest international audience of his career. Already recognised as one of Canada's most exciting poets and innovators, especially for his longer works — the poem-prose collage *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the 'borderblur' poetic fiction *Coming Through Slaughter*, and the stunning 'memoir' of his family in Ceylon, *Running in the Family* — he had never achieved the kind of reputation that breaks beyond the boundaries of the so-called 'literary world' (the reputation, it could be argued, Peter Carey deserved from the beginning but did not gain until the Booker Prize-winning *Oscar and Lucinda*). *In the Skin of a Lion* won or was listed for a number of major awards, and garnered rave reviews in England and the United States as well as in Canada; it made Ondaatje a much more recognisable name.

Now *The English Patient* has become the first Canadian book to win the prestigious Booker Prize in Britain and Ondaatje's first *bone fide* bestseller, has been turned into a multi-Oscar-winning movie, and has made him as recognisable a 'name' as Carey or Hulme or Rushdie. The good thing about the novel, as with those writers' winning novels, is that it manages to be ideally 'international' in scope without in any way betraying his artistic principles. A richly and intricately woven tapestry of fragmented tales, it offers readers the solace of representation but refuses to deny the power of artifice; the authority to make such a complicated bargain with his readers has always been Ondaatje's most precious gift as a writer.

Although critics have not tended to harp on the matter, Ondaatje has always been fascinated by history — seen as a series of arcane stories about the past. And ever since his second book, *The Man with Seven Toes*, a phantasmagoric and fragmented narrative poem set in Australia during the early days of settlement, he has cobbled together history's idiosyncrasies into luminous and complex *bricolages*.

Because history itself can be defined as a kind of invention, Ondaatje has taken great pleasure in reinventing various episodes that have caught his fancy. Perhaps he had to become a novelist, for he has an almost infinite curiosity concerning the tidbits of marginal information that can surround various subjects; and the novel provides larger spaces in which to disperse the disparate nuggets of knowledge that provide such strange pleasure. In his last novel, he reinvented, and made wonderfully strange and exotic, the building of early twentieth-century Toronto, and the people involved in that grand modern project. In *The English Patient*, he returns to a major turning point in our near past, the end of World War II, and explores its impact on the lives of four people.

In a deserted Italian villa, once an army hospital, a young nurse continues to give aid to her final patient, a pilot whose plane had crashed in the Libyan desert, 'someone who looked like a burned animal, taut and dark'. To the villa comes a thief from Toronto, and a young Sikh soldier in the British Army, a sapper whose business it is to defuse bombs. As the complexly ordered fragments of the novel accumulate, their pasts, their presents and their possible futures intertwine in an intricate collage that can best be described as labyrinthian. One of the most interesting aspects of his novel, especially given Ondaatje's declared aim to begin writing anew with each book, is that for the first time he has brought characters forward from his last novel into this one: Hana, the nurse, is the adopted daughter of Patrick, a major viewpoint figure in *In the Skin of a Lion*, while Caravaggio, the thief who has been turned into a spy by the war, was one of Patrick's and Hana's friends, and the eponymous subject of a section of that book. It is oddly delightful to meet them again, and both their presence in a new text and our (at least my) pleasure at reading them five years on (in both writer's and characters' time) raises intriguing questions the novel appears to ignore. Robert Kroetsch, a fellow Canadian novelist who also published a recent book featuring characters from his last novel, puts an argument I suspect Ondaatje would generally agree with: 'How I see it now is this: I would like, every decade or so, to drop in on these characters and see what's happening in their lives. So I'm in no sense writing a sequel. I'm really returning to these characters, because I think it's a shame to leave characters and never see them again.' Certainly, both Hana and Caravaggio have changed during, or more to the point, have been changed by the war. And the two new characters with whom their lives intertwine provide further changes, beyond measurement but not beyond figuration.

Despite the complexity of its time scheme, and the range of its historical and geographical references — from India to Arabia to England to Italy to Canada; from desert exploration in the thirties to bomb disposal in Britain during the war to spying everywhere — *The English Patient* is possibly Ondaatje's most accessible fiction. Yet it rejects nothing of the style and intensity of vision that have won him accolades from writers and readers throughout the English-speaking world. Ondaatje's language has a hallucinatory intensity of focus, a passionate perception at work in images that seem absolutely right once you have read them. He is interested in mood and feeling, and in how they can suddenly transform people and lives. He creates characters who behave with such velocity of feeling they seem transparently familiar, yet in fact are opaque to any rational understanding: as such they are the figures of a wild romanticism, a desire to sink into the sea of feeling in which we all swim, and sometimes drown. These characters hold on to their secrets even as they demonstrate the depths of feeling to which such secrets lead.

A by now familiar trope in Ondaatje's writing, the passionate duplicitous and destructive adulterous affair, is the centre of the maze the English patient creates as he tells the story of his life as a desert geographer in the 1930s. Simultaneously Hana and the young Sikh, Kirpal Singh, enter a love affair equally doomed, if for entirely different reasons. And Singh's more complex 'affair' with the best of English character — in the persons of his mentor in bomb defusing, Lord Suffolk, and his secretary, Miss Morden — has its shades of blindness and duplicity too. As a spy, Caravaggio, who eventually sacrifices his thief's hands to his mission, knows only too well how much of human behaviour is based on illusion and lies, perhaps especially the lies we don't even know we are telling by our conduct. Ondaatje reveals all this while maintaining his and our liking for all his characters: they are, after all, only human.

Ondaatje's always powerful narrative images — girl with piano and rifle-toting soldiers, boy in ditch with bomb, burned pilot with bedouins and shaman-healer, spy sneaking naked into a room containing woman and commandant-lover — affect a perverse permanence in the minds of characters and readers both. But the sense of permanence is illusory, of course, as they deliquesce, waver into insubstantiality, hover at the edge of memory: 'When we meet those we fall in love with, there is an aspect of our spirit that is historian, a bit of a pedant, who imagines or remembers a meeting when the other has passed by innocently . . .' It is that 'imagines' that puts all memory in the novel in question, not to mention all historical documentation. Nothing, but especially the heart's desired ends, lasts in this shimmering and seemingly infinite branching of stories, except in memory, the one place they might be expected to rest, and even there they fragment, lose their sharp edges, become part of an indeterminate flow of events that make up individual lives. Ondaatje's carefully casual *bricolage* of dissociated moments, the accumulation of narrative fragments, never quite solidifies into a plot, never quite denies us the traditional pleasures of narrative movement.

Yet there is a sweeping subtlety to the way these image fragments manage to incorporate so much diachronal implication. Hana is playing the piano that may or may not be mined, when 'two men slipped through the French doors and placed their guns on the end of the piano and stood in front of her. The noise of chords still in the air of the changed room.' The scene, as it develops through remembrance and perception, perfectly demonstrates

Ondaatje's particular poetic power:

A lightning flash across the valley, the storm had been coming all night, and she saw one of the men was a Sikh. Now she paused and smiled, somewhat amazed, relieved anyway, the cyclorama of light behind them so brief that it was just a quick glimpse of his turban and the bright wet guns. The high flap of the piano had been removed and used as a hospital table several months earlier, so their guns lay on the far side of the ditch of keys. The English patient could have identified the weapons. Hell. She was surrounded by foreign men. Not one pure Italian. A villa romance. What would Poliziano have thought of this 1945 tableau, two men and a woman across a piano and the war almost over and the guns in their wet brightness whenever the lightning slipped itself into the room filling everything with colour and shadow as it was doing now every half-minute thunder crackling all over the valley and the music antiphonal, the press of chords, *When I take my sugar to tea* . . .

Do you know the words?

There was no movement from them. She broke free of the chords and released her fingers into intricacy, tumbling into what she had held back, the jazz detail that split open notes and angles from the chestnut of melody.

When I take my sugar to tea

All the boys are jealous of me,

So I never take her where the gang goes

When I take my sugar to tea.

Their clothes wet while they watched her whenever the lightning was in the room among them, her hands playing now against and within the lightning and thunder, counter to it, filling up the darkness between light . . .

She did not want to end this. To give up these words from an old song. She saw the places they went, where the gang never went, crowded with aspidistra. She looked up and nodded towards them, an acknowledgement that she would stop now.

And even here, we can see how this writing, in all its improvisational complication, its rendering of language down to its most sensitive alertness, can explain its own power in the description of some other act of art.

Perhaps then, although there is a kind of spy story hidden in the labyrinth of *The English Patient*, it is nearer the mark to say that the spy story is the labyrinth, its various byways the darkly radiant narratives that intertwine and interfere with one another until we forget we might have been looking for a centre, or a way out. Ondaatje's great generosity as a writer here, to his characters, and to us, is his willingness to let them go in the end, to allow them their human silences. They leave the story as solid and impenetrable as when they enter it, yet they leave us enriched by our involvement in their narratives.

The English Patient is as much about the power of written narratives as it is about the power of passion. Early on, the text calls attention to the obsessive strength books can exert: 'This was the time of her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became her world. She sat at the night table, hunched over, reading of the young boy in India who learned to memorize diverse jewels and objects on a tray, tossed from teacher to teacher — those who taught him dialect those who taught him memory those who taught him to escape the hypnotic.' Of

course, her reading of *Kim* (never named), or later of *The Last of the Mohicans*, cannot be textually innocent: soon enough Kirpal Singh will arrive and she will become his lover; too soon he will find it necessary to leave Europe and her. By then their own stories, as well as those of Caravaggio and 'the English patient' himself, will have become labyrinths they escape into and cannot escape. But see how the text also describes its own workings, as in the description of Hana's reading to her patient: 'books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night.'

Ondaatje has tended to resist politicisation of his texts, and his texts have tended to resist the usual forms of political exploration. yet, because of his choice of subjects, they also refuse to become truly apolitical. A Ceylonese-born Canadian, Ondaatje is necessarily in one way or another a post-colonial writer, and seemingly offhand allusions, such as the one to perhaps the most famous novel in praise of colonisation, or the various references in the chapter on Kip's training in Britain when he falls under the spell of an eccentric paragon of the best British values,

create a climate in which the sudden and final break Kip makes with his three chosen comrades seems sadly inevitable, and for precisely the political reasons the novel seems to ignore. I believe Ondaatje is determined not to write from a program. This is why he seeks to begin each new project anew, as if learning how to write again for the first time. Nevertheless, he does not ignore the political in his work; rather he seeks to place it in a human, fallible context, complicated by the force of powerful and contradictory emotions, which, as Chris Wallace-Crabbe has said, 'are not skilled workers'.

A novel of international scope, set at a time of terrible and triumphant change in the world, *The English Patient* focuses primarily on the wayward ways of the human heart among a small number of people identifiably ordinary. Even its ending, which involves one of our time's terrifying images of slaughter of the innocents to break its tentative community apart, manages to avoid melodrama. The eponymous character at one point tells Caravaggio about words: They have power, he says. Especially when wielded by an artist with the grace and force of Michael Ondaatje, they have the power to move.

— Douglas Barbour, University of Alberta, 1995

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

matters in any novel — is passion.

Banks endorses a rich all-encompassing belief in experience itself, the same belief that appears in *Espedair Street*. Prentice, like all the family, swings wildly from delight to despair, but they all believe that nothing should be shirked from.

Some members of the family express this directly through a pungent version of ultra-fundamentalist Christianity.

Kenneth McHoan, Prentice's father, believes in the direct power of story and myth:

... my father taught us that there was, generally, a fire at the core of things, and that change was the only constant, and that we — like everybody else — were both the most important people in the universe, and utterly without significance, depending, and that individuals mattered before their institutions, and that people, were people, much the same everywhere, and when they appeared to do things that were stupid or evil, often you hadn't been told the whole story, but that sometimes people did behave badly, usually because some idea had taken hold of them and given them an excuse to regard other people as expendable (or bad), and that was part of who we were too, as a species, and it wasn't always possible to know that you were right and they were wrong, but the important thing was to keep trying to find out, and always to face the truth. Because truth mattered.

Which is wonderfully highminded, and as close as any character in any novel has come to expressing my own general position. Unfortunately, as Prentice discovers, at

least two characters in the novel have died because of their unflinching willingness to face the truth. Prentice survives: it's experience rather than truth that matters.

There are many truths, and Banks sees them summed up best in the Scottish landscape, which is the unshakable foundation of his non-SF novels. Banks's finely etched images of Scotland bestow greatness on *The Crow Road* and, to a lesser extent, *Espedair Street*, *Whit*, *Complicity* and *The Bridge*.

Here's my favourite moment from *The Crow Road*. Kenneth as a young man returns home after some years away at university:

He rested his arms on the top of the wall and looked down the fifty feet or so to the tumbling white waters. Just upstream, the river Loran piled down from the forest in a compactly furious cataract. The spray was a taste. Beneath, the river surged round the piers of the viaduct that carried the railway on towards Lochgilphead and Gallanach.

A grey shape flitted silently across the view, from falls to bridge, then zoomed, turned in the air and swept into the current of the far bank of the river, as though it was a soft fragment of the train's steam that had momentarily lost its way and was now hurrying to catch up. He waited a moment, and the owl hooted once, from inside the dark constituency of the forest. He smiled, took a deep breath that tasted of steam and the sweet sharpness of pine resin, and then turned away, went back to pick up his bags.

— Bruce Gillespie, November 1996

In January 1994 Jenny Lee, about to retire as editor of *Meanjin*, asked me to write an essay for her final issue – a comprehensive essay on reference books. I spent the next few months writing a lot about reference books, along with the shreds of autobiography that seem to creep into everything I write, and the result, unfinished, and an essay only in the sense of an attempt, duly appeared in *Meanjin* 2/1994. Ever since then I have tried to complete it and bring it up to date for the *Newsletter*, and now for *The Metaphysical Review*, and have failed.

As a compromise, I have called this version ‘Part One’, to shame myself into writing a second part, and have scattered asterisks through it, partly to assure you that I have not forgotten about books that should be mentioned, for example, two references that I consider essential (Pam Peters’ *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* and the magnificent *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*) and others that are highly desirable (especially the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*). These are recent publications, but there are others that I simply didn’t get around to, or didn’t get beyond drafting notes on – whole subject areas in some cases, including music, art, place names . . . But you have to end somewhere, and this prologue ends here.

ON LOOKING IT UP

A ramble on books and editing

PART ONE

A wise old preacher I knew once told me: ‘Have few books, and know them well.’ His name was Will Gale. He had entered the Churches of Christ theological college in Melbourne in 1904, the year it was founded, and he gave me this advice in 1957, when I was about to enter the college. He also gave me a little book by the classicist and religious historian T.R.Glover, which I enjoyed so much that I went out and bought every other book by Glover I could find. In 1904, even in 1957, in that church, you could pay no greater respect to a man’s faith than to describe him as ‘a man of one book’, namely the Bible. Like many ministers I have known, Will Gale was well-read and had a substantial library, but he was a man of one book.

My father’s advice was different from Will Gale’s. Perhaps it was not so much advice as consolation on my complaining that I would never learn something or other that had just come up at school. ‘To know things’, he said, ‘is not as important as to know where to look them up.’ How ever he meant it, that advice stayed with me, and made me first a lazy student and in time a useful editor. (By lazy I do not mean indolent: I have always been prone to what Alejo Carpentier called ‘that peculiar form of laziness which consists in bringing great energy to tasks not precisely those we should be doing’.¹)

My father had grown up surrounded by books, many of them in Norwegian, which he could not read; I too grew up surrounded by books, and couldn’t wait to start a collection of my own. When I left school and started work in 1954 I resolved that I would buy a book every week. At that rate I would now have 2080 books, quite a collection. In fact I probably do have about that many books,² but most of them are junk, books that no secondhand-bookseller would buy, that not even the local op shop would want to be lumbered with, but books that I will not throw out, because I am against throwing out books on principle, and you never know when one of them might come in handy.

I have bought and sold more books than I have had dinners. I never intended to sell any of them, but for much of the last twenty-five years I have been self-employed (or unemployed: for freelancers the difference between the two states is often mystical) and often enough, too often, my books have gone to pay the rent or some such extravagance. As recently as 1980 I had a

library; now I have merely books. When I feel sad about this (once a day, on average, looking at those empty shelves, 'bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang'³) I try to remember a prayer composed by that great philosopher Kurt Vonnegut Jr. In 1967 he addressed a meeting at Ohio State University to celebrate a great moment in its library's history, and he began with a few jokes and this prayer: 'O Lord, we have with great labor accumulated two million volumes. Grant that all of us gathered here will live long enough to read and understand them all. Amen.'⁴ I find that strangely consoling.

In 1972 I applied for a job as sub-editor with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Reporting Staff, and was invited to sit their entrance examination. It was exhaustive and exhausting, page after page testing your knowledge of words and usage, and then a practical test of sub-editing: a dozen pages of unpunctuated gibberish, which I later learnt was a verbatim transcript of part of a speech by Senator J. A. Mulvihill (Labor, NSW). At this point many people who sat the test gave up: they couldn't make sense of it, and besides, if this was the sort of rubbish they would have to work on (and it was), they would rather not. I hacked into it, didn't finish it in the time allowed, and left the test thinking I might get by on the first part. I was wrong about that. For a start, my brief definitions of 'pungent', 'importunate' and some other words were inadequate. I was appointed a Hansard sub-editor because I had done the best job on Mulvihill that anyone had seen. (A remark at the time that my work consisted in 'making Montaignes out of Mulvihills' appealed to Stephen Murray-Smith and got me into his *Dictionary of Australian Quotations*.)

The word 'editor' has many meanings. It can mean the person who decides what is published. It can mean the person who takes a manuscript that has been accepted for publication and to some extent reshapes, restructures, perhaps even rewrites it. It can mean the person who imposes house style on a manuscript, corrects the spelling and grammar, corrects or queries facts and quotations, and points out inconsistencies of all kinds. In Australian publishing houses the first kind of editor is usually called a publisher or commissioning editor, the second a structural editor, the third a copy-editor. There are also 'commissioning editors' who might better be called publishers' scouts or procurers, and 'production editors', who are traffic managers, co-ordinating the work of editors, designers, printers and everyone else concerned in the production of a book.

In the normal course of her work the editor of *Meanjin* does all of these jobs. So do I, on a much smaller scale, as editor of the *Society of Editors Newsletter*. But what I do in book publishing is copy-editing (which I sometimes call 'nuts-and-bolts editing') and editorial proofreading (which is similar to the work of a printer's reader, but with more responsibility). If Jenny Lee is a kind of architect or engineer, I am a kind of technician, adjusting a bolt here, a nut there, checking that the building material supplied meets specification. What I am called on *Meanjin's* title page – assistant editor⁵ – is exactly right. It's what I do best. (Apart from digressing. Digressing is what I do best of all.)

In an essay on East German writing (*Meanjin* 1991) Beate Josephi mentioned Erich Loest's *Die Stasi war mein Eckermann* ('freely translated, "State Security was my Boswell"]'). When I read this essay in manuscript I said to Jenny it was a pity that even a journal like *Meanjin* could not assume these days that its readers would understand a reference to Eckermann.⁶ She agreed. For some reason I mentioned this to a well-known editor, tactfully explaining who Eckermann was, because I knew he wouldn't have heard of him. He looked thoughtful, then said 'Who is Boswell?'

When I was young I delighted in long and unusual words. I had a terrific vocabulary. By the time I was 30 I was making a deliberate effort to exclude these words from my writing, because I realized that my readers didn't know what I was talking about. I wasn't attempting to write plain English, because some of the things I wanted to say can't be said in plain English; I was attempting to write appropriate English. Since then I have forgotten many of the words I once knew. By the time I joined *Meanjin* in 1988 I had forgotten so many words, and through editing so much bad writing (washing my mind in other people's bathwater, as Cyril Connolly once put it⁷) had lost so much confidence even in my ability to spell, that I could barely edit a paragraph without help from a dictionary.

Dictionaries are like watches; the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true.

Samuel Johnson⁸

In *Everything I Know about Writing* (Mandarin, 1994: a pleasant little book) John Marsden says he has forty dictionaries, which he uses all the time. If they are dictionaries of English, forty is too many; if they are all sorts of dictionaries, forty is nowhere near enough. From my desk I can see over 150 books bearing the word 'dictionary' on their spines. A similar number have such words as 'encyclopedia', 'handbook', 'manual', 'companion', 'guide' and 'register' in their titles. A further 200-odd are in fact dictionaries, encyclopedias, guides, companions, even though the words do not appear in their titles: *Right Words*; *You Have a Point There*; *Bookmaking*; *The Elements of Style*; *The Drum*. Then there are atlases, directories, books about language and history and music, volumes of poetry more often misquoted than read, eight translations of the Bible, or parts of it, two Greek New Testaments, books old and new, some worth hundreds of dollars, some bought for sixpence in 1958 and yet to justify the expense. The books I have bought solely for pleasure or amusement are inside the house; the books in my cramped, dusty little office behind the garage, my *annexe horribilis*, with its leaking roof and rare insects, the books here jostling for dry space with computer, filing cabinets, desks, modest stereo system and spare copies of the last forty-four issues of the *Society of Editors Newsletter*, produced in this room and come to rest here somewhere in the boxes and bundles and mounds of paper I must sort out some day, these are the books I work with, the tools of my trade.⁹

Robert Claiborne, in his *Life and Times of the English Language* (Bloomsbury, 1990), says that English has at least 400,000 words, possibly as many as 600,000. Sidney Landau, in his *Dictionaries: the art and craft of lexicography* (Cambridge University Press, 1989: a book as wonderfully entertaining as it is instructive), seems to suggest that 10 million might be closer to the mark (there are well over 6 million chemical compounds, for a start): it depends on what you call a 'word'. The one great criticism of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is that it ignored so many scientific terms; almost a quarter of Robert Burchfield's huge *Supplement to the OED* (1972-86) is devoted to rectifying this. The language of science and technology has expanded enormously since 1986, and even the second edition of the *OED*, published only five years ago, is now outdated in its coverage of scientific terms. The awesome *McGraw-Hill Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms* (5th edn, 1994: an essential reference) defines over 105,000 terms, and you can be sure that many of those are not to be found in *OED2*.

But sovereign among my tools of trade is the mighty *Oxford English Dictionary: being a corrected re-issue with an introduction, supplement, and bibliography, of A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (13 vols, 1928-33). Inadequate or outdated as it may be, the *OED* is an inexhaustible source of pleasure and instruction. At the time of the Newcastle earthquake, for example, I realized that I had misspelt 'tremor' all my life; I looked to Fowler for

light on the vexed matter of *-or* versus *-our*; Fowler referred me on to *OED*; and I came away converted to the *-or* cause. Earlier, I consulted *OED* to reassure myself that my 'program' is a better spelling than *Meanjin*'s 'programme'; *OED*'s entry for the latter reads, in full, 'see Program'.

Not everyone can afford the *OED* (I got mine for \$100, but that was a fluke), and I don't use it every day. The dictionary I use every day, the one indispensable dictionary, is the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (1993). This is not a revision of the *Shorter Oxford* (1933–73) but a completely new abridgement of the *OED* and Burchfield's *Supplement*, and of material gathered during and since the production of *OED2*. In a sense, it is an abridged edition of an *OED* not yet published. It disappoints me on just one word: 'programme'. As far as the *New Shorter Oxford* is concerned, you can even 'programme' a computer. What James Murray considered a nineteenth-century affectation seems set to survive into the twenty-first century, one of those words that Fowler might have called 'sturdy indefensibles' if he hadn't reserved that lovely term for illogical idioms.¹⁰

Apart from size, purpose and methodology, dictionaries may be divided into diachronic and synchronic, canonic and encyclopedic. The *OED* is diachronic, tracing words to their first appearance in English, and defining words as they have been used in the past as well as the way they are used now. The *New Shorter Oxford* also is diachronic, but confines itself to half a million definitions of words in use between 1700 and the present (or still to be encountered in Shakespeare, Milton and the King James Bible). Both *OED* and *New Shorter Oxford* are canonic, dealing only with 'pure' words, not with terms more properly the province of encyclopedias. Where to draw the line between canonic and encyclopedic has been the subject of constant discussion between lexicographers for many years. Randolph Quirk, for example, considers 'Chomskyan' and 'Kafkaesque' to be encyclopedic, but both may be found in the *New Shorter Oxford*. Like the vast majority of dictionary users, I don't care whether words like 'Chomskyan' are lexicographically pure: I just want to check their meaning and spelling. If I want to know more about Chomsky I turn to an encyclopedia.

A perfect example of a synchronic dictionary is the *BBC English Dictionary* (HarperCollins, 1992). It gives only the current meaning of words, omitting even etymologies. It is also an encyclopedic dictionary, with an emphasis on world politics: no sign of Chomsky or Kafka, but basic facts about George Bush and Saddam Hussein; Robert Mugabe and F. W. de Klerk get entries, but not Nelson Mandela or Desmond Tutu, Green Berets but not Greenpeace. Most dictionaries grow old gracefully; this one seems to have passed its use-by date before publication.

Another way in which dictionaries differ is the form of their entries. The *Chambers 20th Century Dictionary* (1983) is typical of the traditional British approach in its use of 'clustered' or 'nested' entries. In this system, to quote Landau (p. 247), 'compounds, idioms, and other multiple lexical units, as well as some derivatives, are embedded within a consolidated paragraph alphabetized under a word with which they share a common element or from which they are derived'. Under 'green', for example, *Chambers* has first an unnumbered series of definitions, then seventy-four derivatives, idioms and so on. If the word or idiom you want starts with 'green', you must scan a paragraph that extends over a column and a half (unless it's 'greengage', which has a separate entry, presumably because of its etymology). The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* of the same period (7th edn, 1982) varies this system by numbering seventeen primary meanings, then grouping derivatives under the appropriate numbers – which is slightly more confusing than *Chambers*. This system was abandoned in the 8th edition (1990).

In the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2nd edn, 1992, based on *COD* 8th edn), 'green' has twelve numbered primary definitions, with seven sub-definitions, followed by thirty-seven derivatives and idioms (green ban, green belt, Green Beret, green card, green cheese and so on),

then 'greenish', 'greenly' and 'greenness'. The entry 'green' is followed by thirty entries for words beginning with 'green', from 'greenback' to 'greeny'. This is basically the system followed by American 'college' dictionaries, and in Australia by the *Macquarie Dictionary* and the *Collins English Dictionary (Australian edition)*. (For the record, *Macquarie* (2nd edn, 1991) has thirty numbered definitions of 'green', two sub-definitions, and seventy-five following 'green' words. *Collins* (3rd edn, 1991) has almost exactly the same, but the wordlist is not identical.)

Macquarie and *Collins* are encyclopedic dictionaries; *ACOD* is canonic; they are all synchronic dictionaries. For as long as I can remember the *Concise Oxford* was my favorite desk dictionary, until about 1982, when I discovered *Collins* (1st edn, 1979). I liked *Collins* mainly because of its encyclopedic content and its form of entries, and because it had an Oxford-like character but was more adventurous than Oxford in some ways (in dropping hyphens from well-established compound adjectives, for example). I admired *ACOD* (2nd edn) when it appeared, and often use it in preference to *Collins* (3rd edn) simply because it is so much easier to lift. I had never felt any need for *Macquarie*, but having deliberately used it as first point of reference for six months now, I am very impressed by it. *ACOD* and *Macquarie* are recommended by the AGPS *Style Manual* – an endorsement *Collins* will not get while it continues to place the *-ize* form of verbs before *-ise*.

Other dictionaries I like are the *Australian National Dictionary* (Oxford Australia, 1988), which in effect is an Australian supplement to the *OED*; G. A. Wilkes' *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (Sydney University Press, 2nd edn, 1985); *Australian Aboriginal Words in English*, by R. M. W. Dixon, W. S. Ramson and Mandy Thomas (Oxford, 1990); the *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (1991), which makes *COD* superfluous by including all of its canonic entries and more; the *Hutchinson Dictionary of Difficult Words* (revised edn, 1993; I have used the 4th edn, 1958, for many years); Joseph Shipley's *Dictionary of Early English* (Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1963); James Orchard Halliwell's *Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (first published 1847; 7th edn, Routledge, 1924); Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (2 vols, 5th/7th edn, Routledge, 1970); and of course, the inimitable Ebenezer Cobham Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (first published 1870; 5th edn, Cassell, 1959).

Thesauruses should not be allowed into the hands of minors or journalists. They are not dictionaries of synonyms, as some think, but collections of related concepts, and useful books if you know how to use them. They come basically in two forms. The *Oxford Thesaurus* (1993) is arranged as a dictionary, alphabetically, with a comprehensive index. The more traditional thesaurus, based on Peter Mark Roget's original *Thesaurus* of 1852, is arranged thematically by concept. In this form the index is vital to finding the word or expression you want, but the groupings of concepts then encourage browsing, perhaps setting off ideas you didn't have when you opened the book. My favorite thesauruses (Oxford prefers the plural 'thesauri', but you are likely to be ridiculed if you use it in Australia) are *Roget's International Thesaurus* (4th edn, Crowell, 1977; 5th edn, Harper Collins, 1992) and the *Bloomsbury Thesaurus* (1993).

The one thing you must do before using a word or expression you have found in a thesaurus is look it up in a dictionary. And before you even reach for a thesaurus, remember Fowler's advice: 'The obvious is better than obvious avoidance of it.'

There are hundreds of books about style and usage, and they seem to have just one thing in common: contradiction. I can say this with feeling, having written *Meanjin's* little style guide with Jenny Lee. There would be no need for our guide if there was one book we could recommend without reservation to *Meanjin* contributors.¹¹

In Australia, every editor must have the *Style Manual for Authors, Editors and Printers* (Australian Government Publishing Service, 5th edn, 1994), if only because every other editor

uses it. Fortunately, it is a very useful book of its kind. With the *Style Manual* on your desk, along with either the *Macquarie Dictionary* or the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, you can't go wrong.

Nick Hudson's *Modern Australian Usage* (Oxford, 1993) is for people who understand that 'there is a difference between not being wrong and being right' (p. vi). Hudson continues, in his preface: 'This book is for people who want to make up their own minds. It reports variance, and attempts to give readers the information they need in order to discuss the issue and find the solution which best suits their own situation.'

Most people don't turn to books on style and usage for discussion, but for the same thing they expect from dictionaries: rulings, authoritative answers. For them, Viking has published the *Penguin Working Words* (1993), a useful, worthy and (especially compared with Hudson) rather dull book. The dustjacket of *Working Words* conveys the publisher's aim precisely: you might miss the subtitle, 'An Australian guide to modern English usage', but you won't miss the *Macquarie Dictionary*, *Working Words* and AGPS *Style Manual* pictured together on a busy word-worker's desk.*

In my thirty-five years' experience of publishing houses and printeries of all kinds I have found that there is always one resident expert on words, punctuation, style and usage. Some of these oracles are just better informed than anyone else on the staff, and some few are unsung geniuses. (Bill Winter, head reader at Wilke's, was one. I had the good fortune to work with him in 1967–8, and learnt far more from him than the craft of proofreading.) Oxford University Press seems to have been singularly blessed with geniuses, and two of them established standards in their time that have been revised but not outmoded since. Horace Hart was Printer to the University (later Controller of the University Press), 1883–1915. Between 1893 and 1904 he compiled fifteen editions of his *Rules for Compositors and Readers at the University Press, Oxford* before Oxford made it available to the public. My copy is the 38th edition (1978); the 39th appeared in 1983. It is a pocket-size book of 180-odd pages, and it is indispensable. Its companion volume from 1905 to 1981 was the *Authors' and Printers' Dictionary* by F. Howard Collins, usually referred to simply (if confusingly) as *Collins*. Its last edition was the 11th (1973). In 1981 *Collins* became the *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*, a little book every bit as useful, and specifically recommended for use in conjunction with *Hart's Rules*. The latest edition of *ODWE* is hard to come by in Australia, mainly because it has for all practical purposes been supplanted here by the *Australian Writers' and Editors' Guide* (Oxford, 1991), adapted from *ODWE* and edited by Shirley Purchase. *AWEG* has quickly established itself as an essential desk reference.*

Cambridge University Press produced its own special genius in the person of Judith Butcher, author of *Copy-editing: the Cambridge handbook* (1st edn, 1975; 3rd edn, 1992). This wise and valuable book covers far more about usage, style and publishing processes than its title suggests, but all from the viewpoint of the working editor. Every editor, from the least experienced to the most venerable, needs Butcher's *Copy-editing*. It is the bible of the trade.

To the great credit of the Society of Editors (Victoria), we now have a locally produced book on editing that outclasses anything I have seen except Butcher. The Society commissioned two of its most experienced editors, Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill, to write a book for use in training courses and to serve generally as a basic text for Australian editors. They met their brief, and excelled it. The *Australian Editing Handbook* was published by AGPS early in 1994. One sentence in this book stays indelibly in my mind – 'Think of all the people who might read the book, and let them be part of it' – the essence of inclusive language and appropriate English.

