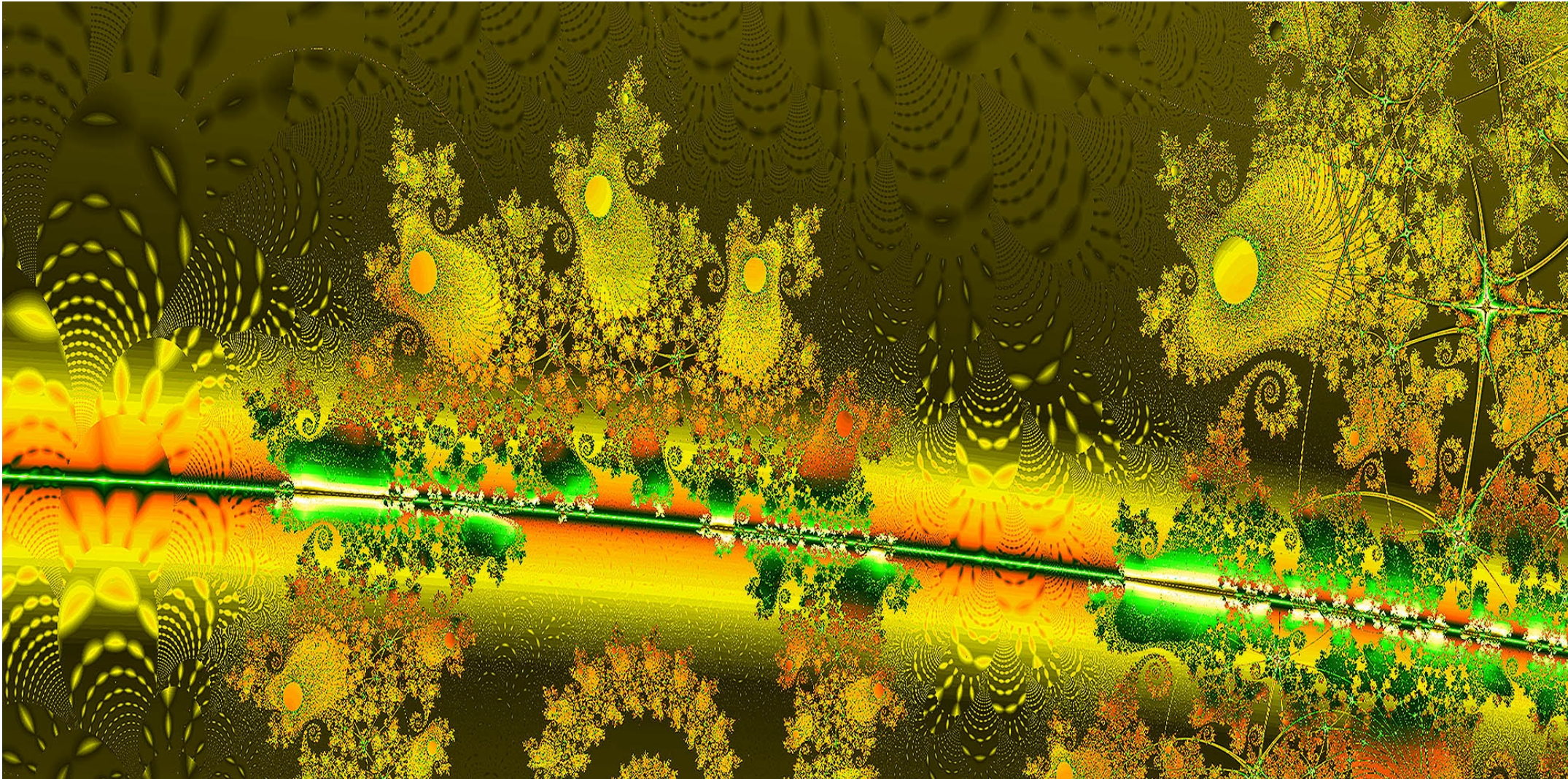


SF COMMENTARY 100

50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION Part 3

DIRDA * BLACKFORD * BRYCE * HOLMBERG * STEELE *
KING * SALVIDGE * TRAIN * RUDD * GILLESPIE



Cover: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Dancing Almond Bread'.

SF COMMENTARY 100

50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION, PART 3

November 2019

80 pages

SF COMMENTARY No. 100, 50th ANNIVERSARY EDITION, PART 3, November 2019, is edited and published by Bruce Gillespie, 5 Howard Street, Greensborough, VIC 3088, Australia. Phone: 61-3-9435 7786. PREFERRED MEANS OF DISTRIBUTION .PDF FILE FROM EFANZINES.COM: <http://efanzines.com> or from my email address: gandc001@bigpond.com.

WRAPAROUND COVER: Ditmar (Dick Jenssen): 'Dancing Almond Bread'. DJ Graphic, Cinemascope version.

3 **BRUCE GILLESPIE**
3 **I MUST BE TALKING TO MY FRIENDS**

4 **TIME WHOOSHES BY!**
6 **GOOD THINGS ARRIVE IN THE MAIL**
11 **2018: THE BEST OF EVERYTHING**
Favourite Novels :: Favourite Books
Favourite Films :: Favourite Television
Favourite Popular CDs :: Favourite
Classical CDs

27 **JENNIFER BRYCE**
FAVOURITES FOR 2018:
TEN BOOKS, TEN CONCERTS, SEVEN
MOVIES

44 **MICHAEL DIRDA**
TALES OF LOVE AND DEATH
BY ROBERT AICKMAN

47 **JOHN-HENRI HOLMBERG**
MANY HAVE MISSED THE THEME OF
FRANKENSTEIN:
CELEBRATING FRANKENSTEIN'S TWO
HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY

49 **CRITICANTO**

49 **DANIEL KING**
GALACTIC POT-HEALER:
PHILIP K. DICK'S 'SYMPATHY FOR THE
DEVIL'

52 **GUY SALVIDGE**
AMETHYSTS AND OTHER TREASURES

54 **DAVID RUDD**
A DOUBLET OF EARLY FANTASY FICTION
FROM BENGAL

56 **COLIN STEELE**
THE FIELD

I must be talking to my friends

First the good news

On Facebook recently I wrote that the best news of the year is that **Ciao**, the favourite Melbourne restaurant of our Friday night fannish group, has reopened on Friday night. It has remained open at lunchtime during the last few years, but meanwhile our group has spent every Friday night wandering mid Melbourne looking for a restaurant with decent food, or a restaurant quiet enough to hear each other speak. Last Friday night (11 October), we wandered down Hardware Lane — and found that Ciao had reopened on Friday night under a new name: **Hardware Club**. Anton, our genial host of yesteryear, greeted our mob of 10 and set up a table. He welcomed us back as if we had been wandering the desert for 40 years (which is how we saw it). Finally — great service, great food, a house wine that is drinkable ... but it's already very popular and noisy. I couldn't hear much of the conversation from my end of the table. But we had returned home at last!

For *SF Commentary* readers this hardly rates as the *best* news of the year. From your point of view, the *best* news is that nearly all issues of *SF Commentary* from the past 50 years are now available for reading, perusing, and printing. **Mark Olson** has scanned all the duplicated issues of *SF Commentary*, and made them available through the website organised by **Joe Siclari** and **Edie Stern's** fanzine history project (fanac.org). A warning: each page is scanned separately as a .jpg file. To read an issue consecutively, you need to download all the pages for an issue, then link them using Word or Adobe Acrobat or similar PDF-generating program. But at least you can now take a peek at the great early years of the magazine.

Bill Burns continues to host at eFanzines.com all the issues of *SF Commentary* that have been created during the last 25 years as PDF files. Along with many other fans, I continue to be grateful for Bill's extraordinary project, which has enabled SF fanzines to continue as a genre.

Good news, bad news ...

The *very good news* of 2019 was that anonymous 'Joe Phan' financed the production of a large number of print copies of *SFCs* 98 and 99 and gave me the funds to post them.

The *bad news* is, as usual, the cloud of gloom generated by Australia Post. It continues to persecute people who want to send real magazines and books overseas. Australia's airmail rates were already twice those of any other country in the world. Rates rose again on 1 October. I will send out overseas copies to a small number of people, mainly contributors, but otherwise will be notifying people to download their copies from eFanzines.com. Sorry about that. I still haven't won a lottery or been offered an inheritance.

Lowlights of the year

Lowligh of the year has been our loss of **Harry** the wonder cat. But I've already written about Harry in *SFC* 99.

Another *lowlight of the year* is the news that our much-missed fan about town and former member of ANZAPA, Chandler Award winner **Bill Wright**, has spent much of the year in hospital. He has suffered several major falls. In one accident, he fell from a tram, incurring the original injuries. In another incident, a taxi sped off while he was getting out. After several months of treatment, he returned home for a month or so. During the third incident, a car backed out straight in front of him as he was visiting hospital. As a result he has been wearing both a neck brace and back brace for many months. He left rehabilitation hospital to return home on 17 October. He always sounds remarkably chipper on the phone. Ring him on 0434 315689, but allow for the fact that he spends much of his day involved in physiotherapy exercises or other aspects of the healing process.

Time whooshes by!

I'm still failing to retire. My basic income is a bit of pension money and a bit of superannuation money (which will run out in about three years). To survive financially I need to keep compiling indexes. When that supply of index work runs out, I will be in real financial trouble. I've had enough work this year to stop the bank account disappearing, but it's also stopped me being the actifan I want to be.

Until now I've been able to produce two parts of the Fiftieth Anniversary Issue of *SF Commentary*. But they should have appeared in January. A few weeks ago (before I was again rudely interrupted by three indexes and a Nova Mob talk), I went diving through the computer files and found at least 200 pages of material.

You might not give a stuff when the next issue of SFC comes out — and I know that I've failed to hit my own deadlines. But some of my contributors have been on the edge of their seats for ten months waiting for their deathless prose to appear in print.

At the beginning of the year I made a very unwise promise to deliver a short talk about the work of James Tiptree, Jr. to the Nova Mob. In doing so, I stepped off the safe little lagoon shore of the literary footnote into the mighty maelstrom of the Tiptree ocean. I had to re-read many stories I had not read for nearly 50 years. I had to read lots of stories I had never read before. (However, I've had no time to read the Tiptree's two novels.) I gave myself the great pleasure of re-reading Julie Phillips' biography *James Tiptree, Jr.: The Double Life of Alice B. Sheldon*, the best literary biography I've read. And I read various other books for the first time, such as *Letters to Tiptree* (Twelfth Planet), edited by Alexandra Pierce and Alisa Krasnostein. All this made it impossible to publish *SFC* 100 by October or write ANZAPA Mailing Comments.

You might be amazed to learn that the Gillespie and Cochrane household has spare minutes in the day. What have we been doing with them?

Elaine has also been working hard on professional jobs during the year. Her editing and proofreading jobs are always much more demanding than anything I do, so she's rather enjoyed the last few weeks without paying work. She has also knitted a lot, and embroidered a lot, and cuddled Sampson a lot. Sampson believes that any Elaine who is sitting still in one spot is there for the climbing-on-of-the-cat. His basic health is not good, and his legs are not very dependable, but Elaine keeps him alive and enjoying life. He's all we have since Harry died very suddenly at the beginning of May. (See *SF Commentary* 99.)

Highlights of the year have included our little film nights with John and Diane and Geoff once a month. Sorry we can't invite anybody else; our seating arrangements are very limited. Both John and Geoff bring along

films (on DVD and Blu-ray) that I would not have seen otherwise. This year's films have included Fritz Lang's great film noir *Human Desire* (1954), starring Glenn Ford and Gloria Grahame (based on Zola's novel *La Bête Humaine*), Memo Meyes' little masterpiece *Martian Child* (2007), starring John Cusack, based on the life of David Gerrold and his adopted son; and the new 4K remastered print of Peter Bogdanovich's *The Last Picture Show* (1972).

Not quite monthly, but near enough, have been dinners with Dick Jessen and a few other friends at the Rosstown Hotel in Carnegie. Geoff Allshorn, who lives in Montmorency, the neighbouring suburb to ours, drives us to Carnegie and picks up Dick from his home. We were eating on Thursdays, but the Rosstown is extremely popular and noisy on Thursday nights, so we've moved to Monday nights. We're all having hearing problems these days, so Dick usually invites only four or six people to these dinners. Sometimes the whole Rosstown seems filled with people with hearing problems who need to speak loudly so they can be heard.

We don't go out to dinner very often these days. Not sure if it's the times we live in, or merely because of the need to make elaborate arrangements in order to visit people. Although Public Transport Victoria was supposed to have fixed many problems on our railway line, it keeps cancelling services and replacing them with buses at night. Therefore we do not feel confident in arranging dinner dates in advance, or booking to go to concerts or events in town. Despite this, we did manage to visit Sarah Endacott and Jamie Reuel in South Croydon in April. My sister Jeanette and Duncan visited us early in the year, and Jo and Carey Handfield, who now live near by, join us for cakes and coffee at Urban Grooves once a month.

Charlie and Nic Taylor took us out to Kilmore to attend the annual Winter Solstice party and barbecue held by Rose King and Francis Payne in a house filled with books. This year's event was more than usually sociable.

A dinner surprise was a night at Taco Bill's in town in July. Gerald Smith and his wife Karen were in town from Sydney, so they arranged a night to meet all the ANZAPA members about which Karen had only heard rumours. It was also my chance to catch up with ANZAPA members, some of whom I hadn't seen for a year.

One night early in the year, Carey and Jo took us to deepest downtown St Kilda to visit the home of Rob and Maggie Gerrand. The three members of Norstrilia Press (1975–85) have been in the same room plenty of times over the years, but I suspect this is the first proper reunion for over 30 years. Maggie's dinner was magnificent.

Another fine dinner — a lunch this time — was a celebration of Yvonne Rousseau's birthday at Urban Grooves

restaurant. Yvonne has been very ill over the last few years, and had been in hospital during the year. However, she's felt a lot better since returning home. Her daughter Vida has been living with her since then, and they both seemed to enjoy the birthday lunch greatly. The other guests included Jenny Bryce and Tony Thomas, and Kathy O'Shaughnessy and Ian Deakin, who have supported Yvonne greatly in recent years.

Jenny Bryce has had quite a year. On 13 June, at Readings in Carlton she held the first of several launch events for her first novel *Lily Campbell's Secret*. The book was launched by Toni Jordan. Several members of her writers' group spoke. Jenny had placed the book with a possible publisher for about a year, but after all that time it seemed that the publisher might let it go. So she took on the services of David Grigg's Rightword Publications to produce a magnificent piece of bookcraft. After the launch, many of us traipsed off to a nearby Carlton restaurant, where I caught up with Nic Thomas, Tony's son, and some of the members of the Melbourne Shakespeare Society, of which Tony is an active member. By the end of the evening, I found that I had promised to become a member.

I've met up with Henry and Judy Gasko a few times during the year. Their daughter Anne, who is a very good singer who would love to be a star of stage, has become an excellent promoter in the last two years. Every two months she stages a theatrical presentation called *Odds Sods & Thingmbobs* at a little venue in Prahran called the MC Showroom (50 seats). Anne books four or five segments by young performers who are also trying to become successful music comedy or cabaret artists. Each act guarantees that a certain number of friends and relatives will pay to turn up at the concert. This covers all costs, and also provides a showcase for the performers. I've seen some brilliant people over the last two years — and can't believe that most of them haven't broken into professional theatre yet. But that's show biz, and there's not nearly enough professional theatre in Melbourne to go round.

Judy and Henry and I have dinner before the Odds Sods concerts. In this way I hear about all their adventures. Now retired, Henry is trying to break into professional SF writing. His stories seem to me very good, but it is difficult to break into the field. In their hometown of Wallan, 50 km north of Melbourne, Judy is involved in what is called a Transition Village project. (I'm sure it's googlable.) Anne and the Gaskos held a fund raiser in Wallan in February. Charlie and Nic Taylor drove me to Wallan. The concert was okay — but the person in charge of the sound board seemed to be quite deaf. My ears were ringing by the end of the evening, and I had found it hard to hear a word that anybody was singing.

As I wrote in *SF Commentary* 99, my old friend Gerald Murnane has also had quite a year. The *New York Times* discovered his fiction in 2018 (his seventy-ninth year), which led to much more attention being paid to his last book of fiction, *Border Districts*, than might otherwise have been the case. For instance, it won the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction for 2019.

In February, Gerald not only turned 80, but also had published his first and only book of poems, *Green Shadows*, and (at last) *A Season on Earth*, the complete version of the novel *A Lifetime on Clouds*. In 1976, his then publisher cut *A Season on Earth* in half, published the first half as *A Lifetime on Clouds* — and then cancelled its fiction list! The most important section of the novel is the third part. Bring all four parts together and you have a novel that is still very amusing, but gains an urgent depth that is missing from *Lifetime*.

To celebrate all these events, Readings Books put on a Meet Gerald Murnane event at the Church of All Nations in Carlton on 28 February, his eightieth birthday. At last 300 people turned up on one of the hottest nights of the year. Jason Steger, literary editor of *The Age*, conducted the interview, then Gerald disappeared into the night. As he told me later, he had expected a much smaller event. I met Gavin Murnane (one of his twin sons) for the first time in many years, then for the first time met Ivor Indyk, the publisher of Gerald's books of fiction over the last 20 years. Ivor and I agreed that one of our favourite Murnane stories is 'The Battle of Acosta Nu', one of the novellas that make up *Landscape with Landscape* (1984). Gavin and I then told Ivor how Gavin became inadvertently the main character in that story.

I quite enjoyed this year's Continuum convention in June, not only because of the program, although I did attend a few items, but also because of the people who were in town for the event. I hadn't seen Janice Murray since my Bring Bruce Bayside trip to Seattle in 2005. She was in town with her partner Paul Capsis. They were staying at the Nunnery backpacker hotel in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, so we retreated for the Saturday afternoon before the convention (2 June) to the St Andrews Hotel, which is nearly next door. Very good food and beer and natter.

On the Friday evening of Continuum (7 June), Geoff Allshorn and friends (including me) put on a panel on *Apollo 11* and the Space Race. (Remember *Apollo 11*?) Enthusiastic audience.

There was an equally enthusiastic audience for the 'Fandom in the 80s and 90s', a lively and necessary addendum to Leigh Edmonds' 'Fandom in the Seventies' panel that was scheduled for Sunday afternoon. Lots of good stories from Rose Mitchell, Alan Stewart, and Geoff Allshorn. Unfortunately, James 'Jocko' Allen was too ill to attend. He is very good at telling scurrilous stories about the great days of the Melbourne SF Club.

The Opening Ceremony on the Friday night proved to be somewhat more interesting than most opening ceremonies. The large room was full. I gained the impression that this conventions was better attended than some recent Continuums. (In recent years it has had to compete against ComiCon.) After the usual Opening Ceremony entertainment/Meet the Guests of Honour, while people were starting to buzz off elsewhere, three more awards were announced. One was the Ian Gunn Award, presented by Murray MacLachlan to Lucy Sussex and Julian Warner for organising the Nova Mob for 21 years. The other was an 'Eternity Award'. I had thought that this was a one-off award given by Danny Oz a few years ago to Merv Binns for keeping the Melbourne SF

Club going during hard times and good. Rose Mitchell began reading one of those screeds designed to keep people in suspense. As she read the last sentence, I thought to myself: 'Maybe it's me. But it couldn't be!' But it was. I was suitably astounded.

I talked to one of the members of the committee later. She said it was awarded for 50 years of work in fandom — and turning up to every Continuum. I'm still a bit dazzled and puzzled by being declared Eternal. Thanks to everybody involved.

On the Saturday of the convention, just to keep me in my place, I lost in two categories of the Ditmar Award to people I've never heard of. Not that I had heard of most of the Ditmar winners or nominees.

Sunday was fun. Ken Liu's Guest of Honour speech was entertaining. Leigh Edmonds put on his annual 'History of Australian Fandom' panel, with me, Rob Gerrard, and Robin Johnson telling of the years (1970–75) that led up to the first Aussiecon. In the second hour, Leigh Edmonds interviewed me about 'Fifty Years of *SF Commentary*'. Leigh had a fistful of questions, and the hour went fast. Later, I caught up with lots of people I don't see very often, including Eric Lindsay, Janice and Paul (again), David Russell, and Stephen Campbell.

Enough! enough! I don't want to give the impression that I really am sociable. I apologise to people I've failed to mention (e.g. David Grigg and Perry Middlemiss, who interviewed me for their Two Chairs podcast). This account leaves out a few medical bits and pieces. For instance, at different times I've been treated with cortisone injections for bursitis in my left hip and right shoulder — and they've worked. I'd suffered that sore shoulder for six months before solving that one (with some help from my GP and my physiotherapist). Elaine and I had our first real colds for years. I fell and skinned my head in June, so I had to wear a skull cap of bandage for a couple of weeks. In retrospect, these seem very small problems compared with those suffered by other members of ANZAPA, but they do take up time.

Which brings us back to the beginning of this bit of rabbiting-on. Time's winged chariot is remorseless. Time whooshes by. I'll only catch up when Time does its final catch-up with me. I'm just glad that I have you to talk to.

— **Bruce Gillespie, 29 September 2019**; the above is an edited version of the editorial for my October ANZAPA contribution, **brg** 106

Good things arrive in the mail

During the year I started the 'SF Commentary' group within Facebook. I wanted to promote *SFC*, of course, during its 50th year of publication — but I also wanted to celebrate the fact that good things still arrive in the mailbox. Most publishers no longer send me review copies, because (I assume) they send only e-books to reviewers... and I don't read e-books. Most fanzine publishers can't afford to send their zines overseas by airmail, so I read their works on screen at eFanzines.com. Most writers of letters of comment send them by email.

But a few people still send me paper fanzines or actual review copies of books. Some people still print out their letters of comment, put them in envelopes, attach stamps, and put them in the mailbox. A few even hand-write their locs. I'll thank them specifically next issue. (The letter column has been squeezed out of this issue.)

Below are a few reviews of a few of the *things that come in the mail* (to use the title of a famous fanzine published by Ned Brooks, who is no longer with us). Thanks for the trouble you've taken.

LILY CAMPBELL'S SECRET

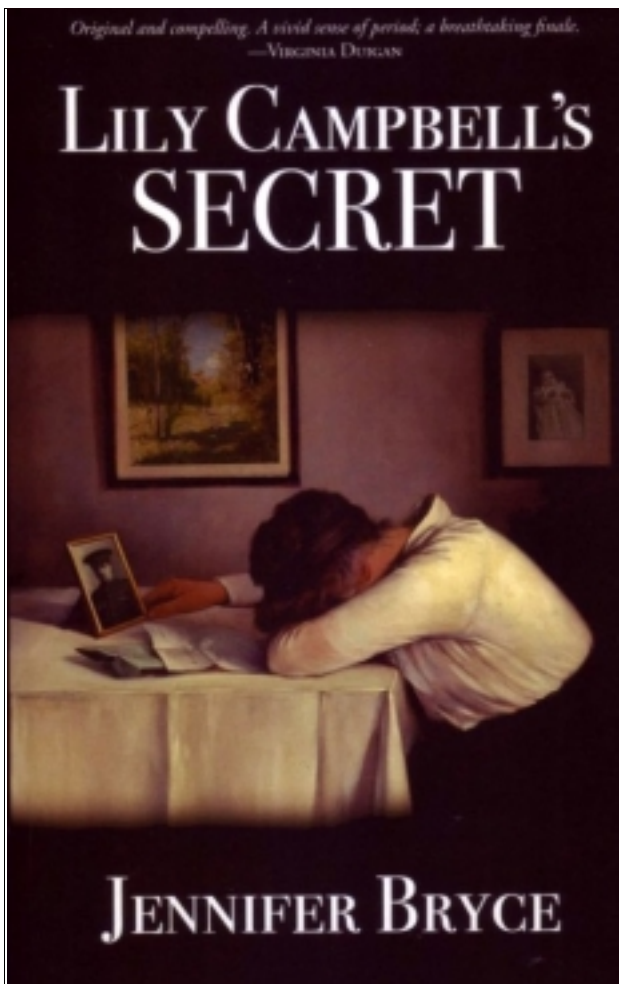
by Jennifer Bryce

(Rightword Enterprises; 2019; 295 pp.; \$25)

If you look at the wonderful cover of this book ('based on paintings by John Barker and Arthur Streeton') you will think you know what the book will be about. A young woman bends prostrate with grief before a small photo showing a man in an army uniform. Her husband or lover, you think, has died during either World War I. But the story is more complicated than that.

Jennifer Bryce's *Lily Campbell's Secret* tells of the years before, during, and after World War I. It's not a science-fictional world, but is now more alien to most readers

than any interstellar alien civilisation. Lily, whose parents and family are very 'respectable' (i.e. rich and self-righteous), falls pregnant to, then marries Bert Campbell, a stablehand. Dispossessed by her family, she, Bert, and her new daughter Emily move into a cottage near Woodend. They become used to living on a very small income, but Bert, like most young men of his time, enlists when World War I breaks out in 1914. From then on, events do not take the path that most readers might expect. I'm not going to give spoilers. Lily shows great courage in adversity, and some foolishness, as the direction of her life slips away from her command. At the same time, her musically gifted daughter becomes a centre of the story, although we never hear her thoughts.



Jennifer Bryce's style is clear, chatty, and totally readable — but these qualities conceal unexpected depths. I was disappointed to find that I had come to the end of the story.

David Grigg's Rightword Enterprises is the producer of this beautiful Print on Demand book.