Just to list all the books about style and usage that I like would take up too much space. I love Fowler's *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, and still use the edition I bought in 1961 (the last before it was revised by Ernest Gowers). The *Longman Guide to English Usage*, by Sidney

Greenbaum and Janet Whitcut (1988), I find very useful. John B. Bremner's *Words on Words: a dictionary for writers and others who care about words* (Columbia University Press, 1980) is exactly what its title says; it is also one of the most amusing dictionaries I possess, and one of the few I have read from cover to cover. Bill Bryson's *Dictionary of Troublesome Words* (Penguin, 2nd edn, 1987) is a similar lot. His introduction begins: 'This book might more accurately, if less convincingly, have been called *A Guide to Everything in English Usage That the Author Wasn't Entirely Clear About Until Quite Recently*.' Bryson's *Penguin Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (1991) is admirable, but in Australia no match for Oxford's *AWEG*.

Bryson, Bremner, Hudson, Shipley, Landau . . . I suppose it shouldn't surprise me too much that so many eminent writers on the origins and use of words should also be humorists. Landau's hilariously polite explanation of the origin of the word 'f**k' (*Dictionaries*, p.183) rightly belongs in any decently researched anthology of twentieth-century wit and humor.

The book I am most often asked by fellow editors to recommend to them is a good, straightforward, *adult* book on English grammar. Until fairly recently I was unable to oblige, being as much in the dark as they were. Like most of my colleagues', my study of grammar ended at school; like them, I have an instinctive feel for what sounds right, and basically edit by ear. You need that ear to be an editor: don't underestimate it. But you need that constant urge to know more, too, and the more you use words the more you feel the need to *name* what you are doing, in short, to know something about grammar.

To understand the terminology of grammar, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* (1994) is a great help, a most useful book. To get a grasp of grammar, the three best books I have found (in ascending order of time and concentration required) are Gordon Jarvie's *Bloomsbury Grammar Guide* (1993); Sidney Greenbaum's *An Introduction to English Grammar* (Longman, 1991); and *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, by Randolph Quirk, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (Longman, 1985). The first is a well-conceived crash course, or refresher. The second is a thorough and eminently useful text. The third is what it says it is: comprehensive. If you have a question about grammar, you'll find the answer somewhere in its 1800 pages (and you should find it quickly: its exemplary index takes up 115 of those pages). It is unbelievably expensive, but not utterly beyond the reach of the determined editor, and once you have it you'll consider it a cornerstone of your library.

*Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die*
Alfred, Lord Tennyson¹²

Authors are notoriously sloppy when they quote other authors. There's nothing much that an editor can do about this when the author quoted is unfamiliar, and unrepresented in the local library. If you are really suspicious you can ask for a photocopy of the material quoted. Most editors don't have time for that, and are more concerned with misquotations of well-known authors and the misattribution of quotations. In this basic sort of checking we are fairly well served by a number of dictionaries of quotations; most editors I know have at least two or three. For a nice balance of comprehensiveness and accuracy, the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is hard to beat; the fourth edition (1992) is superbly organized and indexed, a model of its genre. *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* (14th edn, 1968) is useful, if not entirely to be trusted: it silently corrects Tennyson's 'Their's', for example. Meic Stephens' *Dictionary of Literary Quotations* (Routledge, 1990) is eminently browsable, and naturally, since it is so specialized, contains

quotations missing from the *Oxford*. The *Faber Book of Aphorisms* (1964), selected by W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, is another dangerously diverting collection of quotations.

The four books mentioned are organized in four different ways. *Oxford* is alphabetical by author, and thoroughly indexed. *Bartlett* is chronological by birth date, with an index of key words and a separate index of authors. Stephens is alphabetical by subject (Manuscript, Masterpiece, Meaning, Metre), with key words and authors indexed. The Faber book is an anthology, arranged by concept (Humanity, Religion, Nature, Education, Society), with author index only. The different approaches reflect the different uses of collections of quotations. The subject approach prompts me to mention an enormous collection of quotations that is sometimes overlooked: the multitude of citations in *OED*. The title of my column in the *Society of Editors Newsletter*, 'Threepenny Planet', comes from Dean Swift; recently I went looking for the exact wording of the whole quotation ('I was born under a Threepenny Planet, never to be worth a Groat'), and for a while I thought I must have imagined it, until I remembered to look at *OED*'s entry for 'planet'.

For Australian quotations, Stephen Murray-Smith's *Dictionary of Australian Quotations* (Heinemann, 1984) is essential, as is the *Macquarie Dictionary of Australian Quotations* (1990). The citations in the *Australian National Dictionary* are useful. Sometimes I find what I'm looking for in Bill Wannan's *Australian Folklore: a dictionary of lore, legends and popular allusions* (Lansdowne, 1970), but useful and entertaining as that book is, it is not a work of scholarship to be trusted implicitly.

My background in biblical studies impressed on me the need for accurate quotation – and more, the need for *honest* quotation. The theologian Alexander Campbell once said 'A text out of context is a pretext.'¹³ He was speaking of biblical texts, verses from the Bible, but the principle holds good in all fields of scholarship. The editor must try to weed out the texts that are pretexts, the authentic quotations that misrepresent the author quoted, but I don't know of any book that can help in this regard. It is the instinct for the pretext, among other things, that makes an editor an editor. Wide reading helps. 'The documents are sacrosanct,' Frank Crowley insisted when I was working on his *Colonial Australia in Documents* (3 vols, Nelson, 1980). When I pointed out that three of his documents, attributed only to the *Edinburgh Review* of a certain date, all came from one review by the Reverend Sydney Smith, he was, to say the least, anxious. His research assistants were obviously not fans of 'the Smith of Smiths'.¹⁴

The *Hutchinson Dictionary of Biography* (2nd edn, 1993) is attractively presented and a pleasant book to have. It has portraits of many of its 8000 subjects, and carefully chosen quotations on most pages. I find it a rather endearing book, fun to browse in, but it is not my first choice among dictionaries of biography. For the moment, my first choice is the *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (5th edn, 1990), edited by Magnus Magnusson. It has 20,000 entries, and I have yet to fault it (except in its necessary omissions; you can't include everyone; I am pleased to find Alexander Campbell, sorry not to find André Campra). I regret that I have not yet seen Barry Jones's new *Dictionary of World Biography*. On a good day I reckon our man could out-magnus Magnusson, and his perspective on 'world' biography should be more pertinent to our concerns than any British writer's.*

For Australian biography there's no point messing about in the foothills: editors in particular should go straight to the top and acquire, or at least use, the magnificent *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Melbourne University Press, 1966–). So far twelve volumes have been published covering the period 1788–1939, and the first of a projected four volumes covering the period 1940–80. There is also a very useful index volume for the first period. The thing to remember when consulting *ADB* is that it is constantly being revised, so before or after reading an entry, certainly before quoting it, it is wise to check the corrigenda. (Example: Baudin – 'for Thomas

Nicholas *read* Nicolas Thomas’.) I used to keep the corrigenda pamphlets in a folder, but they have now been consolidated in the index volume. One of the early corrections has deservedly become famous: ‘*for* died in infancy *read* lived to a ripe old age at Orange’. Only a truly great work of continuing scholarship could so correct itself.

Another useful source of information is *A Biographical Register 1788–1939: Notes from the name index of the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, compiled by H. J. Gibbney and Ann G. Smith (2 vols, ADB/Australian National University, 1987).

A few words about encyclopedias: forget the rest, hold out for the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (5th edn, 1993). Isaiah Berlin prefers it to *Britannica*.¹⁵ So do I. It’s in one enormous volume of over 3000 pages. Put it next to your *New Shorter Oxford* and you have a formidable reference library – over 14 million words – in just three hefty volumes. Careful how you heft.*

In a book I proofread recently there was a reference to ‘the fire that occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power station in 1984’. I altered ‘fire’ to ‘explosion’, and 1984 to 1986, and wondered how any writer on the subject could be so careless as to write such a sentence, or any editor to let it stand. In the same book the estimated current population of an Asian country doubled in the space of three pages, and a map of Australia showed Sydney south of Canberra. The latter would probably have been corrected before the book was published, but the other misinformation (and a lot more like it) might well have gone uncorrected. In another book I proofread, Papageno was described as ‘the garrulous bird-catcher in Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*’ (which reminded me of a statement I once heard that Kiri Te Kanawa first came to public attention when she sang Desdemona in Verdi’s *Aida*; just about anyone would attract some attention by doing that). In O’Neill and Ruder’s *Complete Guide to Editorial Freelancing* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1974) the aspiring editor is advised to keep track of changes to the names of countries – good advice, but the authors’ examples unfortunately include ‘Cambodia, now Sri Landa’. Between drafts of her latest novel, *Tunnel Vision*, Sara Paretsky changed her mind about the location of some of the action, moving it from a county west of Chicago to another south. When I proofread the book for Penguin (the first edition was published here to coincide with the author’s presence at Adelaide Writers’ Week) I noticed that, among other oddities, some references to the western county remained; Paretsky’s American editor hadn’t noticed.

How can such things happen, such clangers and confusions go undetected? Easily. Editors and proofreaders are as fallible as anyone else, and some know more than others. But some publishers don’t allow editors the time to get everything right. Freelance editors in particular often find themselves working down to a budget rather than up to a standard. Some publishers seem to regard copy-editing as a necessary nuisance, and spend as little as they can on it. As for proofreading, many don’t bother at all: they leave that to the authors. The editor is often also the proofreader and the indexer, and few people have the skills to do those three jobs properly, especially on one book, so mistakes are not just overlooked but magnified. Increasingly, publishers are turning to ‘desktop publishers’ to typeset and lay out their books – in effect handing over a manuscript (and usually a disk) to the cheapest DTP shop on the block and saying ‘Here, make a book out of this.’ Publishers have an extraordinary faith in DTP, and their accountants seem to encourage it. Again and again, the results are somewhere between barely passable and disastrous, but they persist. I’m sure they think they are at the cutting edge of the new technology, and in a sense they are, but that edge is often more like a rift, where publishers’ expertise is cut off from the expertise of the DTP people – or a sort of remote border post, where the languages spoken are similar but the cultures are different, and mutual ignorance prevails.

That there are many successful and honorable exceptions to this sad picture I need hardly say, but while publishers spend their energy, time and money grappling with new technology they

have less to spend on the actual content of their books. There have been times when I could have saved publishers hundreds of dollars and days of anguish if they had let me spend a few hours cleaning up their disks before they went to the typesetter. Many freelance editors have equipped themselves to provide this kind of service (to act as guides and translators at the border post, to continue that metaphor), but there are publishers who don't understand how valuable a service it is. An absurd example: the copy-editor carefully writes 'en' over every hyphen that should be an en rule, or dash; the DTP typesetter, who has learnt that material underlined is to be in italics, just as carefully replaces all of these hyphens with *en* (1946*en*53, Sydney*en*Hobart); the proofreader, who is as conscientious as the editor, replaces all the errant *ens* with dashes; the typesetter dutifully turns them all back into hyphens. Absurd, but I've seen it happen.

In early 1976 I fled Canberra and became a senior editor at Rigby Ltd in Adelaide. It was my first experience as editor of a commercial publishing house, but it wasn't too different from the Australian Government Publishing Service. When I returned to Melbourne in 1978 I realized that Rigby's were behind the times in some respects. They employed a proofreader and a fact-checker, and they had a good reference library. Not only that, but when an editor finished work on a manuscript, he or she would give it to a fellow editor to read. This was called 'second editing', and it was a useful practice. Given these admirable luxuries, I applied my absolute best to every book I worked on, until I was gently chided one day for my slowness. Surprised, I asked what was more important – getting it *right* or getting it *out*? The publishing manager, Mike Page (a lovely man, self-taught, interested in everything, a prolific writer), looked down at the cigarette he was rolling, and said 'Both.' That was my first real lesson in commercial publishing – the almost inevitable conflict and compromise between content and schedule.

In another context (related, but not directly related) Arthur Delbridge, editor-in-chief of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, is fond of quoting a line from T. S. Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*, 1930: 'Teach us to care and not to care.' That is a hard saying. A large part of the craft of editing, and the business of freelance editing, is knowing when to care, and how much to care – when to overlook the lesser infelicities of expression, when to let the author *be* the author, when to stop looking things up and just get on with the job.

JOHN BANGSUND

NOTES

- 1 Carpentier, *The Lost Steps* (tr. Harriet de Onis, Gollancz, 1956).
- 2 The count is now about 1200; 1994 was a terrible year.
- 3 Shakespeare, Sonnet 73.
- 4 Vonnegut, 'Teaching the Writer to Write: or, A lousy speech in which I manage to tell everything I know in less than an hour', in John Ayotte's *Kallikanzaros* 4, April 1968.
- 5 I still do the same work for *Meanjin*, but my title is now Editorial Consultant.
- 6 Johann Peter Eckermann (1792–1854), author of *Conversations with Goethe* (1837–48).
- 7 Connolly in *Horizon*, November 1949, quoted in Michael Shelden's *Friends of Promise* (Hamish Hamilton, 1989).
- 8 Johnson quoted in Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Anecdotes of the late Samuel Johnson* (1786).
- 9 I have since moved house, but I don't write 100-word sentences every day, so I thought I might keep that one.
- 10 According to Muphry's Law something *had* to be wrong in this sort of essay. A day or so after *Meanjin* went to press I found the mistake: I had *misquoted Fowler* (oh, the ignominy!).
- 11 I have read of a book called *Style Manuals of the English-Speaking World* that lists over 200 titles.
- 12 Tennyson, 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'.

- 13 This aphorism of Campbell's has often been quoted in publications of Disciples/Churches of Christ, but I do not know its source.
- 14 Thomas Babington Macaulay called Sydney Smith 'the Smith of Smiths'. (Smith said of Macaulay 'He has occasional flashes of silence, that make his conversation perfectly delightful.')
- 15 Berlin, review in *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 April 1994.

'On Looking It Up' appeared first in *Meanjin* 2/1994

This version is reprinted from *The Society of Editors Newsletter*, August 1995

The most recent version can be found at <http://www.pipeline.com.au/users/bangsund/>

PAUL KINCAID has been in fandom for more years than he likes to consider. He has published fanzines such as *Tripe Picker's Journal*, *A-Pauling* and *A Balanced Diet*, but is probably better known as the regular fanzine reviewer for *Banana Wings*. He has long been Reviews Editor of *Vector*, the Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association. He is author of *A Very British Genre*, a short history of British fantasy and science fiction, and has contributed to numerous reference books, including *The Fantasy Encyclopedia*. He is administrator of the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and his story 'Last Day of the Carnival: 36 Exposures' has been shortlisted for the BSFA Award. With his wife, TAFF candidate Maureen Kincaid Speller, he was joint Fan Guest of Honour at Evolution, the 1996 British Eastercon.

BOOKS TO HAUNT US

by Paul Kincaid

(First published in *Rewriting Old Diaries*, Acnestis mailing No. 34, October 1995.)

***The Regeneration Trilogy* by Pat Barker (1996; Viking 0-670-87184-2; 592 pp.; £12.99/\$A24.95).**

Comprises *Regeneration* (first published 1991); *The Eye in the Door* (1993); and *The Ghost Road* (1995).

The First World War has never exercised the fascination for me that, say, the American Civil War does. I have never enjoyed (if that is the right word) the work of the war poets. In the years immediately after 1918 the War became just an excuse for the injury (Hemingway) or heroism (Buchan) of the protagonists, so it became a background to rather than a focus of the work. The Second World War, more mobile, more varied in locale, more straightforward in its morality, more simple in its drama, overshadowed its predecessor — fine for boy's own adventure stories, which is what war fiction seemed to become for a long time during the 1950s and into the 1960s. The First World War, if it featured at all, seemed to have just one moral purpose, futility and horror hammered home to such an extent that it achieved a remorseless, grim tedium; flickering black and white compared to the wide-screen technicolor of the more recent adventure. It may be irrational (probably is) but whenever I was confronted with another searing novel about the horrors of the Great War, my heart sank, much as it does when I've faced with another heartwarming and colourful epic of life in India.

Then, in the late seventies and early-to-mid eighties, I came across a string of novels which had, in sudden uniformity, taken the whole sweep of twentieth-century history as their subject: *The New Confessions* by William Boyd, *Earthly Powers* by Anthony Burgess, *Star Turn* by Nigel Williams, *Days Between Stations* by Steve Erickson among others. Inevitably, the First World War became a starting point for these novels, but instead of following the dour lead of what had gone before, they shifted the war into a new, broader context, and in the process gave it a new, moral force. Just as Sally Heming in Erickson's *Leap Year* and *Arc d'X* provides a moral blueprint for America, destroying the soul of a nation by her acceptance of slavery, so the First World War became a moral blueprint for our century. For me that made the war as a fictional event far more accessible than it had ever been before.

Now Pat Barker seems to have taken it a step further,

making the war a psychological as well as a moral blueprint for the twentieth century. Barker makes this explicit: as we follow Rivers over three volumes, for instance, we see his struggle with the psychological problems of his patients take on an endless, near-static toing and froing until some catastrophe suddenly precipitates an end (significantly this is not always a 'cure'). Meanwhile the war, offstage throughout most of the three books, follows the same static course until, towards the end of the final volume, an allied assault abruptly breaks the German line and within a couple of months four years of stalemate are resolved. The psychological and the military follow the same pattern.

Again, Rivers makes the 'shocking' point to his patients that their psychological response to the trenches is actually not a reaction to the horrors they see every day (and there are plenty described in passing) but to their sense of being trapped in a powerless and unchanging state: it is a condition found most often before the War in working-class housewives. The War is feminised; class divisions are being destroyed (a point made again and again in little ways throughout the books). There is another telling moment in the final book when this feminisation is again brought into sharp focus. To cure one patient with hysterical paralysis of the legs, Rivers draws a line around the top of the patient's thighs. Each day he draws the line a little lower down the leg, like rolling down a pair of stockings, and feeling returns to the leg above the line. The treatment is successful, but the patient's response to this demasculinisation is to attempt suicide. In Barker's world, if the First World War does indeed paint a blueprint of the twentieth century, then it is a century of psychological breakdown, social breakdown, the end of the old class distinctions and the growth of the female.

The three books are, not unnaturally given the subject matter, largely masculine affairs, but the women who do come in to even peripheral focus — Billy Prior's girlfriend, her straitlaced and spiritualism-obsessed mother, the nurses, the old woman imprisoned for a plot to kill Lloyd-George, her bitter anti-war activist daughter — are all strongly drawn. But even more vivid is the way that the conventional, male-oriented world is undermined by homosexuality. Sassoon's genteel homosexuality, Billy Prior's eager pursuit of both hetero- and homosexual encounters, the married Charles Manning's furtive pursuit of homosexual relationships but his heroic refusal to abandon Ross, Oscar Wilde's executor, then under hysterical but

effective attack by MP Pemberton Billing; each of these is shown to be life-affirming and so a better response to the madness of war than the hide-bound traditionalism of the old order. The First World War is always said to have changed the world; what Pat Barker's books have shown me is that it wasn't just the mad slaughter that did this; life was changed also.

Away from this, one other thing that interests me is the way that the trilogy works as a trilogy. In fact, the first two volumes have been on my shelf a long time unread. I always meant to get round to them, tempted by the counterfactual frisson of fiction about real people but put off by my usual reaction to fiction about World War One. Then Maureen bought the third volume for my birthday and I thought it was time to get round to it.

The first volume, *Regeneration*, was exactly what I had expected. It tells the story of the few months Siegfried Sassoon spent at Craiglockhart, Edinburgh, during the autumn of 1917. He had written an open letter denouncing the war, a letter that had been read out to near-universal opprobrium in Parliament. Following the urgings of his friend Robert Graves, Sassoon allowed himself to go before a military board so the authorities could pretend it was shell shock that led to this action. At Craiglockhart he was under the care of William Rivers, an anthropologist who was also probably the most forward-thinking and, in our terms, humane psychologist of the period. The relationship between the two men, which is the heart of the book, is two way: Rivers uncovers genuine monsters in Sassoon's psyche and helps him to face them, but Sassoon's humanity forces Rivers to question for the first time the relationship between the good work he is doing in Craiglockhart and the War which, he comes to believe, Sassoon is right in opposing.

But this relationship is set within a host of others which spiral out from the central pair. On the one hand, Sassoon meets and encourages a would-be poet also being treated at the hospital, Wilfred Owen. On the other, we see Rivers with a number of his other patients, notably Billy Prior, the most important fictional character in the trilogy. Prior is a working-class lad who has risen through the ranks, so there is the sense of being a social outcast among his fellow officers on top of the psychological abuses of the War: he is truculent, bitter, uncommunicative, and his relationship with Rivers is very different from Sassoon's. In a later volume this prickly, love-hate relationship exposes psychological damage in Rivers' own past: the physician is no more whole than his patients. We also see Prior's slowly developing affair with a girl working in a munitions factory in Edinburgh.

By the end of the novel, Rivers has ensured that Prior has a job on the home front on the strength of his asthma; Sassoon has decided that his duty means he must rejoin his unit in France; and Rivers has left Craiglockhart to work in London. As a novel *Regeneration* is moving, insightful and complete; there is a satisfying wholeness to the work; the conclusion is right.

I turned to the second volume, *The Eye in the Door*, wondering how Barker might sustain the story without making it a mere repetition of the first, as in so many fantasy trilogies.

She does it by making *The Eye in the Door* a very different book. Yes, the cast of characters is essentially the same; yes, the action follows on chronologically from the first; but in other respects the two books diverge significantly.

Where *Regeneration* was a fairly straightforward story, closely focused on Craiglockhart, its patients and staff, *The Eye in the Door* is much broader, moving between London and the North of England, placing its characters in a context outside the doctor-patient relationship. Where *Regeneration* took as its central themes duty and psychology, *The Eye in the Door* widens this to bring in guilt and morality.

In this novel Prior is now in London working for the Ministry of Munitions, a convenient catch-all job that actually involves spying. Under cover of this he decides to investigate the case of an old woman in prison for allegedly being involved in a plot to assassinate Lloyd-George. The woman, Beattie Roper, helped to raise him when he was a child and is a contact with another childhood friend, now a wanted antiwar activist. When he visits her in prison he sees the eye painted on the inside of the cell door around the spy-hole. The event that triggered his own mental disintegration was when he picked up the eyeball of a companion who had been blown to bits in front of him, so the eye acquires a powerful symbolic imagery throughout the novel, representing lack of privacy and hence social uncertainty on the one hand, and espionage and hence betrayal on the other. Prior meets his old schoolfriend secretly, but the schoolfriend is betrayed and captured; Prior has been suffering fugue states in which he is not aware of this actions, and he comes to believe that he is the betrayer.

Along the way we watch the process of other betrayals: Charles Manning, for instance, risks blackmail for his homosexuality when he realises he is one of the '47,000 eminent Britons' that Pemberton Billing claims are a security risk, so he must decide whether to abandon his friendship with Ross; Prior is cheating on his Sarah with Manning and with prostitutes; the *agent provocateur* who tricks Beattie Roper into prison weaves a sorry path in and out of the story; and at the centre of it all is Rivers, now riven by his own doubts and demons.

The final volume, *The Ghost Road*, expands the story and its themes yet further. There are formal, structural differences: for the first time part of the story is told in the first person in the form of Prior's journals. There are differences of setting: for the first time we leave Britain to follow Prior and Owen to France, and to trace Rivers' memories of his time as an anthropologist in the South Pacific. And this anthropological theme — backed up by scenes in which, for instance, Prior goes to a spiritualist meeting with his Sarah and her mother — make the book hinge far more upon questions of how death, and our beliefs about death, define the nature of our human societies. This is, perhaps inevitably, the darkest of the three books. We know what will happen to Owen in the final months of the War, but not whether Prior will share his fate. Rivers is struck down by Spanish influenza.

None of these books is easy, though they are all written with a beautiful light touch that makes them a real pleasure to read, but *The Ghost Road* is the hardest of all, clogged, fevered, and overall brooding under a threatening, menacing cloud. This is the end of the War we are talking about here, but there is no sense of release, of achievement, of joy to be found in that end.

We all have books which haunt us, which linger somewhere in the back of the mind. These three novels, I think, are set to join that select band of books I shall never forget.

— Paul Kincaid, October 1995

I CAME UPON A CHILD OF GOD

by Paul Kincaid

(This article first appeared in *Nutz* 5, edited by Pam Wells, July 1985.)

Steve was my best friend from school, and in musical terms I owe him a lot. Over the years we were friends he was instrumental in bringing to my attention some of the artists who have been important to me, or who have become particular favourites. He was also involved in my happiest musical discovery.

We were in Chester, making our way, as was our habit, from bookshop to record store. I remember it was in a rack in a rather small record shop that I came upon the cerulean sleeve of Joni Mitchell's *Blue*. This was the early seventies, probably 1971. I don't think the record had been released long. Of course I knew of Joni Mitchell, and was familiar with her work through other singers — how many versions were there of 'Both Sides Now' and 'Chelsea Morning' and 'Woodstock'? I'd heard her on the radio a few times, though; enough to put her work on that impressive list of records I would someday like to add to my collection.

So this day I looked through the racks, but somehow always came back to *Blue*. Steve was in much the same mind, and following his prompting we eventually decided that I would buy the record and he would tape it — a reciprocal arrangement we had. For that I am grateful. The music of Joni Mitchell has been an integral part of my life ever since.

I don't quite know why *Blue* caught my imagination so immediately. The words, probably. Words have always been important to me. They have haunted, fascinated me; books, poetry, patterns and rhythms of words. From the moment I first became interested in music it was always the beauty or cleverness of lyrics that I went for, rather than the melody or the skill of the instrumentalists or anything related to the music *per se*.

This was what was so exhilarating about *Blue*. Here was a song writer with such skill that she sacrificed nothing in fitting the lyrics to the melody, neither meaning nor vocabulary. The lyrics were intelligent, and nowhere did she have to resort to monosyllables merely to get it all to match the rhythm.

'Richard, you haven't really changed,' I said
'it's just that now you're romanticizing some pain
that's in your head
You got tombs in your eyes, but the songs you
punched are dreaming.
Listen they talk of love so sweet . . .'

Here was someone attempting to talk seriously and sensibly through the medium of song. It was an album of love songs, yet there was nothing conventional about any of them.

We don't have no piece of paper from the city hall
keeping us tied and true,
my old man,

keeping away the blues.

Nothing conventional in the sentiments, or in the way they were expressed. This wasn't the tortured English of Tin Pan Alley hacks, but the conversational patterns I heard around me and on the television. I could not have put it this way at the time, but here was the first suggestion that in Joni Mitchell I had found a mirror reflecting myself and my world. And it was liberating.

Acid, booze and ass
needles, guns and grass.
Lots of laughs, lots of laughs.

It wasn't a true reflection yet. We both had some changes to go through before that. But there was a lot in this freewheeling, don't-give-a-damn, literate music that I would have liked to see in myself.

A lot of this is how I look back on it. At the time I was not hooked. I had simply found a set of songs I liked, and a singer whose distinctive voice, fluttering up and down the register, I found quirky but appealing. But I did go out and buy her first two LPs. Ah, now here was the folk music I was familiar with. I knew where I was with *Song to a Seagull* and *Clouds*, and the fact that I recognised so many of the songs from other sources just made it all the more undemanding. I slipped easily into the habit of the songs. This was where my musical tastes lay and it required no effort on my part to let the music wash over me. After all, hadn't so many balladeers rendered 'Both Sides Now' just another pleasant pop song, for all its amusingly oxymoronic lyrics?

Again hindsight gives me a slightly different perspective. Now I know how many of those songs continue to haunt me. 'Marcie' because of the sounds it allows me to make on my guitar, and the neat way she traces Marcie's loneliness during the course of a year:

Marcie's faucet needs a plumber
Marcie's sorrow needs a man.
Red is autumn, green is summer,
Greens are turning . . .

The gentle mystery of 'Michael from Mountains':

You want to know all,
but his mountains have called
so you never do.

The shadow of madness in 'I Think I Understand':

Sometime voices in the night will call me back again,
back along the pathway of a troubled mind.
When forests rise to block the light that keeps a
traveller sane,
I'll challenge them with flashes from a brighter time.

For me, though, perhaps the most significant of these songs, because it points the way to my first really personal contact with her music, was 'Songs to Aging Children Come'. There is a stark and evocative scene in the film *Alice's Restaurant* when the song is sung at the grave of Woody Guthrie. I don't think I really appreciated it until I saw that film. I was eighteen, in that last summer before university. I had cast off school at last. For years I had been assiduously and aggressively putting away childish things, and now I could turn around and see what I had left behind. That song to aging children was a song to me.

For some reason I did not buy *Ladies of the Canyon*, but taped Steve's copy. It was probably part of our reciprocal arrangement. I play tapes less often than records, so this album has tended to take something of a back seat. A pity, for in the insidious way her music has of creeping up on you, it now seems to mean more than any other album. Or rather, one song does.

And the seasons they go round and round
and the painted ponies go up and down.
We're captive on a carousel of time,
we can't return we can only look behind from where
we came
and go round and round and round in the circle
game.

'The Circle Game' touched a nerve. I am prone to nostalgia. I suppose it all began on the day I left school for the last time, tearing off my tie and thinking I'd never have to strangle myself with it again. All around me were people I'd known for years, friends and enemies, people I'd just said goodbye to and probably wouldn't see again. It was a lovely summer day, all the memories seemed to be suffused with the same warm glow, and what was coming was the night. That was the watershed, the turning point; I've been sensitive to such feelings ever since. It was some time after I first heard the song that I recognised myself in 'Songs to Aging Children Come', but 'The Circle Game' struck home right away.

Words like when you're older must appease him
and promises of someday make his dreams.

That was me. A lot of my childhood seemed to be made up of waiting to be older. Now, of course, I was older . . .

And they tell him take your time it won't be long now
till you drag your feet to slow the circles down.

A connection had been made.

This is going over the top, but I suppose when you try to analyse something that has touched you, something that is more of a feeling than anything tangible, there is no way you can avoid going over the top. Let me try to put it in perspective, then. 'The Circle Game' was one track among a dozen on an album that I acquired, probably, in 1972. Though I may rave about all the tracks individually I still feel that the LP as a whole is one of her weakest. 'The Circle Game' is a pleasant song, with well-constructed lyrics, and worthy of the attention I have given it only because it ties in with my morbid regret for yesterday. Yet it was precisely because this song about nostalgia suited my mood that I began to pay attention to Joni Mitchell.

Still, the thing that drew me to her was the writing, the

precision of the language, the ability to distil quite complex ideas into a simple song, the way of writing about unusual subjects or from unusual angles, and most of all the conversational sound she gave it all. This began to change with the next album.

In the sixties I would keep a sharp eye on the music papers, and haunt record shops for weeks before each new record by a favourite group or artist was released. Now I had given up on the music papers, and I was living in digs in Northern Ireland with only a radio and a guitar for music. So it would have been the Christmas holiday of 1972, or even Easter or summer 1973, before I bought *For the Roses*. My university career, as far as music was concerned, was a strangely uneven time. I would listen to records in bursts during the holidays, then return to my radio and guitar. As a result my reaction to *For the Roses* was a stutter of varying responses.

Initially I was, as always, bowled over by the lyrics. Then I began to realise that the lyrics had become more elliptical. There was a richness in the language that I hadn't encountered in the works of any other song writer, and I relished it. An excellent example is the elegant but indirect way she refers to Beethoven's deafness in 'Judgment of the Moon and Stars':

No tongue in the bell
and the fishwives yell,
but they might as well be mute,
so you get to keep the pictures,
that don't seem like much.

Then it began to get through to me that there was something else about *For the Roses*. There were no individual songs that stuck in my mind. I did not sing 'Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire' over and over again until the lyrics were fixed in my memory. The songs expressed emotions I shared and points of view I agreed with, but there was no longer the shock of recognition. They were a part of my milieu.

It's a rough road to travel,
Mama, let go now,
it's always called for me.

Playing my five Joni Mitchell albums in sequence brought it home to me that her music had changed. I could trace the progression from the folk of *Song to a Seagull* and *Clouds*, through the transition of *Ladies of the Canyon* and *Blue*, to the rock of *For the Roses*. And I realised that what I liked about it as much as the cleverness of the lyrics was the sound it made.

Now ever since I was ten or so and saw the Beatles make their first appearance on 'Thank Your Lucky Stars', I have had an acute awareness of popular music. Everyone of my generation had. It was a fact of life. Pop was as much a sound of daily life as traffic on the road or conversation. The radio was always on, and almost perforce I had developed a liking for much of what I heard. In the late sixties I discovered folk, and decided that this was where my musical tastes lay. Around the same time I also discovered poetry, and decided that what I looked for in a song was the lyric.

So far so good. I still like folk music. I still like good lyrics. It was this, after all, that first led me to Joni Mitchell. Now she was leading me away from this limited stance. It would be too dramatic to say that I rediscovered rock; it had never really been out of my musical awareness. It was just that I became a little bit more tolerant in what I was prepared to

consider 'my musical taste'.

Court and Spark came out a couple of years later, during that uneasy transition period when I finished my degree at the New University of Ulster and began my post-graduate year at the University of Warwick. Someone had decreed that I should not receive a grant for this year, so I was not exactly in a position to buy a new LP. The old reciprocal arrangement with Steve came in useful, but *Court and Spark* was relegated to my little-played tape collection. Supposedly this was the most popular of all her albums, but it had the least impact on me, perhaps because I've played it less than the others.