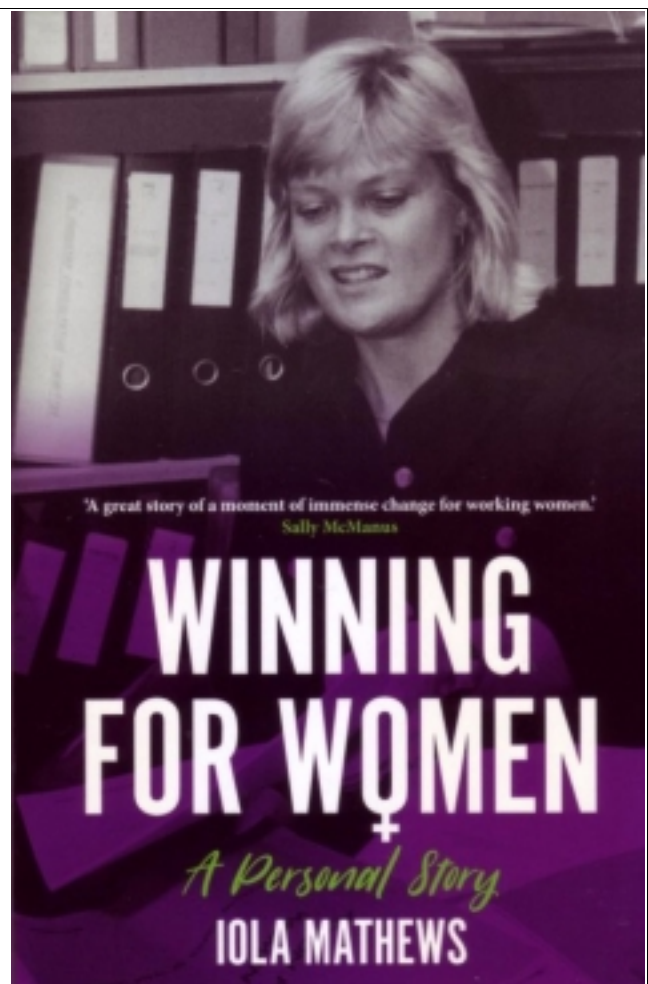
WINNING FOR WOMEN: A PERSONAL STORY

by Iola Mathews

(Monash University Publishing; 2019; 301 pp.)

When Race Mathews lost his Victorian state seat of Oakleigh in 1993, he retired from politics and returned to his old love, science fiction. He reached out to members of the original Melbourne SF Club and other friends within the SF community, and began a small monthly gathering to watch films on a series of ever-larger TV screens. We all knew about Race's political career. But in 1993, I had no idea that **Iola Mathews** had also just retired from an illustrious career, this time in Australian social politics. *Winning for Women* is the story of her life and remarkable achievements.

This is the third Iola Mathews book I've read. Each of her books has a compelling narrative strength that gives life to events that might sound a bit flat if written by anybody else. In *Winning for Women*, Iola tells two stories: (1) that of her own life, in which she tried to break through all those glass ceilings in Australian society that are imposed on our women of achievement, while still raising five children and being the wife of a successful



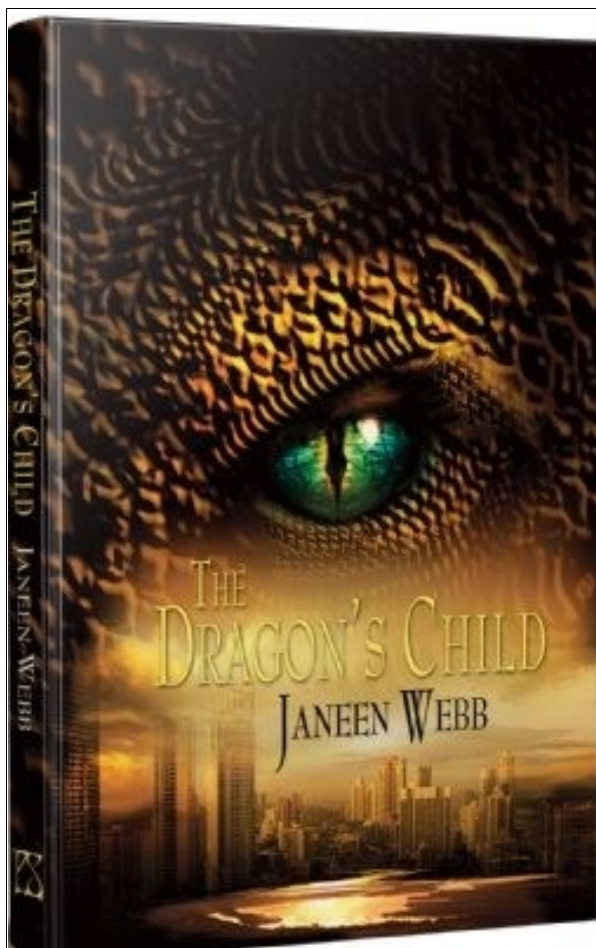
federal and state politician; and (2) the story of her involvement in a series of industrial legal campaigns that have improved the lives of ordinary working women.

Born Iola Hack, she wanted to become a top journalist in an era in which the few women journalists were restricted to writing the cookery and knitting pages of newspapers. During the reign of Graham Perkin as editor of the Melbourne *Age*, Iola became the first Education Editor of the paper. Iola and Race married in 1972. Her journalist career continued until Race became a Minister in the Cain Government in 1983, when Iola was told that there was no future for her as a journalist while her husband remained in politics.

Life had been difficult enough when Race was away in Canberra from 1972 until 1975, but the pressures became even greater while Race was a Minister in Victoria's Cain Labor Government (1983–92). 'Race was energized by his new job, rising at 6 am every morning to work in his study, before being picked up by his driver at 8 am. He came home at midnight, and when I asked about the day's events, he would fall asleep mid-sentence.'

Iola's experience as a 'politician's widow' gave her a sharp insight into the lives all those Australian women who, labelled as 'housewives', work for no pay and see little of their husbands for weeks or months at a time.

Iola had joined Women's Electoral Lobby in 1972, and she became very involved in other voluntary feminist causes, but she needed a job that was worthy of her abilities. Such a job came in the form of an offer from



Bill Kelty of the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1984 to take over the unions' campaigns to implement the Working Women's Charter of 1977. Iola tells an exciting story of David-and-Goliath legal battles that, one by one, freed women from the various work restrictions that had always hobbled them. Yet, as Iola writes in *The Age* (27 April 2019), 'the gender pay gap has fluctuated between 14 and 19 per cent for the past two decades, and the biggest gap during that period was 18.5 per cent under prime minister Tony Abbott'. Nevertheless, I could sense the triumph in her authorial voice as Iola gives details of the meticulously planned court cases designed to overturn the dead weight imposed by many of the politicians of both sides. Pages 272 to 277 give details of suggestions for reform that still need to be made by the federal government. It's a long list.

When we SF film addicts met Iola in 1993, her life seemed relatively tranquil, with some of her children leaving home, and she and Race enjoying their new home in South Yarra. But during the 90s and noughties Iola became increasingly involved in a wide range activities centred on becoming a writer and helping other women writers. I hope you enjoy her story as much as I did.

THE DRAGON'S CHILD

by Janeen Webb (PS Publishing; 2018; 96 pp.)

It was great to catch up with **Janeen Webb** and Jack Dann at the presentation of the Aurealis Awards in Melbourne on 4 May 2019. Janeen would have reasonably have

expected to win the Best Fantasy Novella category with **'The Dragon's Child'** — but she didn't. I had to admit to her, though, that I had not read it, because of the difficulty of tracking down PS Publishing books in Australia. Janeen sent me a PDF of the book, and I was even more surprised that she had not won. Could any of the other short-listers been better written than this story?

'The Dragon's Child' fully develops a fantasy idea but places it within a non-fantastic world — what we call 'the real world'. Or is our 'real world' just part of a world that is actually controlled by dragons in disguise? The story is both fantastical (the fate of a dragon's child, hatched from an egg to a human couple) and realistic (the infiltration of the human world by hostile forces).

The story is a grim joke that is both serious and ironic, told with the economy of means that I find only in novellas. It delivers surprise after surprise, in language both clear and delicious. An entertainment for all tastes.

BANANA WINGS Nos. 73 (April 2019) and 74 (July 2019)

edited by **Claire Brialey** and **Mark Plummer** (64 pp. and 60 pp.; availability by 'editorial whim' or The Usual from 59 Shirley Road, Croydon, Surrey CR0 7ES, UK)

TRAP DOOR No. 34 (December 2018)

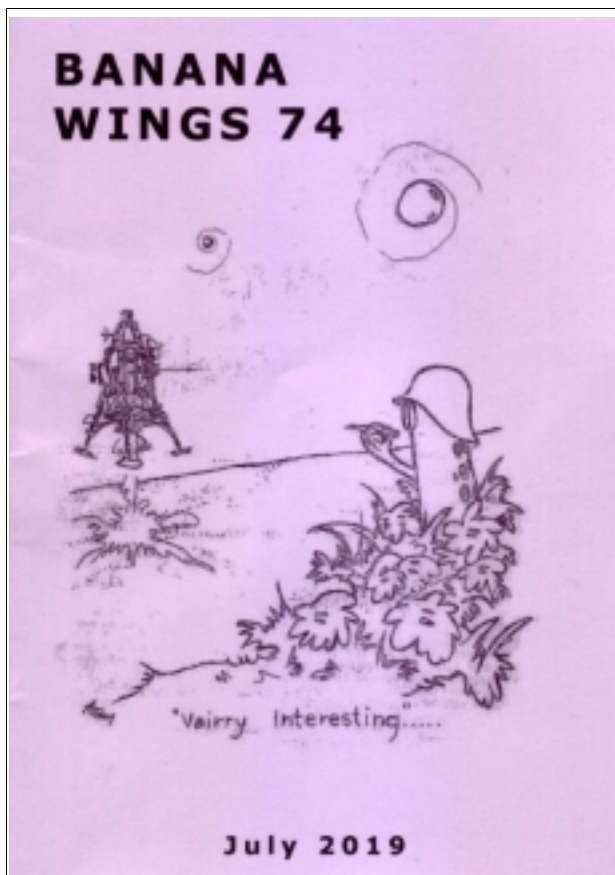
edited by **Robert Lichtman** (60 pp.; available by Editorial Whim or The Usual, from 11037 Broadway Terrace, Oakland CA 94611-1948, USA)

Only a few fanzines today are not available as PDF files on eFanzines.com. **Claire and Mark's *Banana Wings*** and **Robert Lichtman's *Trap Door*** are the best of them. Indeed, I wish that Claire and Mark would also publish a non-academic magazine about science fiction and fantasy, just to show me how to do it. And only such fans with superpowers could keep up their quarterly schedule.

Most of the contents of the most recent issues of *Banana Wings* are fannish or personal writing, of which I usually most enjoy the editorials and letter column. Both Mark and Claire offer astute and often hilarious comments on the current state of their lives, fannish and mundane. In No. 74, Claire and Mark write the whole issue between them, apart from the loccers. In his 'Roadrunner' editorial, Mark writes about my strange predilection for reading the Deaths Notices at the back of newspapers. No doubt this was designed to elicit from me a letter of comment, a strategy that succeeded. Among recent letter writers, Leigh Edmonds' recent speculations on the state of the apostrophe were particularly enjoyable.

The most memorable item in both issues, though, is Taral Wayne's 'The Last Moon', which not only commemorates 50 years since *Apollo XI* but also provides a poignant memory of what his life was like in 1969.

Robert Lichtman's tales of present and past journeys are always interesting, but the real star of *Trap Door* No 34 is Sweden's best-known fan, John-Henri Holmberg, who was the Fan Guest of Honour at the 2018 World Conven-



tion held in Helsinki, Finland. I can't recall many other convention reports by worldcon guests of honour, apart from my own. John-Henri provides a vivid, energetic description about being caught up in a gigantic social whirl that constantly threatens to overwhelm every person involved, let alone a mere Guest of Honour. John-Henri had a 'living GPS', I note, a Finn named Pia, to make sure that he turned up at every scheduled event. I had nobody except Elaine to guide me through my stint as Fan Guest of Honour in 1999 in Melbourne. At the opening ceremony, John-Henri said 'something about my first world convention, which I realize with monumental disbelief happened fifty years ago'.

John-Henri was asked to give a Fan GoH presentation. Of all the events of all recent world conventions, that is the one I would most liked to have attended. Only 50 or 60 fans turned up. (I was luckier than that in 1999. I was given the chance to give my GoH speech to 1000 people at the Opening Ceremony.) John-Henri talked about fandom — he gives a summary of his talk here in *Trap Door*: 'And so fandom sinks into oblivion when the last of us mimeo publishers perish.' When talking about science fiction, John-Henri found himself being just as gloomy: 'science fiction, a literature of the Enlightenment, based in a secular view of the world, in the supremacy of rationality and in a belief in progress, stands crestfallen in the current surge of irrationality and despair, and in succumbing to the triumph of fantasy, which is wishful thinking in literary form. Science fiction said, wishing won't make it so. Fantasy says, yest it will. How could we prevail? ... Applause is, to put it bluntly, mild and scattered. Oh well. Harbingers of doom have never been particularly popular.'

John-Henri Holmberg, you speak wonderfully well



for us here at *SF Commentary*. A pity I couldn't be there to hear you.

Not that the rest of John-Henri's report is doom laden. Instead, it ripples with all the excitements only to be found at a World Convention that works well.

Trap Door 34 also includes very entertaining articles by Greg Benford, Andy Hooper, Gary Hubbard, Bob Silverberg, and (70 years late) F. Towner Laney. I'm told the issue will be up on eFanzines.com at the beginning of 2020.

PORTABLE STORAGE 1

edited by William Breiding (80 pp.; available as hard copy for contribution or \$5 from Portablezine@gmail.com or [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com))

William Breiding has been an enthusiastic contributor to my magazines for some years, but I hadn't realised that he had published his first fanzine as early as 1974. That fanzine fell by the wayside many years ago. Now he returns, spectacularly, at the age of 62 with *Portable Storage 1*, the fanzine with a beautiful cover (by Tracy Nusser). William hasn't tried to produce a successor to *SF Commentary* or any of his other favourite fanzines. The variety of the contents makes *Portable Storage* feel much more like my own *The Metaphysical Review* or *Treasure*.

Aljo Svoboda pays tribute to June Moffatt (paid tribute to in *SFC* 99). This fannish article is followed by an in-depth but non-academic look at Tolkien and his followers: 'Sort of Like Tolkien — but Not Fantasy'. Dale Nelson sets out to show that 'though Tolkien is a very great fantasy writer, a great deal of fantasy is not Tolkienian ... and ... that a lot of writing that might prove



to appeal to some of Tolkien's readers is not fantastic'. The article is enjoyable, although I'm not much interested in Tolkien's own works. William Brieding, in his own piece, confesses himself an 'unliterary man', but he makes good sense when playing around with ideas sparked by Jo Walton's *What Makes This Book So Great* and C. S. Lewis's *On Stories and Other Essays in Literature*. I'm somewhat less sympathetic to John Fugazzi's article about 'The Beatles' Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', but enjoyed personal articles from Janet K. Miller ('Blue') and Vincent McHardy ('Not a Good Day to Die'). The highlight of the issue, though, is Ray Wood's letter commenting on William's recent book *Rose Motel*. Ray, who lives in Quorn, South Australia, has written me some wonderful letters and articles over the years, but this is probably his best yet.

21 October: *Portable Storage 2* has just reached me in Australia!

THE GIANT LEAP TO NEVER NEVER: GUFF TRIP REPORT 2018

by Marcin 'Alqua' Klak (74 pp.; Krakow, 2019; available for \$10 GUFF donation; contact Marcin at www.FandomRover.com)

GUFF (Get Up and Over Fan Fund) is a fan fund that transports an Australian or New Zealand fan to Britain and Europe every second year, or somebody from Britain or Europe to Australia the other year. It is expected, but not demanded, that the winner write and produce a report on her or his trip. There have been quite a few

fine GUFF Reports in recent years, and if I haven't reviewed those by Donna Hanson or Gilliam Polack, it is not for lack of good intent. It's simply because *SFC* is always months, often years, behind schedule. Also, I don't quite know where Donna's and Gillian's reports are in the house at the moment.

Marcin Klak is from Poland. He speaks and writes a very pleasing brand of English, as can be found in his report on his 2018 trip to Australia. He is also, unlike me, a man of sparkling personality, who seems to have met nearly everybody in SF fandom in New Zealand and Australia during his trip, and also visited many of the natural wonders of both countries. He takes a good photo, and his friends have taken good photos of him in action. Australians and New Zealanders rather like being publicised throughout fandom, in light of the fact that New Zealand is hosting the World Convention in 2020.

I'm not sure what Marcin actually does in Polish fandom, but I'm sure it's a lot. I hope he can travel here again next year.

HAVING RUN OUT OF ROOM ...

I can only apologise to many other publications that people have sent me through the mail, still not discussed and appreciated. Will there be room for this little segment in *SFC* 101, or will it have to wait until No. 102? All is mystery and high anticipation in *SF Commentaryland*.

— Bruce Gillespie, 21 October 2019

2018: Best of everything

2019 has disappeared at top speed. 2018 also seemed like a month to me. There were a few highlights, especially the 50th Anniversary gathering for ANZAPA, the 48th Anniversary meeting of the Nova Mob, and Jean Weber's Big Birthday Bash in February. I had more freelance indexing jobs than expected, but far fewer fanzines produced than I had planned. 2018 produced only two issues of *SF Commentary*, 96 and 97, whereas I needed to produce five issues. Therefore the following lists and comments failed to appear in *SFC* 98, then were pushed to *SFC* 99, and here they are, ten months late ...

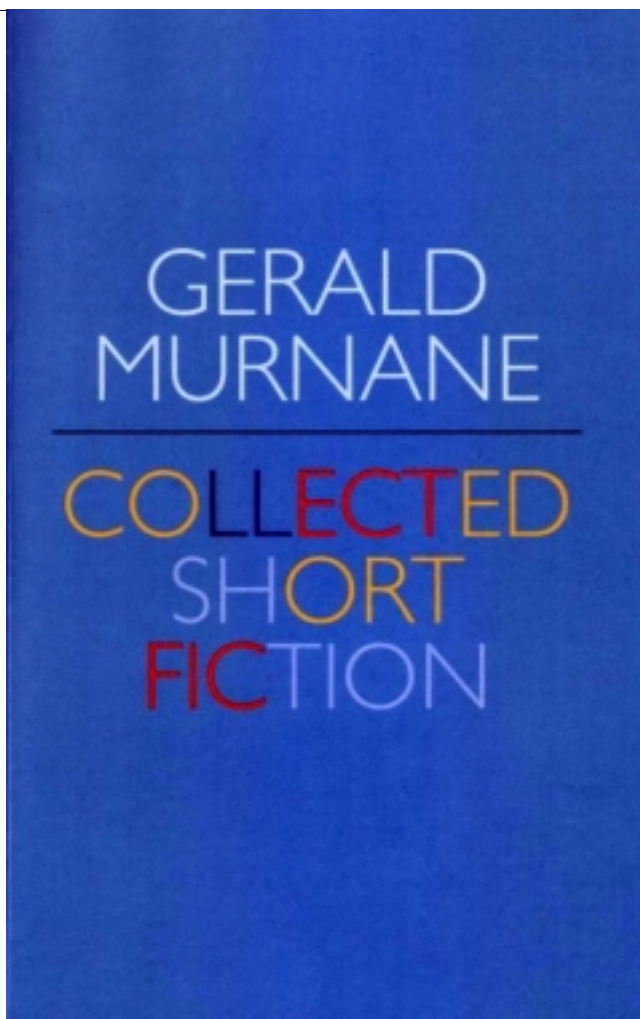
Favourite novels read for the first time in 2018

- | | | | |
|---|---|----|--|
| 1 | THE DISESTABLISHMENT OF PARADISE: A NOVEL IN FIVE PARTS PLUS DOCUMENTS (2013) Phillip Mann (Gollancz) | 7 | THE SUSPECT (2004) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia) |
| 2 | A BOOK OF SPLENDOR (2002) Frances Sherwood (Norton) | 8 | THE FALLEN SUN (2018) David R. Grigg (Rightworld Enterprises) |
| 3 | THE BERLIN PROJECT (2017) Gregory Benford (Saga Press) | 9 | AN AMERICAN STORY (2018) Christopher Priest (Gollancz) |
| 4 | THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS (2014) M. R. Carey | 10 | LOST (2005) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia) |
| 5 | THE OVERSTORY (2018) Richard Powers (Heinemann) | 11 | THE WATCH TOWER (1966/2012) Elizabeth Harrower (Text Classics) |
| 6 | FROM THE WRECK (2017) Jane Rawson (Transit Lounge) | | |
-

Favourite books read for the first time in 2018

* Books read thanks to the generosity of Dick Jenssen.
** Book read thanks to the generosity of David Russell.
*** Book read thanks to the generosity of John Hertz.

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|--|
| 1 | COLLECTED SHORT FICTION (2018) Gerald Murnane (Giramondo) | 11 | Russell Blackford (Springer) |
| 2 | DICKENS (1990) Peter Ackroyd (Minerva Press) | 12 | **THE GIRL WITH ALL THE GIFTS (2014) M. R. Carey (2014) |
| 3 | TALES FROM THE CITY (2018) Shaun Tan (Allen & Unwin) | 13 | DARK EMU (2014/2018) Bruce Pascoe (Magabala Books) |
| 4 | THE DISESTABLISHMENT OF PARADISE: A NOVEL IN FIVE PARTS PLUS DOCUMENTS (2013) Phillip Mann (Gollancz) | 14 | THE OVERSTORY (2018) Richard Powers (Heinemann) |
| 5 | A BOOK OF SPLENDOR (2002) Frances Sherwood (Norton) | 15 | FROM THE WRECK (2017) Jane Rawson (Transit Lounge) |
| 6 | SO FAR, SO GOOD: FINAL POEMS 2014–2018 (2018) Ursula K. Le Guin (Copper Canyon Press) | 16 | *A CONVERSATION LARGER THAN THE UNIVERSE: READINGS IN SCIENCE FICTION AND THE FANTASTIC 1762–2017 (2018) Henry Wessells (The Grolier Club) |
| 7 | THE BERLIN PROJECT (2017) Gregory Benford (Saga Press) | 17 | THE SUSPECT (2004) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia) |
| 8 | *SPACE ODYSSEY: STANLEY KUBRICK, ARTHUR C. CLARKE AND THE MAKING OF A MASTERPIECE (2018) Michael Benson (Simon & Schuster) | 18 | THE FALLEN SUN (2018) David R. Grigg (Rightworld Enterprises) |
| 9 | LAST STORIES (2018) William Trevor (Viking) | 19 | AN AMERICAN STORY (2018) Christopher Priest (Gollancz) |
| 10 | SCIENCE FICTION AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION: VISION, MINDS, ETHICS (2017) | 20 | CROSSROADS: TALES OF THE SOUTHERN LITERARY FANTASTIC (2004) ed. F. Brett Cox and Andy Duncan (Tor) |
| | | | NEW AND SELECTED POEMS (2013) Chris Wallace-Crabbe (Caranet) |



Other four-star contenders (in the order of reading)

GRIM PICKINGS (1987) Jennifer Rowe (Allen & Unwin)

***THE ANNOTATED ARCHY AND MEHITABEL (1927/1933/1935) Don Marquis ed. Michael Sims (Penguin Classics)

FIRE, PLUS (2017) Elizabeth Hand (PM Press)

A WRINKLE IN TIME (1962) Madeleine L'Engle (Puffin)

A SUIT OF DIAMONDS: A COMMEMORATIVE VOLUME OF SPECIALLY COMMISSIONED SHORT STORIES, PUBLISHED TO CELEBRATE THE CRIME CLUB'S DIAMOND JUBILEE (1991) (Dell)

DEATH QUALIFIED: A MYSTERY OF CHAOS (1991) Kate Wilhelm (St Martin's Press)

CHASING LOST TIME: THE LIFE OF C. K. MONCRIEFF: SOLDIER, SPY, AND TRANSLATOR (2014) Jean Findlay (Farrar Straus Giroux)

ALIVE IN SHAPE AND COLOR: 17 PAINTINGS BY GREAT ARTISTS AND THE STORIES THEY INSPIRED (2017) ed. Lawrence Block (Pegasus Books)

*READING THE O.E.D.: ONE MAN, ONE YEAR, 21,730 PAGES (2008) Ammon Shea (Penguin)

BAREFOOT: POEMS (2018) Kevin Hart (University of Notre Dame Press)

WILD TRACE: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS (2015) Kevin Hart (University of Notre Dame Press)

MORTAL ENGINES (2001) Philip Reeve (Scholastic Press)

WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS (2012) Kazuo Ishiguro (Knopf)

TRANSCRIPTION (2018) Kate Atkinson (Doubleday)

PAINT BY MAGIC (2002) Kathryn Reiss (Harcourt)

YOU SHOULD COME WITH ME NOW: STORIES OF GHOSTS (2017) M. John Harrison (Comma Press)

*MISSING PERSON (RUE DES BOUTIQUE OBSCURES) (2005) Patrick Modiano (Verba Mundi)

*SUCH FINE BOYS (DE SI BRAVE GARÇONS) (1999) Patrick Modiano (Yale University Press)

LOST (2005) Michael Robotham (Hachette Australia)

THE WATCH TOWER (1966/2012) Elizabeth Harrower (Text Classics)

As usual, I've divided the book list into 'Favourite novels' and 'Favourite books', but the 'Books' list is more interesting than the 'Novels'.