For the Roses is full of strange guitar tunings and odd chords. Musically *Court and Spark* is much simpler. Lyrically, too, there is far less of the obliqueness of *For the Roses*, though the songs are as literate and perceptive as ever.

Some are friendly
some are cutting
some are watching it from the wings
some are standing in the centre
giving to get something.

Now that I'm so familiar with Joni Mitchell's work I recognise themes and subjects emerging again and again. The consideration of the music business in 'Free Man in Paris', the bitter-sweet love stories like 'Car on the Hill'. And there is the subject of insanity. It has already appeared in songs like 'I Think I Understand', and here re-emerges dramatically in the best song on the album, 'Trouble Child'. Joni Mitchell's ability to find a simple but telling symbol, couched in direct, everyday, conversational language, really comes to the fore:

So why does it come as such a shock
to know you really have no one,
only a river of changing faces
looking for an ocean?
They trickle through your leaky plans
another dream over the dam,
and you're lying in some room
feeling like your right to be human
is going over too.

This serious and deeply felt lyric is immediately contrasted with the jokey 'Twisted', the first song she recorded that she didn't write herself. Although the predominant musical style on the album is rock, 'Twisted' is evidence of the emergence of a jazzy style, perhaps brought on by the inclusion of musicians like Tom Scott and Chuck Findley and the use of trumpets for the first time.

Now I don't know if Joni Mitchell was blazing the trail for me, or whether the album just came along at the right time, when I was prepared to admit that jazz was not as bad as I'd always made out. Although I didn't make a big thing of it, I'd always liked such masters as Sinatra and Astaire; but in general my attitude to jazz (and I am using the term very loosely) was conditioned by a sort of friendly antipathy between my father and myself on all matters musical. Now, when I heard that sweet horn segue from 'Trouble Child' to 'Twisted', I realised just how good that sound was. My next musical conversion had begun.

Miles of Aisles, the live double album that followed, was a disappointment. The two new songs she included were

among the weakest she has recorded, and gave no indication of what was to come next. It was at this point that Joni Mitchell's popularity apparently underwent a sudden decline. I suppose the majority of fans could follow her through the familiar spectrums of folk and rock, but balked at the movement towards jazz. For myself, however, I was surprisingly finding myself caught up on what was happening to her music.

Then *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* burst upon me. Though from time to time I become temporarily addicted to one album or another, one record stood out clearly as the most played LP in my collection, and had held that position since I bought it in 1969, Pentangle's *Basket of Light*. It didn't take long for *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* to claim the honour, and since 1975 only two records have come close to it in terms of frequency on my turntable: *Basket of Light* and Joni Mitchell's next album, *Hejira*.

Over Easter 1975 I discovered fandom. Otherwise that year at Warwick was not exactly the happiest in my life, and when we finally parted company in September 1975 on not very amicable terms, I entered upon 18 months of unemployment. Both *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* and *Hejira* belong to these depressing years, yet I look back on them now with considerable affection.

Musically, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* was something like an omnibus edition, with everything from rock 'n' roll to jazz by way of the warrior drums of Burundi, which were exactly the right complement to her allusive lyrics linking 'Douanier' Rousseau and smoky Harlem jazz clubs in a portrait of the modern urban jungle.

Harking back to *For the Roses*, the lyrics are again oblique and poetic, but no less perceptive and to the point for that. Again there is a song she didn't write, a jazz standard from the fifties, 'Centerpiece'. The simple love story of this song —

'Cause nothing's any good without you,
baby, you're my centerpiece

— is wrapped up in her own jazzy song about what happens to that marriage twenty years later, caught up in the blight of the modern business world.

Battalions of paper-minded males
talking commodities and sales
while at home their paper wives
and their paper kids
paper the walls to keep their gut reactions hid.

Her continued uneasy fascination with city life, so much a feature of her work right through from *Song to a Seagull*, really comes to the fore here. 'Cold Blue Steel and Sweet Fire' re-emerges in a love story involving a pusher:

Women he has taken grow old too soon
he tilts their tired faces
gently to the spoon

It is the idea of that *gentle* introduction to cocaine that somehow seems to make this 'romantic and snowblind' song ring true.

And there are bright lights turned upon suburban life:

He put up a barbed wire fence
to keep out the unknown,

and on every metal thorn
just a little blood of his own.

The point is, you can recognise it all, the moods and attitudes and people she presents in her story songs. She has always been a confessional writer, putting her life into song with painful honesty. Maybe that is why I identify with what she has to say; though the details may be different, there are points in common between every life. She remains a confessional writer, but her horizons have opened up; she has become a chronicler of the world through which she moves. The tight little world of showbiz society and the concert tour may be as far from reality as it is possible to get, but by turning upon them the eye for detail she applies to herself she manages to make its relevance wide-ranging and easy to understand. Who has not met the little pretensions that she pricks so easily?

But even on the scuffle
the cleaner's press was on my jeans,
and any eye for detail
caught a little lace along the seams.

If I were to go through *The Hissing of Summer Lawns* picking out every image I thought good, every line that seemed particularly true, everything that seemed to convey some special relevance or importance to me, I would end up quoting every line of every song. It caught my imagination immediately, and held fast.

Turning from the hissing lawn sprinklers of suburban America, Joni Mitchell next took to the road. In *Rolling Stone* she said this about *Hejira*'s origin:

So we drove across country; then we parted ways. It was my car, so I drove back alone. The *Hejira* album was written mostly while I was travelling in the car . . . *Hejira* was an obscure word, but it said exactly what I wanted. Running away, honorably.

Hejira is all about that, about breaking up and breaking away:

I left him then,
for the refuge of the roads.

In the familiar sense of her confessional songs, it is the failure of her love affairs that she is fleeing:

A defector from the petty wars
that shell shock love away

And it is to love she knows she will fall victim once more:

A defector from the petty wars
until love sucks me back that way.

The same themes, the same tone of voice, emerge again and again throughout the set of songs. They are as uniform as any album I know, yet there is a richness in the language and the music that makes it impossible to grow bored with the record. There is always something new to be discovered — the comparisons drawn in 'Furry Sings the Blues' between the crumbling world of the old blues singer and her own affluence. Her encounter with another approach to the world in 'A Strange Boy':

He asked me to be patient.
Well I failed, 'Grow up!' I cried,
and as the smoke was clearing, he said,
'Give me one good reason why!'

There are glimpses of autobiography in 'Song for Sharon' and 'Hejira':

There is the hope and the hopelessness
I've witnessed thirty years.

And there is the final revelation of her journey:

In a highway service station
over the month of June
was a photograph of the earth
taken coming back from the moon.
And you couldn't see a city
on that marbled bowling ball,
or a forest or a highway,
or me here least of all.

I was in my mid twenties. I had been unemployed for a year. I was watching all the hopes, dreams and joys of youth and university disappear in a welter of depression and social security. I could empathise with those lyrics only too well.

Don Juan's Reckless Daughter came out around the first Christmas after I got a job, and the album seemed to suit my mood, for many of the songs had a lighter tone. Yet I've never quite known what to make of it. It is a two-record set, though barely longer in overall playing time than *Hejira*, and with one track, 'Jericho', repeated from *Miles of Aisles* (though in a considerably better version). What is more, there is none of the unity I had come to expect of Joni Mitchell albums. There is a strange and rather uneasy mixture of styles, and one suspects more than a touch of self indulgence. Yet . . .

Each of the four sides seems to set a different tone. The first is happy-go-lucky rock:

I didn't know I drank such a lot
till I pissed a tequila-anaconda
the full length of the parking lot.

Musically the tracks are simple, guitar and bass to the fore.

On Side 3 things are different. 'Otis and Marlene' is one of the few pieces that might have fitted into *Hejira*, a vicious song about the sort of people who seek eternal youth under the plastic surgeon:

Always the grand parades of cellulite
jiggling to her golden pools
through flock and cupid colonnades
they jiggle into surgery
hopefully beneath the blade
they dream of golden beauty.

On the next two tracks the influence of Don Alias, in particular, is strongly felt, for both the instrumental 'The Tenth World' and 'Dreamland' consist purely of percussion and vocal.

There is yet another change on the fourth side. It opens with a typically caustic look at America, using Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan as a springboard.

Here in Good-Old-God-Save-America,
the home of the brave and the free,
we are all hopelessly oppressed cowards
of some duality,
of restless multiplicity.

This seems representative of her recent song writing, though the next track, 'Off Night Backstreet', is a step back to her old love songs, a 'portrait of a disappointment'.

You give me such pleasure,
you bring me such pain,
who left her long black hair
in our bathtub drain?

And the final song is yet another step back, to her folk-singing days, taking lines and themes from traditional songs:

Come all you fair and tender school girls,
take warning now — when you court young men.

I have missed out one side of this double LP. Side 2 consists of one 16-minute track, 'Paprika Plains'; and if Joni Mitchell has written just one masterpiece, this is it. It's a long, sprawling, disturbing song that for much of its length is backed simply by her piano; and its arhythmic dissonances seem to have more in common with contemporary 'serious' music than anything else. The lyrics, with their springboard in personal memory and their vivid images of the American Indian, have a haunting, dreamlike quality.

When I was three feet tall,
and wide-eyed open to it all,
with their tassled teams they came
to McGee's General Store.
All in their beaded leathers,
I would tie on coloured feathers.

Yet this early glory is quickly destroyed by our 'civilisation':

But when the church got through
they traded their beads for bottles,
smashed — on Railway Avenue,
and they cut off their braids
and lost some link with nature.

In the middle of the song, indeed taking up the majority of the track, is an extended instrumental passage. It hammers through the intellect to the emotions, easily sustaining the mood of the piece. Yet on the album sleeve are printed the lyrics to cover this section of the song. They continue the theme, linking the Indian, the man of nature, with her own childhood.

Where crows gaze — vigilant on wires
where cattle graze the grasses,
far from the digits of business hours
the moon clock wanes and waxes —
but here all time is stripped away.

The song drifts with the logic of dream, from an Indian band, to the atomic bomb, a child's beach ball, to her birth:

I suckle at my mother's breast
I embrace my mother earth

I remember perforated blinds
over the crib of my birth.

It is not really a song to analyse, any more than a dream can be analysed. It is simply to be listened to, and read. And it haunts me, the way a vivid dream haunts not just the next morning, but somehow every day after.

The story goes that around this time Charles Mingus started trying to get in touch with Joni Mitchell. He had written six pieces of music just for her, and she spent a year working with him, putting lyrics to them. The last song for the album, 'God Must Be a Boogie Man', was completed shortly after his death in January 1979, and the album, simply called *Mingus*, was released that summer. Of the six tracks, one is her version of the classic 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat', two are Joni Mitchell compositions, and the remaining three are presumably what remain of the six he wrote for her. I bought the album shortly before I left Manchester and played it to a colleague who was a Mingus fan. He liked it. But to my ear it is a mess. The musicians are brilliant jazz instrumentalists, and Joni Mitchell proves that she has the range and phrasing of a great jazz singer — perhaps it is just that she has developed more quickly than I have been able to follow.

Nevertheless, her lyrics suit the tribute to Lester Young, 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat', perfectly, tying his life story in with more familiar themes such as smoky Harlem jazz clubs so that it seems in direct line of descent from, say, 'The Jungle Line'. And her sense of humour is evident in songs like 'The Dry Cleaner from Des Moines' about a lucky gambler in Las Vegas:

But the cleaner from Des Moines
put a coin
in the door of a john
and got twenty for one.

But it's an album I don't play much.

There was another live album in 1980, *Shadows and Light*, which I consider to be as good as any other live album I have. The clever reworking of the older songs and the quality of the sound make it comparable to, say, Dylan's *At Budokan*. But there was nothing new on the album.

Then silence, until just before Christmas 1982 when *Wild Things Run Fast* appeared. The critics savaged it, but they've done that to everything since *Court and Spark*. We fans bought it nevertheless, and though it's no *Hejira*, there's no 'Paprika Plains', it's still a good album. There have been changes, of course, the most obvious being that she has married, which comes out in more happy and upbeat music. As ever the record is full of love songs, but these are no longer the 'portraits of a disappointment'.

We got a break,
unbelievable,
we got a break
right in the middle of this
Hollywood heartache.
We got this solid love.

All through the record these images recur, building up to the final track, simply called 'Love', one of the most beautiful pieces she has ever written. It's built around the

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 72

FEATURE LETTERS

MORE BOOKS WE REALLY READ

JANE CARNALL ♣ CHRISTOPHER PRIEST ♣ RACE MATHEWS ♣
WALT WILLIS ♣ ROB GERRAND ♣ CHARLES TAYLOR ♣ PAUL ANDERSON
♣ GEORGE TURNER ♣ JOHN LITCHEN ♣ KAREN JOHNSON

JANE CARNALL
IF3, 57 Albert St.,
Edinburgh EH7 5LW Scotland

Thank you very much for *The Metaphysical Review*. I was more pleased than I can say to find my list had sparked such a chain of fire.

One thing that none of the other listers seems to have picked up on: I wanted not only the hundred writers, but all 'biographies, literary criticism, and spinoffs'. No book and no writer exists in isolation.

I was thinking particularly, of course, of Shakespeare. The mountain of spinoffs, fictionalised biographies and speculations, and lit crit, would just double the library; and a third of it would be good reading, a third of it provide me with people to argue with, and a third supply kindling for a lifetime's fires.

But I was also thinking of Arthur Conan Doyle. I could certainly live without his serious novels, and probably without Professor Challenger, and possibly without Sherlock Holmes — but add in all the wonderful spinoff novels, crossing Holmes with everyone from Freud to Oscar Wilde, add in all the intelligent and entertaining essays from Baker Street irregulars, and I definitely couldn't live without all of that.

There is just one writer on the whole list who got in on one book alone (I know she's written more,

but I've never been able to find any of them): Keri Hulme and *The Bone People*. She and her novel went in because I just couldn't imagine being without them. And two or three people slipped in almost against my better judgment because of the sheer volume of their work, always valuable on desert islands: Isaac Asimov, Dorothy Dunnett, P. G. Wodehouse, Dick Francis.

Mary Stewart went in on her Merlin books (though I do enjoy her romances, I *could* live without them) and C. S. Forester on Hornblower (which would no doubt annoy him, in a resigned sort of way); I've enjoyed his other novels very much, but Hornblower is the fascination.

I'm astonished that I entirely forgot Arthur Ransome, and disappointed but not entirely surprised that I also forgot Virginia Woolf, though I tend to prefer her non-fiction. (And the letters . . . oh my. Particularly those to Vita Sackville-West.)

I did the list at work. I share a basement office with just one other person, who was away on holiday for a couple of weeks at the end of June, and I had a lot of processing to do, which largely consisted of waiting for 45 minutes at a time for the computer to do it, and then pressing another key to do it again to another section of the manual. I was beginning to feel totally isolated and was already very bored; so I did

a desert island list, based on the writers I could remember without checking my bookshelves or in the library. That was why I forgot Arthur Ransome, I suppose. Appropriate though he would be for a desert island, he just didn't fit in the basement.

These were all writers read for pleasure, my principal criterion in choosing: not all of the writers on my list were chosen for their fiction. Hendrik van Loon, Gerald Durrell and M. F. K. Fisher weren't, and George Bernard Shaw, Isaac Asimov, Joanna Russ, George Orwell, Samuel R. Delany and Naomi Mitchison were chosen as much for their non-fiction as for their fiction, if not more so. (And which side of the line does poetry like Marilyn Hacker's fall on?)

But what percentage of my total reading does all this work out to? I boasted once in an essay I wrote for school, when I was twelve, that I had once read twenty books in one day. The teacher read that part out, and I was teased by my classmates for four years. Of course my habit of wandering around with a book at break and lunchtime couldn't have helped. It's true, I did; the day after I'd just spent my Christmas and birthday book tokens in one glorious orgy; but I always was a fast and voracious reader, and probably most of the books were fairly short.

Looking at the little black book I

started keeping when I rejoined Acnestis, I discover that in a 'normal' week (one in which I have no more spare time than evenings and weekends) I read about twelve books.

In any case, the 'normal' week really has only applied in the past year and a bit; before that, I was unemployed for two years; before that I was a student for four years, and before that I was unemployed for three years since I left school. And I certainly read a lot more then; being conservative, let's say maybe fifty per cent more.

When I was at school, I used to read a couple of books a day and twice that at weekends. I think. It would be more than that during the holidays, of course, but take that as an average. It was probably more than that at primary school, because if I finished my work early, most of the teachers considered it quite acceptable behaviour for me to read quietly. But call it fifteen books a week for fifteen years: 11,700. While unemployed and/or a student, call it eighteen books a week, for nine years: 8400. Since full-time employment caught up with me, it seems to be about twelve books a week: 700. That comes to just over 20,000 books read in twenty-five years (not counting the first year after I learnt to read). I re-read a lot, though, so halve that number; call it 10,000 books, and that's probably about right. Of those, maybe 4000 were borrowed from public libraries; I'm assuming an average of three books a week for twenty-four years. Let's say ten per cent were books not read for pleasure; that leaves me with 9000.

Assume, too, Peter Nicholls's figure of the number of writers being less than half the number of books. That means I've read maybe 3600 writers in my lifetime. So my list of 100 writers I would take with me to a desert island is perhaps three per cent of those read. That is perhaps a little low, but then my tastes have changed a fair bit over the past quarter-century; fifteen per cent of the writers named might have been on a desert island list if I'd done one twenty years ago.

Now that is a fascinating thought. In twenty years, if I do another list, will it have a fifteen per cent overlap, or greater, or less? Fewer than 10 per cent of the

writers on my desert island list were encountered by me for the first time within the last five years.

If you're still metaphysically reviewing in twenty years' time, what about another set of lists?
(29 January 1996)

New lifetimes

CHRISTOPHER PRIEST
32 Elphinstone Road, Hastings,
East Sussex TN34 2EQ
England
cpriest@cix.compulink.co.uk

Although I generally find your lists of things tedious, Peter Nicholls's entry in this inglorious field was actually rather good. I was amused by the slight air of surprise he evinced when he realised how comparatively few books he had read, in numerical terms. I think this is a familiar surprise to people who feel they read a lot of books. Without counting, you look back over your life and recall how books have always been the silent and constant companions in your travels, and you think of those hundreds of evenings when you did nothing but sit in a chair and read, and the (much rarer) weekends when a book or two filled up the waking hours, and you can't help assuming that you must have read thousands and thousands of titles. Yet, as Peter shows, even a fast, habitual reader of advanced years, like himself, can manage only about 7000 titles! (He must have passed value judgments on many more than that in his encyclopaedias!) I'm a slow reader, so my own score would be significantly slower than this; perhaps half as many.

It reminded me of the time I gave a young fan a lift in my car, and as we went along it soon turned out that his conversation consisted entirely of reporting the titles of the science fiction books he'd read. One title rolled out after another, in an endless litany of dreadful rubbish. In the end, fearing madness, I said, 'For God's sake, how many SF books have you read?' He said, 'Up to four-thirty this afternoon: twelve thousand, four hundred and fifty-two.' Me, trying to control the car as it swerved insensately across the road, 'Don't you ever read anything else?' Him:

'Well, I've read three thousand, seven hundred and fourteen fantasy books.'

At the same general time as this happened (about fifteen years ago) I was going through one of those periods when you think about mortality, time running out, books still unread, and so on. This led to the more specific notion that with life being finite, only a finite number of books remained to be read. Like most frequent readers, I view the prospect of unread books in a romantic and optimistic light: the shelves of unread titles waiting to be picked up in my home, the libraries and shops stocked with discoveries waiting to be made, the soothing flood of new titles coming out every year, the reassuring anticipation of picking through old favourites for re-reading, and so on. The reality is different. What I did that day was the simple calculation of multiplying the number of books I can read in a year (fifty-two, or about one a week on average) by the remaining years of my reasonable life expectancy. The result, which was of course the number of books that were left to me to read, was so depressingly small that it immediately changed my reading habits. Each book is now seen as occupying a valuable place in a shrinking resource! I'm much more critical of books. If I find myself reading something shoddily written I tend to see it as hogging the place of something I would probably enjoy more. I've read a few more classics because I was always a bit lazy about those, and feel I want to catch up before the grim reaper catches up with me. (Specifically, I read *War and Peace*, having been daunted by the prospect of one day finding myself on my deathbed, minutes to go, and realising that I'd frigged away a whole lifetime without reading Tolstoy's masterpiece.) But the main feeling is that reading is a pleasure, not a duty, and so the books that Peter Nicholls listed as his 'Shame' continue to feature. What George Orwell called 'good bad books' (he memorably compares their pleasures to those of eating cheap sweets) have always had a hold on me. I find I am increasingly seeking pleasure from reading, not some abstract notion of quality.

A recent discovery here has been Roald Dahl, whose children's books

are wonderful! (This will not be news to anyone who has read them, but I couldn't help noticing Dahl doesn't appear on any of the lists in issue 24/25. Our kids have just reached the age where they can take in his novels.) I picked up Dahl's *Danny* on Christmas morning, and after the first few pages realised I had come across a novel that was genuinely unputdownable! I spent much of the rest of the day happily rushing through it. When a week or so later we read it to the kids at bedtime, it was always difficult to find a place to break off, because of their demands to know what would happen next. Dahl writes clear, effective prose with believable characters, and has that enviable skill of the instinctive storyteller. I also recommend *The Twits*. More later, perhaps, as we work through them.

Another discovery from 1995 was John Keegan, whose books about the history of war are genuinely inspirational. I noticed that no one listed Muriel Spark. Odd, that. I was also surprised to see that an overwhelming majority of the writers listed were novelists (and a majority of them were SF writers, which is less surprising within that context). Could it be that we remember non-fiction for the subject, not the author? And that consequently it's relatively easier for a novelist to build up a recognisable body of work, and hence a following, than it is for a biographer, historian, etc?

In general, *TMR* has an aura of death and decay, a sense of the reaper lurking somewhere close beyond its pages. Isn't it slightly depressing to realise that we *TMR* readers are all now members of an old or oldish fandom? What's the average age of your readership, I wonder? Death, of course, has its fascination. I turn to the newspaper obituaries immediately after the cartoons (or after the cartoons and the book reviews, on that day of the week), while for many years when I was younger the obituaries simply seemed irrelevant. An older generation, of whom I knew little, was dying off and (in all likelihood) a good thing too. Elderly judges, politicians and business leaders were no loss to me. These days, it can bring you up short when you find that people of your own age are dying of natural causes, and not just

once in a while, but really quite regularly. 1995 was the first year I felt threatened by it all: several SF writers died, some of them in my own general age group. When your friends start to drop off the twig, the newspaper obituary page becomes a place you first glance over nervously with half-narrowed eyes, before settling down with a feeling of temporary relief. Then it's safe to relish the timely demise of a judge who jailed unmarried mothers, a politician who backed the poll tax or a business leader who has been ripping you off for a decade. Incidentally, I found your story about your father's death moving, and I have also been interested by the way in which other people have responded in your pages with their own experiences and tributes. But I know such writing is unlikely to work at the other end of life's rich tapestry! The most important and inspiring thing that's happened to me in this second part of my lifetime is the birth of my twin children. Both Leigh and I could write a lot of material about the twins, but if we did we would merely seem to your readers to be doting parents whose experiences are neither unique nor pertinent. One senses that Priest tales of bottle-feeds and colic would inspire worldwide yawns. Perhaps the reason is that a death comes as a kind of relief, after which one may express emotions others can understand and share; a new life is about hope and promise of the future, but it is necessarily banal because the subject is unformed, and in any case the emotions are deeply private and incommunicable, leaving room only for the expression of clichés. But both deaths and births are thrilling and enlightening to those who witness them, and leave permanent emotional marks.

(11 January 1996)

My favourite things

RACE MATHEWS

123 Alexandra Ave, South Yarra
VIC 3141

MY FAVOURITE FILMS,
AS OF 8 P.M., 17 MARCH 1996

- 1 *Napoléon* (directed by Abel Gance)

- 2 *Casablanca* (Curtiz)
- 3 *The Godfather* trilogy (Coppola)
- 4 *Chimes at Midnight* (Welles)
- 5 *Tales of Hoffman* (Powell and Pressburger)
- 6 *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola)
- 7 *Seven Samurai* (Kurasawa)
- 8 *Citizen Kane* (Welles)
- 9 *Ivan the Terrible (Parts I and II)* (Eisenstein)
- 10 *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Carne)
- 11 *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Powell and Pressburger)
- 12 *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone)
- 13 *Patton* (Schaffner)
- 14 *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean)
- 15 *Andrei Roublev* (Tarkovsky)
- 16 *Nashville* (Altman)
- 17 *Shane* (Stevens)
- 18 *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah)
- 19 *All That Jazz* (Fosse)
- 20 *The Seventh Seal* (Bergman)
- 21 *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick)
- 22 *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (Lean)
- 23 *Paths of Glory* (Kubrick)
- 24 *MASH* (Altman)
- 25 *Cabaret* (Fosse)
- 26 *The Red Shoes* (Powell and Pressburger)
- 27 *I Know Where I'm Going* (Powell and Pressburger)
- 28 *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Spielberg)
- 29 *High Noon* (Zinneman)
- 30 *Scrooge* (Desmond-Hurst)
- 31 *Rebecca* (Hitchcock)
- 32 *Henry V* (Olivier)
- 33 *On the Waterfront* (Kazan)
- 34 *In Which We Serve* (Coward)
- 35 *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein)
- 36 *Rear Window* (Hitchcock)
- 37 *ET* (Spielberg)
- 38 *The Innocents* (Clayton)
- 39 *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (Hamer)
- 40 *From Here to Eternity* (Zinneman)
- 41 *North by Northwest* (Hitchcock)
- 42 *The Man Who Would Be King* (Huston)
- 43 *The Cotton Club* (Coppola)
- 44 *Gunga Din* (Stevens)
- 45 *Don't Look Now* (Roeg)
- 46 *8½* (Fellini)
- 47 *Great Expectations* (Lean)
- 48 *Richard III* (Olivier)
- 49 *Chariots of Fire* (Hudson)
- 50 *Mephisto* (Szabo)
- 51 *Oliver Twist* (Lean)
- 52 *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir)
- 53 *The Third Man* (Reed)
- 54 *The Birds* (Hitchcock)

- 55 *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges)
- 56 *This Happy Breed* (Lean)
- 57 *Passport to Pimlico* (Cornelius)
- 58 *The First of the Few* (Howard)
- 59 *The Way Ahead* (Read)
- 60 *Spartacus* (Kubrick)
- 61 *Terminator 2* (Cameron)
- 62 *Star Wars* trilogy (Lucas)
- 63 *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg)
- 64 *Poltergeist* (Spielberg)
- 65 *Empire of the Sun* (Spielberg)
- 66 *Pimpernel Smith* (Howard)
- 67 *The Hunt for Red October* (McTiernan)
- 68 *Dr Strangelove* (Kubrick)
- 69 *Stagecoach* (Ford)
- 70 *Alien* (Scott)
- 71 *Hanussen* (Szabo)
- 72 *Singing in the Rain* (Kelly)
- 73 *Witness* (Weir)
- 74 *A Chorus Line* (Attenborough)
- 75 *Marat Sade* (Brook)
- 76 *O Lucky Man!* (Anderson)
- 77 *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (Ford)
- 78 *A Man for All Seasons* (Zinneman)
- 79 *Twelve Angry Men* (Lumet)
- 80 *The Russia House* (Schepisi)
- 81 *Brewster McLeod* (Altman)
- 82 *Moulin Rouge* (Huston)
- 83 *Chinatown* (Polanski)
- 84 *On the Beach* (Kramer)
- 85 *French Can Can* (Renoir)
- 86 *War and Peace* (Bondarchuk)
- 87 *Oh! What a Lovely War* (Attenborough)
- 88 *Amadeus* (Forman)
- 89 *Heaven's Gate* (Cimino)
- 90 *Fame* (Parker)
- 91 *Tom Jones* (Richardson)
- 92 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman)
- 93 *Hamlet* (Olivier)
- 94 *Gone with the Wind* (Fleming)
- 95 *Funny Face* (Donen)
- 96 *Some Like it Hot* (Wilder)
- 97 *True Grit* (Heffron)
- 98 *A Canterbury Tale* (Powell and Pressburger)
- 99 *Three Days of the Condor* (Pollack)
- 100 *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino)

MY FAVOURITE 100 WRITERS

By way of prologue — and in no particular order — 50 favourite writers from before and during my schooldays:

- 1 H. C. F. Morant, whose *Whirlaway* was among the books that influenced me most as a child.
- 2 Arthur Ransome for his

- 'Swallows and Amazons' books.
- 3 Richmal Crompton for her 'William' books.
- 4 Charles Hamilton for the Greyfriars, St Jim's and Rookwood school stories, published in both hardcovers and on a weekly basis in the *Magnet*, the *Gem* and the *Popular*.
- 5 Edward Searles Brooks for his school and adventure stories in the weekly *Nelson Lee Library*.
- 6 Norman Lindsay for his *The Magic Pudding*.
- 7 Enid Blyton, mostly for her *The Faraway Tree*, but also for her books about the 'Five Findouters and Dog'.
- 8 Erich Kastner, for *Emil and the Detectives*, which — along with his other books — was burnt by the Nazis.
- 9 S. Walkey, for his historical adventure stories in the weekly *Chums*.
- 10 Hendrik Van Loon for *Van Loon's Lives*.
- 11 Dorothy Wall for *The Adventures of Blinky Bill*.
- 12 P. L. Travers for her 'Mary Poppins' books.
- 13 Kathleen Tozer for her 'Mumfie' books.
- 14 C. S. Forester for his *Pooh-Pooh and the Dragons* and also his 'Horatio Hornblower' books.
- 15 Mary Gibbs for her 'Snugglplot and Cuddlepie' books.
- 16 J. R. R. Tolkien for *The Hobbit*.
- 17 Charles Dickens, mostly for *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*.
- 18 Tove Jansson for the 'Finn Family Moonintroll' books.
- 19 E. Nesbit for just about everything she ever wrote.
- 20 Norman Hunter for his 'Professor Branestawn' books.
- 21 John Masefield for *The Midnight Folk* and *The Box of Delights*.
- 22 Lewis Carroll for his *Alice in Wonderland*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and *The Hunting of the Snark*.
- 23 Lord Macaulay for his *Lays of Ancient Rome*.
- 24 J. W. Dunne for his *An Experiment with Time*.
- 25 T. H. White for his *The Sword in the Stone*.
- 26 A. E. Coppard for his *Pink Furniture*.

- 27 Walter de la Mare for his *The Three Mulla-Mulgas*.
- 28 Arkadi Gaidar for his *Timur and His Team*.
- 29 J. B. S. Haldane for his *My Friend Mr Leakey*.
- 30 W. E. Johns for his 'Biggles', 'Gimlet' and 'Worralls' books.
- 31 C. S. Lewis, mostly for his 'Narnia' books, but also for his SF.
- 32 Arthur Conan Doyle, most of all for *The White Company* but also for *The Lost World*.
- 33 Eric Linklater for *The Wind on the Moon* and *The Pirates of the Deep Green Sea*.
- 34 Eve Garnett for *The Family from One End Street*.
- 35 Kenneth Grahame for *The Wind in the Willows*.
- 36 Hugh Lofting for the 'Dr Doolittle' books.
- 37 John Bunyan for *Pilgrim's Progress*.
- 38 Mark Twain for *Tom Sawyer*.
- 39 Joyce Lankester Brinsley for her two 'Bunchy' books.
- 40 C. Day Lewis for *The Otterbury Incident*.
- 41 Alison Uttley for *A Traveller in Time*.
- 42 Edgar Rice Burroughs for his 'Tarzan' and 'Mars' novels.
- 43 Leslie Charteris for his 'Saint' books.
- 44 John Creasey for his detective stories and thrillers.
- 45 Manning Coles for his 'Tammy Hambledon' books, in particular *Green Hazard* and *Drink to Yesterday*.
- 46 P. G. Wodehouse for his 'Jeeves' stories.
- 47 H. Rider Haggard for *She* and all his 'Alan Quartermain' books, particularly *The Ivory Child*, *Alan Quartermain*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *Alan's Wife*.
- 48 Dorothy Sayers for her 'Lord Peter Wimsey' novels and her translation of Dante.
- 49 Georgette Heyer for her *These Old Shades* and *Devil's Cub*.
- 50 Rudyard Kipling for his *Barrackroom Ballads*, *Puck o' Pooks Hill*, *Rewards and Fairies* and *Rikki Tikki Tavi*.