That's because I kept being disappointed by most of the novels I read in 2018. Many of my favourite authors had a rest year. Yes, they produced their Book for the Year, but it was just a minor ripple waiting for the next wave. Even ever-reliable **Garry Disher** produced a dull Wyatt novel, *Kill Shot*. **Paul McAuley's** *Austral* included some wonderful images of a near-future Antarctica denuded of much of its ice sheet — but its chase story was dull. **Andy Weir's** *Artemis* is not so much a dull follow-up to *The Martian* as a completely dispensible yarn. I don't remember anything about **Mark Haddon's** *A Spot of Bother*, a 2006 follow-up to his great novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*. **Michael Robotham's** *The Other Wife* is a competent enough thriller, to follow his recent successes, but I could remember little about it a month after reading it. I count myself a fan of **Lisa Tuttle**, but I suspect I didn't even finish *The Sommambulist and the Psychic Thief* (2016) before sending it to the op shop. I could not remember anything about **Derula McTernan's** much-publicised *The Ruin* a few days after finishing it, so that also went to the RSPCA's little op shop in Greensborough. **Chris Hammer's** equally well-publicised, very badly written *Scrublands* suffered the same fate, for the same reason.

Some books that made my Favourites list, **Kate Atkinson's** *Transcription* and **Chris Priest's** *An American Story*, were interesting and memorable, but are a bit tepid compared with these authors' recent novels.

So why did I not give up reading in 2018?

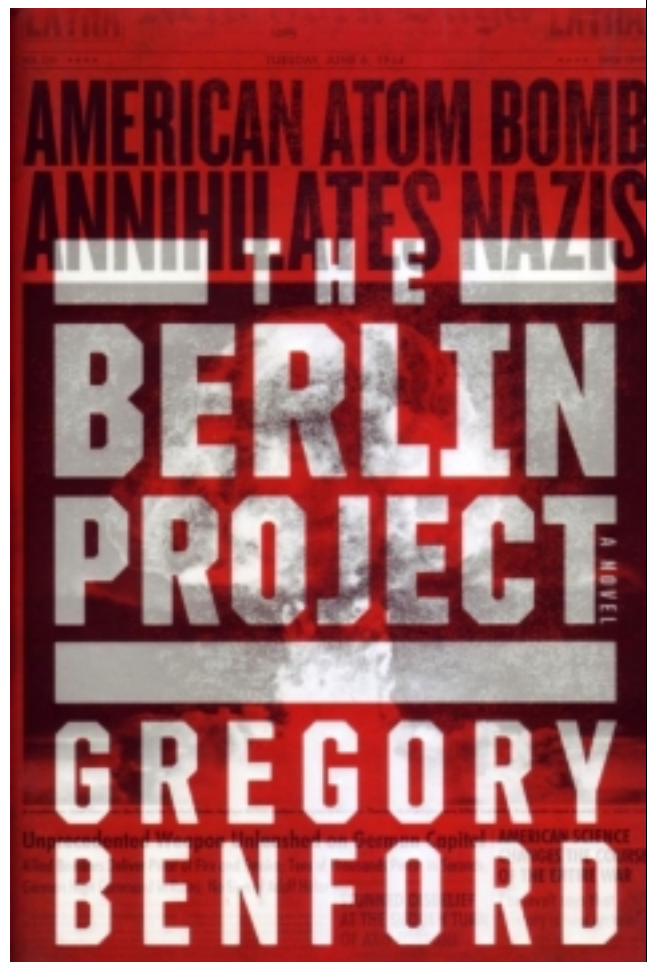
The best novel I read in 2018 is not a novel; it is **Peter Ackroyd's** huge biography of *Dickens*. Ackroyd draws himself up into full literary majesty and undertakes a feat of epic story-telling that reads even better than most of Dickens' own novels. It is, as with many of Ackroyd's other books, about London. In only one other book, Julia Barker's *The Brontës*, have I been able to glimpse the full horror and energy of living in nineteenth-century England, populated by vast crowds of people whose speech would be incomprehensible if they popped up in 2019, and whose assumptions were quite different from ours. It is Ackroyd who points out, over and over again, that Dickens was writing literature, and his idea of literature was prose, speech, and characters with which his readers could identify. Any drop in sales figures was a rejection of Charles Dickens personally. For Dickens, his characters were more alive to him than members of his own family. Dickens' prose was popular prose. Today's younger readers, I'm told, find Dickens' prose so difficult that they cannot read his novels. We can actually measure the changes in the degeneration of the language skills of today's readers by the differences between Dickens' prose world and our own.

A man who lives in Victoria, but whose mind works in a quite different way than that of almost anybody else, is **Gerald Murnane**. After publishing for 45 years and reaching the age of 79, Gerald Murnane finally achieved a Miles Franklin Award nomination and a Prime Minister's Prize win for *Border Districts*, his last long piece of reflective prose (see his letters later in this issue of *SFC*). I can only hope that readers who have just discovered *Border Districts* will also discover the earlier novels ... and *The Collected Short Fiction* (published in 2018), which brings together two collections from about 30 years ago (*Velvet Waters* and *Emerald Blue*) plus four stories written since then. I have my own special favourites, but readers who take the trouble will find stories that

upset and enlighten every assumption you make about the world or ways of seeing it. I believe 'Land Deal' is the best piece of Australian short fiction, rivalled only by Murnane's novella 'The Battle of Acosta Nu', which does not appear here because it is part of another, recently reissued book, *Landscape with Landscape*. Murnane's images and propositions can be quite dazzling, or at least amusing and challenging.

Just as dazzling, but perhaps more accessible to most readers, are the visions of **Shaun Tan**. He began his career as an illustrator of other people's prose, but for the last 15 to 20 years has been writing fables of increasing depth, as well as refining his artistic vision (including a wordless novel, *The Arrival*, and an animated film). Tan's prose and painting skills merge perfectly in *Tales of the Inner City*. It is my belief that the paintings were probably prepared before the pieces of prose and poetry, but in many cases, such as 'Dog', they are inseparable. The great pity is that all the paintings are split over two pages. Surely the publisher (and Shaun) could make a fortune by issuing the paintings as a prints for people like me who want to look at them more closely?

I read **Greg Benford's** novel *The Berlin Project* early in the year, and enjoyed it greatly. *The Berlin Project* is a thoroughly absorbing companion to Benford's *Timescape* (early 1980s), his novel about the way scientists work and make breakthrough discoveries. *Timescape* tells of a successful attempt to send a message through time, therefore enabling the alteration of events. In *The Berlin Project*, we see the results of events that never were, but could have been. Nearly all the characters in the novel are real theoretical scientists from the 1930s. The main character is Greg Benford's father-in-law. Benford tells what might have happened if the US had developed the



atomic bomb a year earlier in World War II than it did. Benford demonstrates the way in which America's theoreticians are turned into soldiers in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

It took until late in the year to discover two novels that I should have read earlier, because they have been sitting on my shelf for years. **Frances Sherwood's** *A Book of Splendor* (2002) tells of the building of a golem to protect the Jewish enclave in Linz in 1601. Its main story, however, concerns a humble but beautiful Jewish seamstress who merely wants to lead a more satisfactory life than the one that has been decided for her. This was the first novel I read for the year that was built entirely from delicious prose. When in doubt, don't read dull contemporary novels that you 'ought' to read. Reach out for the shelf, flick through the first few pages of the book you pick up. If the author is a real writer, you will keep reading.

Phillip Mann's *The Disestablishment of Paradise* (2013) does not look as if it could be my favourite novel of the year. The cover is quite interesting when you look at it closely, but it looks dull on the bookshelf and I was put off by the dullness of the book's title. It's only because noted New Zealander-in-Australian-residence **Murray MacLachlan** kept reminding me that I had a copy of this major novel by New Zealander Phillip Mann that eventually I began reading it. It is not, as the title suggests, a plodding sort of novel. Instead, it explodes with the beauty of its subject matter, the planet Paradise, which Earth people tried to colonise but must leave behind, and the passion of its main characters, who go to a lot of trouble to work out why the planet and its terrestrial colonists could never coexist. The planet is completely lived in, so the journey across it becomes one of the most exciting epic adventures in science fiction. So why am I one of the few SF readers who has discovered this book?

The pleasure of reading during 2018 was mainly sustained by outlier books — poetry, short stories, non-fiction. **Ursula Le Guin** sent off the final proofs of her eighth poetry collection, *So Far, So Good 2014–2018*, on the day before she died, making it an even more accurate record of her last thoughts than her final two books of essays. Ursula's appreciation of Taoist thought and expression shows in most of these poems, the best of which plunge straight into the prospect of personal death. The only comparison I could make, in both intensity of concentration and exclusion of the non-important, is with the poetry-lyrics of *You Want It Darker*, Leonard Cohen's last CD.

I did read other fine poetry collections in 2018, from distinguished Australian practitioners such as **Chris Wallace-Crabbe** and **Kevin Hart**, but too many of the poems were spoilt by complacency: either too greater ease of expression or triteness of subject matter. Perhaps if Chris Wallace-Crabbe's *New and Selected Poems* (2013) had been culled to a quarter of its length and called *Very Best Poems*, I might have valued it as much as Ursula Le Guin's.

Thanks to Dick Jenssen, I read (then bought a copy for myself) **Michael Benson's** lively and funny *Space Odyssey: Stanley Kubrick, Arthur C. Clarke and the Making of a Masterpiece*. Stanley Kubrick was perhaps the most exacting filmmaker ever to work in mainstream cinema. Yet the crew he gathered around him during the making of *2001: A Space Odyssey* showed loyalty beyond endurance. Many participants made heavy personal sacrifices to stay with the endless process of making this great film, yet all stayed because they learned so much. Not that Kubrick had a master plan in his head; he consulted his crew and changed his mind con-

stantly, but most of his (very expensive) decisions made the film even greater than it would have been otherwise. No wonder it's the only film I have watched more than 20 times.

Dark Emu, by **Bruce Pascoe**, is written in basic, non-poetic prose but, considered in total, is more exciting than most science fiction novels. Pascoe has made a survey of the huge amount of research carried out during recent years to find out how Australia's original inhabitants lived before their paradise was destroyed by the arrival of Europeans. It turns out that a true record of a highly complex civilisation lies in the notebooks of the earliest European settlers — but the evidence was ignored because the Aborigines 'couldn't possibly have done that'. And if you judge that an entire people couldn't possibly have done something, you destroy the evidence that they did so. It is wonderful to think that Australia before 1788 was a completely different place from the endless empty spaces about which we were taught in the 1950s. (I should be fair, though, to **Ion Idriess**, whose *The Red Chief*, written 80 years ago, tells of a country divided into carefully organised tribes, i.e. rural city-estates. *The Red Chief* was the first adult book I read, in Grade 3 (1955), and recently I found a copy of a reissued edition.)

In 2018, I read several books about science fiction and fantasy that added to my knowledge and appreciation of the field, instead of merely repeating what I know already. **Russell Blackford's** *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination* has more to tell me about the structure and possibilities of science fiction than it does about 'moral imagination', but this could be a result of the extreme compression of the book. Blackford tells us about some of the best examples of many of the most important streams of science fiction litera-



ture. His summaries of the works of major authors are more than exemplary: they really give some idea of an author's habit of thought and achievement. I was impressed by his article about Kurt Vonnegut, Jr, for instance. I remember that I loved Vonnegut's early novels when I first read them, but I've never returned to them. Blackford tells us, in a few pages. His own favourite SF writer seems to be (unaccountably) Robert Heinlein. A modern researcher who is having trouble finding copies of Heinlein's books might well explore this description of the essence of several of his major novels. But as for 'moral imagination'? I've never had much time for the Michael Valentine Smith, main character of *Stranger in a Strange Land*, because of his habit of 'disappearing' his enemies just because they oppose him. These days it's called 'ethnic cleansing'. So how does one make any comparison between the moral slipshod of someone like Heinlein, who mainly enjoyed telling people what to do, and, say, Philip K. Dick's perceptions about the difficulty of resisting evil, no matter what forms it takes?

The main difficulty with *Science Fiction and the Moral Imagination* — the difficulty that makes it interesting to read — is its failure to tackle some of the major moral dilemmas of the time; in particular, the imminent destruction of the whole terrestrial environment because of the cumulative actions of human beings. George Turner was one of the first SF writers who build climate change into a fully realised near-future world (*The Sea and Summer*), but George Turner is not mentioned in this book. Brian Aldiss is another writer who did his best to explore the major moral problems that can be built into a science fiction story, but there is little discussion of Aldiss's mass of magnificent work. A sequel to this book is needed, and perhaps Russell Blackford is writing it at the moment.

A Conversation Larger than the Universe has its limitations, but they are not those imposed by the author. **Henry Wessells'** collection was exhibited at the Grolier Club in New York, so the range of exhibits has decided the shape of the book. Wessells tells us why the various items in the collection are important to the history of science fiction and fantasy. Wessells' writing is very *SF Commentary*-like: he offers an entirely personal view of each book or author so that readers gain a unique perception of the work that we would never have considered otherwise.

There was a time during the 1970s when it was good to be alive and we all read books written for children and 'young adults'. Such books were better written, deeper, more difficult, and more satisfying than most 'adult mainstream' books of the period. Friends put me on to authors such as Russell Hoban, William Mayne, Leon Garfield, Diana Wynne Jones and, deepest and most difficult of all, Alan Garner. I enjoyed their books greatly, but I did have a suspicion that they were written more for literary adults than literary children. At the age of thirteen I would not have understood or enjoyed, for instance, Mayne's *The Jersey Shore* or Garner's *Red Shift*. But age-specific books of that quality did not exist when I was thirteen (1960).

Now Young Adult Fiction is more than a category. It's a vast industry, and I've talked to adults who read almost nothing but YA books. The trouble is that YA novels seem to be aimed now for kids who would much rather be zipping through messages on their devices or watching TV. YA writers seem to believe that good fiction is narrative that keeps your attention at all costs. The resulting novels are usually distracting, event driven, and without the kind of satisfactions that were offered by young adult novels in the

seventies.

Good fiction is a voyage based on a wave action: ups of action balanced by dips of reflection. Most YA fiction feels like a continuous blast of cold water in the face. Given that limitation, I did enjoy some YA novels during 2018, although I do wish their authors would stop to smell the daisies occasionally.

An author who understands the essence of good fiction is **David Grigg**, a Melbourne author and fan. He published a few YA novels in the mid 1970s in Australia, then was waylaid by Real Life for many years. Now he has retired, he has written *The Fallen Sun*, a slow-moving and very satisfactory novel set on a version of Earth, strangely altered. The book is based on us getting to know the characters through the difficult journeys they take. The feeling is melancholic although the story is told as a series of adventures.

Much the same could be same of **M. S. Cary's** *The Girl with All the Gifts*. I'm not sure if this is meant to be a YA novel, or a mainstream novel most of whose characters are young adults. This novel benefits from its mysterious structure. For quite a few pages we have little idea of what kind of future world we are in, because the characters are imprisoned within a 'school' that cuts them off from knowledge of their world. Freed in hyper-dramatic circumstances from one world, suddenly they face a much more dangerous world. The book proves to be a novel based on a scientific version of the zombie-invasion plot. Standard plot, but the world we travel through is anything but standard, and the conclusion deals out some interesting surprises. I suspect this is one of those great science fiction novels that has been overlooked because the publisher placed it in the wrong category.

I read another YA novel that has become so well known that it was made into a movie in 2018: **Philip Reeves' Mortal Engines**. This fits all the current YA criteria, and it's much too filled with twists and turns of action for my taste. Its tale of cities moving across a future blasted landscape could well be compared with Chris Priest's *The Inverted World* (1974), the novel that first imagined this idea. Whereas *The Inverted World* sets out to solve the scientific mystery of the world in which the mobile cities could exist, *Mortal Engines* takes its cities for granted, and makes the story into a crime/political thriller. In the recent movie of the book, the cities themselves are presented as vividly in the film as they are in the book, and the relentlessness of the story, so annoying in the book, is a strength of the film.

So now to the hardest category of all: Uncategorisable Books:

If you want a set of traditional-style short stories, clearly written with interesting characters who live scattered throughout England, you could hardly go past **William Trevor's Last Stories**. He died recently, after a very long and successful career as novelist and short story writer. He was still writing vigorous and memorable stories until the end.

There is a little bit of book-land that will be forever IanMondLand. Each year **Ian Mond** (now a reviewer for *Locus*) has been giving a talk to members of the Nova Mob about his favourite books of the year, especially those mainstream novels that we aficionados would recognise as science fiction and/or fantasy. This year, Ian praised **Richard Powers' The Overstory**, but he thought more of it than I did. Richard Powers has become one of America's major novelists, but I might never have noticed his work had it not for the scientific perspective that he builds into most of his novels. His early novels include *The Goldbugg Variations* and *Galatea 5.1*. In *The Overstory*, Powers plunges into the world of trees, celebrating their extraordinary interconnections

and independent life, and the people who recognise the life of trees. The first half of the novel is a set of odysseys, bringing together characters connected with separate projects for trying to save the trees of the North American continent. In the second half these individual characters tend to become interchangeable, as they are being defeated by the forces that seek to wipe out American trees. *The Overstory* is memorable but messy. It feels too rushed, as if

the acorn of an even mightier novel is waiting to sprout.

Ian Mond's suggestion (from 2017) led to me reading Australian author **Jane Rawson's** *From the Wreck*. This has all the poetic and fantastical elements usually absent in the rest of Australian 'mainstream' fiction, and I enjoyed it very much. Strongly recommended, even if I haven't placed it No. 1 on my Novels list, as Ian did in 2017.

Favourite books read again during 2018

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE (1962) Philip K. Dick | 4 | NIGHT-TIME (2003) Mark Haddon |
| 2 | THE COMEDIANS (1966) Graham Greene | 5 | JUNIPER TIME (1979) Kate Wilhelm |
| 3 | THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE | | BORDERLINE (1996) Leanne Frahm |

I re-read the first two books on this list while I was researching and writing the history of the Nova Mob. I unearthed the first talk given to the Nova Mob, my talk about Philip K. Dick (who else?) given at the September 1970 meeting. The only copy of the talk I have is not complete, but is a first draft. It merely lists references to **Philip K Dick's** *Time Out of Joint* and *The Man in the High Castle* and **Graham Greene's** *The Comedians* — but without page numbers! I still haven't re-read *Time out of Joint*, but I did re-read *The Man in the High Castle* and *The Comedians*. They triumph over almost all the novels I've read during the intervening 50 years! Both are lean, tense thrillers (which makes the lame, lifeless TV series of *The Man in the High Castle* all the more insulting to the novel). Both offer startling perceptions about the ways people think and act in dangerous situations. In *The Comedians*, his novel about a group of Westerners trapped in Papa Doc Duvalier's Haiti, Greene shows that he was a better thriller writer than anybody else writing in English, and makes even the best work of John Le Carré seem grey and

laboured.

I must admit I have no idea whether **Mark Haddon** (in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*) is medically accurate in his presentation of the thoughts of an autistic child, but in terms of gripping fiction, his portrait of the boy who walks home speaks to me. A vivid and suspenseful book that can be read over and over.

I wrote a tribute to **Kate Wilhelm** in 2018, and returned to my favourite Wilhelm novel, *Juniper Time*. It remains a wonderful novel, featuring a walking trek over the high country of Oregon, and predicts many of the unfortunate political scourges that have beset the USA during the last 40 years. Read it, if you can still find a copy.

I was hoping to jog **Leanne Frahm**, Queensland (now Melbourne) writer and fan, to returning to writing fiction, so I re-read *Borderline*, her book of four long short stories. It's still a magnificent book, making me wish that Carey, Rob, and I might have kept Norstrilia Press going long enough to publish a large collection of Leanne's fiction.

Favourite films seen for the first time in 2018

*Films seen thanks to the generosity of Dick Jenssen.

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|---|
| 1 | ROMA (2018) Alfonso Cuarón | 15 | COCO (2017) Lee Unkrich |
| 2 | *ANNIHILATION (2018) Alex Garland | 16 | PADDINGTON 2 (2018) Paul King |
| 3 | STALKER (1979) Andrei Tarkovsky | 17 | EYE OF THE NEEDLE (1981) Richard Marquand |
| 4 | THE CHILDREN ACT (2017) Richard Eyre | 18 | MISS PEREGRINE'S HOME FOR PECULIAR CHILDREN (2016) Tim Burton |
| 5 | DOWNSIZING (2017) Alexander Payne | 19 | PERSONAL SHOPPER (2016) Olivier Assaye |
| 6 | MOUNTAIN (2017) Jennifer Peedom | 20 | THE CIDER HOUSE RULES (1999) Lasse Hellstrom |
| 7 | *THE BRIDE WORE BLACK (1968) François Truffaut | | |
| 8 | THE SHAPE OF WATER (2017) Guillermo del Toro | | |
| 9 | ISLE OF DOGS (2018) Wes Anderson | | |
| 10 | *HOME FROM THE HILL (1959) Vincente Minnelli | | |
| 11 | ALL THE MONEY IN THE WORLD (2017) Ridley Scott | | |
| 12 | WIDOWS (2018) Steve McQueen | | |
| 13 | THE IMAGINARIUM OF DOCTOR PARNASSUS (2009) Terry Gilliam | | |
| 14 | PADDINGTON (2014) Paul King | | |

Other four-star contenders, in order of watching:

THE DISASTER ARTIST (2017) James Franco
 DARKEST HOUR (2017) Joe Wright
 *MAIGRET AND THE ST ACRED CASE (1959) Jean Delannoy
 *MAIGRET SETS A TRAP (1958) Jean Delannoy
 THE BLUE LAMP (1950) Basil Dearden
 LITTLE WOMEN (1933) George Cukor

THE KING AND I (1956) Walter Lang
 GOODBYE CHRISTOPHER ROBIN (2017) Simon Curtis
 THE MAN WHO INVENTED CHRISTMAS (2017) Bahrat Nallung
 *GUNFIGHT AT THE OK CORRAL (1957) John Sturges
 COLOSSAL (2016) Nacho Vigalondo
 *JUMANJI (1995) Joe Johnston
 LOVING VINCENT (2017) Dorota Robela and Hugh Welchman
 *THEY CAME TO A CITY (1944) Basil Dearden
 *TOWN ON TRIAL (1956) John Guillermin
 SHERLOCK HOLMES IN NEW YORK (1976) Boris Segal
 THE INCREDIBLES (2004) Brad Bird
 A WRINKLE IN TIME (2018) Ava Du Vernay
 THE INCREDIBLES 2 (2018) Brad Bird
 EARLY MAN (2018) Nick Park
 CROOKED HOUSE (2017) Gilles Pacquet-Brenim
 *LEAVE HER TO HEAVEN (1945) John M. Stahl

GOLDSTONE (2016) Ivan Sen
 THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM (2016) Juan Carlos Medina
 CRAZY RICH ASIANS (2018) Jon M. Chu
 *SPOTLIGHT ON A MURDER (PLEIN FEUX SUR L'ASSASSIN) (1962) Georges Franju
 FIRST MAN (2018) Damien Chazelle
 *101 DALMATIANS (1961) Wolfgang Reitherman, Hamilton Luske, and Clyde Geronimi
 UNLOCKED (2017) Michael Apter
 THE BREAKER UPPERERS (2017) Jackie van Beck and Madeleine Sami
 BLACK PANTHER (2018) Ryan Coogler
 THE HONEY POT (1967) Joseph L. Mankiewicz
 CHRISTOPHER ROBIN (2018) Marc Forster
 LADIES IN BLACK (2018) Bruce Beresford
 THE HOUSE WITH A CLOCK IN ITS WALLS (2018) Eli Roth

Until late in the year, Film Year 2018 was a bit disappointing, but that's partly my fault. For awhile I stopped being adventurous in choosing films. It's also the fault of Netflix.

During 2018, Netflix decided to change the way in which people watch films. We might subscribe to their streaming service (through the Internet), or we might, if really lucky, see their films in limited release on a cinema screen. It seems that we will not be allowed to buy their productions on DVD or Blu-ray, at least not in Australia. (The first series of *The Man in the High Castle* has still not been released on DVD in Australia.) If you are set up to watch Netflix productions on a large screen at home, you might gain some of the effect of watching their large-budget films on the cinema screen. If, like me (and despite three hours of the best efforts of **Rob Gerrand**) you can't link your computer to your big screen, you miss out altogether.

Luckily, I have friends who can work miracles. Although Netflix did not release **Alex Garland's** *Annihilation* in any form in Australia (other than streaming), Dick Jenssen obtained the overseas Blu-ray of it. Thanks to Dick, I've also been able to see **Truffaut's** *The Bride Wore Black*, **Minnelli's** *Home from the Hill*, **Hallstrom's** *The Cider House Rules*, **Jean Delannoy's** two Maigret films from the 1950s, **John Sturges' Gunfight at the OK Corral, **Joe Johnston's Jumanji**, **John****

Guillermin's *Town on Trial*, **John Stahl's** *Leave Her to Heaven*, **Georges Franju's** *Spotlight on a Murder*, and **Disney's** *101 Dalmations*. And quite a few others.

Roma, by **Alfonso Cuarón**, financed by Netflix, did gain a cinema release in Melbourne, but only at a few theatres and without publicity. Fortunately, I was able to see *Roma* on the large screen at ACMI (Australian Centre for the Moving Image). How could any director allow himself to be insulted by having such a film shown on a small screen? This black-and-white epic contains some scenes that are more complex and detail-filled than in any film of the last 40 years. Ostensibly this is the story of a domestic servant living with a family in a Mexico City suburb in 1971. There is nothing small or domestic about the cinematography. Even the house in which the family lives is full of interesting detail. As the main character and the family venture out from home, the Mexico City of 1971 lurches into life before us. The run-down suburb that is the main character's original home is brought to life, as is the metropolis in which riots are taking place. The scene during which most of the characters are threatened with drowning is breath-taking on the large screen. Perhaps the only current film-maker with such a fine eye is Paolo Sorrentino, but in the films we've seen in Melbourne he's



concentrated on Italian high life. Cuarón succeeds in revealing an entire civilisation, as it both crumbles and emerges.