100 favourite novelists/thriller-writers, short story writers and playwrights since leaving school:

- Margery Allingham
- Kingsley Amis

- Jane Austen
- James Baldwin
- J. G. Ballard
- John Buchan
- Anthony Burgess
- A. S. Byatt
- Truman Capote
- Raymond Chandler
- Tom Clancy
- Norman Corwin
- Richard Condon
- Simone de Beauvoir
- Len Deighton
- R. H. Delderfield
- Charles Dickens
- John Dos Passos
- Margaret Drabble
- Theodore Dreiser
- Alan Drury
- William Faulkner
- Frederick Forsyth
- Dick Francis
- Nicholas Freeling
- Marilyn French
- John Galsworthy
- Martha Gelhorn
- William Golding
- Graham Greene
- Robert Graves
- Helene Hanff
- Frank Hardy
- Thomas Hardy
- Thomas Harris
- Joseph Heller
- Aldous Huxley
- M. R. James
- James Jones
- James Joyce
- Tom Keneally
- Stephen King
- Rudyard Kipling
- Christopher Koch
- Arthur Koestler
- Jerzy Kosinsky
- Emma Lathen
- D. H. Lawrence
- John Le Carré
- Harper Lee
- Doris Lessing
- Sinclair Lewis
- David Lodge
- Robert Ludlum
- Arthur Machen
- Norman Mailer
- Charles McCarry
- Mary McCarthy
- Alastair MacLean
- Herman Melville
- Arthur Miller
- Iris Murdoch
- Clifford Odets
- Eugene O'Neill
- George Orwell
- Edgar Allen Poe
- Anthony Powell
- Anthony Price

- A. Annie Proulx
- Marcel Proust
- Erich Maria Remarque
- Mary Renault
- Anne Rice
- Philip Roth
- F. Scott Fitzgerald
- J. D. Salinger
- Irwin Shaw
- William Shakespeare
- Upton Sinclair
- Howard Spring
- Robert Louis Stevenson
- Mary Stewart
- Bram Stoker
- Tom Stoppard
- Patrick Susskind
- Josephine Tey
- J. R. R. Tolkien
- Leo Tolstoy
- Anthony Trollope
- C. P. Snow
- John Steinbeck
- John Updike
- Kurt Vonnegut
- Evelyn Waugh
- H. G. Wells
- Morris West
- Nathaniel West
- Virginia Woolf
- Émile Zola

20 favourite currently or recently active SF authors:

- 1 Iain M. Banks
- 2 Arthur C. Clarke
- 3 Greg Benford
- 4 Greg Bear
- 5 Gene Wolfe
- 6 Ursula Le Guin
- 7 Larry Niven
- 8 Bruce Sterling
- 9 Brian Aldiss
- 10 William Gibson
- 11 Robert Charles Williams
- 12 Orson Scott Card
- 13 David Brin
- 14 Dan Simmons
- 15 Keith Roberts
- 16 Frederik Pohl
- 17 Brian Stableford
- 18 Harry Turtledove
- 19 Robert Holdstock
- 20 Tim Powers

NB: I have not as yet read any Kim Stanley Robinson.

(17 March 1996)

Magnet, Gem and Nelson Lee

WALT WILLIS

**9 Alexandra Rd, Donaghadee
Northern Ireland BT21 06D**

TMR Nos. 22/23 and 24/25 have arrived here, escorted by a fortune in airmail stamps, and have taken up three days of my life. I don't begrudge a moment of that time because I can't think of anything more worth doing than reading an outstandingly literate and well-produced fanzine like yours, an opinion which is only marginally influenced by the fact that you named me as one of your favourite authors out of all world literature. I can't think of anything I can say about that than 'aw shucks'.

I was fascinated by Race Mathews' reviews of school stories of the twenties and thirties because they cover a period of my youth dominated by the same phenomenon. I remember quite a long period of youth when I used to get to sleep by thinking of characters in the *Magnet* or the *Gem* whose names began with each letter of the alphabet. I can't remember just how far I got, just that Mr Quelch, the form master at Greyfriars, played a prominent role, so I must have got as far as Q.

At this point in the letter there has occurred a hiatus of some six weeks, during which I was whisked to hospital by ambulance to have my back seen to, this at the request of my GP. The hospital didn't agree with my GP that an operation was necessary, with the result that after five weeks of bed rest I find myself back at home, dependent on crutches to get about. Today for the first time I have been able to get to the computer on my own two feet, and able to resume our conversation.

I would be interested to know if Race ever reached a conclusion about the authorship of the school stories in the *Nelson Lee Library*. I always thought they were of a different and higher standard than those in the *Magnet* and *Gem*, but something else Race says, which I cannot find again, seems to cast doubt on that attribution.

Sally Yeoland's memoirs are evocative, not least for their reflections on the controversy about

the notorious decision by the Australian Governor-General in 1975. I must say it doesn't seem to me to be all that outrageous and I can't see how it would have been less likely to have been taken by a popularly elected President.

In the letter section Casey June Wolfe's contribution was fascinating, but all I have to add is that her mother's recollection of the words of 'The Minstrel Boy' is almost correct, except that it was a wild harp that he had slung behind him, not a great one. I'm not sure of the exact dimensions of a wild harp, but at least it relieves us of the image of the Minstrel Boy struggling helplessly to catch up on his comrades, weighed down by a concert harp. It was an Irish tune, by the way, by Thomas Moore, 1779–1852.

I rang up James White to tell him he had been listed among Elaine Cochrane's 80 favourite authors, along with Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, and he said 'My goodness'. I don't know if he was referring to the quality of his writing or simply expressing astonishment.

Thank you for your mention of *Warhoon* 28. I understand that Joe Siclari has now got his act together and there should be no more difficult in getting copies of *The Work*. It was kind of you to make your suggestion that new readers send me copies of their letters of comment on it.

(17 January 1996)

At the right time of life

ROB GERRAND
863 Hampton St
Brighton VIC 3184

The following are selected on Peter Nicholls's ('The Books We Really Read, *TMR* 24/25) criterion of the 'excitement test' (those writers I most looked forward to reading a next book by), rather than on their particular worthiness as literature; that is to say, it is not my list of the best 100 writers. Neither is the list necessarily of my current favourites (though most are), but rather those at the time of my life when I read them. As it is a list of fiction writers, I have omitted playwrights and poets, essayists and

(auto)biographers.

I've indicated in brackets a few authors who are on the list because of one particularly impressive work of fiction that I've read; which is not necessarily to say that they have not written other interesting work — for example, I love Elias Canetti's other writing (*Crowds and Power* and his three volumes of autobiography, but they are not fiction) — but, on the other hand, nothing else that I have read of Joseph Heller's is in the league of *Catch-22*.

- Brian Aldiss
- Kingsley Amis
- Isaac Asimov
- J. G. Ballard
- Alfred Bester
- James Blish
- Enid Blyton (You have to give her credit for *The Faraway Tree*, not to mention *The Secret Seven* and *The Famous Five* series.)
- Ray Bradbury
- John Brunner
- Charles Bukowski
- Anthony Burgess
- Elias Canetti (*Auto da Fé*)
- Karel Capek
- Lewis Carroll
- Miguel de Cervantes (*Don Quixote*)
- Agatha Christie
- Arthur C. Clarke
- Collette
- Avram Davidson
- Len Deighton
- Philip K. Dick
- Charles Dickens
- J. P. Donleavy
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky
- Lawrence Durrell
- George Eliot
- Philip José Farmer
- George MacDonald Fraser
- William Golding
- Graham Greene
- Jaroslav Hašek (*The Good Soldier Schweik*)
- Robert A. Heinlein
- Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*)
- Hayden Howard (*The Eskimo Invasion*)
- Aldous Huxley
- W. E. Johns (the Biggles series — I read virtually every one of them.)
- James Joyce
- Franz Kafka
- C. M. Kornbluth
- Jerzy Kosinski
- R. A. Lafferty
- Doris Lessing
- Stephen Leacock
- Violette le Duc (*La Bâtarde*)

- Ursula Le Guin
- Fritz Leiber
- Stanislaw Lem
- Katherine MacLean
- John D. McDonald
- Frederick Manning (*Her Privates We*)
- John Masters
- Peter Matthiessen
- Somerset Maugham
- Guy de Maupassant
- Colleen McCullough
- Grace Metalious (Who, as an adolescent, having read *Peyton Place*, could ever forget it?)
- Herman Melville
- Henry Miller
- C. L. Moore
- Alberto Moravia
- George Orwell
- Ruth Park
- Thomas Love Peacock
- S. J. Perelman
- Edgar Allan Poe
- Frederik Pohl (early work)
- James Purdy
- Arthur Ransome
- Erich Maria Remarque
- Henry Handel Richardson
- Eric Frank Russell
- Françoise Sagan
- Saki (H. H. Munro)
- Robert Sheckley
- Tom Sharpe
- Georges Simenon
- John Sladek
- Cordwainer Smith
- C. P. Snow
- Ivan Southall
- Olaf Stapledon
- Christina Stead
- John Steinbeck
- Jack Trevor Story
- Theodore Sturgeon
- J. R. R. Tolkien
- Mark Twain
- Jack Vance
- A. E. Van Vogt
- Gore Vidal
- Voltaire
- Kurt Vonnegut
- H. G. Wells
- Mary Wesley
- Nathaniel West
- Patrick White
- Angus Wilson
- P. G. Wodehouse
- Bernard Wolfe
- John Wyndham
- Émile Zola

(14 December 1995)

Top 100

CHARLES TAYLOR

44 Ross St Huntingdale VIC 3166

The order in this list is fairly arbitrary: categories and authors as they came to mind. It was a bit disappointing to discover how conventional my favourites were, by and large, and embarrassing how very few were women.

Science fiction

- 1 Philip Dick
- 2 Thomas Disch
- 3 Bob Shaw
- 4 Eric Frank Russell
- 5 L. Sprague de Camp
- 6 Fredric Brown
- 7 Clifford Simak
- 8 Arthur Clarke
- 9 Herbert George Wells
- 10 Connie Willis
- 11 Michael Moorcock
- 12 Henry Kuttner
- 13 Kurt Vonnegut
- 14 John Wyndham
- 15 Jules Verne

Fantasy

- 16 Terry Pratchett
- 17 Edgar Rice Burroughs
- 18 Stephen King
- 19 Jonathan Carroll
- 20 Robert Howard
- 21 Keith Taylor
- 22 Jorge Luis Borges

Crime

- 23 Dick Francis
- 24 Barbara Vine
- 25 Arthur Conan Doyle
- 26 Patricia Highsmith
- 27 Wilkie Collins
- 28 Dashiell Hammett
- 29 Raymond Chandler

Respectable

- 30 Jane Austen
- 31 Henry James
- 32 Edward Morgan Forster
- 33 Charles Dickens
- 34 Joseph Conrad
- 35 Daniel Defoe
- 36 Fanny Burney

Respectable and translated into English

- 37 Fyodor Dostoevsky
- 38 Leo Tolstoy
- 39 Guy de Maupassant
- 40 Marcel Proust
- 41 Honoré de Balzac
- 42 Natsume Soseki

- 43 Anton Chekhov
- 44 Ivan Turgenev

Historical novelists

- 45 Walter Scott
- 46 James Michener
- 47 Alexandre Dumas

Historians

- 48 Paul Oskar Kristeller
Edward Paul Thompson

Humorists

- 49 Mark Twain
- 50 Groucho Marx
- 51 Stephen Leacock
- 52 Norman Lindsay
- 53 Pelham Grenville Wodehouse
- 54 Thomas Love Peacock

Science writers

- 55 Isaac Asimov
- 56 Paul Davies
- 57 Stephen Jay Gould
- 58 Thomas Kuhn
- 59 Geoffrey Lloyd
- 60 Henry Hodges
- 61 Richard Feynman
- 62 John Watson

Thrillers

- 63 Leslie Charteris
- 64 John Creasey
- 65 Alistair McLean
- 66 Hammond Innes
- 67 John Buchan
- 68 Robert Ludlum

Educationists

- 69 John Dewey
- 70 Howard Gardner

Critics

- 71 René Wellek
- 72 Bruce Gillespie
- 73 George Turner
- 74 Terry Eagleton
- 75 David Langford
- 76 John Cawelti
- 77 Noel Carroll
- 78 Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan
- 79 Edmund Wilson
- 80 George Steiner

Contemporary and probably respectable

- 81 Amos Oz
- 82 Vikram Seth
- 83 Lisa Alther
- 84 Anne Tyler

Philosophers

- 85 Georg Hegel
- 86 Aristotle
- 87 Martin Heidegger
- 88 Charles Taylor (of Canada)

- 89 Hubert Dreyfus
- 90 Don Ihde
- 91 Herbert Spiegelberg
- 92 Bertrand Russell

Social sciences

- 93 Clifford Geertz
- 94 Tzvetan Todorov
- 95 Raymond Aron
- 96 Michael Argyle

Linguists

- 97 Charles Hockett
- 98 Deborah Tannen
- 99 David Crystal
- 100 Steven Pinker

(9 February 1996)

Short-story writers, and others

PAUL ANDERSON

17 Baker St, Grange SA 5022

I seem to have listed quite a few of the following for their production of short stories:

- 1 Aldiss
- 2 Anderson, P.
- 3 Anthony
- 4 Asimov
- 5 Ballard
- 6 Bester
- 7 Bixby
- 8 Blish
- 9 Bloch
- 10 Blyton
- 11 Brackett
- 12 Bradbury
- 13 Brown
- 14 Brunner
- 15 Buchan
- 16 Burroughs, E. R.
- 17 Calvino
- 18 Carroll, L.
- 19 Chandler, A. B.
- 20 Chandler, R.
- 21 Chesterton
- 22 Christie
- 23 Clarke
- 24 Clement
- 25 Collier, J.
- 26 Cooper, S.
- 27 Cresswell
- 28 Dahl
- 29 de Camp
- 30 Del Rey
- 31 Dick
- 32 Dickens
- 33 Dickson
- 34 Doyle, A. C.
- 35 Dumas
- 36 Eco
- 37 Farmer

38 Haggard
 39 Hamilton
 40 Heinlein
 41 Herbert, F.
 42 Hesse
 43 James, M. R.
 44 Jansson
 45 Jennings, P.
 46 Keillor
 47 Keyes, D.
 48 Kuttner
 49 Lee
 50 Le Guin
 51 Leiber
 52 Leinster
 53 Lem
 54 Lessing
 55 Lewis, C. S.
 56 Lofting
 57 Lovecraft
 58 Lunn
 59 Marquez
 60 Matheson
 61 May
 62 McCaffrey
 63 Merrill
 64 Miller, W.
 65 Moore, C. L.
 66 Nesbit
 67 Niven
 68 Pangborn
 69 Peake
 70 Perelman
 71 Piper
 72 Poe
 73 Pohl
 74 Pratt
 75 Ransome
 76 Reamy
 77 Robinson, K. S.
 78 Russell, E. F.
 79 Saki
 80 Sheckley
 81 Silverberg
 82 Simak
 83 Simenon
 84 Smith, C.
 85 Smith, E. E.
 86 Stevenson, R. L.
 87 Sturgeon
 88 Tenn
 89 Tiptree
 90 Tolkien
 91 Travers
 92 Vance
 93 Van Vogt
 94 Varley
 95 Verne
 96 Wells
 97 White, J.
 98 Willis
 99 Woolrich
 100 Zelazny

On looking at the list I see that there are quite a few who would be very

difficult to find in book shops these days. Also most of the SF writers are there for their early work. I find very few new books in the field I enjoyed reading as much as I did 10 to 15 years back.

The statistics:

- We agree on 17. I found a spot for Edgar Pangborn after I had made up the list.
- Shorter fiction: 23.
- Children's: 8.
- Ben Hecht should get a place, but I restricted my writers to those in the print medium.
- Male writers: 83, although such a sexist category is not all that PC.

I am not all that surprised that male readers should find it harder to list female writers. The response from the female list-makers is equally predictable. Given that you readers come mainly from SF fandom, the imbalance of the sexes in the field alone forces a result that favours male writers. I assume that there are more female writers of science fiction these days, but when I first started devouring everything that I came across, few female authors got into print.

(15 February 1996)

George Turner's last letter of comment

* If this letter had appeared when George sent it, it would have been his last *second*-last letter of comment to a fanzine. A letter in a recent *Eidolon* seems to be his last. But *TMR* is late, and George is no longer here to add further thoughts, so here's his Last Letter of Comment. *

GEORGE TURNER Ballarat VIC 3350.

Some time ago you suggested I should join your '100 Novels' quest. I thought about it and hundreds of novels came to mind, but very few of them had any lasting influence on or other importance to me. Then I started thinking about the few and soon realised that the trouble was that I had grown old and my taste had grown old with me.

For instance, when I was ten I would have trumpeted Jules Verne and Rider Haggard as the greatest

writers ever, but at fifteen adoration was reserved for E. E. Smith and Edgar Rice Burroughs. A couple of years later my list would have included *Scaramouche*, *Beau Geste* and the works of Dornford Yates, while at twenty-two I saw *All Quiet On the Western Front* as immortal literature.

I had 'studied' (uneasy word) Dickens at school, of course, but at thirty-five I rediscovered him as an English genius and swallowed his works whole. (I was toiling over my first novel and nearly gave up in despair.) Twenty years passed before I trusted myself to detect flaws in the feet-of-clay idol. By then I was writing criticism for *The Age* and knew that no shortcoming could evade my steely perusal and pursuing pen. I got over that, too, eventually — probably after having my AA novel reviewed under the headline of 'A Resounding Plonkle'.

Now, at eighty, I look back on a lifetime's reading and realise that far fewer than 100 novels have made any lasting impression on me. Fine writing evaporates in memory, great descriptive passages stand out like rocks in the desert of surrounding unimportant pages, profound characterisation leaves only a passing appreciation unless it is backed by a profound subject considered by a piercing intellect. *The Forsyte Saga* has Soames Forsyte, but what else does it have?

That's enough introduction; I will try to recall what has mattered to me among the thousands of novels of a lifetime's self-indulgence:

The roll call must begin with *Alice In Wonderland*, read to me by my father while I thrilled with excitement on his knee. I was three years old and that book has never faded in memory. He read and re-read it on my demand until I knew most of it by heart, and knew, even before I learned to read for myself, the precise point at which each page should be turned. Given a child's inability to tell fantasy from reality, I must suppose that it had much to do with my abiding interest in fantasy, fairy tales and science fiction.

The next significant memory to surface is of the SF novels of H. G. Wells, read at about age 10, when I surely did not understand their social significance but was enthralled by their story telling,

sufficiently so to re-read them years later. Given the technology of their period (most were written before 1910), Wells's vision was more sophisticated than that of most of today's writers of SF and he created memorable characters — on the small scale of his intentions — which is more than can be said of the present crop. (Offhand, the only contender in my memory is Stanley Weinbaum's *Martian*, Trweel.) When I started writing SF, about 1976, it was Wells I chose as my classical master, not the moderns.

My next formative contender is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Published in 1932, it made all the Gernsback era of SF look paralytic and most of the Campbell regnum (I read it about 1950) second rate. Together with *After Many A Summer* (also by Huxley) with its scarifying final chapter, it forced me realise that SF could serve a social and literary purpose rather than merely play with blasters, time travel and galactic empires.

By then I was plugging desultorily at my first novel (the inevitable ex-soldier's war story) and had entered, God knows why, on an extended period of classical reading. Dickens and Dumas, Fielding and de Maupassant, Trollope and Austen, Balzac and Chekhov, George Eliot and Henry James went down in great gulps (along with forgettable and so forgotten modern novels by the hundred). It was, I suppose, a formative period of some sort.

From those ten years or so of total immersion three novels stand out — *War and Peace*, *Don Quixote* and Dante's *A Divine Comedy*. Of the first two I can write nothing useful that has not been said by commentators down the years. They are simply the two greatest novels ever written. They reward revisiting every few years, always revealing fresh aspects of total grandeur. The third is, I know, a poem. However, it reads like a novel and that is how I read it. For sheer imaginative power it leaves the whole corpus of SF in the shade; only *Alice In Wonderland* can approach it on such ground.

I am tempted to add a fourth novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, but against such competition it fails by a whisker. Still, I remember it and go back to it every so often.

The only modern novel that

comes to mind from that period (1950–60) is the gorgeous *Lord of the Rings*. The modern fashion in fantasy, which Tolkien did much to launch, is feeble stuff by comparison. Again the superiority is to be found not so much in imaginative genius as in the creation of memorable characters. Frodo and Sam and slimy Smeagol, Sauron and Saruman and the Riders . . .

At some time in the sixties I attacked (it's a suitable word) Joyce's *Ulysses*. I can't claim to have wholly enjoyed the experience because there was an element of hard work in it, but I learned a lot (in the technical sense) and after thirty years the book stays obstinately with me. It is not one but a whole series of experiments with language wherein each chapter is approached in a different, individual mode of syntactical structure. In the first chapter it begins ordinarily enough, with little warning of the hedges and thickets to come. Then, little by little, as if the reader is being led by the hand, the style and presentation become more demanding of utter concentration right through to the exhausting effort of the famous final forty or so pages of stream-of-consciousness prose.

It is a monument among novels, not easily read but worth the effort. (Later I attempted the far more difficult *Finnegans Wake* but after a few pages decided that such devotion to duty was not for me.)

With these pinnacles of reading achieved, the run thereafter is inevitably down hill. This is not to say that nothing memorable follows. On my shelves I have preserved Burgess, Calvino, Bulgakov (*The Master and Margarita* — beautiful!), Graves, Faulkner, Carey, Gardner, Golding, Vargas Llosa, Garcia Marquez and Robertson Davies; all spring to mind without the bother of checking. And not to forget the 'Albany' novels of William Kennedy. Or Joseph Conrad. Or Mervyn Peake. Or Leonardo Sciascia. Or *The Satanic Verses*. Or *The Name of the Rose*.

On the Australian shelf Patrick White takes pride of place, especially Voss and *The Tree of Man*, with Rodney Hall's 'Yandilla' trilogy not far behind him. Then there are Gerald Murnane's *Landscape With Landscape* and lots of Keneally, Christina Stead, Peter

Carey, Randolph Stow, David Malouf — and David Foster's *Moonlite* as an especial comic joy.

Of modern SF there is little to be found there. Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* is probably the best of them, closely followed by the works of the Strugatsky brothers, but of the products of the last ten years I have kept very little and that mainly the quirky works of Iain M. Banks. Australia is represented by the stories of Rosaleen Love and Lucy Sussex; Sean McMullen's 'Edge' novels are also there for a future closer reading.

Altogether it doesn't make a great harvest for nearly eighty years of gorging on fiction but I don't at all regret the time spent on transient novels that have given pleasure in their moment and immediately passed out of mind.

I don't read much SF now; there seems to be an awful sameness about the adventurers and an equally awful straining for novelty among the more literate writers.

My own final novel is in the hands of the publisher — and that seems a good place to shut up.

(26 June 1996)

Culling a lifetime's collection

JOHN LITCHEN
3 Firestone Court, Robina
QLD 4226

It has been steadily raining, drizzling, much like the weather often is in Melbourne, for the last two days, though the temperature has remained about 24°C. There is not much to do in weather like this except stare out the window and wonder at how everything looks and how fast it all grows. I have been laying sandstone paving and landscaping the garden around a swimming pool we have constructed (installed? built?) in December and January. This is a very time-consuming job and has taken the best part of three months. I also covered the patio so we could have somewhere to sit outside when it rains, and it rains a lot up here during the summer wet season. We should have seven or eight months of dry weather with warm sunny days and cool nights while you denizens of Melbourne have your

usual freezing winds, icy rain and cold miserable days. Of course, some people like that kind of weather. I don't, which is one of the reasons we moved north.

One of the things I had to do before leaving Melbourne was to decide how many books to keep and pack, and how many to get rid of. I have never been one to worry too much about culling the library, and periodically I go through the shelves pulling out all the books I know I will never read again, or books that I have outgrown. Years ago I got rid of all the *New Worlds* magazines, the *Astoundings* and the *Amazing Stories*, and many paperbacks from Corgi and Pan. I also got rid of a complete collection of Volstead Gridban and Vargo Statten pulp novels, which I read and loved in my early teen years but which were beyond readability once I had passed the age of seventeen. Merv Binns sold them for me, and no doubt they are still out there somewhere on someone's shelves.

I had Justin Ackroyd sell books for me at conventions in years past, and more recently Merv Binns has sold substantial numbers of my hardcovers. The paperbacks went a long time ago. Finally, when the packing was done I moved up here with seventeen large boxes of hardcover fiction and ten boxes of non-fiction books, most of which are still stacked in the garage because I have no shelves to put them in. There are also three boxes of new books that I have yet to read. On reflection, I should have gotten rid of more books, but nostalgia prevented me from doing that. There are too many books I loved

when I was younger for me to give them up now even though I know I'll probably never read them again.

I won't attempt to give you a list of my favourite authors, since the list changes from year to year as new writers are discovered and older ones remembered less, if not forgotten. It is a great shame that writers who sustained me during various stages of my life are dying — people like Asimov, Shaw, Zelazny, Walter M. Miller Jr, just to mention a few recent ones. Suddenly it makes me feel old. It reminds me that in the not-too-distant future my turn will also come, and I will not have read all the books that I have bought, and continue to buy with the intention of reading them soon. I will also probably never do all the things I would like to do or travel to all the places I would like to see. (Age, or course, has not as much to do with that as does lack of money.)

Talking of books, there is something that Monica asked me to ask you. She read your list with mini-reviews, and *Chamber Music* by Doris Grumbach intrigued her. We have been through numerous secondhand book shops in search of it, but to no avail. She did discover it, however, in the Southport Public Library, and promptly borrowed it. When she got home she found that the second-last page of the book has been torn out. She was wondering if it would be possible for you to make a photocopy of the last four pages of the book, if you still have it, and send it to us. The edition we have is different from yours: a Sphere paperback of 180 pages.

I thought you'd like to see a piece I wrote on Easter Island. A number of SF writers have been

there recently. Perhaps they are all doing research, as David Brin did while writing *Earth*. I went there at the end of 1994 and spent ten days on the island. The article was written for a photography magazine, but they never used it. Not only that, they never returned the colour slides I sent with the article either. This pisses me right off because the slides, which even if they were duplicates, cost \$2 each. That's \$30 down the drain, not to mention the envelope and stamps included for their return.

Both of us are well and comfortable settled into our new location. Monica has found a place to practise and continue studying her Tai Chi. I have found a Dojo nearby where I can go on training in Aikido. We like the climate. The cats have gotten used to the new furniture and the new surroundings. I do miss the *Tirra Lirra* lunches though. Do say hello to Eva Windisch next time you see her.

(24 April 1996)

A lifetime's reading to look forward to

KAREN JOHNSON
35 Mariana Ave, South Croydon
VIC 3136

Thanks for sending me some of your zines, and especially all those issues of *TMR*. I've had my nose buried in them for a solid week and still haven't finished, but I've enjoyed every moment. The only problem is that while I've been reading them I haven't been reading the books I'm supposed to be reviewing for *The Captain's Log*, or the pile I

Life phase	Age	Reading speed***	No. of books read**
Beginning	5–7	1 book per week	100
Primary school	8–12	2 books per week	500
High school	13–17	5 books per week	1250
VCE	18	2 books per week	100
University	19–22	1 book per day	1400
Then till now*	23–26	1 book per day	1400
Total number of books read			4750
* This works out even, as it's my twenty-seventh birthday in three weeks' time.			
** Assuming 50 weeks per year, to simplify the maths, and make up for anomalies.			
*** Not including books read solely for assignment/study purposes. At times, one university assignment would entail reading 25 books in two weeks. Not my favourite way of reading. On the plus side, as well as the teaching books essential to my studies, I read my way through everything that looked interesting in the University Library (sociology, history, social history, etc.). At one point the library staff got sticky because I was borrowing more books than any other student on campus, and I'd had more than a few occasions when they'd mislaid one after I returned it, and blamed me.			

borrowed from the MSFC library last week. I'll save my comments for when I get back from Sydney, and have caught up a bit. All I'll say now is that you have some very talented and interesting friends, and I feel privileged to be able to meet them through *TMR*. The most exceptional person described is Roger Weddall. Having read the loving tributes to him in *TMR* 19/20/21 I almost feel I know him. They made me wish I had joined fandom ten years ago, so that I could have got to know him in person (thought at seventeen, I would have been too young to move in his circles). The world could use more people like him.

I'm glad you're a cat person — there's nothing better in the world than settling down in a comfortable chair with a good book and a friendly cat, though the cat doesn't usually have reading in mind. We don't actually have a cat, because my parents are both allergic, but I'm drawn irresistibly to other people's. There's only one cat in the world I loathe — our next door neighbour's. It think it owns our yard as well as theirs, and ours makes a better toilet cum dead-animal-dumping ground.

I found myself fascinated by 'The Books We Really Read' in *TMR* 24/25. I'm thinking carefully about my Top 100 authors, but in the meantime here are the calculations on how many books I've actually ploughed through in my lifetime so far [see box, previous page].

(28 April 1998)

I've been working on my list of indispensable authors. My lifetime book tally is about 4500, but I like to re-read favourite books, so my actual total is far less than that. They include biographies, histories etc., though I have left them off my author list. I would guess I've read about 2000 different books, but somewhat less than 1000 authors, because I enjoy series books.

Most of the authors on my list are childhood favourites. I worked on the basis that if I could still remember the name now the author must deserve to be on my list. I cringe at some of my aberrations from good taste, but they were the books that passed the excitement test then, and they hold fond memories. I have never gone in for Literature with a capital L, so most of the authors are what critics might label 'populist trash'. Because I am

somewhat younger than the original listmakers and haven't read as much, I consider a 100-author list to be over-ambitious. My final list is seventy-five names long.

The actual figures are: Male authors: 39; Female authors: 39 (I didn't rig it; it just happened); Fantasy: 35 (46.6%); Science fiction: 20 (26.6%); Mystery: 10 (13%); Thriller/horror: 5 (6.6%); Animal writers: 3 (4%); Romance: 2 (2.6%); General fiction: 6 (8%); Children's writers: 21 (28%); Series fiction (at least a trilogy featuring the same characters): 55 (73.3%); Australian authors: 7 (9.3%) (Ngaio Marsh is close enough to count). You'll see that the percentages and figures add up to considerably more than 75, as authors overlap categories.

THE LIST

Straight fantasy

- 1 Joan Aiken: especially *A Necklace of Raindrops*
- 2 Lloyd Alexander
- 3 Marion Zimmer Bradley
- 4 Stephen Brust
- 5 Susan Cooper
- 6 David Eddings
- 7 Ru Emerson
- 8 Raymond E. Feist
- 9 Paul R. Fisher
- 10 Alan Garner, esp. *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* and *The Moon of Gomer*
- 11 Randal Garrett
- 12 Nicholas Stuart Gray
- 13 Barbara Hambly
- 14 Diana Wynne Jones
- 15 Katherine Kurtz and Debra Turner Harris: the 'Adept' series
- 16 Simon Hawke
- 17 Mercedes Lackey
- 18 C. S. Lewis, for the 'Narnia Chronicles'
- 19 Joel Rosenberg
- 20 Sherri S. Tepper
- 21 J. R. R. Tolkien
- 22 Ann Spender Parry
- 23 Terry Pratchett
- 24 Margaret Weiss and Tracey Hickman, for the original 'Dragonlance' trilogy
- 25 Patricia Wrightson
- 26 Jane Yolen
- 27 Roger Zelazny

Straight SF

- 28 Isaac Asimov
- 29 Stephen Barnes (with Larry Niven): the 'Dream Park' set
- 30 Peter David
- 31 Debra Doyle and James D.

- Macdonald
- 32 Robert Heinlein
- 33 Monica Hughes
- 34 Vonda N. McIntyre
- 35 Larry Niven
- 36 Andre Norton
- 37 Melissa Scott
- 38 E. E. 'Doc' Smith
- 39 James White: for the 'Hospital Station' series

Either/or

- 40 Piers Anthony
- 41 Ray Bradbury
- 42 Orson Scott Card
- 43 Diane Duane
- 44 Ursula Le Guin
- 45 Anne McCaffrey

Thriller/horror

- 46 Clive Cussler
- 47 Dick Francis
- 48 Stephen King
- 49 Dean R. Koontz
- 50 Alistair Maclean

Romance

- 51 Cynthia Harrod Eagles
- 52 Danielle Steel

School stories/nostalgia

- 53 Enid Blyton
- 54 Elinor M. Brent-Dyer: for the 'Chalet School' books
- 55 Mary Grant Bruce
- 56 Antonia Forest
- 57 L. M. Montgomery

Mystery

- 58 Lillian Jackson Braun
- 59 George Chesbro
- 60 Carole Nelson Douglas
- 61 Dorothy Dunnett
- 62 Tony Hillerman
- 63 Ngaio Marsh
- 64 Ellis Peters: for the 'Brother Cadfael' series
- 65 Dorothy L. Sayers
- 66 Dell Shannon/Lesley Egan etc.