As I mentioned above, I did see *Annihilation* despite the fact that it still has received no release in Australia apart from a Netflix download. **Alex Garland** has taken a mess of unrelated images from **Jeff Vandermeer**'s novel of the same name and created a journey of great beauty and terror. The last quarter-hour is unmissable, although a bit unnerving. Both the novel and the film occur within a mysterious Zone, echoing many of the images of the Zone in the Strugatsky Brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic*. In the novel of *Annihilation*, not much sense or explanation is offered, whereas the film makes the journey into the Zone coherent as well as awe-inspiring.

Roadside Picnic has already been made into a film, or course: **Andrei Tarkovsky**'s *Stalker*. I had not seen it until now because when I tried watching it a few years ago, I was baffled by the non-events of the first quarter-hour. Tarkovsky likes doing this. The first quarter-hour of his *Solaris* is baffling, especially as it is not based on the novel. I've known people who can make nothing of the opening balloon sequence of *Andrei Rublev*. I suspect Tarkovsky liked to baffle his viewers so they would gain more from the rest of the film. In *Stalker*, the characters are less interesting than the resourceful main character of *Roadside Picnic*, and the Strugatskys' development of the story more interesting than Tarkovsky's. The strength of the film version is Tarkovsky's ability to make a giant Moscow rubbish dump and wasteland feel like a Zone filled with mysterious dangers. He uses no special effects, but even a version made today with umpteen CGI special effects could not be more suspenseful. I saw a woeful print from a boxed set, but have since been able to buy a much better print on Blu-ray.

It was my fault that I missed many major films in 2018. Either I was too busy to travel by train into the Nova Cinema to see the well-reviewed films, or I found at midnight (when I begin watching films at home) that I would much rather watch a compressed episode of a good TV series on DVD than to a Major Motion Picture Filled With Overwhelming Emotions. No wonder I seek out movies from the 1940s and 1950s (thanks, Dick; thanks also to the members of our little monthly film club).

However, when I did wander off to the movies from time to time, I was pleased to find a few films in which great actors spouting great lines about great themes. Best of these was *The Children Act*, **Richard Eyre**'s adaptation of an Ian McEwan novel about a senior woman lawyer (Emma Thompson) who is pushed into making too many decisions too quickly and nearly ruins her own life and those of the people she most cares about. Nothing mushy here, though — it's a very tight script about an agonising decision.

Every year brings one or two genuine science fiction movies, and *Downsizing* was the SF movie for last year. The trailer made it sound uninteresting. I saw it mainly because it is directed by **Alexander Payne** (*Election* and others) and stars Matt Damon, who likes to take chances and whose performances get better and better. This starts out with an SF gimmick: rich people pay their money to become miniaturised, and join a vast housing estate of miniaturised people, thus using fewer of the earth's resources than large people do. The spin for the enterprise is: idealism plus comfort. But after the main character downsizes, the situation turns gradually into a nightmare. He has an imagination and is not fooled by the spin. The second half of the movie is completely unexpected and very satisfying, so I

won't tell you about it.

Mountain was my Art Movie of the year. In this montage/documentary, **Jennifer Peedom** gathers a vast amount of footage about people who like to climb (and fall off) mountains, and makes a coherent narrative documentary this is filled with magnificent images. If you suffer from vertigo, as I do, close your eyes during some scenes, including those featuring the bloke who climbs up cliff faces without ropes. The most disturbing shot, though, shows the vast queue of people waiting at base camp on any day to take the trip to the top of Mount Everest. When you get to the top, you have a minute or two to take your selfies of you and the view from the top of the world. Then you must to get off the summit quickly and descend so the next lot can take their photos. The descent is the dangerous bit.

Francois Truffaut's *The Bride Wore Black* (1968) is my classic movie of 2018, along with Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution*, on my 'Films Seen Again' list. I'm not sure how I missed seeing *The Bride Wore Black* in 1968. Yes, I was doing my Diploma of Education, attending lectures and classes and writing essays and venturing out to schools, so I saw very few films that year. But to miss one of Truffaut's best-regarded films? (Maybe it was shown in Melbourne a year later, when I was living up at Ararat.) Anyway, Dick Jensen gave me the Blu-ray, so finally I could catch up with one of Truffaut's best-regarded movies. The film is about the revenge wrought by a character played by Jeanne Moreau, who is magnificent. It takes half the film before we discover why and how she picks her victims, well-heeled men who will go anywhere and do anything for the chance to bed a dazzling woman. The tone of the film is Hitchcockian jolly mayhem. The colour photography is magnificent, and Ms Moreau's dress designer should have received an Oscar.

It's not clear why most photographers for today's big budget films are choosing to make their films in a peculiar wash of turgid blues and browns, although they still have available to them Technicolor palettes. **Guillermo del Toro**'s *The Shape of Water*, which won the Oscar in early 2018, has a wonderful script based partly on SF ideas, partly ideas about biodiversity, partly fable, and partly crime fiction. The actors are great. Everything is great except the MurkiScan quality of the images. If *The Shape of Water* had been photographed well, it would have rivalled *Annihilation* on my list.

MurkiScan is the most notable negative feature of two other major films. Both *All the Money in the World* and *Widows* offer brilliant scripts featuring complex plots full of plausible surprises, and great acting and direction — but they are painful to the eye. Forty years ago **Ridley Scott** photographed the most beautiful film ever made, *The Duelists*, his first film. Now 80, in *All the Money in the World* he shows that he has lost none of his directorial energy — but now his films look ugly. Why?

Ridley Scott's star in *All the Money* is 80-something-years-old **Christopher Plummer**, replacing disgraced Kevin Spacey at ten days' notice, and turning in the best performance of 2017 or 2018.

Steve McQueen, who directed *Widows* from a Lydia La Plante novel, is of the generation of directors who take MurkiScan for granted. Fortunately, he likes good scripts and actors (especially Viola Davis).

Faced with the inadequacies of current cinema, I found myself turning to films that seem to be made for children but really are not; or films made during the decades when directors and producers really knew how to make films.

Because of a recommendation by **Yvonne Rousseau**, whose opinions are usually more trustworthy than other people's, I watched *Paddington* and *Paddington 2*, two of the most delicious films of the year. Both films (and **Simon Curtis's** *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, **Mark Forster's** *Christopher Robin*, and **Bharrat Nallang's** *The Man Who Invented Christmas*) are filmed by great photographers who know how to use colour to delight my sweet-tooth eye. Also, these films purport to be filmed in London, which seems a lot prettier than American cities. The CGI animation (of *Paddington* in two films, and A. A. Milne's animal characters in two films) makes these characters far more funny and believable than any of the characters I find in big budget American animated films. (Okay, *Coco* disproves that generalisation; it shows **Pixar's** strengths at their spectacular best.) The human actors are effective as well. I gained a jolt of pure pleasure from watching *Paddingtons 1* and *2*, the two Christopher Robin films — one about the real Christopher Robin Milne, and the other about a fictional character invented by A. A. Milne — and *The Man Who Invented Christmas*. It's a feeling I don't get from other types of film. If Britain can survive Brexit in 2019, keep it on the road in order to make films like these.

You might have noticed the exception to my generalisation. **Tim Burton's** *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* is another film for and about children that is really made for cineaste ancients like me. It has all the strengths of the films I've just mentioned, despite it being made by an American, but it does use a less-than-aesthetically-pleasing contemporary colour scheme. So does another fantasy film I enjoyed a lot, **Eli Roth's** *The House with a Clock in Its Walls*. But both sense of films have qualities of magic and humour that are rare these days.

Wes Anderson's *Isle of Dogs* has been on many critics' lists

of Best Films of 2018. Its animation style owes as much to anime as to Pixar, and it is definitely not made for children, but it is very funny as well as suspenseful, and is the most aesthetically pleasing animated film since the great days of Miyazaki. And it's a Wes Anderson film.

Many of my favourite Golden Oldie movies from 2018 I saw either because Dick Jenssen tracked down the bright shiny new Blu-rays of classic films, or my esteemed colleagues at Thursday film nights (Geoff and John and Diane) brought along films I would never have seen otherwise. For instance, Dick sent me **Vincente Minnelli's** *Home from the Hill*, **John Sturges'** *Gunfight at the OK Corral*, and **John Stahl's** *Leave Her to Heaven*, all films that I might well have seen on late-night TV during the 1980s but didn't. They are all photographed by genius exponents of the Technicolor paintbrush, and star actors besides whom today's actors are mere shadows: **Robert Mitchum** in *Home from the Hill* (as the father who would destroy a son rather than allow him to grow up non-macho), **Burt Lancaster** and **Kirk Douglas** (*Gunfight*), actors who enjoy every minute of their roles as legends from the Old West, and **Gene Tierney** (*Leave Her to Heaven*) as the most beautiful psychopath of her era.

Films we saw at Film Night during the year included **Lasse Hellstrom's** *The Cider House Rules*, one of Michael Caine's finest roles; and **Basil Dearden's** *The Blue Lamp* (1950), a film that makes nonsense of Truffaut's famous dismissal of British cinema. A police procedural, it has the ferocious energy of the French New Wave. Another **Basil Dearden** film we saw is *They Came to the City*, based on a very strange play by J. B. Priestley. It's much too talkative for my taste, has little physical action, and has few sets — but it must be counted as one of the most ambitious movies of the 1940s.

Favourite films seen again in 2018

- 1 *LA BELLE ET LA BÊTE (1946) Jean Cocteau
- 2 *A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH (1946) Michael Powell and Emric Pressburger
- 3 WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION (1957) Billy Wilder
- 4 TRULY MADLY DEEPLY (1991) Anthony Minghella
- 5 *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE (1993) Martin Scorsese
- 6 THE TRIPLETS OF BELLEVILLE (2004) Sylvain Chomet
- 7 THE CITY OF LOST CHILDREN (1994) Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marik Caro
- 8 S.O.B. (1981) Blake Edwards
- 9 *HANGOVER SQUARE (1945) John Brahm
- 10 *ELEVATOR TO THE GALLOWS (1957) Louis Malle
- 11 FANTASTIC PLANET (1973) Rene Laloux and

- Roland Topor
- 12 THE TRUMAN SHOW (1998) Peter Weir
- 13 THE LAST DETAIL (1972) Hal Ashby
- 14 THIS IS SPINAL TAP (1984) Rob Reiner

Other four-star contenders, in order of viewing:

- *PANIC IN THE STREETS (1951) Elia Kazan
- BLADE RUNNER 2049 (2017) Denis Villeneuve
- HIDDEN FIGURES (2017) Theodore Melfi
- *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS (1990) Jonathan Demme

Here is where Dick Jenssen's skill at tracking down unobtainable films comes into his own, giving me and our friends access to fabulous newly remastered Blu-ray prints of films that I had seen before, but never like this.

Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bête* (1946) is one of the two masterpieces he made during the 1940s, a film whose every shot could be put on your wall as a piece of art photography, whose every gesture is filled with sadness, delight, and nostalgia. (The other film is *Orphée*, which I like even more.)

A Matter of Life and Death (1946) is the most ambitious of the great movies that Michael Powell and Emric Pressburger made in Britain during and just after World War II. It is filmed in tinted black-and-white and Technicolor. It tells of a British airman (David Niven) who should have died in a flaming bomber during his return from Europe, but whose assigned messenger (from the Other Place, never named) fails to find him in the fog. The film's creation of a giant stairway between life and death, and a bureaucratised,



modernistic Other World is matched by the trials of the airman (David Niven) as he tries to tackle the consequences of being alive when he shouldn't be. (Dick points out that the film is also a medical-science SF film.)

The other hero of my film world is a little shop called **Play It Again**, 55 Bourke Street, round the corner in the lane beside the comics store. It contains more wonderful treasures than the rest of the Central Business District — DVDs and Blu-rays you would find nowhere else in Melbourne. When I was in there one afternoon, the guys behind the counter were showing on their TV a film I knew only too

well. 'The print couldn't possibly be as good as that!' said I. 'Oh, yes it can,' said they, as they sold me the new Blu-ray of **Billy Wilder's** *Witness for the Prosecution*, starring Charles Laughton and his wife Elsa Lanchester, and Marlene Dietrich in one of her most memorable roles. Lots of extra features are on the Blu-ray, including an interview with Wilder and explanations of why the very funny script is much better than that of the original Agatha Christie play. The black-and-white photography is as much a star of this film as any of the actors. Of all the films on both my lists for 2018, this is the one I re-watch most often.

Special applause for **Anthony Minghella's** *Truly Madly Deeply* (1991), the film that alerted me to the acting talents of **Alan Rickman** and **Juliet Stevenson**. It's a fantasy that could have become twee at any time, but is saved by the sheer depth of the pain experienced by the Juliet Stevenson character after she loses her husband. Grief has never been presented more forcefully than in this otherwise delicate film.