Animal writers

- 67 Gerald Durrell
- 68 James Herriot
- 69 Willard Price

General fiction

- 70 Richard Bach, for *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*
- 71 Helen Forrester
- 72 John Marsden
- 73 Ruth Park
- 74 Lynne Reid Banks
- 75 Neville Shute

(28 May 1998)

version. There are exceptions. Elaine and I have found it impossible to buy Ida Haendel's performance in Karel Ancerl's version of Lalo's *Symphonie espagnole*, although it was briefly released on CD by Supraphon. Thanks to Thomas's, I was able to buy my favourite version of Brahms's Fourth Symphony (Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt conducting the North German Radio Orchestra a few weeks before his death in 1961). The same wizard record store found for me Boult's 1959 recording of Vaughan Williams's Ninth Symphony (Everest). They weren't allowed to import it because Everest had no agent in Australia. They kept the item on their computer for four years until Everest gained an agent in Australia.

But in general I stick to my Desert Island Discs, including Barenboim's versions of the Beethoven piano sonatas, Karajan's versions of the Beethoven symphonies, the Borodin Quartet's versions of the Shostakovich quartets, and an amazing version of the Mozart string quartets by the Eder Quartet on Naxos. (The same group is currently recording the Shostakovich quartets for the same company. Will I reach for my VisaCard?)

When Joseph Nicholas and Judith Hanna visited us earlier this year, Joseph was astonished that I had three complete sets of the Beethoven sonatas on CD (Brendel, Barenboim and Schnabel). Elaine also has the Kempff versions in a boxed set of vinyl LPs. I said little about this peculiarity, lest anything I said might be written down and used in evidence against me. A few months later, I bought the Rudolf Serkin version on Sony of the 'Hammerklavier' (Sonata No. 29) because it was coupled with the D Minor Fantasy. Serkin's playing of the second two movements of the 'Hammerklavier' made the whole piece into something quite new. Most pianists, including my heroes, play this music like a drunken Liszt, supermelodramatising music that's pretty ferocious anyway. Serkin, instead, begins a 'line' at the beginning of the third movement and finishes it at the end of the fourth movement, stitching every note into the complete argument. Staggering stuff, and proof enough that every version of every great piece of music is effectively a new piece of music.

Books? I still buy every Barbara Vine/Ruth Rendell title and a fair variety of other mystery books, so nothing much has changed. I still find a few good SF and fantasy novels per year, and always some standout short stories. Some years I read poetry, and other years I don't. Recently, without meaning to desert the field, I seem to have stopped reading criticism. I'm encouraged by the continued signs of life in the Australian SF and fantasy field.

At the beginning of 1998 Peter McNamara persuaded me to become a judge for the Young Adults' Section of the annual Aurealis Awards for Australian Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror. (Why couldn't Dirk Strasser, who set them up, have called them the 'Dirks', so each year we could have a knockdown contest between the Dirks and the Ditmars?) I'm currently reading all these YA novels and a very small number of YA short stories, but can't review them until after the results are announced in February next year. I volunteered to talk about the fiction of Joanna Russ for the November meeting of the Nova Mob, so I'm alternating the reading of each Young Adults book with a Joanna Russ book. The contrast is not as absolute as I expected.

Favourite Books 1995

- 1 *Dead Souls*
Nikolai Gogol (1842; Signet Classics; 278 pp.)
- 2 *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*
Simon Callow (1995; Jonathan Cape; 640 pp.)
- 3 *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*
M. Barnard Eldershaw (1947; Virago Modern Classics; 456 pp.)
- 4 *Things Happen*
Philip Hodgins (1995; Angus & Robertson; 331 pp.)
- 5 *Sandstone*
Andrew Taylor (1995; McPhee Gribble; 216 pp.)
- 6 *The Tin Can Tree*
Anne Tyler (1965; Hamlyn; 189 pp.)
- 7 *Shadow of Ashland*
Terence M. Green (1996; Forge; 221 pp.)
- 8 *A Window in Mrs X's Place*
Peter Cowan (1986; Penguin; 278 pp.)
- 9 *She's Fantastical*
edited by Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich (1995; Sybylla; 260 pp.)
- 10 *The Man Who Fell to Earth*
Walter Tevis (1963; Avon; 189 pp.)
- 11 *Axiomatic*
Greg Egan (1995; Millennium; 289 pp.)
- 12 *Einstein's Dreams*
Alan Lightman (1993; Sceptre; 179 pp.)
- 13 *The Time Ships*
Stephen Baxter (1995; HarperCollins Voyager; 630 pp.)
- 14 *Artificial Things*
Karen Joy Fowler (1986; Bantam Spectra; 218 pp.)

I had always heard that *Dead Souls* was a grim novel, but it's not. It's perhaps the only truly funny Russian novel, as it doesn't collapse under the undirected hysteria found in most other Russian fiction. Gogol's main character sets out to gull the worthy citizens of a very small Russian town, way out on the steppes, in the early years of the nineteenth century. Everything, including the main characters, is covered in mud. The people of the town are villains or fools, but Gogol observes them with so great an enjoyment of fine detail that they are a pleasure to meet. The con man is no hero, but neither is he strictly a villain. He's simply interesting, like everything else in this novel. This is satire of a very high level, based not on disgust or ridicule but on an all-consuming interest in the peculiarities of humanity.

When he's not dying spectacularly on screen (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) Simon Callow is a fine writer of biographies of well-built actors (I've also read his book on Charles Laughton). The strength of Callow's *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*, compared with at least three biographies of Welles, is that he concentrates on the man before he made *Citizen Kane*. Callow pieces together a picture of what Welles's stage and radio productions were actually like, and concludes that in gaining a film-maker America lost perhaps its greatest stage producer. Except, of course, that it was Welles who deserted the stage and went to Hollywood. Warts-and-all biography, but Welles's warts are more interesting than anybody else's.

By printing a fragment of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* in their recent anthology *She's Fantastical* (see below), Lucy Sussex and Judy Buckrich pointed me towards this novel, which I've had on the shelf ever since Virago

published the first complete edition in 1983. Not that it's easy to work out exactly what the original edition was. (Thanks to Yvonne Rousseau for sending me the full story of the variant editions — see box.) The 1942 edition was badly cut by Australian censors; the final, 1947 version by Mary Barnard and Flora Eldershaw had some benefit of hindsight, as it appeared after some of the events that the first edition predicted. The book tells the story of a working-class family during the Depression and the early years of World War II, then extrapolates to an Australian revolution during the last days of the War. A framing story tells of an attempted revolution in a far-future 'utopia' that eerily prefigures the mindless Menzies years of the late fifties and early sixties. Sombre, careful writing, but with a story of enormous, accumulating power. One of the great Australian novels (and George Turner's main inspiration for *The Sea and Summer/Drowning Towers*), it is still pretty much unknown here or elsewhere.

Things Happen appeared after the little piece I wrote about Philip Hodgins in *TMR* 22/23 but before Alex Skovron's tribute in *TMR* 26/27. Hodgins's last book of new verse, it contains some of his finest work (my favourite is 'Midday Horizon'). His 'Collected Poems' appeared in 1997. If you like Australian poetry, send me some money and I'll try to find you copies of Hodgins's books.

Andrew Taylor (*Sandstone*) is an Australian poet whose work I like nearly as much as I like that of Philip Hodgins. Taylor does not have quite Hodgins's quality of flashing gallows humour, but like Hodgins he uses words with simplicity and ease to give haiku-like compression to unlikely

subject matter. The main poem, 'Sandstone', gives a series of perceptions based on scenes from Western Australia's dry sandstone coast; sand is crushed rock and shells but it was also once alive, porous; it changes continually; sandstone is ancient rock but lifelike.

Having kept up with Anne Tyler's novels since the mid-1970s, I'm gradually catching up on her earlier works. It's a poor sort of book that doesn't include at least one funeral scene, and *The Tin Can Tree* begins with one. People stagger home from the funeral of the youngest member of the family. Gradually we find out about the people themselves, but only in brief reflections do we find out anything about the child who died or why her death leaves the family rudderless. Like all Tyler's work, this is funny as well as sad and powerful.

I admit my prejudice towards *Shadow of Ashland*. Terry Green, of Toronto, started writing to my magazines during the 1970s, after he had heard that I'm a fan of the work of Philip K. Dick. (Many of my most enduring pen friendships have been with other Phil Dick fans.) At that time he was only writing reviews. Later he began to publish stories, and he sent me copies of his first two novels and his first collection of short stories. The collection included 'Ashland, Kentucky', which seemed much better than anything he had written before.

A contemporary Canadian family begins to receive letters written by a long-lost son/uncle in the 1930s. The main character sets off for Ashland, Kentucky, the small town from which the most 'recent' letters had been received. His arrival in the town is more or less where that story ended.

Rousseau and 'Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow'

YVONNE ROUSSEAU
PO Box 3086, Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000

I enclose a copy of my ancient review of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, complete with the bit *The Age* cut out.

In *As Good as a Yarn with You: Letters between Miles Franklin, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw and Eleanor Dark*, edited by Carole Ferrier, it is fairly clear that Marjorie Barnard's memory eventually played tricks on her, and that Flora Eldershaw did indeed collaborate on *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. Barnard wrote to Eleanor Dark on 21 September 1947:

Very much thanks for your letter and good wishes for *To-morrow and To-morrow and To-morrow*, a kind word is more than welcome in the circumstances. The publishers' last act was to lop off one of the To-morrows from the title. We only discovered this (galley proofs didn't indicate) when, on the eve of publication, he sent the jacket round to Teenie {Flora Eldershaw}. She protested — but

gave in when Harris pointed out that to change it would delay the book another year.

And Flora Eldershaw wrote to Miles Franklin on '22 February [1948]' (square brackets indicate Ferrier's interpolations, while the { } kind around 'Teenie' indicated mine):

Yes, we are awfully glad to have *T & T* out at last, for its unpublished state seemed to inhibit any further effort. And the awful effort of having to close up the gaps left by the censor and adapting the end — never successfully accomplished — was very trying. However, we no longer have that excuse for not writing but we are both so busy — and apart — and older than we were, that writing seems impossible.

Apart from this, I was interested in William Charles Wentworth's view in September 1952 (while he was worrying in Parliament about whether the Commonwealth Literary Fund was 'being honestly administered for the furtherance of Australian literature or whether, in some way, it was under Communist influence and being

used as a means of providing sustenance for Communist authors and propagandists and the furtherance of Communist ideas'), when he attacked Marjorie Barnard thus:

How is it that, when a fellowship is granted for an historical research work, a trashy, tripey novel with a Marxist slant [*Tomorrow and Tomorrow*] appears in its place . . . How is it that a fellowship is issued to Miss Marjorie Barnard, and then the work that is

supposed to be subsidized is written, not by her, but by her in collaboration with a lady [Eldershaw] who is one of the five members of the Advisory Board.

Wentworth eventually wrecked his case when he baselessly accused Kylie Tennant of being 'very actively connected with the Communist Party'.

(14 October 1995)

Classical view of wartime

TOMORROW AND TOMORROW AND TOMORROW, by M. Barnard Eldershaw (Virago; \$9.95).
YVONNE ROUSSEAU

The cover-blurb of Virago's 'full uncensored' edition of *Tomorrow* accurately states that Patrick White named this as 'the Australian novel he would most like to see re-published'. The blurb-writer was perhaps unaware that White then went on to recommend the lopping off of the book's 'boring prophetic shell'.

This 'shell' is the 24th-century Australian setting in which a writer, Knarf, reads to a friend his just-completed novel, reconstructing Australian society between 1924 and World War II. Knarf's reconstruction is accurate and absorbing, resembling Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) or *World's End* (1940) in its intimate evocation of 'unrecorded' individuals, during depression and war, who suffer and die 'without redress or drama'. And it is from Knarf's novel, chiefly, that the wartime censor in 1944 deleted sections varying in length from several pages to just a few words (one complete cut is: 'The censor in a panic shut down on it').

These cuts were designed to protect the morale, rather than the morals, of the public. Wartime readers must not be exposed to the reprehensible improbability that the British and Americans, when the war ended, could become increasingly friendly towards the Japanese enemy, and turn against the Russian ally. Thus the novel appeared in 1947 with no word of the international about-turns and American standover which goaded Knarf's Sydneysiders into revolution. Nor did it any longer mention the public's conviction of 'not being told' about the inroads of an untreatable plague originating in China — while the account of the plague itself was shifted to locate it safely after the war, not during it. To accommodate these changes, the 1947 edition contained altogether 139 new lines which Virago does not mention, but which were written after the bombing of Hiroshima, and would have formed a worthwhile appendix.

Marjorie Barnard's statement that this book was 'entirely my own work' has been published elsewhere: the Virago edition, however, retains the 'M. Barnard Eldershaw' pen-name, used for collaborations with Flora Eldershaw. Dating is another mystery; '1940-42' appears at the end of the book, yet Virago's introduction gives 1942 as the year of beginning.

Whatever its exact dates, the novel is written from the apocalyptic standpoint of the war years. Marjorie Barnard had joined the Peace Pledge Union and the Australian Labor Party at the end of the thirties — when, as Knarf says, 'never were people so aware, so powerless to act'. In this word 'out of control', fundamental questions about humanity's actual trajectory were clamouring for attention; and the impassioned expedients of martyrdom, revolution or logical argument were tested by radicals refusing to despair of change. Knarf looks back on this from his 24th-century world, which has achieved the universal peace and plenty that seemed only visionary in the 1940s. Yet his own son is being drawn towards the old radical expedients, in his quest for 'liberty', and comes close to creating another instance for Knarf's inductive argument: 'Because liberty has always called power to its aid it has perished.'

Marjorie Barnard was living and working in Sydney, where the war entailed a constant possibility of the city's being invaded. Any resident with a Harbour view 'inhabited a target'. Thus, descriptions of the city have 'the sharp-edged beauty of something threatened'; Sydney is seen anew in the unnatural light of a 'black-out' and an air raid; and its final celebration is the memorable scene of revolutionary destruction where it is razed and abandoned by its own inhabitants. (In the censored version, this becomes somewhat distractingly implausible — though impressive still.)

The author made no claim to be literally prophetic — only to 'show how the thoughts and tendencies of today, if uncorrected, may resolve themselves tomorrow'. Knarf's perspective is not a mere 'shell'; his own presentation as artist, the resonances his friend perceives between the novel's events and Knarf's own circumstances, are indispensable to the book's final effect.

To me, the book seems long only as *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney* seems long; I doubt that it is *too* long. Breathtakingly wide in its scope, yet frequently capturing the fleeting experience or insight that has escaped other expression, this work thoroughly deserves its inclusion among Virago's Modern Classics.

— *The Age 'Saturday Extra'*, 27 August 1983, p. 10

Terry Green has seen a wide range of possibilities in his original idea, so that the resulting novel, *Shadow of Ashland*, is convincing. Given that the letters had dropped through time, what did the long-lost uncle think was happening to him when he sent them? What had really befallen him during the 1930s? At first the storyteller meets Ashland people who had known his uncle during the 1930s, then realises they are withholding part of the story. And then . . . Terry Green puts goose bumps on your goose bumps.

Some of Peter Cowan's earliest stories have a compressed gritty desperation hardly matched by other post-war fiction in English. *A Window at Mrs X's Place* has stories from each period of Cowan's writing. All I know about Cowan is that he is in his eighties, is a prominent academic in Western Australia, and published his first stories in the 1940s. His lean, hard-bitten style is much more visionary than the easy-going naturalism ('dun-coloured', as Patrick White called it) of most Australian prose of the 1940s and 1950s. His books are probably unavailable outside Australia, but you might be lucky.

She's Fantastical is fabulously fannish in lots of ways. Lucy Sussex and Judy Buckrich had been thinking about an anthology of science fiction and fantasy by Australian women writers. They mentioned the idea to a third person, who was connected to Sybylla, a Melbourne women's publishing co-operative, who made an offer to publish it. No doubt Lucy or Judy will tell eventually the story of the battle with Sybylla to produce this book. *She's Fantastical* emerged as a paperback with end-flaps on the cover; with a striking cover illustration that is also its icon; blue ink throughout; and a combination of type faces that is blinding but unforgettable. The stories are pretty good, too. The real achievement of Lucy and Judy has been to drag stories out of three people who are equally well known for the quality and scarcity of their writing. They include Philippa C. Maddern (Pip Maddern), Petrina Smith and Yvonne Rousseau.

The Man Who Fell to Earth is a complex, meditative book about a drunken alien. Bowie was perfect for the part in the film, but only a few scenes from Roeg's baroque film match the dry brilliance of this tale.

I pounced on my copy of Greg Egan's *Axiomatic* as soon as I received it. It's a pity that I had read most of its best stories before they appeared in the collection. But I had not already read 'Into Darkness' and 'The Safe-Deposit Box', and I was happy to re-read stories such as 'The Caress' (which is about art, and the nearest Egan has reached to a fully-formed piece of art) and 'The Walk'.

More a fanciful essay than a story, *Einstein's Dreams* is both a blithe satire on the Swiss and a compendium of great unused science fiction ideas.

In deference to H. G. Wells, to whose *The Time Machine* it is a sequel, Stephen Baxter might well have made *The Time Ships* slightly shorter. But given that *The Time Ships* does go on and on, I found myself romping through it with a peculiar leaping speed. The quality of Baxter's prose does not emulate Wells's, but Baxter has a piercing ability to visualise the alternate futures and pasts that he borrows from Wells and others. Reading this book is like leafing through a book of ultra-realist paintings: everything is clear, yet everything feels distorted because of the clarity.

Favourite Short Fiction 1995

- 1 'The Gate of Ghosts'
Karen Joy Fowler (*Artificial Things*)
- 2 'The Safe-Deposit Box'
Greg Egan (*Axiomatic*)
- 3 'The Interior of Gaaldine'
Gerald Murnane (*Emerald Blue*)
- 4 'Hungry Skin'
Lucy Taylor (*Little Deaths*)
- 5 'Not With Love'
Philippa C. Maddern (*She's Fantastical*)
- 6 'Angel Thing'
Petrina Smith (*She's Fantastical*)
- 7 'Living'
Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)
- 8 'Escape'
Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)
- 9 'The Last Time'
Lucius Shepard (*Little Deaths*)
- 10 'The Green Road to Quephanda'
Ruth Rendell (*Collected Stories*)
- 11 'Back of Beyond'
Cherry Wilder (*Strange Fruits*)
- 12 'Uh-Oh City'
Jonathan Carroll (*The Panic Hand*)
- 13 'The Beach'
Peter Cowan (*A Window in Mrs X's Place*)
- 14 'Possum Lover'
Yvonne Rousseau (*She's Fantastical*)
- 15 'The War of the Roses'
Karen Joy Fowler (*Artificial Things*)

I probably wouldn't have read *Artificial Things* for years if I had not found myself unexpectedly sitting opposite Karen Joy Fowler at a dinner held in Melbourne in the week after Thylacon (Australia's national convention, held in Hobart in June 1995). We all knew Kim Stanley Robinson would be at Thylacon, but I didn't get to meet him during his one day in Melbourne. Karen Fowler turned up out of the blue, and was good company. Several people already admired her stories, so I thought I'd rip into *Artificial Things* and *Sarah Canary*. I gave up on the latter half way, never having glimpsed what the author was on about, but several stories in the collection were brilliant, especially 'The Gate of Ghosts'.

'The Gate of Ghosts' is about a little girl who learns to disappear from home to a space that's simply Elsewhere. At first she does it in such a way that she returns home on the instant, but later it becomes obvious that she is slipping from our world into the other. All this relates to her relationship to her parents, one of whom has Chinese ancestry, and their relationship to each other. Jessica's mother wants to 'rescue' her, pull her back into 'normal' space.

I fell in love with this story because of the following sentences on Page 146 of the Bantam Spectra edition. The mother is trying to entice Jessica into telling about her 'other place':

Jessica pushed the spoon off the table with her elbow. It bounced with a tinny sound on the floor. She slid lower and lower in her seat until her mother disappeared below the horizon of the tabletop. Jessica slipped off the chair entirely and sat by the spoon underneath the table . . . Her mother slid forward; her knees came closer

to Jessica's face and then back again and her mother was sitting on the floor under the table beside her, cross-legged.

This is my favourite kind of writing, where a metaphor for the whole story is expressed entirely in concrete terms, but still conveys the abstract motion of the story. Here I feel Jessica slipping out of one world into another; her mother then joins her, but she must change perspective. Later in the story, of course, the mother is able to enter the child's 'other place'.

Greg Egan's more than usually taut **'The Safe-Deposit Box'** has two wonderful ideas: the main character spends each day in a different body; and he gets to glimpse the creature who is creating him anew each day.

Gerald Murnane is a unique Australian writer whose prose puzzles most critics (and, recently, me). **'The Interior of Gaaldine'** (which, I'm told, is a reference for Brontë buffs) is a real return to form: an amazing mix of wild ideas served up in the most rigorous of prose, inspired by Tasmania, that most baroque area of Australia.

From *She's Fantastical*, Philippa C. Maddern's **'Not With Love'** is a story that reminds me most of the best stories of Gene Wolfe; you know, there's the story, and it's all happening, but what is actually happening? On an artificial living environment a long way from Earth, rebellion is steaming. But how to get in touch with Earth? What kind of people are these inhabitants? What sex are they? (It's only when you finish the story that you realise that, although this is a story of aroused passions, you are not really sure who is male and who is female, or whether it matters.) This is not just clever writing; this is suspense fiction of a high order.

Petrina Smith's **'Angel Thing'** recreates all the fear of the alien that you find in outback Australian small communities. Is the creature an angel or an alien? And who are the aliens, anyway? Another first-class suspense story, with that absolutely clear style that Petrina has developed during the last twenty years.

A few years ago Yvonne Rousseau stopped writing her brilliant reviews and critical articles in order to 'write a novel'. No sign of the novel yet, but it was a Sussex/Buckrich coup to extract a story from her. **'The Possum Lover'** is not perfect, but it sticks in the memory. Yvonne has still not learned, as Pip and Petrina have, to leave out all but the essentials, then leave out most of the essentials. (If I knew how to do that, I'd probably be writing fiction.) But given that **'The Possum Lover'** is at least twice as long as it need be, it's a bravura performance with a delicious ending.

'Hungry Skin' is about a woman who is swallowed up by her own creations. Without melodrama, Lucy Taylor takes the reader step by step from a mundane if interesting setting into a disturbing fantasy dilemma.

Lucius Shepard's **'The Last Time'** could be described in much the same way, except that Shepard's prose is all melodrama, a sort of Giger monster of a story that tears away at the main characters' and readers' skins and assumptions.

Ruth Rendell carries little conviction in her short stories, the best of which could only be described as sketches for future novels. However, **'The Green Road to Quephanda'**, which ends her otherwise dull *Collected Stories*, is a perfect little fable that need never be lengthened.

The Panic Hand, Jonathan Carroll's short-story collection first released in German, was the book I most anticipated reading during 1995, but in the end it proved just a bit disappointing. Many of the stories have reappeared as sec-

tions of novels since they were written. **'Uh-Oh City'** is an exception, a long piece with much of the edgy trip-up-the-poor-reader quality of the best Carroll novels.

Favourite Films 1995

- 1 *Runaway Train*
Andrei Konchalovsky (1985)
- 2 *Barton Fink*
Ethan Coen (1992)
- 3 *The Crying Game*
Neil Jordan (1992)
- 4 *Ed Wood*
Tim Burton (1994)
- 5 *Dirty Harry*
Don Siegel (1971)
- 6 *The Fugitive*
Andrew Davis (1992)
- 7 *Four Weddings and a Funeral*
Mike Newell (1992)
- 8 *Babette's Feast*
Gabriel Axel (1987)
- 9 *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (complete)
Nicholas Roeg (1976)
- 10 *The Bad and the Beautiful*
Vincente Minelli (1952)
- 11 *Pursued*
Raoul Walsh (1947)
- 12 *Once Upon a Time in the West*
Sergio Leone (1969)

Runaway Train is one of those films people talk about in awe if they've seen it, but is still almost unknown among critics. It begins as one of the fastest, least sentimental chase movies I've seen. Two convicts are on the run, having escaped an inescapable prison. They're hiding on a train when it takes off, sans driver. As the main characters (especially an almost unrecognisable John Voigt) hurtle through Canadian snow-laden countryside, the movie changes form and intention. If you appreciate the ending you will love the movie.

The Fugitive, which had the commercial success that eluded *Runaway Train*, resembles the latter movie in many ways. While watching *The Fugitive*, one forgets all about the 1960s TV series that inspired it, as the war between the characters played by Harrison Ford and Tommy Lee Jones becomes intensely personal, mythic and funny. The film works as much because of its humour as its action.

For most of 1995 I was sure that *Barton Fink* would be unbeatable as Film of the Year. The story of a film writer entrapped in Hollywood in the thirties has its own wild humour; but I did not expect that halfway through, the film would become a painting that is expanded and twisted in unexpected ways. As in *Runaway Train*, a great unfolding of meaning towards the end makes it into a tale that threatens the viewer as much as the main character.

In some years *The Crying Game* would have been my Favourite Film for the Year. The fact that it was made at all, let alone became immensely popular, shows the extent of the revival in not-quite-mainstream cinema during the last decade. This story takes bizarre turns, beginning with an incident featuring IRA troops and a British soldier. Your friends have probably told you the surprise at the end, but the reviews could hardly prepare you for all the other surprises along the way.

Ed Wood, it seems, 'failed' in America, although with a

bit of promotion, surely, it could have succeeded as one of the great buddy movies. Ed Wood himself was perhaps too kooky for American audiences to accept the emotional heart of the film: his attempts to help the dying Boris Karloff (a magnificent role for Martin Landau, playing opposite Johnny Depp), hoping that Karloff's reputation would launch his own directing career. *Ed Wood* is filmed in black and white, appropriate for the man who made the worst black-and-white movies ever released. Very funny, very sad: don't miss out on this if and when it reaches the TV screen.

Dirty Harry has such a high reputation among film buffs that I expected to be disappointed when I finally caught up with it on TV. I wasn't disappointed. The style of Don Siegel, Clint Eastwood's directing mentor, is always clipped and assured; he doesn't waste a word or a frame. What I hadn't expected was the originality of many of Siegel's devices, such as the night-time race from telephone booth to telephone booth. I wait, seemingly in vain, for a full-scale Don Siegel retrospective from Cinemathèque or one of the film festivals.

I didn't expect to like a film as popular as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. Parts of the film, such as Rowan Atkinson's mugging, made me wince, but in general I loved the thing for the truth it tells about the people I grew up with. (Or didn't quite grow up with; is there a part for the background observer at every wedding and funeral?) Every weekend they head off for another wedding, regardless of whether or not they know the people well. It's a way of filling in time until they decide what they will do with their lives, and with whom. The film is famous for having only one word in its script for its first twenty minutes. That's a nice funny device, but did not prepare me for the pathos of the events leading up to the funeral, or the funeral itself.

There is a moment in *Babette's Feast*, as a main character ascends a staircase, when I realised this is a great film, but I find it hard to describe what it is outstanding about that moment. I suppose it's the sense of sublime watchfulness that nestles in every shot, reflecting Babette's own willingness to watch and wait for the right moment, however many years it takes to arrive. This is not a movie about food (the essence of the publicity when it was first released) but about what it takes to be a worthwhile person.

The version of Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* released in the 1970s was so cut that it became incomprehensible. It was more a sound-and-light trip than a story. Now on a laser-disc 'director's cut', the movie appears as it was originally supposed to be shown. Cut in the 1970s were all the story bits that would have made it understandable. Roeg's alien, memorably created by David Bowie, is still obtuse compared to Tevis's main character, who drinks himself senseless through sheer loneliness. But Bowie's last line, his farewell to all hope, is worth waiting for.

Favourite Books 1996

- 1 *The Prestige*
Christopher Priest (1995; Touchstone; 404 pp.)
- 2 *Faith Fox: A Nativity*
Jane Gardam (1996; Sinclair-Stevenson; 312 pp.)
- 3 *The Crow Road*
Iain Banks (1992; Abacus; 490 pp.)
- 4 *The Blue Mountain in Mujari*
Aina Vavare (1988/1990; Penguin; 173 pp.)
- 5 *The Brimstone Wedding*

- Barbara Vine (1996; Vintage; 312 pp.)
- 6 *I Served the King of England*
Bohumil Hrabal (1989; Chatto & Windus; 243 pp.)
- 7 *The Keys to the Street*
Ruth Rendell (1996; Hutchinson; 310 pp.)
- 8 *Distress*
Greg Egan (1995; Millennium; 343 pp.)
- 9 *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*
Anthony Cronin (1990; Paladin; 290 pp.)
- 10 *Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future*
Robert Crossley (1994; Liverpool University Press; 474 pp.)
- 11 *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales*
Oliver Sacks (1995; Picador; 319 pp.)
- 12 *Dealers in Light and Darkness*
Cherry Wilder (1995; Edgewood Press; 166 pp.)
- 13 *The Moth*
James M. Cain (1949; Robert Hale; 356 pp.)
- 14 *Lilian's Story*
Kate Grenville (1986; Allen & Unwin; 211 pp.)
- 15 *Whit, or Isis Amongst the Unsaved*
Iain Banks (1995; Little, Brown; 455 pp.)
- 16 *In the Presence of the Enemy*
Elizabeth George (1996; Bantam; 477 pp.)
- 17 *Civil War Land in Bad Decline*
George Saunders (1996; Jonathan Cape; 179 pp.)
- 18 *Espedair Street*
Iain Banks (1987; Futura; 249 pp.)
- 19 *Unlocking the Air and Other Stories*
Ursula K. Le Guin (1996; HarperPrism; 207 pp.)
- 20 *Ladder of Years*
Anne Tyler (1995; Chatto & Windus; 326 pp.)

The Prestige is Chris Priest's best book since *Inverted World*, because it's the first since then in which the formal story works as well as the metaphor. In some of the post-*Inverted World* novels, the events don't quite make sense, although the total pattern does. In many Priest books during the last twenty years I've been left hungry for the novel-that-might-have-been. And here it is: *The Prestige*.

Andrew Westley is invited to a country house to receive the manuscript written by his great-grandfather, who had been a famous magician at the beginning of the century. The person who hands him the manuscript is the great-granddaughter of Rupert Angier, a rival magician. We read two rival manuscripts, that of Alfred Borden, Westley's great-grandfather, and that of Angier. We are invited to guess at the secrets of their magic. In learning these secrets, we are drawn into an ever-interlocking series of meditations on magic (that is, illusion), twindom, and (for want of a better word) identity. Borden asserts that he is a certain sort of person, and we discover that that is untrue. Angier, painted as a villain in the first part of the novel, proves to be a hero of persistence. And Westley proves to be not the person he thought he was.

All this is written with enormous energy, clarity and precision. The prose surface gives no hint of pomposity or calling attention to its own cleverness, yet it draws us into a world in which every true statement is up for questioning. And the ending works! It's a sublimely gothic masterstroke.

Even so perceptive a critic as Brenda Niall (in *The Age*) was inclined to belittle *Faith Fox: A Nativity* because it seemed to deal with minor, domestic matters. A baby is left alive after her mother dies; the characters are trying to work out what to do with the baby. This approach ignores the muscly nature of the prose itself. Gardam has absolute pitch

of dialogue. Creating her characters through this dialogue, she links them with landscape to create a metaphor for the world as it is today. Yet Gardam's writing does not call attention to its high ambitions; her style is so modest it almost becomes immodest.

The Crow Road is the masterpiece Iain Banks was working towards during the first part of his career. It could become the masterpiece he'll spend his career retreating from. *The Crow Road* is so well-made, complex, passionate and vivid that he is unlikely ever to better it. Generations of families overlap each other; various Scottish landscapes and cityscapes enfold into each other; everything is delicious, especially the disasters.

Published by Penguin Australia, *The Blue Mountain in Mujari* is a fine collection of short fiction about growing up Latvian/Australian. It was mainly ignored when it first appeared. A pity, since this has the humour and sharpness of observation and dialogue that are hard to find in most Australian general fiction. The main characters are not satisfied with the restrictions of the traditional life style; on the other end, they don't easily come to terms with things Australian. Vavere lets us experience that knife edge of double perception without making easy conclusions.

I'd given up hope that 'Barbara Vine' (Ruth Rendell's more interesting self) would produce another novel as compelling as the first three or four, but *The Brimstone Wedding* proves a return to form. A naïve younger woman attends a sprightly older woman who is dying of cancer in a nursing home. The younger woman's problems stir echoes in the memories of the older woman, but only the events of the novel can persuade the older woman to reveal the strange story of why she has kept a house locked and unlivid in for more than thirty years. This novel interweaves several dark stories, plus some fine examples of Vine's vivid descriptions of the English countryside during summer and autumn.

Part of Ruth Rendell's secret is her sense of place and her love of London. In *The Keys to the Street*, four seemingly disconnected stories are told about the people of Regent's Park: those who live near it, cross it during the day, or live there at night because they are homeless. Eventually the stories interconnect in a pattern much like the pattern of paths across the park.

I Served the King of England is a bracing breeze of a novel by the major Czech novelist of the generation that survived World War II. Like many of the best novels I've read in recent years, this is told from the viewpoint of a *faux naïf*, a chirpy little chap who aims to become a head waiter. During the ups and downs of the Nazi Occupation he becomes first the owner of a restaurant, then a prisoner in the world's most easy-going prisoner-of-war camp. All these high jinks have, no doubt, a extra layers of meaning for the book's Czech readership. For me, the author's ability to live both inside and outside the main character. Hrabal 'paints' the mind of the main character, blending it like an art object into his picture of the land itself as it survives that period between 1920s and the late 1940s.

I see Greg Egan's *Distress* as a series of dramatic metaphors loosely connected by a plot. The first metaphor in the novel is that of the man who dies, is revived very briefly, and in that moment realises the full horror of his own mortality. The book's other vivid metaphor is that of the island that is made of living matter, able to dissolve into its constituent particles. The Theory of Everything, which seems to be the subject of the novel, is shown to be a McGuffin; the main character's experiences during his stay on the mid-Indian

Ocean island give him a small key to understanding. A novel that carries echoes of Benford and Bear proves to be a refutation of everything they stand for.

Australia's John Bangsund made Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) famous throughout fandom when he wrote new 'Keats and Chapman' stories in his fanzines. In mundane literary circles, O'Brien's reputation has been growing steadily during the last thirty years. Cronin's *No Laughing Matter* is not just a biography of O'Brien, since it is partly Cronin's biography as well: writers drinking and knocking around Dublin, forever trying for the big success that never happens. This is the story of a writer-against-himself, a dour and snappish alcoholic who wrote funny books, a man who wrote some classic Irish novels, then disowned them in favour of doomed attempts to write a big commercial success. It's Cronin's story, too, and that of post-independence Ireland. O'Brien's friends try to help him, but they can't; Ireland tries to lift itself by its bootstraps, but keeps falling over (at least during the period discussed in this book).

Olaf Stapledon: Speaking for the Future is also a rich and satisfying biography, a book that lets you feel you've met this strange, distant figure; a book that sends you straight back to the novels, because you feel you could never have read them properly. My memory of this book is dominated by two images: that of Agnes Stapledon, the author's widow, giving Crossley the keys to the author's room thirty years after he had died, whereupon Crossley discovers that everything has been left exactly as it had been on the day he died; and that of Stapledon in New York in 1949, reviled by the American press for attending a large Peace Conference, finding that the only people who know his works are the members of the Hydra Club, where Stapledon spends one happy evening meeting all his favourite SF authors. At last he is able to talk to people who have some idea of what he is on about. When Stapledon dies the next year, none of his books is in print. Pre-images and after-images of these events haunt Crossley's narrative. Stapledon pursued Agnes for many years, despite many difficulties, but in his last years was to insist on an 'open' marriage because he still looked and felt young while she now seemed old. Working within that isolation and detachment that marks every aspect of his life, Stapledon more or less invented modern science fiction, with Wells as his mentor, only to find in his last years that his literary relatives were the American 'pulp' writers. And they repaid him by including him in SF's group memory. How many 'classic' SF works turn out to be based on Stapledon's ideas! (Two come to mind immediately: the aliens of Lem's *The Invincible* and the Venus of Kuttner's *Fury*.)

Reading *An Anthropologist on Mars* gave me nearly as much of that good old-fashioned sensawonder as reading *The Prestige*. Both Priest and Sacks write with satisfyingly understated styles; each relies on slow revelation and quiet dis-closures to make their impact. The reviews of Sacks's books give the impression that he merely trots out a series of oddities among human beings: a literary version of the carnival freak show — here's Ollie and the next gang of weirdos! We're the weirdos, of course. We go about thinking we're 'normal', that the human brain works in such-and-such a way, but Sacks shows us that it doesn't. In looking at each 'case history', he attempts to see how the other person sees the world. But if it is possible for this or that person to see the world in this or that way, how do we account for the way we see things? For example, how does an autistic person see the world or feel about it? How can we tell? Sacks talks about two different autistic people, one of whom is perhaps

the world's most 'successful' (in conventional terms) autistic person. Yet, although Temple Grandin can think about her own condition, she still sees other humans as aliens; she sees herself as an 'anthropologist on Mars'. She can see that a sunset is pretty, but the concept of 'awesome' or 'magnificent' is unknown to her. She can plan systems in minute detail — this is what she does for a living — but if interrupted when planning a system, she must plan it all again from the beginning. Does Temple Grandin have a different sort of brain; or are the elements of her brain merely arranged differently from ours? Do we all have some elements of autism, or Tourette's syndrome? (Sacks tells the astonishing story of a man who is a great surgeon although he has Tourette's syndrome.) Are all 'disabilities' disasters? What kind of a thing is a 'normal mind'? Sacks throws all these questions up for grabs. Will SF writers grab at them?

Cherry Wilder, the author we love to claim as Australian, is actually a New Zealander who has just moved back there after living in Germany for twenty years. Her career began while she was living in Australia, and this remains the country where readers most appreciate her. For all that, I did not know of the existence of this American-published collection of Wilder's short stories until Yvonne Rousseau brought *Dealers in Light and Darkness* back from overseas. This is a much-too-short collection from a major SF writer. Wilder combines a quiet authority of experience and utterance with a style that most writers would kill for: apt, compressed, allusive. Her stories are strange accretions of events that slowly reveal their truths. In 'Odd Man Search' and 'Something Coming Through', the two best stories in this collection, it takes most of the story to find out what kind of a world we have entered, let alone make sense of the nature of its people. As in the stories of Gene Wolfe, many characters are not quite human, and many landscapes would be uninhabitable by twentieth-century people. Yet, as in Wolfe's work, all the clues are here; they are presented so tersely, however, that reading each story feels like absorbing a novel. Several of the stories, including 'Odd Man Search' and 'The Dreamers of Deliverance', are set in the same post-holocaust world. 'The Ball of Hilo Hill' has connections with *The Luck of Brin's Five*, Wilder's Ditmar-winning novel from the mid-1970s. Despite these connections, each story sets the reader adrift in new waters; exciting experiences all.

James Cain's *The Moth* is an Australian printing of the first British edition; not rare, I suspect, but an interesting curiosity. British publishers with a guaranteed bestseller occasionally do separate printings from the British plates for the Australian market. This edition of *The Moth* suggests that James Cain was doing pretty well in Australia in 1949, although the novel itself has disappeared. A great pity, since it is a major novel about surviving in America during the Depression. The 'moth' of the title is the story-teller, an ordinary chap who seems guaranteed a good living until the Depression hits him and his family. Investments made by his father become valueless. Keeping a good job depends on marrying the boss's daughter. The main character escapes the situation, endures all the vicissitudes of hobo life during the Depression, and fetches up in California, where he begins a new life. A very American tale, but made attractive by Cain's knowledge of the practicalities of staying alive and his brisk, self-mocking style. Cain's work always seems ripe for a major revival; I hope that when it comes, *The Moth* will be given back its rightful rank as a major American novel.

Kate Grenville is the first credible successor to Patrick

White in Australian fiction. Other would-be Patrick Whites have tried to re-mint his prolix ambiguous prose, therefore missing White's real concern, the innermost soul of the secret person. In Grenville's *Lilian's Story*, Lilian is the secret person who talks to us in this novel. She is said to be based on Bea Miles, a famous Sydney eccentric of the post-war years. Grenville retains the superficial aspects of Miles's life: the background of privilege, the ferocious heterodox opinions, the vagrant's life on the streets, her great girth. What she adds is a complex, finely written inner life, the tale of a soul trying to find some relationship with the world. Very funny, very poignant. A recent Australian film is based on this novel, which is unfilmable, so I've avoided the film.

Whit is a clever story, full of delicious surprises, owing as much to SF as general fiction. Isis sets out from the isolated human colony into the big bad alien world and proceeds to find out much about it and herself. But the 'human colony' is an isolated religious community, and the 'alien world' is a twisted version of modern Scotland. Is this, then, merely a version of *Candide*? Or even *Roderick*? An upbringing in the religious settlement has left Isis naïve about modern life, but she shows a remarkable ability to adapt. She needs to, because she discovers that it's not the outside world that is corrupt, but the secluded 'saintly' environment that sent her on her pilgrimage. Nothing defeats Isis, not even a betrayal of her lifelong beliefs. In the Banksian battle between Life and True Belief, Life wins yet again.

Like all mysteries these days, *In the Presence of the Enemy* is at least 200 pages too long. Given that annoyance, it's the best novel that Elizabeth George has written since *For the Sake of Elena*. Better still, it's the novel she's been aiming for since *A Suitable Vengeance*, her extraordinary debut. Everything works here. The book is about its characters, not the mere solving of a mystery; but to solve the mystery one has to reinterpret the whole situation, not merely a bunch of facts. It sounds trite to say that every character is closest to his or her 'enemy', to the person who can hurt most. George has a great ability to dramatise (sometimes hair-raisingly) the damage that parents and children and husbands and wives can inflict on each other — the laceration of inter-relationship within interrelationship.

George Turner sent me a copy of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* at about the time somebody mentioned it in *Acnes-tis*. Saunders writes bitter comedy that reminds me of Tom Lehrer mixed with Garrison Keillor, without providing the easy laughs of either. I found myself wincing as much as laughing: this is the near future in America, and it won't be fun. 'Bounty', the novella that ends the book, tells of a pilgrimage through a near-future USA undergoing a chaotic civil war; in other stories, characters work in weird, broken-down theme parks that might all be called CivilWarLand. There are moments of human redemption, but not many. Saunders seems to be saying: this is the America you voted for, mugs, and this is what it will be like to live in.

I keep thinking I know what Ursula Le Guin is up to. With a collection like *Unlocking the Air*, featuring stories that don't quite fit the SF or fantasy categories, I feel I can lean right in and go along for the ride. Many of the early pieces are a bit twee and undeveloped; I sneered 'New Yorker stories!' under my breath. (Several of them were published first in *The New Yorker*.) Never underestimate Le Guin. Towards the end of *Unlocking the Air* two stories brought me up short. 'Olders' and 'The Poacher' are two astonishing stories, penetrating and clear and serious, yet revealing themselves in small unfoldings. 'Olders', set (it seems) in the Earthsea world, begins with a voyage, turns into a

fantasy, and becomes a pained and burning love story. 'The Poacher' begins as a modernised fairy story, turns into a modern version of yet another fairy story, then transforms itself into a complex metaphor of the possibilities of life and art. Yet the surfaces of both stories seem simple. This is not just accomplished writing; these are stories that extend your idea of what fiction can achieve.

Tyler's 1972 novel *The Clock Winder* has basically the same story as her latest novel, *Ladder of Years*. A person leaves home, usually because he or she is too eccentric or wayward to stay there, and wanders into a situation in which other people come to lean on him or her (usually her). Eventually the new situation takes on the same constrictions as the old, and the heroine (usually) must make an ambiguous choice between the old and the new. When I read each new Tyler novel, I rarely notice the similarities between the plots until towards the end; I'm much too interested in the particular characters who hold centre stage. In *Ladder of Years*, the leading character walks away from a beach on which her family are holidaying. She hitches rides as far as she can, then settles in a small town, and vanishes from sight. But she must earn a living; she needs to find a place in this new society; again she finds people leaning on her. Great pleasures remain in life, and reading Tyler's fiction is one of them. I just hope that next time she finds a new plot.

Irritating novel of the year:

Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow

by Peter Høeg (Harvill/HarperCollins; 1992; 409 pp.)

I realise that this is everybody else's favourite novel, but, well . . . could somebody please tell me what actually *happens* at the end? And what happened at the beginning to the boy on the roof? Miss Smilla tells us at the end of the novel that she has had a blinding flash of inspiration, *but doesn't tell us what it is*. This is my Irritating Novel of the Year: lots of vivid stuff about snow, and Greenland, and the Inuit, but the plot makes no sense at all. Why does Smilla remain alive throughout the novel, when she should have been bumped off by the baddies within the first 30 pages?

Favourite Short Fiction 1996

- 1 'The Poacher'
Ursula K. Le Guin (*Unlocking the Air and Other Stories*)
- 2 'Olders'
Ursula K. Le Guin (*Unlocking the Air and Other Stories*)
- 3 'Hidden'
Stuart Kaminsky (*Dark Love*)
- 4 'Lunch at the Gotham Café'
Stephen King (*Dark Love*)
- 5 'Looking Forward to the Harvest'
Cherry Wilder (*Dealers in Light and Darkness*)
- 6 'Isabelle'
George Saunders (*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*)
- 7 'Robert and Edith at the Song Festival'
Aina Vavare (*The Blue Mountain in Mujani*)
- 8 'Mathias' Fortifications'
Aina Vavare (*The Blue Mountain in Mujani*)
- 9 'Bounty'
George Saunders (*CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*)
- 10 'His Angel'
Robert Lannes (*Off Limits*)

Most of the stories on this list I've mentioned already, at least in passing. I've already commented on the two top

stories when I looked at *Unlocking the Air*.

Stuart Kaminsky's 'Hidden' seems to be about a child's capacity to commit mayhem, but turns on much deeper matters. Kaminsky is best known as a film writer: he knows how to use one 'set', the interior of an ordinary suburban house, to great effect.

Also from the Collins, Kramer and Greenberg collection *Dark Love* is Stephen King's 'Lunch at the Gotham Café'. It could hardly be called subtle, but it is very funny. It shows that if you arrange to meet your ex-wife for lunch, you should watch out for whatever's happening at the next table.

Robert Lannes' 'His Angel' is one of those fantasies that has the solidity of a good science fiction story. It appears in Ellen Datlow's *Off Limits* collection, which also has a fine Bruce McAllister story, 'Captain China'.

Favourite Films 1996

- 1 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*
directed by James Cameron (1991)
- 2 *The Shawshank Redemption*
Frank Darabont (1994)
- 3 *The Music Teacher*
Gérard Corbiau (1988)
- 4 *The Big Country*
William Wyler (1958)
- 5 *The Boyfriend* (complete)
Ken Russell (1971)
- 6 *Mona Lisa*
Neil Jordan (1986)

Not many movies on this list, because I had little opportunity during 1996 to see new movies. The films I did see convinced me that hanging grimly to the underside of darkest Hollywood are film-makers who are still trying to make good films with literate scripts and interesting characters. The blockbusters get all the publicity, and come very close to wiping out the independents, but somehow the good guys are still there.

Having said *that*, you'll think I've finally blown a fuse in my brain when I say that I'm besotted by *Terminator 2*, to such an extent that when Dick Jenssen lent me the really complete version (with the missing fifteen minutes restored) I watched it all again. (Even my favourite movies I don't watch more than every five years or so.)

Terminator 2 is dominated by the contrast between vast exterior power and even vaster inner power. The big effects are effective; the explosions louder than anybody else's explosions; the chases more spectacular than anybody's else's chases. That's James Cameron for you. But he's also a real film-maker. The dream-like nuclear destruction of Los Angeles is framed against an image of children playing in a park; Big Arnie as Terminator 1 has to take orders from the child he has come to rescue; in the movie's finest moment, mighty tough 'n' mad Linda Hamilton refrains from pulling the trigger that would kill the inventor of future chaos who is also the father of children, the people she is trying to save. If we believe we are responsible for the future, how should we really behave? Seems odd to find this in a movie seemingly devoted to irresponsible power, but Cameron's vision is truly epic.

In Australia *The Shawshank Redemption* was the sleeper hit of its year. People probably kept telling each other: 'It's a Hollywood movie, it stars Tim Robbins, but it has this great

script and characters.' And it does, too. Usually Hollywood drowns in bad writing, but *The Shawshank Redemption* leaps up and hits people when they least expect it.

Since the 1970s I've almost given up watching French movies, but on Dick Jenssen's recommendation I watched *The Music Teacher*, which has that unbeatable combination of great script, acting and photography. A dying music teacher (José Van Dam) puts up both his favourite students for a singing competition. The main competitor is the student of his old rival. *Rocky* for classical singing buffs? Maybe — but José Van Dam gives an intense dignity to his role.

The Big Country is also about dignity in difficult circumstances, in this case, when you find yourself (if you're Gregory Peck) a tenderfoot on a huge ranch and nobody, including your wife, will take you seriously. This is one of the best of the 1950s big, big Westerns, a bit too ponderous to be considered as effective as a Ford Western, but very watchable.

I saw Ken Russell's *The Boyfriend* in the early 1970s in a version deprived, like *The Man Who Fell to Earth* a few years later, of all the story-line. Beautiful but confusing. The complete version, a tribute to the great screen musicals of Berkeley and Donen, its colour fully restored, had me decomposing on the carpet the night I saw it. Russell is the only British director other than Michael Powell with a sense of colour and design, Twiggy is effective as the wan little starlet, and Tommy Tune is memorable as his own spidery self.

Mona Lisa can be seen now as Neil Jordan's dry run for *The Crying Game*. Even the heroines in each film look much the same. Bob Hoskins is brilliant as the confused hero, and he has every right to look confused. Perhaps a few more viewings will reveal what actually happens towards the end of the film.

Favourite Books 1997

- 1 *Titan*
Stephen Baxter (1997; HarperCollins Voyager; 581 pp.)
- 2 *The Voice That Thunders: Essays and Lectures*
Alan Garner (1997; Harvill; 244 pp.)
- 3 *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*
Florence King (1985; St Martin's Press; 278 pp.)
- 4 *The Secret of this Book: 20-Odd Stories*
Brian W. Aldiss (1995; HarperCollins; 334 pp.)
- 5 *Sirius*
Olaf Stapledon (1944; Dover; 157 pp.)
- 6 *Strandloper*
Alan Garner (1996; Harvill; 200 pp.)
- 7 *Windows*
D. G. Compton (1979; Berkeley Putnam; 255 pp.)
- 8 *Seasons in Flight*
Brian Aldiss (1984; Jonathan Cape; 157 pp.)
- 9 *At the Caligula Hotel and Other Poems*
Brian Aldiss (1995; Sinclair-Stevenson; 99 pp.)
- 10 *Fermat's Last Theorem*
Simon Singh (1997; 4th Estate; 362 pp.)
- 11 *Collected Poems*
Philip Larkin (1988; Marvell Press/Faber & Faber; 330 pp.)
- 12 *Last and First Men*
Olaf Stapledon (1930; Methuen; 355 pp.)

- 13 *Gather Yourselves Together*
Philip K. Dick (1994; WCS Books; 291 pp.)
- 14 *Bare-faced Messiah: The True Story of L. Ron Hubbard*
Russell Miller (1987; Michael Joseph; 390 pp.)
- 15 *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography*
Ian Hamilton (1992; Pimlico; 344 pp.)
- 16 *Tourists*
Lisa Goldstein (1989; Simon & Schuster; 239 pp.)
- 17 *Star Maker*
Olaf Stapledon (1937; Penguin)
- 18 *King Solomon's Carpet*
Barbara Vine (1991; Penguin; 356 pp.)
- 19 *From Time to Time*
Jack Finney (1995; Simon & Schuster; 303 pp.)
- 20 *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction & Fantasy*
edited by Jonathan Strahan & Jeremy G. Byrne (1997; HarperCollins; 365 pp.)

I wouldn't have read *Titan* if it hadn't arrived as a review copy, as the first 100 pages are crowded with the acronyms and gung-ho space skiffy of the worst hard-SF book. If I hadn't already enjoyed Baxter's *The Time Ships* I wouldn't have kept reading. If I hadn't reached page 200, then page 300, then found myself on the journey of a lifetime, I would have been a poorer person. Pro-space-race propaganda dissolves into multiple ironies as Baxter reveals how NASA has been mothballed progressively since 1972. Humanity can reach the rest of the solar system, if not the stars, but has chosen not to. A human race who can still plan, build and crew a one-way trip to Titan can also destroy everything on Earth. Baxter rarely uses generalisations. Instead, as in *The Time Ships*, he uses visualisations: one dazzling set piece after another. As for the ending: some will hate it, and others, like me, will see it as inescapable outcome of Baxter's Stapledonian view of life.

A lecture by Alan Garner must be an arresting, even frightening event. He is a Biblical prophet without a Bible, a writer who treats the past as if it's as alive as the present, a declaimer who upbraids the whole of modern English literature for its failures. He makes extravagant claims for his own novels, delivering expositions that are sometimes more interesting than the novels they talk about. The lectures and essays in *The Voice That Thunders*, written over twenty years, cover a wide range of material. He shows that a ballad from his local area has been handed down not from the sixteenth century, as everybody believed, but from the Bronze Age. Similarly, he shows that an implement found in the area was made of metal mined in the area more than 4000 years ago. He reads selections from his fan mail, and in so doing gives us insights into why he writes his novels. He provides the background for *Strandloper* and many of his other famous books. He shows us just what it is like to go mad suddenly. He challenges listeners and readers to explore their own past. This is a memorable book; I wish it didn't make me feel so inadequate.

Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady was much mentioned in Acnestis when I first joined, but I had little hope of finding a copy. Yvonne Rousseau found a copy in Adelaide, and sent it to me for my fiftieth birthday. It is very funny and very serious. This is the one book any woman would want to give any man to show just why the women's movement restarted in the 1960s among intelligent American middle-class women. Not that it's a theoretical tome; all the book does is show what it was like to grow up female, intelligent and out of step in the 1950s American society where every-

thing is suffocated by a McCarthyism of the spirit. When Florence bursts out, she really explodes. Failed at the dating game, she discovers love in the arms of a divine Southern lady, and suffers everything any of us have suffered from first love. But Florence is still fabulously funny, even when she's piquantly pained. Her father, mother and grandmother, more vivid than any characters in an Anne Tyler novel, are the other stars of the book.

I'd put off reading *The Secret of this Book*, this latest Aldiss collection, for far too long. Reading it made me search out his two previous collections. Aldiss the writer gets younger all the time. At the age of seventy he gives the impression of discovering the sheer joy of writing for the first time. A Dionysian gusher of ideas and visions boils up from the pages: from 'A Dream of Antigone' and 'The God Who Slept With Women', new glittering fables based on ancient fables, to 'The Mistakes, Miseries and Misfortunes of Mankind' and 'Horse Meat', dark meditations on the bleeding sores at the heart of European culture. Aldiss has not quite abandoned an earlier, less glittering style, but he takes such pleasure in his new-found sense of fantasy that I can overlook the few uninteresting stories in this collection.

I'll discuss *Sirius* in some detail in my long-delayed article on Olaf Stapledon. This is the liveliest and best written of his novels, perhaps because he limits the range of the subject matter. On the other hand, in showing how a dog might be bred and made into a superdog and the dreadful things that would happen to such a creature, Stapledon's scientific speculations still sound plausible in the light of current research into cloning. Stapledon's castigation of his fellow human beings reads as true today as it did then, and tells us more of why he felt a stranger in his own country than any of the mighty speculations of the earlier novels.

Strandloper is so challenging that I suspect I could not have read it without first reading Garner's essay about it in *The Voice That Thunders*. It is more poetry than prose; highly concentrated, offering few concessions to the conventions of narrative. William Buckley, a transported convict, escaped from the first expedition to the Sorrento area. The settlement failed, and Buckley was left for dead. Believing he was walking north to China, Buckley walked right around Port Phillip Bay to the Corio area. There he was adopted by the local Aboriginal tribe, who believed him to be the ghost of a dead shaman. Buckley lived with the tribe for thirty-two years. After he was 'rescued' by white settlers, he returned to England. Even if you know this before you begin reading the novel, much else is difficult, demanding close scrutiny: the pagan village rituals during which Buckley and his future wife choose each other; the equally strange pre-Christian church service during which Buckley is arrested for crimes he cannot comprehend; the terrifying sea voyage to New Holland; the escape; and the mystical process during which Buckley learns the insights given only to a shaman. Garner does his best to stretch his perceptions back into eighteenth-century Chester, then into pre-white-settlement Australia. He links the symbols seen on an early Christian church window with the symbols found on Aboriginal weapons; pagan rituals in Chester with the initiation rites that Buckley undergoes in Australia. Mysticism is never far away, but what remains true is the intense earthiness and sensuality of the writing. For the first time I understood much that was unclear about the reality-world of the people who have lived here for 40,000 years. If *Strandloper* were easier to read, I would say that every white Australian should read it. But it's valuable because it's difficult to read! It's a

Garner book: it should not just be read, but reread.

Windows is the sequel to *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe*, which I read again in December 1996. *Mortenhoe* is very much better than I remembered it — one of the best British SF novels of the seventies. The surprise was to find that *Windows* is just as interesting, if not more so. The observer from the first novel, blinded by his own hand, tries to put his life together while a media contingent lays siege to his home. He and his wife escape to Italy, but find that the new venture is no escape. Compton's characters are vivid, but even more vivid is the atmosphere of the midsummer Italian villa, cut off by a civil war from the rest of Europe, in which Rod and his family find themselves. Compton is the least appreciated British SF writer; it would be wonderful to have his best novels back in print.

Seasons in Flight is Aldiss's most coherent theme anthology of short stories. When it appeared, it must have seemed a bit of an oddity: dark fables set in 'primitive' settings or informed by ancient legends. (To complement the newer stories, Aldiss revives his sublime 'The Oh in Jose', first published in 1966.) Most of the stories feature granular, stripped-down language and unforgiving plots. They are memorable but dour. Reading *Seasons in Flight* more than a decade after its publication, it feels like a curtain-raiser for *The Secret of this Book*.

In the past I have never been impressed by Brian Aldiss's poems when they've appeared in his novels and anthologies. Nevertheless *At the Caligula Hotel* is a very satisfying collection. Aldiss's poetic voice is heartwarming in a way that Philip Larkin's never could be, and in many poems just as musical and deft. Remarkably fine lyrics include 'Moon-glow: For Margaret' and 'All Things Transfigure', but my favourites in the collection include funny-haha poems such as 'Government' and 'Stoney Ground' and funny-grimace pieces such as 'Writer's Life'.

I know that *Fermat's Last Theorem* is mathematics for the millions — mathematical dummies like me — but Singh explains many things clearly that are incomprehensible in the maths textbooks I 'edit' for a living. Singh has a great feeling for the numinous quality of mathematics; if only I could follow his arguments all the way. He is able to show what Andrew Wiles achieved when he solved Fermat's last theorem without feeling the need to transcribe the 100-page proof itself.

Britain's Philip Larkin and Australia's Philip Hodgins are the two poets whose work led me back to enjoying poetry. Therefore reading Larkin's *Collected Poems* was to be my Big Enjoyable Project for the year. To some extent it has been, but I still felt a slight letdown. Including the 'Early Poems 1938–1945' was not a great idea, although some of the early poems (especially 'Night-Music') are as fine as anything Larkin did later. The problem is that lyric poetry rarely carries the weight that readers expect from it. While 'Aubade', which sums up all my own thoughts about impending death, is probably the greatest British poem since Eliot's best, and 'Church Going' and 'The Dance' are worth buying the book for, many of the other poems seem merely brilliant outpourings of spleen. Most of these poems are about the limits of Larkin's experience and expectations; no amount of technical brilliance can hide the narrowness of their focus. Equally, nothing can hide their lyrical deftness: Larkin's ability to put all the right words in the right places often seems magical. This is how good poetry should be; why, then, can it not *do* more?

Did *Last and First Men* really stop me in my tracks when I tried reading it in 1973? Armed with the Crossley bio-

graphy (which demonstrates that even the most esoteric details of Stapledon's far futures are based on incidents and impressions from his life's experience), I launched again into Stapledon's most famous work and found it a long but satisfying journey. Stapledon's style is ponderous, but always readable, and occasionally lyrical. His perceptions are often astonishing. Humanity does not progress upward, but performs evolutionary cycles. We — the First Men — commit suicide, but the Third Men almost make it to Utopia. Stapledon doesn't believe in Utopia; even near-perfect humans sink under the weight of accumulated errors. Natural disasters send humanity off to Venus, then outward to Neptune. Stapledon is a true Darwinian, describing an endless, fascinating game of ping-pong between chance and necessity. My interpretation of his many stages of humanity is that they are a fictional way in which Stapledon can unpack parts of his own soul. What, he asks, are the many possibilities, good and bad, I might find in myself? Of great interest are the number of his SF plot ideas that were used by later writers (for instance, Stapledon's Martians turn up, virtually unchanged, in Lem's *The Invincible*). If Wells's great SF works can be kept in print, why can't the same privilege be given to Stapledon?

I asked people not to give me presents for my fiftieth birthday, but fortunately Justin and Jenny Ackroyd chose not to hear me. Thanks for *Gather Yourselves Together*. It's the last but one of Philip Dick's non-SF novels to be published. This might imply some inferiority to his other non-SF novels written during the early 1950s, but I that's not what I found. It tells of three American characters who are left behind for a week in a Chinese factory complex in 1949 after the company has pulled out and before the Chinese forces arrive. Two of the Americans had met each other some years before; they had been lovers briefly. The other is a raw innocent. The three wander around the empty complex; their lives become relinked; a kind of magic takes place. What's astonishing is how complex and observant a writer Dick was during this early part of his career, especially compared to some of his SF potboilers of the early 1950s.

I have a vision of massed Scientologists combing the bookshops of the world, snatching copies of *Bare-faced Messiah* from the shelves and ripping them apart on the spot. Perhaps that's exactly what they did. Fortunately I found *Bare-faced Messiah* on a remainder table not long after it was published. It would be the funniest book of the year if it were not so sad. Why do people want to be disciples? Especially of somebody as worthless as Hubbard? I can understand Hubbard: he got away with murder because people asked him to pull the trigger. But who invents the gun, the shyster or the shystered? Incomprehensible puzzles, to which not even Miller can offer answers. His writing is crisp, his research exhaustive; I'm glad I found the book before all the copies disappeared.

Maureen Speller, who put me onto *Keepers of the Flame* by discussing it about a year ago in Acnestis, will realise the irony of my reading it just a week after I discovered I've been made George Turner's literary executor. Executors are the baddies of the literary world. They burn old diaries, destroy caches of letters or hide them in attics, and never, never let a truthful word be said about their 'charge'. Hamilton goes on the trail of horrors and perfidies perpetrated by executors, and has delicious fun with what he finds. Boswell's diaries lie deep within the bowels of a country house for nearly two hundred years; as much truth about Hardy as possible is obliterated by his widow. The war between executors and biographers is fought down the centuries. Hamil-

ton traces brilliantly the connection between executorship, biography and hagiography. How does all this affect me? Already I find that Judy Buckrich, George Turner's biographer, has said some things about George that would have annoyed the hell out of him, but I'm not going to object too much, since Judy has done a fine job. George destroyed his own letters and cut his own ties before he died. Secrets, damned secrets.

Lisa Goldstein is one of those authors whose books I'd kept buying although I hadn't read any of them. Casually I started reading *Tourists* one day, and couldn't put it down. It's difficult to describe Goldstein's special talent. She knows what to leave out. Is the story itself original, or does the pert sparkiness of her style make it seem so? This is a story of Americans living for a year in a Middle Eastern country. The revolution takes place, but this is not a story so much of the Americans' physical survival as of their magical discoveries. Goldstein has a weird and amusing angle on events. I'm looking forward to her other books.

I discuss *Star Maker* in a fair bit of detail in my (eventually) forthcoming Stapledon article. It begins with the same device found at the beginning of Edgar Rice Burroughs' *A Princess of Mars*. The main character wishes and wishes that he could fly up from the Earth, and lo! off he goes. As he floats among the stars, then the galaxies, he acquires a companion. Together they take the Cook's tour of the universe, then all possible universes, and in the process describe a vast number of possible SF ideas, many of which have never been used by later SF writers. Eventually they glimpse the Star Maker itself. In 1937 *Star Maker* must have seemed like the ultimate trip; I don't know why the 1960s hippies thought they were doing it all for the first time.

After I had read *King Solomon's Carpet* I had no more Barbara Vine novels to read. I'll just have to reread the others. This novel is all about the London Underground. One of the characters is nuts about underground railways. He owns a marvellous mausoleum of a house (houses are usually the main characters of Vine/Rendell novels) that sits between two London Underground lines. The other characters, most of whom board in the old house, are affected by the Underground, which embodies Life itself: remorseless, blind, multifarious, cruel. Vine was not feeling kind towards the human race when she wrote this book. Each character is consumed by some obsession, and each object of obsession is lost. The details about the Underground are luscious, making me want to read more.

I could hardly hope that *From Time to Time*, this sequel to *Time and Again*, would be as enjoyable as Finney's classic SF/fantasy novel, but it's pretty good. Given that we already know the gimmick (that time travellers somehow pass from one era to another through any place that remains exactly the same in each era), Finney rings some new changes. Simon Morley, willing refugee in 1890s New York from our era, is drafted back into service, and finds himself in a vividly recreated New York of 1912. Can he change history or not? Who is the mysterious gal who seems to pop up behind every lamp post?

It always seemed unlikely to me that any major publisher in Australia would take on a volume as *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. But the tide has turned, and here's the evidence that Australian SF and fantasy has been developing well over recent years. Although Strahan and Byrne, co-editors of *Eidolon* magazine, run no stories from rival magazine *Aurealis*, the *Year's Best* covers a wide range of fiction drawn from Australian and overseas sources. My own favourite story is Marele Day's

'A Man and His Dreams', a quiet magic realist fable, but I also liked the two main pieces of science fiction, Greg Egan's 'Silver Fire' and Andrew Whitmore's 'Ilium', and a fair number of the fantasy stories, especially Simon Brown's 'The Mark of Thetis', Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God', and Sean Williams' funny horror story 'Passing the Bone'. There were very few stories I did not like, which makes this *Year's Best* an attractive package.

Favourite Short Fiction 1997

- 1 **Tom Fobble's Day**
Alan Garner (*Collins*)
- 2 **'A Man and His Dreams'**
Marele Day (*The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*)
- 3 **'Ratbird'**
Brian W. Aldiss (*A Tupolev Too Far*)
- 4 **'The God Who Slept with Women'**
Brian W. Aldiss (*The Secret of this Book*)
- 5 **'Horse Meat'**
Brian W. Aldiss (*The Secret of this Book*)
- 6 **'A Swedish Birthday Present'**
Brian W. Aldiss (*The Secret of this Book*)
- 7 **'A Day in the Life of the Galactic Empire'**
Brian W. Aldiss (*The Secret of this Book*)
- 8 **'Glory'**
Nicholas Royle (*Narrow Houses, Vol. I*)
- 9 **'Passing the Bone'**
Sean Williams (*The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*)
- 10 **'Naming Names'**
Pat Cadigan (*Narrow Houses, Vol. I*)
- 11 **'Another Orphan'**
John Kessel (*Meeting in Infinity*)
- 12 **'Jackie Chan'**
Chris Gregory (*Twins*)

'Tom Fobble's Day' was one of the stories published in America as *The Stone Book Quartet*. Nearly twenty years separates them from the publication of *Strandloper*. Garner works slowly, for reasons made clear in *The Voice That Thunders*. In that volume Garner claims that the 'Stone Book' series have been his best-received work. Each book is scarcely more than a short story, yet each packs in more experience than a good novel. In 'The Stone Book', the most intense of the four novellas, we climb to the top of a newly built spire and descend to the depths of an almost inaccessible cave. In 'Tom Fobble's Day' we travel very fast over snow on a perfectly made sled. In 'Granny Reardun', which I liked much less than the first two, we find out just what it was like to harvest a field up until the early years of this century. These particular experiences are just part of a complex response to old England itself. Garner talks much in *The Voice That Thunders* about the need to know one's place: a peculiarly English concept to an Australian. Yet this concise family saga, various generations indicated from volume to volume by mere hints, connects people and place in a way that proves Garner's contentions. Marketed as children's fiction, these books are not stories I could have read when I was a child; instead, they have a depth rarely achieved by Booker Prize winners.

Marele Day's 'A Man and His Dreams' creates a perfect balance between fable and fantasy. A dispirited man walks into a dispirited town. He sets up a dream shop. As it begins

to succeed, dreams return to the town. There's more to the story than that, but you'll have to discover it by reading the story.

Brian Aldiss remains one of Britain's best writers of short stories, but in recent collections his skill and enthusiasm for the form have taken a sudden lurch forward.

'Ratbird' is full of wild disconnections and tropical revelations, a prose poem in praise of ferocity and mad adventure. Much the same could be said of 'The God Who Slept with Women' and 'Horse Meat'; the former imbued with a love of the classical in story-telling, but breaking away from the constraints of formal fable; and the latter imbued with disgust at the direction things are taking in Europe, yet trying to maintain the link between the best and the worst that humans can do to each other.

With 'A Swedish Birthday Present' and 'A Day in the Life of the Galactic Empire' Aldiss uses much more traditional forms of story-telling. The former is a subtle tale of people and cultures passing in the night; the latter is as powerful and darkly amusing a science fiction fable as anything Aldiss wrote in the 1950s and 1960s.

Nicholas Royle's 'Glory' is saturnine and amusing and horrific as only an English horror writer can be. But much the same could be said of Pat Cadigan's 'Naming Names', although she is an American. Sean Williams' 'Passing the Bone' is outrageous and grungy and wildly funny as only an Australian horror writer might be. Since Australian writers haven't written much good horror fiction until recently, Williams shows the way forward.

When I read John Kessel's novella 'Another Orphan' I had that hair-prickling sensation of coming upon a story already famous among SF readers, which I had never seen before, but which proved worthy of its reputation. This Nebula Award winner tells of the time traveller who finds himself dumped on the deck of the *Pequod* just before Captain Ahab begins the final chase for that damn whale.

If you have read books by Gerald Murnane or by students of his writing class, you might know what to expect from Chris Gregory, one of his successful students. Indescribable to those who are not in the know, this kind of writing tests anybody's definitions of 'modernism' or 'postmodernism'. 'Jackie Chan' is the best of these stories, which give the impression of being essays, including documentary matter and asides. Conventional dialogue and characterisation are missing. It is a wry dialogue between the author and the reader, yet the events described are taken to be fiction. Yet often they are not; they are rearranged versions of events that the author claims to be part of his experience. This would all be very tedious if it were not for Chris Gregory's unfailing lightness of hand. 'Jackie Chan' begins with the odd events that happened around Melbourne when Jackie Chan made a movie here a few years ago, but becomes a prose poem in praise of Melbourne.

Favourite Films 1997

- 1 **Touch of Evil (restored)**
directed by Orson Welles (1958)
- 2 **Fearless**
Peter Weir (1993)
- 3 **Eating Raoul**
Paul Bartels (1982)
- 4 **Groundhog Day**
Harold Ramis (1993)

- 5 *In Country*
Norman Jewison (1989)
- 6 *Cape Fear*
J. Lee Thompson (1962)
- 7 *Crumb*
Terry Swigart (1994)
- 8 *Giant*
George Stevens (1956)
- 9 *Gettysburg*
Ronald F. Maxwell (1992)
- 10 *In the Name of the Father*
Jim Sheridan (1995)
- 11 *Rats in the Ranks*
Bob Connelly and Robin Anderson (1996)
- 12 *Forrest Gump*
Robert Zemeckis (1994)
- 13 *The Fly*
David Cronenberg (1986)
- 14 *Twelve Monkeys*
Terry Gilliam (1995)
- 15 *Edge of Eternity*
Don Siegel (1959)

I saw *Touch of Evil* several times during the seventies and eighties, but I hadn't realised how little I had seen of it until the restored print was shown at the Lumiere last year. In the print that has long been available in Australia, there is an abrupt cut from what proves to be halfway through the motel scene to what proves to be nearly the end of the film. This seems to have been a combination of a US distributor's and the Australian Censor's cuts. The restored material gives the film both a comprehensible story and some notion of why the viewer is supposed to feel sympathy for the truculent and dangerous police chief played by Welles. Print restoration has also given *Touch of Evil* back its dazzling black-and-white deep-shadowed 'look': that restless all-encompassing style of photography that marks Welles as the greatest of all film-makers.

Fearless, *Eating Raoul* and *Groundhog Day*, along with *The Shawshank Redemption* from 1996's list, give hope that well-scripted, well-acted films with interesting ideas can still slip through the Hollywood net. *Fearless* and *Groundhog Day* are splendid urban fantasies.

In *Fearless* the main character (played by Jeff Bridges) survives a plane crash and leads some of the other passengers to safety. He stays in touch with the others, but also finds his own view of life warped by the feeling that no harm can touch him. Weir's brilliance is to make the viewers feel that they are watching the world from the main character's skewed vantage point; it's his willingness to take a good idea, then extend it beyond our expectations.

Groundhog Day has at its centre the old SF idea: 'What if you had to repeat one day over and over again forever?' For about half the film Ramis and his script writer ring familiar changes on the theme, as Bill Murray (and we) go loony from being woken up every morning by Sonny and Cher on the radio. Then the interesting ideas begin to flow in surprising directions. The trouble is that it's hard to believe that any character played by Bill Murray is capable of self-improvement.

Eating Raoul plays on the nicest fantasy of all: there are some people who can nonchalantly get away with murder. Played by exuberant film-maker Paul Bartels and his equally exuberant wife Mary Woronov, the two main characters have huge fun luring unsuspecting sexual deviants to a flat, bonging them on the head (you'll never forget that

'bong!'), and purloining their possessions. It's all in the style. Well-edited and photographed, this is a film unencumbered by that sluggishness usually found in Hollywood 'comedies'. The supporting actors, who are unknown to me, have great fun being murdered, and the soundtrack is sprightly.

Norman Jewison began his career in the mid-sixties with quirky, interesting comedies featuring quirky, interesting Americans. He's done his share of blockbusters since, but in *In Country* (based on the novel by Bobbie Ann Mason) he returns to his real interests. Bruce Willis, in his best role, is a Vietnam War vet who can never stir himself to get rid of the shadows left in his mind by the War. His buddies suffer from a similar lethargy of the spirit. Emily Lloyd lights up the film as the energetic niece who decides to break the hold that Vietnam War memories have on these people. The family's journey to the Washington memorial wall, the final section of the film, I could watch many times. One question haunts me: why hasn't Emily Lloyd become a great star since 1989?

This original version of *Cape Fear*, starring Robert Mitchum and Gregory Peck, is about as tough as any American film I've seen. I don't know what filmgoers made of it in 1962, when the rest of American cinema was at its lowest ebb. Grainy, high-contrast black-and-white photography emphasises the physical and spiritual impact that wild man Mitchum makes on one family, seemingly with their collusion. No compromises here and no sentimentality: just pure cinema.

During the first half of 1997 I was sure that I would pick *Crumb* as my Best Film of the Year. As the year went by it sank down the list, but it remains with me as the best documentary I've seen. Robert Crumb is an offbeat, almost ghoulish figure, and his mother even stranger. Swigart deals not so much with Crumb's art as with the way it enables Crumb to sidestep our world into his own. Our world just has to come to terms with the Crumb family, but when it doesn't Crumb moves to Europe. The only films comparable to *Crumb* are the seemingly unscripted films of John Cassavetes.

What can I say about *Giant* that hasn't been said before by every reviewer and critic, except that I took an awful long time to see it? As part of the Astor Cinema's series of reconstructed prints, it stood up well on the giant screen. On late-night TV I'd already watched James Dean push over the ranks of wine racks and collapse drunken at the dinner that was supposed to celebrate his accomplishments. What I had forgotten is the unexpected impact of the penultimate scene in the roadside diner in which Rock Hudson defends the Mexican family. I had never seen Mercedes McCambridge's burning performance as the loving sister scorned. Watching her here and a few weeks later in her *Touch of Evil* cameo, I wondered why curators put on endless James Dean retrospectives but fail to resurrect the work of Mercedes McCambridge.

Thanks very much to Race Mathews for showing a few of us one night the nearest-to-complete version of *Gettysburg* that's available in Australia — the laser disc version. It has the Battle of Gettysburg itself, staged to take exactly the same time as the original, but most of the film is concerned with the wide range of motives and strategies found in a diverse group of soldiers. Maxwell spends equal time with the Unionists and the Confederates, but during the first half takes the viewpoint of Colonel Joshua Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels), the Union soldier who is left in charge of a raggle-taggle bunch of deserters, takes them on instead of

shooting them, then uses them to win the flank-saving action that saved the Union campaign.

In the Name of the Father runs pretty much true to its opening premise, i.e. that these Irish people living in Liverpool were not guilty of the IRA bombing they were blamed for, and that a great injustice was done to them. What is unexpected is that one of them (played by Daniel Day Lewis) is placed in the same cell as his father (played by Peter Postlethwaite) and the usual conflicts between sons and fathers must be fought out within this tiny space. Jim Sheridan is not limited by confined spaces; his camera has great flexibility, and many scenes are unexpectedly beautiful, especially the prisoners' tribute to the father.

The documentary team of Bob Connelly and Robin Anderson are not yet famous outside Australia, but in *Rats in the Ranks* we find them stretching the limits of the genre. They spent more than a year with all the members of an inner-suburban Sydney council. Traditional Laborites, but they all jockey for position, hoping to win the upcoming mayoral election. The best/worst man wins, of course, but the underhand deals by which he wins are recorded step by step by Connelly and Anderson. Incredibly, the councillors forget about the cameras that following them around, and reveal all.

At least one member of ANZAPA could not believe that I liked *Forrest Gump*. As I wrote to her: '*Forrest Gump* was saying a lot more than it seemed to be saying on its surface. And it *looks* so fabulous throughout, some of the best photography I've seen recently. I'm struggling to pin down where its cleverness lies. The film's all about the difference between conventional stupidity and moral stupidity. Forrest himself is the mirror that shows up the moral stupidity in others, but this works because he never sees himself as anything but an ordinary bloke leading a slightly odd life. In "real life", who most closely matches Forrest Gump? Not some slightly dim innocent, but super-talent Art Garfunkel, who one day took off from New York and ran all over America for the next two years. No wonder there's this strange feeling throughout the film that nothing in it is exaggerated; it might well be a documentary.'

Watching *The Fly* is a little hard on the stomach, but it does have a strange kind of dignity. How does one stay a human being when one finds oneself turning into an alien? Although the camera watches the disintegrating Jeff Goldblum coldly, somehow it also stays in sympathy with him. Cronenberg's whisper-quiet style and crisp editing help to remove melodrama from the situation and give it intensity. On the other hand, he has an odd fondness for stray body parts.

Twelve Monkeys has been Bruce Willis's triumph of the nineties. Gilliam's splendid SF movie, which puts the Willis character through hell, is true to its initial premises. Unfortunately, I've seen it only once, so I'm still not quite sure what I saw.

As I've already said elsewhere, movies from 'my' period have almost disappeared from TV. However, *Edge of Eternity* (no relationship to the 1980s British TV serial) turned up late at night. It's a crisp little Don Siegel thriller, set near and above the Grand Canyon, featuring people who investigate strange crimes in shutdown mines. Some nice aerial work here.

Favourite events

LEIGH EDMONDS

6 Elvira St, Palmyra WA 6157

Your 184 pages of *The Metaphysical Review* arrived a few weeks back. I'm a bit amazed to see myself on the cover of one of them. Well, it's not really me; that was over 20 years ago. These little things about the passage of time and the difference between who we were and who we become is always interesting to ponder on.

I suppose this is why so much of the material in the issues is about the big changes in life. The deaths of others are always key points for those still alive, especially when they are somebody close to us. Everybody's parents seem to be dying off, which probably says as much about the generation contributing to this fanzine as it does about anything else. I suppose it also tells us something about how, when we start to extend beyond the decent bounds of middle age we begin to realise that there is no escape from the entropic process.

You'll have to forgive me if I don't write a monster letter along the lines of many of those you have published. I have this great pile of paper sitting in front of me, the leftovers from a month of holidays in the eastern states (as we Westralians say) and a further month of not being too serious about keeping up with all the work that needs to be done. Everyone knows that the summer holidays really don't finish until the final ball has been bowled in the Adelaide Test Match. That was yesterday, so today I'm determined to get down to the business of making a little order out of a lot of chaos.

I had to hunt hard to see if I had written a loc to your previous issues, but finally I found myself lurking on a page there next to Don Ashby making lists of things and after the section where lots of other people have made more lists. I find no great enthusiasm for lists these days. I had to think about why this might be so for a while, but it occurs to me that in the past few years I haven't had the opportunity or the money to get involved in any one thing so much that I could make a lists of it. For example, in 1995 I bought so few CDs that it wouldn't even make up a Top Five. The same with books (novels, anyhow) and movies. Of course there are things that I could make lists of, but they would be more personal things like 'The best night out at dinner with friends' (not that we had much time for that in 1995) which are so subjective that we would have no points of comparison. Then the fun would go out of lists because we would have nothing to compare.

On the other hand, why not?

Leigh Edmonds' List of Most Memorable Recent Events

(This does not necessarily mean the best.)

- **1990:** A day-long oral history conference down at Harvey followed by a drive to stay overnight with Craig Hilton and Julia Bateman in Collie.
- **1991:** Handing in my PhD thesis.
- **1992:** The reception given by the City of Luzern in the Orangery for the Society of the History of Technology meeting.
- **1993:** Getting pulled up by a policeman in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, because I looked suspicious.
- **1994:** An evening drinking beer with a bunch of road workers at Fitzroy Crossing.
- **1995:** Lying in an operating theatre in the Eye and Ear

Hospital in Melbourne at midnight having my retina reattached and thinking how stfnal it all was.

You will notice that all but one of these memorable events occurred in some other place than Perth. I suppose this is because travelling is a bit memorable in itself, while staying at home and doing the mundane things of everyday life is likely to be less exciting.

(30 January 1996)

Those favourite old movies

TOM FELLER

Box 13626, Jackson MS 39236 USA

I agree with your preference for old movies, especially from the 1940s. On those rare occasions when I channel surf, I will stop if I come across an old black-and-white movie. Billy Wilder is one of my favourite directors, and *The Apartment* is my favourite of his movies. Other movies of his (*Some Like It Hot*, *Seven Year Itch*) are funnier, but I have always felt that this seamless combination of comedy and a serious story has never been equalled, except possibly by *All About Eve*.

I saw *All That Jazz* when it was first released, and was blown away. It was quite autobiographical. Bob Fosse had a non-fatal heart attack when he tried simultaneously to direct his ex-wife Glen Verdon in a musical called *Chicago* and edit the film *Lenny*. Ann Reinking's character is based on herself.

I just wrote a 1500-word article on *On the Beach*, the novel by Nevil Shute, for a reference work entitled *Masterplots II: Juvenile and Young Adult Literature*. Shute hated the movie Stanley Kramer made from his book. I guess you could consider him an Australian writer, since he spent the last ten years of his life there.

Basic Instinct made me grateful for refrigerators that come with ice makers.

I've never felt the need to have children. I would rather take the money they consume and spend it on travel and take the time they require and spend it on my fanac.

(23 January 1996)

Favourite SF and jazz

DOUG BARBOUR

11655-72 Ave, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 0B9 Canada

I taught a course on SF and Postmodernism this past term, so read or reread a lot for that — one of the most pleasurable classes I have had in years. The students, even those who had read little or no SF, were keen, interested and interesting, and more than willing to talk. Great stuff.

Here is the list:

- Iain M. Banks: *The Player of Games* (Little Brown)
- Philip K. Dick: *Ubik* (Vintage)
- William Gibson: *Neuromancer* (Berkley Jove)
- Gwyneth Jones: *White Queen* (Orb)
- Ursula K. Le Guin: *Fisherman of the Inland Sea* (HarperCollins)
- Rebecca Ore: *The Illegal Rebirth of Billy the Kid* (Tor)
- Tim Powers: *The Anubis Gates* (Berkley Jove)
- Joanna Russ: *The Female Man* (Beacon)

- Geoff Ryman: *The Child Garden* (A. B. Fenn)
- Bruce Sterling (ed.): *Mirrorshades* (Berkley Jove)
- Walter Jon Williams: *Aristoi* (Tor)
- Jack Womack: *Elvissey* (Tor)

I had to make a number of changes because of the speed with which popular paperbacks go out of print: dropped the Ore and the Williams, and changed the Womack to the also very powerful *Random Acts of Senseless Violence*; added Karen Joy Fowler's *Sarah Canary*. It was still a wonderful list, and all the students found at least a few of the books really terrific. We did look at a lot of the various definitions of postmodernism and postmodernity, and read the fiction against those various attempts to represent the conditions under which we live now and might live in the future.

I finally read *Only Begotten Daughter*, which I enjoyed a lot, even if I'm not quite as high on it as you are, perhaps. Also found Stephenson's new novel, *The Diamond Age*, or a *Young Lady's Visual Primer*, a real improvement on *Snow Crash*.

(12 March 1996)

CDs: I have a sale syndrome, where I go out and 'save' a whole bunch of money by buying a whole bunch of CDs, but then take forever to catch up with them, since I really need about a week on each new one before playing another. I also keep playing all the old favourites.

In the area of string quartets, I am especially pleased to have the complete Shostakovich (Brodsky Quartet). I listen to them a lot. I also got that terrific box of the Tchaikovsky quartets by the Borodin Quartet. I have a complete Britten but haven't played it yet — sometime this summer for sure.

In jazz, I keep picking up a lot of the great stuff from the past, as well as some good new stuff. My favest rave of late is the extraordinary pianist Jessica Williams. A small company in Calgary of all places (started by a rather rich dentist who loves jazz) is producing a number of her CDs. I buy them all. She played here before Christmas to promote a new solo CD. It was the third time I've seen her, and as in the other concerts, it was electric. She stands about 6'2", which explains a lot, such as how she manages to play the strings directly so much, even while maintaining a vamp with her other hand — she can do so sitting down. She really plays things differently every time, so even hearing the same pieces over again is always an adventure. Technically, she's the equivalent of about three other master pianists. She really explores the medium when she plays, and there's lots of soul and heart there too. She always does some Monk, and catches his humour. In fact, in her own writing you can hear that she learned from him. Her sound is like Monk through Bill Evans.

She's not the only pianist I admire. Fred Hersch is also terrific. After I caught him a couple of years ago, I kept my eyes out for his CDs, which are usually too expensive, but I've picked up three at a secondhand dealer. Perhaps the only 'out' gay jazz player, he recently did a wonderful CD of music by Billy Strayhorn (who was gay too).

On my favourite instrument, sax, I have a new album of older music by alto great Lee Konitz, and some great stuff from tenor saxist Joe Lovano. There are lots more. If you like the blues, one of the great mostly unknown albums, from the early 70s I think, is *Better Days*, a copy of which I finally found recently. And if Keb Mo's CDs have arrived in shops Down Under, I highly recommend

him. He was terrific at the folk festival last summer, a real charmer and a fine singer.

I forgot to mention Van Morrison's *A Night in San Francisco*, one of the great live albums.

(9 June 1997)

Favourite television shows

SIMON BROWN

16 Ulmarra Ave, Camden NSW 2570

The last couple of years have been very kind to me and Alison. Our first child — Edlyn Trelayne Tokley (Alison's last name) — was born 25 November 1994. She is running now and speaking (though in no language either of her parents understand). She is blessed/cursed with interminable curiosity, particularly for things like power sockets, sharp knives, hot stoves, strange dogs and high places. She has absolutely no sense of self-preservation.

Being parents has, of course, dramatically altered the way Alison and I lead our lives, but the transition was so natural we had no problem in adapting. We miss going to movies and out to restaurants, but not much else.

Alison returned to work as a history/English teacher six months after the birth, and is now teaching Year 12, a task she finds challenging and exciting. She has some very good students. I am constantly surprised at the level of understanding these seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds are expected to have of history and historiography. The essay questions they are set are as difficult as those set me in second year at university. (Twenty years ago! gasp!)

I have moved jobs twice since 1993. First to CityRail, where I worked as one of their media officers, and then back to the University of Western Sydney, this time in the Vice-Chancellor's Office, just in time to help fight the proposed cuts to higher education funding; sadly, at this stage it looks as if we've lost the fight.

In 1995 I signed a contract with HarperCollins Australia for my first two novels. The first — *Privateer* — was published in April 1996. The second, *Winter*, is scheduled for publication in 1997, and I'm now working feverishly on the third draft. Everyone expected me to be over the moon with excitement because of the deal, but instead what I felt was huge relief — that after 25 years of writing for publication I had finally managed to sell a novel. To paraphrase a former US president, I felt like I'd crapped a pineapple.

Life in Camden itself becomes increasingly interesting. It is now Australia's fastest-growing town. When we first moved here in 1990 its population was around 13,000. Last year it reached 31,000. Some predict it will reach over 100,000 early in the new century. Camden now refers to the original town, its surrounding flood plain and a dozen or so nearby hamlets. Nevertheless, while the region has room for all these people it does not have the necessary infrastructure — roads, hospitals, shops, public transport, etc. It is still a beautiful place to live, but for how much longer?

Good books I have read recently include *Alien Shores* (ed. Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch), *Wormwood* and *Intimate Knowledge of the Night* (Terry Dowling), *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (Angus Wilson), *Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede* (Bradley Denton), *Brainchild* (George Turner), *Seven-Tenths* (James Hamilton-Paterson) and *The Vicar of Sorrows* (A. N.

Wilson).

I enjoy reading the lists you and your correspondents come up with, but one list I cannot remember seeing is for

Favourite television shows

so I thought I'd submit mine. I've made no distinction between drama, documentary, serial, one-off, comedy, etc. Everything's lumped together, and in no particular order. One thing I noticed while compiling the list is that many of my favourites from my teens, such as *Star Trek*, are no longer among those shows I would go out of my way to watch, whereas others would still make me drop everything (except Edlyn!) to catch, such as *Dr Who*. So, for what it's worth . . .

- *Dr Who* (all the Doctors, from Hartnell to McGahan)
- *Edge of Darkness*
- *The Singing Detective*
- *Ancient Lives*
- *Testament*
- *The Seven Wonders of the World*
- *Life on Earth*
- *The Living Planet*
- *Trials of Life*
- *Rumpole of the Bailey*
- *Minder* (the first five seasons)
- *An Angel at My Table* (the full version, not the cutdown one Campion released for the cinema)
- *Elizabeth I* (not sure of the title here, but Glenda Jackson played Good Queen Bess)
- *Arthur, King of the Britons* (again, not sure of the title, but Oliver Tobias played the title role)
- *The King's Outlaw* (Does anyone else remember this? During school holidays in the time before colour TV, it always played just before *Dr Who* on the afternoon on the ABC. It was a French-Canadian production.)
- *Red Dwarf* (good science fiction as well as outrageously funny)
- *Frontline*
- *Northern Exposure* (especially the first two years)
- *Babylon 5* (a real sleeper, but it just got better and better)
- *The Dismissal*
- *Wandjina* (another one whose title I'm not sure of, but this ABC series for kids was made in the sixties and scared the hell out of me the first time I saw it)
- *All Creatures Great and Small* (so, call me soppy . . .)
- *Ulysses: the Greatest Hero of Them All* (told just the way I'm sure the Hellenic Greeks themselves would have heard it — a brilliant job by Tony Robinson)
- *I, Claudius*
- *Nicholas Nickleby* (again, not sure of the full title, but basically the stage play put on by the RSC, I think)
- *Monty Python's Flying Circus*
- *Not the Nine o'Clock News*
- *Brides of Christ*
- *The Outer Limits*
- *The First Eden*
- *The Barchester Chronicles*
- *Captain Scarlet*
- *Survivors*
- *UFO*
- *Christianity* (not sure of the title, but presented by Bamber Gascoigne — and is that how you spell his bloody name?)
- *Pride and Prejudice*

● *A Voyage Around My Father*

Well, it's a bit of a grab bag, but some patterns are apparent. Overwhelmingly British; anything by David Attenborough and John Romer. Lots of SF, history and nature/science documentaries. Lots of 1960s kid shows (some of which, like *Star Trek*, I probably would hate now if I saw them again).

Any agreements, strong agreements, additions?

How about some other lists? Favourite computer games? Favourite album covers (for those of us old enough to have known what an album cover was)? Favourite television and movie themes? Any takers?

(9 August 1996)

* You've left me scratching my head. I don't watch much television except for movies. The best things I've watched in the last ten years include *Inspector Morse*, *Inspector Wexford*, *Dalziel and Pascoe* . . . and not a lot else. *Edge of Darkness* in the mid-eighties. Andrew Denton's *The Money or the Gun* in the late eighties. I'd have to go back to the 1960s for my two favourites: *The Avengers* (Diana Rigg series) and *The Prisoner* (McGoohan), especially as I saw them although our family did not own a TV set. I'll leave TV lists to others — after all, many fans publish entire fanzines about TV shows. *

The best and worst of times

ROBERT MAPSON

PO Box 7087, Cloisters Square WA 6850

The People Issue (*TMR* 22/23) strikes me as an important sociological document, where the resonances and the interrelations between the articles and the letters, between the memories and the impressions, form a synergistic strength. I have no connection with Melbourne or Sydney fandom (nor little interest in the internecine politics of same), but the recollections of this issue were engrossing and illuminating. Without disparaging the contents, it was almost like an anthropological investigation of some secret society. Rather than being a dry, intellectual investigation, however, these writings are set apart by the emotion, the feelings contained therein, which are just as, if not more, important than the facts themselves. The tales in this issue are a fugue: different themes, playing in counterpoint and in harmony, altering their keys, amending their prominence, but always part of the development of the greater composition.

This issue has an awful lot of sadness at the passing of loved things — places, buildings, people — but also hope at the continuation of things. Being a pessimist, I know which side my vote falls on. I was reading Terry Frost's recollections of Tasmania while the news of the Port Arthur massacre and siege was on the radio. Strange conjunction, indeed! I hold little hope for any change in the Human Condition. We are too embroiled in that very situation, and it is too difficult to step outside it and view it from some Archimedian leverage point. Brian Aldiss says all this sort of thing much better in his recent novels, such as *Somewhere East of Life*. (An irrelevant aside: that little log in the title for Terry's report on page 49 is a croissant, isn't it? It looks awfully like something the local dogs leave in my front garden . . .)

The letter from Casey June Wolf was extremely moving. This is the darkness and the light, the pain and

the hope that I refer to above, brought bleeding into the open and thrust into the light. To write of such issues is, I think, cathartic, but I also realise from a close friend who has been, and still is, enduring similar issues how extremely difficult it is to talk of these things so openly, and it is extremely brave of Ms Wolf to do this.

The memorials to those who have died are important. As Marie Maclean wrote in her letter to you: 'It really helps to read people's fond memories.' What I hate about death is how it takes away so much, not just the person who has died, but also their memories, their aspirations, their achievements. Even those few things left in the memories of those remaining (even written memories such as those in *TMR*, even biographies or autobiographies — because even these can never completely contain the essence that was the person) are eventually lost in the dark backward abyss of time. This is the tragedy that is the ontological despair central to *Blade Runner*: the fragility of memory, the ephemerality of dreams, the ultimate annihilating entropy of existence.

My mother died at the end of November last year. It hurt, and it helped as well, to read some of the letters in this issue of *TMR*. She had Parkinson's Disease, and I have a lot of sympathy for David Lake and his wife, and the concerns he expresses in his letter. My mother had been ill for many years, and had been in a nursing home for the last two years, but there were complications with a declining mental state as well. The changes in her were frightening. It was as if she had died years ago but some antinomic phildickian force had taken her body over in those last years. Her eyes became like those of a lost and frightened girl; like somebody trapped in an incomprehensible situation. Eventually she had a stroke and died a week later.

On to *TMR* 24/25, and a whole plethora of lists, including my own lists for 1995! On the radio recently an anthropologist was speculating that, even though we live in a technologically advanced society, our behaviour patterns are still those hardwired into the brain in Palaeolithic times. Hence, as hunter-gatherers, we still go out shopping, for instance, or collect stamps, or (if we have the luck to be a J. Paul Getty III) collect great art works. I wonder if this is also reflected in the need to make lists? I think there may be a PhD thesis in all this somewhere . . .

I've often seen Keith Roberts' books on the shelves, but they never seemed to interest me, so I've always passed them by. On the strength of your recommendation, I went out and bought *The Grain Kings*. I can't believe I've been missing out on this author all this time! Brilliant stuff. This includes 'The Passing of the Dragons', but also 'Weihnachtsabend', set in an alternative reality where the German Reich won the Second World War and Britain (no longer Great) is thoroughly Teutonicised. What makes the story so good, though, is not the frisson of familiar things seen through a distorting lens, but the unnervingly accurate study of the relationships between power and violence, sadism and love. I haven't finished the book yet, but will be looking out for his other works. Has Roberts published anything since the late seventies, though?

* Yes. I've bought them, but didn't have time to read them before writing my long essay on Roberts, to be published in the next *SF Commentary*. *

Favourite books of 1995

- Peter Ackroyd: *Blake*
- Brian Aldiss: *Remembrance Day*
- Jorge Luis Borges: *Selected Poems 1923–1967*
- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *Wind, Sand and Stars*
- Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*
- George Herbert: *The Works of George Herbert*
- Russell Johnson with Steve Cox: *Here on Gilligan's Isle*
- John Moyne and Coleman Barks: *Open Secret: Poetry of Rumi*
- Graham Phillips and Martin Keatman: *The Shakespeare Conspiracy*
- Oliver Sacks: *An Anthropologist on Mars*

I've listed the books in alphabetical order, but the Ackroyd biography of William Blake would still have topped the list. There have been many books written about this individual visionary and rebel, but only a couple of standard biographies in the 170 years since his death: that of Alexander Gilchrist, which fails on a number of points but is valuable in having been written by a contemporary and associate of Blake, and that of Mona Wilson in 1927 and revised in 1948. What does Ackroyd add? As the author books such as *Hawksmoor*, he adds much: a late twentieth-century sensibility, and also a real sense of place, of the streets and buildings Blake frequented and which figure so strongly in his art and poetry.

Brian Aldiss just seems to write better and better novels all the time — how does he do it? *Remembrance Day* is a novel in the 'Squire Quartet', which started with *Life in the West*, a sequence linked more by recurring concerns and themes than by recurring characters, though these appear also. This is a novel of cause and effect, predestination and freewill, demonstrating the forces affecting our lives and our relationships. We already know the outcome: four people are killed by an IRA bomb (though we're not quite sure which four until the end), and the novel backtracks in time and follows the circumstances leading up to just those people being present at the denouement. Aldiss is a wordsmith (and I mean that as a compliment), a humourist, a pessimist, an observer, a speculator. What more could you want in an author?

I've been looking for the Jorge Luis Borges volume for a long time. When I started reading him, this volume disappeared from all the bookshelves of all the bookshops in Perth, which seems to be a perfect Borgesque thing to happen. Borges' poetry is of the deceptively simple kind: easy to read but with a deep understanding of the form and of metaphor. As would be expected, the poems cover a vast range of subjects: Home, Poe, Borges' ancestors, chess, history.

The Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is a new translation of this important work, the translator (William Rees) using the definitive, and shorter version of the work, as compared to the longer version translated by de Saint-Exupéry's friend, Lewis Galantière. While I would not wish to be without that translation, this new one reads well, and more concisely. Partly autobiographical, partly philosophical, the book tells of the pioneering days of air flight, of the challenge of man against the elements (I hope I'm not making this sound like a *Boy's Own* adventure, because it is not — de Saint-Exupéry, being French, uses his subject matter to explore the nature of mankind, rather

as Conrad did slightly earlier in terms of the sea). This strikes me as closer to what first attracted me to science fiction than most stuff being published these days with that appellation.

I bought a copy of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* after watching a documentary on the subject on SBS, narrated, very appropriately, I thought, by Leonard Cohen. It's interesting to compare the subject matter, its visions and colours, its demons and temptations, with those reported by Westerners involved in Near Death Experiences. This is a very readable translation also. The message of the book is not just about death, though, but about all the transitions we constantly undergo in our lives.

I've always enjoyed the poetry of the seemingly incestuous world of the Elizabethan poets, where everyone seems to be a cousin of everyone else, and where there was still a belief in the Great Chain of Being, in an order and purpose to the world. Herbert's hits, so to speak, are works like 'The Pulley' or 'Easter Wings', but, as with any artist, these tend to obscure his other works, which are just as worthwhile.

As any child of the sixties, or any cable TV addict will know, Russell Johnson was The Professor in *Gilligan's Island* (but he was also in *Attack of the Crab Monsters* and *This Island Earth*), so who better to co-author this look at one of the greatest of sitcoms? This is an unashamed trip down Nostalgia Highway, with behind-the-scenes stories, an episode guide, and lots of trivia.

Rumi lived from 1207 to 1273. He was a Sufi — a member of the mystic arm of Islam, but his poetry is just as relevant today in the West. He writes of common-day things: love, wine, roses, the beloved. The poems are multilayered, simultaneously speaking of the devotional love for Allah, or is it the wholly secular love for a beautiful woman? Does it matter which it is? Is there any difference? In Rumi's world, the answer is no — all love is transcendental and intoxicating.

The Shakespeare Conspiracy is the latest in a long, long line of books arguing that Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare, or that a whole plethora of other people were in fact Shakespeare. I'm not sure I accept all the arguments put forward in this volume (the problem as I see it is twofold: the length of time that has passed since the events described mean many documents, and certainly all the people involved, have disappeared, and secondly, I don't have access to the documents that are quoted and therefore have no idea as to their accuracy or how selective the authors are being), but it does read as a very good real-life detective story. What does come across strongly, however, is the almost total separation of the Stratford Shakespeare (corn merchant and businessman) and the London Shakespeare (actor and playwright) so that, apart from a minor reference in his will to some of his fellow playwrights, they could have been totally separate people. The author's answer is that Shakespeare was employed as a spy. Is this true? You decide . . .

Oliver Sacks, that literate and compassionate neurologist, is back with another book, looking at seven case studies this time. 'Case studies' sounds too dull, however. These are personal tales of people, fellow human beings, who are caught in some other world, and how they are none the less *whole* human beings. The title essay, for instance, tells the story of an autistic anthropologist who is nonetheless successful in her career, and reads like something between Ursula Le Guin and Franz Kafka. If only all doctors were this

understanding of the fact that their patients are still individuals with their own needs, their own sense of self, their own method of expression.

Favourite CDs of 1995

- John Cale: *Paris 1919* (Reprise)
- Hawkwind: *Hall of the Mountain Grill* (EMI)
- Hawkwind: *Tales from Atom Henge* (Virgin Universal)
- Garrison Keillor: *Gospel Birds* (Highbridge) (3 CDs)
- Garrison Keillor: *Lake Wobegon USA* (Highbridge) 4 CDs
- Jackie Leven: *The Mystery of Love is Greater than the Mystery of Death* (Cooking Vinyl)
- Roy Orbison: *Mystery Girl* (Virgin)
- Roy Orbison: *The Golden Decade* (Castle) (3 CDs)
- Rautavaara: *Cantus Articus* (Catalyst)
- Sibelius: *Complete Symphonies, Vols. 1 and 2* (Philips) (2 sets of 2 CDs)

A lot of my CD buying in 1995 was replacing what I had once on LP, now that the record companies seem to be reissuing a lot of their back catalogues (and sometimes not even at full price — make sure you read that comment in a sarcastic tone!)

The John Cale represents a number of his albums that I bought. This one falls somewhere in the middle of his two styles, that of the overt (rather paranoically acid-wasted) rocker, and the serious composer.

I'm not afraid now of the dark anymore
And many mountains now are molehills
Back in Berlin they're all well fed
I don't care
People always bored me anyway.
'Half Past France'

The two Hawkwind albums represent different periods of their output. *Hall of the Mountain Grill* has always impressed me as one of their best early (psychedelic, pre- Calvert — 1974, to be exact) works. *Tales from Atom Henge* is actually a very generous compilation of the work the band did with Robert Calvert before his death, when they became more story oriented in their songs and their sound became more refined. Robert Calvert gained much of his inspiration from SF authors such as Roger Zelazny and Hermann Hesse. Anyway, any band that credits a dancer on their albums, in all seriousness, can't be all bad.

Gospel Birds replaces my cassette copy. The stories on *Lake Wobegon, USA* were new to me. These new stories seem to be from the *American Radio Company* shows. It's good to know that Lake Wobegon is still there, and the epistles from the sedate town continue. Garrison Keillor has an automatic placement in my Best Of lists.

Jackie Leven fronted one of my favourite bands, Doll by Doll, back in the late seventies and early eighties. No one else ever seemed to hear of them, and they disappeared from sight after four albums or so (and if anyone has copies of those albums, I'd love to get copies). Now he's back as a solo artist. The liner notes go some way to explaining his long absence, with a tale of being attacked in the street and losing his singing voice as a result, of heroin addiction and alcoholism, etc. etc. Leven has gone back to his roots in Scotland. Doll by Doll was always a literary band (doing a song based on a poem of Anna Akhmatova, for instance), and this album continues that trend, mixing Leven's work with settings of poetry by

Kabir, Osip Mandelstam and Antonio Machado. Robert Bly, American poet and the author of the bestselling *Iron John*, also appears on the album. With the cover being Arnold Böcklin's *The Isle of the Dead*, and quotes from Rainer Maria Rilke and others, you know this is not an average rock album.

When I was a farm boy
working in snow
putting up fences
in shadow of skiddaw

it was cold in the morning
and my hands couldn't feel
but the hammers kept raining down
on wet posts of steel

and the sky made me frightened
with shape and with sound
configuration
to menace the ground.
'Farm Boy'

1995 was also the year I 'discovered' Roy Orbison. Shame on me for taking so long. This was prompted by the local ABC radio station playing 'You Got It', and the song grew on me, so I bought *Mystery Girl*, and then the compilation covering 1960–69 was just too tempting . . .

Well, here we finally are with the classical stuff! Einojuhani Rautavaara is a contemporary Finnish composer, somewhat in the minimalist vein, but retaining a shifting tonal structure, and enough creativity and independence to keep him interesting. This album contains *Cantus Articus*, deeply desolate and moving Concerto for Birds (on tape) and Orchestra, as well as a String Quartet and a Symphony. A fine introduction to his work. The artists are the Leipzig Radio Symphony orchestra conducted by Max Pommer, and the Sirius String Quartet.

I cheated with No. 10 on my list, because it's actually two separate CD sets. This is a reissue on Philips' mid-price Duo label of the 1970s cycle of the Sibelius symphonies by the Boston Symphony orchestra under Sir Colin Davis. One of the finest complete cycles of these works — not necessarily the only one, but indispensable to any committed Sibelian, and more than simply recommendable to anyone seeking a single set of the symphonies, along with the Violin Concerto (with Salvatore Accardo), *Finlandia*, *Tapiola* and *The Swan of Tuonela*.

(29 April–6 June 1996)

Oliver Sacks vis à vis the death of SF

I read less and less 'SF' each year (or the stuff that's filed under that category on the bookshop shelves anyway — if I had access to a time machine and could go back in time to eliminate one person before he or she became famous it wouldn't be Hitler, it'd be Tolkien — every person and their canine seems to be churning out 'Fantasy' epics by the boxload — plot by numbers and characterisation that is less than one-dimensional) but I appreciate Sacks for the same reasons I started reading SF: there is a sense of wonder in his works, a perceptual shift where the assumptions of our world, and our method of interacting with and interpreting that world, are called into question and other realities are posited instead (it's also important

to remember that Sacks is that rarity among clinicians: a doctor who actually cares about his patients, rather than viewing them as some carrier that simply brings the disease into the surgery for treatment and can be ignored thereafter).

What Sacks relates about the gifted autistic Temple Grandin parallels what Dick was writing about in regard to androids: Temple Grandin is a machine that is posing as human, that must observe other humans and copy them in order to blend in with them. I don't want to imply that she is evil (I heard an interview with her on the local ABC radio recently in which she showed herself as an articulate, interesting person, which is more than I can say about a lot of people), but that she allows us a way to view (and re-view) *ourselves* rather than take our being for granted. I'm not an expert on autism, but isn't what Temple Grandin has done, observing and replaying interactions so that she blends in with the crowd, what we all do to some extent?

Oliver Sacks' latest book, *The Island of the Colour-Blind*, demonstrates what a gifted author he is. I mean, a book about cycads, and it's actually interesting. Okay, it's about other things as well, but cycads are one of the major themes in it.

The burglary industry

I didn't actually lose *all* my CDs, but did lose about two-thirds. The person(s) responsible returned for more after the first robbery (both occurred during school holidays, and — after I installed security screens and locks — they simply smashed a window the second time. The hole was small enough to indicate that it was children who committed the crime, and I have these bizarre images of some kid walking into a pawn shop with the complete BIS Sibelius pretending they're his. (I'm very angry at the existence of pawn shops — remove the market and there's no longer any point or purpose to the crime).

The TV, video, stereo, computer etc. were ignored, (though the second time — when I disturbed them in the house when I returned home — they'd started to take the plugs out of the back of the computer) in favour of the CDs, and stuff like watches, sunglasses and so on.

The police were next to useless. Every time I'd contact them they'd keep asking me if I'd sent them a list of what had been stolen. I'd respond 'Yes', but they'd ask for it again. I sent the list to them three times. They basically gave the impression of being uninterested and, given their track record on burglaries, this is unsurprising. WA has recently introduced 'three strikes and you're in' legislation: if a person is convicted of home burglary, he or she is supposed to automatically receive a prison sentence. Given that the police can't even locate most first-time burglars, the legislation, however draconian, is rather pointless. The local paper's Crimewatch column soon after the burglaries boasted that police had recently recovered \$2000 worth of stolen goods that month. That's less than a quarter of what was stolen from me alone, never mind all the other burglaries.

The insurance company wasn't much help either. It fulfilled the terms of the insurance agreement (eventually) but kept giving me conflicting instructions (to the point where I had to write and state I'd no longer accept any directions from insurance assessor unless they were received by me in writing so that there was proof), and have now doubled my premium (this was based on the

'replacement' cost of items in my house, including my extensive book collection, regardless of the fact that the majority of them are out of print and hence irreplaceable anyway). One of these days I'll sit down and work out how long it will be before they get back the cost of the insurance settlement through the raised premiums. The only positive comment I have about them is that they took so long to settle that when I was burgled a second time there was nothing new for them to take. Hopefully, the increased lack of return for their efforts and the increased difficulty in getting in and out got the message across to them that it wasn't worthwhile coming back again.

After the first burglary I was talking to the owner of the classical music shop where I get most of my CDs (if you're ever in Perth, drop into the Gramophone and tell Jim I sent you) and it was quite clear that CD theft was widespread around Perth (though not necessarily organised) and the implication was that they went over East to be sold (so if anyone you don't know offers you cheap CDs tell them to get lost). He also mentioned that insurance companies only go for the cheapest quote (i.e. the five-dollar labels will win out every time). When I was talking to the insurance assessor, I mentioned that I expected the CDs to be replaced with the same, or comparable performances. He looked at me blankly and appeared quite surprised. I can only say I'm glad I mentioned it, or I'd have all these crappy poorly recorded performances.

A great deal of the CDs have been replaced, often with the same performances, but some are still missing, and will remain so (the Beecham *Harold in Italy*, the Karajan *Pelléas and Melisande* of Sibelius, the collected recordings of Jacques Brel, etc. etc.). Others have been replaced with performances other than those I originally had. The most annoying thing is that a lot of works have been recoupled since I bought them: some pieces are no longer available; others are coupled with works I'm not interested in.

As you say, you look at your possessions in a different light after being burgled. They are 'unprotectable' (the owner of the Gramophone told me about one house that was burgled by having a vehicle hooked up to the front door, and ripping the front door off — no matter what you do, if someone wants what you've got they can get it; all you can do is make it harder for them and hope they'll go to the next house). I still buy CDs, but far fewer than before. I guess you have to take a Buddhist view: they are only possessions and, as such, ephemeral, not as important as the self, though I have to admit the choice of CDs reflects the self; by losing the CDs my sense of self has been directly violated.

What am I left with? Things are almost back to normal, but my sense of security has been shattered and I don't think that will ever be restored. The amount of work and effort caused by the thefts was enormous compared to what the burglars did: police, insurance, obtaining quotes, obtaining replacements, installing security (twice, since I increased the security again after the second theft) and I have a terrible feeling that, if the costs of my time, the police, the insurance company, the loss assessor, the CD shop that replaced my CDs, the money spent by pawn shops, etc. were added up and multiplied by the numbers of thefts across Australia it would be seen to be a multi-million dollar industry.

Radio

I watch about four or five hours of television a week. This must make me a television junkie in comparison to you! I prefer listening to the radio, mainly the ABC, but I'm dismayed by some of the decisions it makes. I visualise a board meeting where the board members workshop through the worst things they could do to the ratings and, through some terrible error (at least, I'm hoping it was an error), these ideas are mistaken by a junior executive for holy writ from the CEO. I used to listen on Sunday nights to *The Coodabeen Champions*: a wonderful substitute for Garrison Keillor (but a totally different brand of humour). I guess it's cheaper to pay one announcer than a whole gaggle. I wonder where they got Frank Crook from. I also used to listen on Saturday nights until the ABC axed *Sentimental Journey* (and who else in radioland is going to feature that period music?). I was so angry I wrote my One and Only Letter of Complaint to the ABC, and to my local Member of Parliament. The MP is a Liberal, and didn't even bother replying. The ABC at least replied, with a response that basically said '*Fait accompli*, yah boo sucks!', assuring me the new program would be similar to *Sentimental Journey* (liars) and more wide ranging, featuring talk as well as music. (I didn't hear much evidence of the music.) Frank Crook instead of John West? I can imagine the same board saying 'Macca on Sunday? Keep him! The man can't talk and hasn't a clue what's going on! We need more people like that!' *Music for Pleasure* has disappeared as well. A couple of years ago the line-up of the local ABC station was revamped: for some reason the breakfast and evening announcers were swapped, another announcer was sacked (although this was rescinded after a public outcry), and a fourth announcer resigned in protest. I hope the ABC executives don't own guns; they've only got two feet to shoot.

I listened to Radio National a good deal (*The Science Show*, *Letter from America*, Terry Lane's *In the National Interest*, which is essential listening, Philip Adams occasionally, *The Planet* and, of course, *The Goons*), but it's still a fairly narrow focus. I turned on the Books Program the other day. The program was about an Aboriginal writer/editor whose book had recently published. Not that I'm saying this isn't a worthy subject, but when I switched over to the BBC World Service it happened also to have a books program, which happened to mention that a number of publishers, including Allen & Unwin and Penguin, have decided to reduce their publication of Australian novels by 50 per cent. Surely this is a Significant Event to the Australian literary scene? Yet I had to hear about it from a *British* source.

Because of the uninteresting nature of local radio I bought a shortwave radio. The BBC has been broadcasting longer than anyone now, and its service is just so much more professional and interesting than the ABC.

(29 July 1997)

Are burglars more intelligent than they seem? Just as your computer wasn't taken, the people who burgled me didn't touch my television, which doesn't work properly any more, and which it would have been nice to replace. As to the suggestion that they have shopping lists, I wouldn't doubt it. It certainly goes on in car theft: if a spare part is needed for a car, steal the whole car, then sell the parts (which is why older cars are stolen so often; the parts are harder to obtain).

As to what I do for a living — not very much at the

moment, having joined the ranks of the de-employed (or whatever the currently terminology is). Until recently I was in the employ of Senator Jocelyn Newman (only vicariously; I was working for the Department of Social Security) but I'd gotten to where I was in a position where I no longer enjoyed the work (when I was working on the counter interviewing clients — sorry, we're supposed to call them customers now — I enjoyed the variety, but I'd worked my way up the ranks to where I was a section supervisor, dealing with staff squabbles, abusive clients, resource cutbacks, etc. and it just wasn't fun anymore), where staff were being made redundant and not replaced, and when they offered me redundancy as well, I decided it was time to leave. Rats and the sinking ship, so to speak. As to your comments about the social scene in Australia at the moment, the toilets at the office had become a haven for people to shoot up heroin and frequently overdose on it (it's so convenient, you can drop in your form and shoot up at the same time). Senior management refused to close the toilets, so they put in a sharps disposal unit instead (I ask myself, do I expect to go into a government office anywhere and use a toilet there? No, but I obviously see things differently.) This also is not part of something I wanted to be involved in. (I should also mention that two days after I finished a junkie finally managed to do what so many before had regularly tried, and died there.) I still have a part-time job on the weekends teaching horse riding, so technically I'm not actually unemployed by the Bureau of Statistics definition (but try to convince the masses about that). So, while I've spent about \$3000 on upgrading security, finances won't allow any further additions at this stage.

The Internet has many uses other than for home-page publishing, not the least of which is the ability to order books (which I've done) and CDs (which I haven't tried yet) directly from America and the United Kingdom. Much quicker than ordering them locally, and a far wider selection.

I was reading a piece in *The Australian's Review of Books* about Philip Hodgins. It mentions that he survived nine years longer than predicted. Not much, maybe, in the cosmic scheme of things, but . . .

I'm reminded of a hospital chaplain who frequently dealt with terminal patients. She was asked the Big Question about What the Point of Suffering was — why people should have to undergo such awful pain. Basically she fudged the question, saying we shouldn't ask what the reason for the pain was, but what we could gain in spite of the suffering. Objection, Your Honour, the witness is not answering the question posed.

It's situations like Philip Hodgins' and Ian Gunn's that show there's no God, or if He/She exists, He/She is an incompetent artisan. Why, when He/She is omnipotent and omnipresent, did He/She make such a *shoddy* world? I demand to see the warranty. The idea that you have to undergo years of failing health and pain just to enter the Kingdom of Heaven strikes me as not a little vindictive and petty-minded. *Eloi, eloi lama sabachthani*. Even Jesus doubted it, and he had a better insight into these things than a lot of us, and certainly more than hospital chaplains.

(14 August 1997)

Best books of 1997

These books were first read by me in 1997. Many were published before. They are presented here in no particular

order of merit.

- **Don Marquis: *Archyology: The Long lost Tales of Archy and Mehitabel***
Any books that warrants a Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data listing of 'cockroaches — poetry' deserves a place on my shelf! Archy (the cockroach) is the transmigrated soul of a *vers libre* poet, who taps out poems at night on Don Marquis' typewriter by jumping on the keys with his head. Mehitabel (the alley cat, who claims to have once been Cleopatra) is his more worldly and often pregnant alter ego. Together the two wryly look at life from the underside (so to speak). The two have appeared before in a couple of volumes of poetry; this volume publishes some works found among Marquis' papers after his death.
- **Alan Garner: *The Voice that Thunders***
Following his twelve-year silence with the publication of *Strandloper* last year (now available in paperback) comes this first volume of essays from Garner, and it provides a lot of background information to the man: family history; his interest in local archaeology; the abiding streams of place and family history (the cover depicts a rock carving from Alderley Edge, where Garners have lived for hundreds of years, made by the author's great-great-grandfather); award speeches; and mental illness and myth.
- **James Wright: *Above the River: The Complete Poems***
I had to order this from overseas. Wright strides the poetic ground somewhere between Robert Frost and Sherwood Anderson, but that does little to acknowledge his distinctly personal voice. Wright's poetry is deceptive: it seems, at its best, like simple description, but is in fact intensely metaphorical and imagistic. Wright left behind his smalltown beginnings and working-class family, but they are never far from his poetry. 'The human soul was threshed out like maize in the endless/granary of defeated actions, of mean things that happened.'
- **James Hamilton: *Arthur Rackham: A Life with Illustrations***
Just what it says, really. A biography of one of the greatest illustrators ever, along with profuse reproductions of his work. Goblins, fairies, trees that twist and come alive; everywhere the sense that the world we perceive hides fearful things. Rackham was also a supreme master of line and nature studies.
- **James Park Sloan: *Jerzy Kosinski***
The other biography in this year's list. This one tells the story of Kosinski, forced to change his name and hide his Jewishness during the Holocaust, a Polish emigré who married into the richest echelons of society, a trained sociologist, a CIA tool (?), a haunter of sex clubs, an intellectual, a man who enjoyed wandering the streets in disguise, and an award-winning author of confronting novels that describe and reinvent his life. Sloan describes the conflicting aspects of his individual, a modern Conrad cut loose from his Polish homeland, who attempted to understand his life through his writing, and the sense of failure that prompted his suicide.
- **Eric Morecombe and Ernie Wise: *The Morecombe and Wise Jokebook***
In its way, a little classic. They don't write them like this anymore. (Thank God for that. Boom boom!)

Best CDs of 1997

Much of 1997 was spent replacing CDs from the Burglaries of 1996. Nonetheless, there were a few new CDs I purchased, of which the following stand out (in no particular order, again):

- **Rautavaara: *Angel of Light* (Helsinki Philharmonic Orch. cond. Leif Segerstam) (Ondine)**
Angels seem to be very fashionable at the moment (a bumper sticker seen today: 'Baby on board protected by angels'). Maybe it's the millennium or something. Rautavaara has been fascinated by angels for the last twenty years, and his work is certainly not 'New Age'. (Q: What do you get if you play New Age music backwards? A: New Age music.) The angels Rautavaara is interested in are Jungian archetypes, symbols rather than ethereal mother figures. *Angel of Light* is his seventh symphony, treading the line between harmony and atonality. It is accompanied by *Annunciations*, a rather more severe work. This is also an example of a professionally presented and packaged CD; something not often seen.
 - **Sibelius: *Kajanus Conducts Sibelius* (Various orchestras) (Finlandia)**
Apart from a (apparently spurious) single recording of Sibelius conducting, this is as close as we can get to the man himself, in these contemporary recordings made in the early 1930s. The three CDs contain all of Robert Kajanus's recordings of Sibelius (except for the minor *Finnish Jager March*) in performances and transfers that are better than many of the recordings available today. As an introduction to Sibelius's work, this is highly recommended.
 - **Bach, etc. arranged Kempff: *English Suite No. 1 etc.* (William Kempff) (DG Galleria)**
Here's a completely 'unauthentic' disc: Bach played on the piano! Transcriptions of Bach, Handel and Gluck! *Mein Gott!* Yet Kempff's unerring artistry saves the day (and the fact that he knew what he was doing: he was a (minor) composer himself). Since his death, Kempff seems to have been largely ignored. His style was not pyrotechnical, but every note is carefully placed and the line is sure throughout all the works.
 - **Flanders and Swann: *The Complete Flanders and Swann* (Michael Flanders and Donald Swann) (EMI) (3 CDs)**
The duo's famous LPs, as well as some more obscure material. Soon after the Second World War, there seems to have been a renaissance of British humour (*ITMA*, *The Goons*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again*, *Morecombe and Wise*) which has not been paralleled since, and here is some of the best of that humour: witty, multilingual, intellectual, satirical and musical, including a copiously illustrated booklet and presenting the CDs with their original covers, this is a set that sees some thought having gone into its presentation. A treasure.
- Mud, mud, glorious mud,
Nothing quite like it for cooling the blood!
So follow me, follow me, down to the hollow,
And there let us wallow in GLOO-ORRI-OUUUSS
MUD!
- **Sibelius: *Symphonies 1 and 4* (Lahti Symph. Orch. cond. Osmo Vanska) (BIS)**
BIS has already produced a complete Sibelius

symphony cycle, so it seems strange that it has embarked on another one — until you listen to these performances. Vanska has won awards for his earlier Sibelius recordings, and these are certainly among his best, coupling the youthful, exuberant first with the dark, embittered fourth (still, I think, the single greatest symphony of the twentieth century). The BIS recording maintains the high acoustic standards of the label (acoustic standards are something the major labels, with all their money, have trouble with).

- **Jackie Leven: *Fairytales for Hard Men* (Cooking Vinyl/Jackie Leven)**

Perhaps not as brilliant as Leven's album last year, nonetheless it has more angst-ridden despair and anger in an ambience that shifts between rock, Celtic and 'world' music (whatever that singularly unhelpful phrase means). Includes settings of James Wright and W. B. Yeats, and a rendition of 'Sir Patrick Spens' which shows a man betrayed, and Scotland betrayed, rather than just an old ballad, as well as Leven's own confronting lyrics:

there is fear to the west
there is sand to the west
there are children in rage
who have never been blessed
there are women and men
who have nowhere to go
and the wind is still moaning
through Kirkconnell flow.

- **Dowland: *Collected Works* (The Consort of Musicke cond. Anthony Rooley) (l'Oiseau-Lyre)**

Back in the late seventies, this ensemble produced a series of works presenting all the known works, and many arrangements, of the music of the master-lutanist John Dowland (one of Philip Dick's favourite artists — remember *Flow My Tears the Policeman Said*). Some of these discs have appeared before on CD, but now they are collected together and issued at a bargain price on twelve CDs. Minor quibbles: some of the original discs have been split over more than one CD, and a lot of the original, lengthy notes have been ditched. (Get a copy of Diana Poulton's authoritative critical biography instead.) The artistry and performance still shine through, even if some critics would see these as dated performances.

(February 1998)

Farewell to Margaret Aldiss

BRIAN W. ALDISS

**Hambleden, 39 St Andrews Rd, Old Headington,
Oxford OX3 9DL England**

It's very kind of you to write. I cannot tell you the pain that Margaret's death has brought. Her life was beautiful and creative; she was lovely and caring, the very warm heart of our family. She had become my life. If only it had been my pancreas instead of hers — I think it every day.

We had good friends in Nick and Romy Waterlow, who lived in Kirribilli, Sydney. He is English, she was Australian. For a long while, they lived near us in Southmoor and we used to throw joint parties together. Romy was a wonderful life-giving woman. Alas, she developed breast cancer and died early this month. Nick's over here now — I had lunch with him on Tuesday. He and two of their grown kids held a memorial service for Romy in London. It is awful that two friends and good women like Margaret and Romy should die so close together in time, if not in space.

I have written a book about Margaret's illness and life, entitled *When the Feast Is Finished*. Maybe it will help bereaved people, maybe not. To write it was a compulsion. Now I get on with my utopia, *White Mars*, which I am writing in collaboration with Sir Roger Penrose. It should be completed soon and published in 1999. My delayed autobiography, *Twinkling of an Eye*, should be out from Little, Brown in November. I care less for these matters than I once did.

Good of you to write. Regards to my friends, and especially to you and Elaine.

(19 February 1998)

* This letter should have appeared in *TMR* No. 26/27. But it didn't; my mistake. Thanks very much for your thanks, Brian.

And thanks to everybody for lasting the distance through two double-issues and about 170,000 words. Perhaps you'll see the next *SF Commentary* this year. Don't wait up for it. **(Bruce Gillespie, 8 July 1998) ***

Be there!

AUSSIECON III

The 57th World Science Fiction Convention, 2–6 September 1999

Melbourne Convention Centre, cnr Spencer and Flinders St, Melbourne, Victoria 3005, Australia

Accommodation: Centra, under the same roof as the Convention Centre.

Membership until Sep. 98: \$200 Australian: Attending membership. \$A45: Supporting membership.

Child in tow (born after Sep. 87): \$45. Infants: free.

Postal address: GPO Box 1212K, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia.

Web address: www.aussiecon3.worldcon.org.

Guests of Honour: Greg Benford (Overseas Prof. GoH). George Turner (Australian Prof. GoH).

Bruce Gillespie (Fan Guest of Honour).

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36

You have just been
enjoying or are
about to enjoy the
work of these
contributors:

BRIAN ALDISS
PAUL ANDERSON
JOHN BANGSUND
DOUG BARBOUR
SIMON BROWN
JANE CARNALL
DITMAR
LEIGH EDMONDS
TOM FELLER
ROB GERRAND
BRUCE GILLESPIE
KAREN JOHNSON
PAUL KINCAID
JOHN LITCHEN
ROBERT MAPSON
RACE MATHEWS
CHRISTOPHER
PRIEST
YVONNE
ROUSSEAU
CHARLES TAYLOR
GEORGE TURNER
WALT WILLIS

verses from I Corinthians 13:

Although I speak in tongues of men and
angels
I'm just sounding brass
And tinkling cymbals without love.

Direct quotations from Corinthians keep appearing in the song, set to a jazz melody notable for the contribution of Wayne Shorter on soprano sax. It's about the gentlest and most lyrical track on an album which mostly consists of upbeat, up tempo numbers — rock with a flavouring of jazz.

Around this time I was having big problems at work. The job itself was okay, but the bosses were really fucking me about and I was screwing up the courage to quit. For once Joni Mitchell's developments could hardly be said to parallel my own. I was not in a mood to be bright and cheerful. And this, I suppose, along with an inbuilt conservativeness, made me first appreciate those tracks that reminded me of the older, darker spirit that was Joni Mitchell.

'Moon at the Window', for instance:

I know these battles
deep in the dark
when the spooks of memories rattle
ghosts of the future
phantoms of the past.

Do I detect distant echoes of 'I Think I Understand' and 'Trouble Child'? Certainly the spooks of memory have rattled me more than once, as they rattle her on the album's best track, 'Chinese Cafe/Unchained Melody'.

I have said before that I am a chronic sufferer from morbid nostalgia; and this struck home as nothing else on the album did. Indeed, it struck with a force matched only by 'The Circle Game'. Here I was, caught once more with the precision of an artist and the sharpness of a surgeon's blade, as the present slithers past faster and faster before I can quite manage to grasp it. This fleeting mood, and what it reflects in the way I am right now, is echoed uncannily in the words of the song:

Caught in the middle,
Carol, we're middle class
we're middle aged.

Again:

This girl of my childhood games
has kids nearly grown and gone.
Grown so fast,
like the turn of a page,
we look like our mothers did, now,
when we were those kids' age.

Throughout the song runs the chill refrain:

Nothing lasts for long

while she remembers going to the Chinese Cafe and playing 'Unchained Melody' on the juke box.

Time goes — where does the time go —
I wonder where the time goes . . .

Then, in April 1983, Joni Mitchell came to do two concerts in London; and I was there, on the Sunday, among the vast crowds somehow squeezing themselves into Wembley. Of course I was receptive. I'd finally got out of a company I'd grown to hate. I was in business for myself, earning my living from my pen — a long-held ambition though I'd never quite visualised it in this light. I didn't have much money, but I did have work coming in. Everything seemed to be going right. I felt good. And when my all-time favourite singer appeared on that distant stage and began to sing those light, bright and optimistic songs, suddenly I, too, was light, bright and optimistic.

Okay, I don't think there was any way I was not going to enjoy that concert. Even so, it became more than that. I leaned forward in my seat, I forgot the time, I forgot the rest of the audience. She was singing for and to me, just as privately as on any of the records. Yet the vague presence of the thousands in that audience, the tangible and exciting silence when so many people are quiet at the same time, the explosion as they applaud, added an electricity that made it even more special. Oh I know, the same is true of any good concert that works well; even so, in every case it is unique. This was unique.

The audience enjoyed the concert. The performers sensed this, and they enjoyed the concert. Which in turn communicated itself to the audience and so on, building and building. You could feel it in the air. You could hear it in the music. You could see it in the way Joni Mitchell snatched her dulcimer back from one of the roadies because she suddenly decided she wanted to do another, unscheduled, song on it. And at the end of the concert, at the top of the wave, they did their encores and still we would not leave, still we would not let them leave. They came back on stage unprepared, hesitated, then burst into the liveliest version of 'I Heard It Through the Grapevine', leaving us dancing in the aisles.

There'll be new dreams, maybe better
dreams, and
plenty
before the last revolving day is through.

Oh yes.

— Paul Kincaid, 1985