Not much more to say about the rest of the list, except:

- **The Age of Innocence**, in a brand-new print (courtesy of Dr J.), proves again to be **Martin Scorsese's** best film other than *Hugo*.
- **Sylvain Chomet's** *The Triplets of Belleville* is Elaine's and my favourite animated film. It is very weird and wonderful, with a great soundtrack, as is:
- **René Laloux** and **Roland Topor's** *Fantastic Planet*, another very weird and wonderful animated film with a creative soundtrack.
- **Peter Weir's** great Philip K. Dick rip-off *The Truman Show* is about the man who spends his whole life in a fake reality, then eventually finds a way to escape it (incidentally allowing all the actors in the fake reality to escape as well).

Favourite documentaries and music films seen for the first time in 2018

- 1 THE GO-BETWEENS: RIGHT HERE (2017) Kriv Stenders
- 2 Rolling Stones: STICKY FINGERS: LIVE AT THE FONDA THEATRE 2015
- 3 PAUL KELLY: LIVE AT SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE (2017)
- 4 STILL ON THE RUN: THE JEFF BECK STORY (2018) Matthew Longfellow
- 5 JOE COCKER: FIRE IT UP: LIVE (2013) Nick Wickham/Emer Patten
- 6 SPITFIRE (2018) Anthony Palmer and David Fairhead
- 7 I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO (2017) Raoul Peck
- 8 OLD CROW MEDICINE SHOW: 50 YEARS OF BLONDE ON BLONDE: THE CONCERT (2017) Lee Tucker

DIRECTED BY ANDREI TARKOVSKY (1988) Michael Lecszykowski

WILLIE NELSON'S TEATRO (1999) Wim Wenders

INVISIBLE UNIVERSE REVEALED (2015) Peter Yost

ERIC CLAPTON: LIFE IN 12 BARS (2017) Lili Fini Zanuck

Classical music:

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, MISS RENEE FLEMING (2003) Tony Palmer

*ALBAN BERG VIOLIN CONCERTO/ MENDELSSOHN SYMPHONY NO 3: ANDRIS NELSONS/GEWANDHAUS ORCH.

*MESSIAEN: SAINT FRANÇOIS D'ASSISE (2009) Misjel Vermeiren

Other four-star contenders, in order viewed:



Apologies; this list is idiosyncratic. Perhaps only No. 1 would be interesting to a wider audience. **The Go-Betweens** was an Australian band of the 1980s that had only two hit tunes ('Streets of Your Town' and 'Cattle and Cane') and no hit LPs, but whose reputation has grown steadily since the band broke up acrimoniously and the later death of the co-lead singer (Grant McLennan). **Right Here** is the story of three deep friendships: that of Robert Forster and Grant McLennan (band founders), and between both of them and their partners/co-band members (Lindy Morrison and Amanda Brown). The music brought them pain and pleasure and not much money, all reflected upon during this documentary. (Our friend Roger Weddall, a fine guide to popular music who died in 1992, mentioned the Go-Betweens as his favourite band many years before I heard any of their songs.)

Still on the Run: The Jeff Beck Story is also a biographical documentary, but doesn't give much away about its mercurial subject. Jeff Beck is technically the best electric guitarist in the world (apart from John McLaughlin), but he does not sing on stage. Therefore he can only tour with guest vocalists, and he doesn't seem to like touring anyway. His career has barrelled up and down: ups include his years with the Yardbirds, and downs include decades of silence before his current run of dazzling CDs and DVDs. Beck has discovered the secret of eternal youth; he's about the same age as Mick Jagger, but he looks somewhat younger and moves on stage with the ease of a twenty-year-old rock guitar hero. In this concert DVD/documentary, apart from an interview with his gorgeous new wife, who is also his current bass guitar player, we glimpse little about his private life. Between gigs, he

builds and repairs hot rod cars.

Meanwhile, Mick Jagger at 75 remains the fittest Brit over 30, to judge from his antics on stage. On **Sticky Fingers: Live at the Fonda Theatre 2015**, the **Rolling Stones** play better than ever. Ron Wood seems to have abandoned the booze. It is great to see the Stones performing every track of one of their greatest albums, including some songs they have almost never performed on stage.

Paul Kelly is, like Jagger, an awe-inspiring performer, and his swag of songs becomes more interesting with each new album. (The Stones have written only four good new songs in the last 30 years.) Just as awe-inspiring is his current band, which includes several relatives, and the setting of this concert, the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House filled with an adoring crowd and filmed on a glorious night.

My list includes a few real documentaries, two of which have been shown at cinemas. **Spitfire** (2018) purports to tell the whole story of the design, building, and combat success of the Spitfire aircraft during World War II, but it lacks a lot of pictorial material that might have made it above the mundane. It's fortunate that 50 working Spitfires still exist, so we see lots of current photography of them weaving around in today's clouds. Perhaps not much footage exists of those famous aerial dogfights of 1942. The film improves in its second half. Veterans tell tales of complex military operations involving fleets of Spitfires. There is a good coverage of the 1000 women pilots who delivered the planes from the factory to the war front, but who were not allowed into battle. The highlight of the film is an interview with a sparkling 98-year-old woman pilot recalling her air adventures.

I Am Not Your Negro is less impressive than I was led to believe from the reviews. Based on interviews with **James Baldwin**, it purports to give his side of his conflicts with the white American authorities once he returned from Paris to USA during the civil rights movement. Unfortunately, Baldwin gives the impression of being rather patronising and superior. I'd recommend reading his best books

This year the classical music items don't quite fit with the others. **Tony Palmer's Ladies and Gentlemen, Miss Renee Fleming** includes some biographical material about this great American soprano, but is mainly a set of clips from various performances to show off her many vocal talents. I loved the clips, but would have liked much more information.

The filmed performances of the **Alban Berg Violin Concerto** and **Mendelssohn's Symphony No 3** are excellent; and for once, well directed.

The performance of **Messiaen's** five-hour opera **Saint Francis of Assisi** is not for the faint-hearted. This powerful percussive crescendo-y music would be too much to take in if it were not for the fine performance of the opera, and the very slow-moving opera would be impossible to watch without the music. But somehow the whole enterprise works. (I would never have known about this music if it had not been for Dick Jenness's recommendations.)

Favourite television (seen on DVD or Blu-ray) in 2018

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------|----|---------------------|
| 1 | HARROW: SEASON 1 | 6 | JORDSKOTT: SEASON 1 |
| 2 | ENDEAVOUR: SEASON 5 | 7 | SHETLAND: SEASON 3 |
| 3 | JACK IRISH: SEASON 2 | 8 | VERA: SEASON 1 |
| 4 | BOSCH: SEASON 3 | 9 | VERA: SEASON 6 |
| 5 | SHETLAND: SEASON 1 | 10 | VERA: SEASON 3 |
-

Other TV seasons seen, in order of viewing

TIN MAN (2008) Nick Willing
THE DOCTOR BLAKE MYSTERIES: FAMILY PORTRAIT

SHETLAND: SEASON 2
VERA: SEASON 2
VERA: SEASON 4
VERA: SEASON 5
VERA: SEASON 7

An idiosyncratic list, reflecting my antipathy to televisual SF. (An exception is the first season of German/English series *Counterpart*, which I finished watching in the first week of January 2019. It will have to wait until next year for a place on the list.)

TV series are ideal for watching late at night, when often my brain won't deal with Big Issues or Long Movies. One-hour episodes are ideal, as in many Australian series; but my favourite crime series are made in Britain, with individual episodes usually stretching to 90-minute episodes.

Harrow is Australian, although the main actor (Ioan Gruffud) is Welsh. The series is not yet available on DVD ... officially. Fortunately, a clever person has made it available to me, for which I'm very grateful. It features one-hour separate episodes, with an overarching story that concludes, sort of, in the last episode of Season 1. *Harrow* feels like a

combination of *Rake* and *Jack Irish*; investigators who break the rules, solve crimes, but annoy most of their colleagues. The script is excellent.

As I've written before, **Shaun Evans**, the lead actor of *Endeavour*, doesn't remind me at all of the character he's supposed to be, the young Endeavour Morse (of *Inspector Morse*). That aside, the series maintains very high standards of script writing and acting. It's a pity that British 'seasons' now stretch to only four or six hour-and-a-half movies per year.

In the second season of *Jack Irish*, **Guy Pearce** returns to Australia to survive yet another round of being much put upon, annoying both his female and male friends, and emitting funny lines. I can't remember anything about the mystery plot of this season, but I did enjoy the humour, mainly involving disastrous forays into the racing industry. There are no dull episodes in this series.

Most of my viewing this year was of series set in the north of England (*Vera*) or on a wind-swept Scottish island (*Shetland*). Both are based on series of novels by novelist **Ann Cleeves**, who was interviewed during 2018 on Melbourne radio. I like *Shetland* better than *Vera*, but did need to listen to the Scottish dialogue using earphones and subtitles. The scenery is great, **Douglas Henshall** as the policeman main character is excellent, and the episodes are well written. Some of them are based on Cleeves's novels.

When interviewed, Ann Cleeves said that her character Vera Stanhope began with an image of a woman of authority who looks like a bag lady. **Brenda Blethyn** does Bag Lady quite well, although by Season 7 she settles into a number of repetitive idiosyncrasies that become irritating. The Northumbrian coastal scenery is as enjoyable to watch as that of the Shetland Islands (it has been said that the scenery for both is filmed in the same area of mainland coast), and Vera and her colleagues are more comprehensible than the Scots. The scripts are mainly excellent.



Favourite popular CDs heard for the first time in 2018

- 1 Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale Gilmour: DOWNEY TO LUBBOCK (2018)
 - 2 First Aid Kit: RUINS (2018)
 - 3 Kamasi Washington: HARMONY OF DIFFERENCE (2017)
 - 4 Lucinda Williams, Charles Lloyd and the Marvels: VANISHED GARDENS (2018)
 - 5 Bruce Springsteen: SPRINGSTEEN ON BROADWAY (2 CDs) (2018)
 - 6 Willie Nelson: LAST MAN STANDING (2018)
 - 7 Ry Cooder: PRODIGAL SON (2018)
 - 8 Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite: NO MERCY IN THIS LAND (2018)
 - 9 Joseph Tawadros: THE BLUEBIRD THE MYSTIC AND THE FOOL (2018)
 - 10 Various: THE LIFE AND SONGS OF EMMYLOU HARRIS (2016)
 - 11 Mary Gauthier: RIFLES AND ROSARY BEADS (2018)
 - 11 Dawn Landes: MEET ME AT THE RIVER (2018)
 - 12 Olivia Chaney: SHELTER (2018)
 - 13 Marianne Faithfull: NEGATIVE CAPABILITY (2018)
 - 14 Betty Lavette: THINGS HAVE CHANGED (2018)
 - 15 Madeleine Peyroux: ANTHEM (2018)
 - 16 John Prine: THE TREE OF FORGIVENESS (2018)
 - 17 Amy Helm: DIDN'T IT RAIN (2017)
 - 18 Broderick Smith: MAN OUT OF TIME (2018)
 - 19 Tony Bennett and Diana Krall: LOVE IS HERE TO STAY (2018)
 - 20 Madeleine Peyroux: SECULAR HYMNS (2016)
- Various: JOHNNY CASH FOREVER WORDS (2018)
 Jack White: BOARDING HOUSE REACH (2018)
 Chris Smither: CALL ME LUCKY (2018)
 Nathaniel Rateliff and the Night Sweats: TEARING AT THE SEAMS (2018)
 Ben Harper: DIAMONDS ON THE INSIDE (2005)(
 Ray Davies: OUR COUNTRY: AMERICANA II (2018)
 Archie Roach: DANCING WITH MY SPIRIT (1995/2018)
 Herbie Hancock: THE IMAGINE PROJECT (2010)
 Luluc: SCULPTOR (2018)
 Wilko Johnson: BLOW YOUR MIND (2018)
 Jennifer Warnes: ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER PLACE (2018)
 Willie Nelson and the Boys: WILLIE'S STASH VOL. 2 (2017)
 Paul Simon: IN THE BLUE LIGHT (2018)
 Joan Armatrading: NOT TOO FAR AWAY (2018)
 Mary Chapin Carpenter: SOMETIMES JUST THE SKY (2018)
 Chris Hillman: LIKE A HURRICANE (1998)
 Slava and Leonard Grigoryan/Joseph and James Tawadros: BAND OF BROTHERS (2010)
 Ronnie Earl and the Broadcasters: THE LUCKIEST MAN (2017)
 Greg Brown: ONE NIGHT (1982/1999)
 Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette: INSIDE OUT (2001)
 Paul Kelly: NATURE (2018)
 Xavier Rudd: DARK SHADES OF BLUE (2018)
 P. P. Arnold: THE TURNING TIDE (2017)
 Linda Thompson presents: MY MOTHER DOESN'T KNOW I'M ON THE STAGE (2018)
 Amy Helm: THIS TOO SHALL LIGHT (2018)
 Broderick Smith: TOO EASY (2002)
 Chick Corea and Steve Gadd Band: CHINESE BUTTERFLY (2 CDs) (2017)
 Joe Cocker: FIRE IT UP: LIVE (2 CDs) (2013)
 Buffy Sainte-Marie: MEDICINE SONGS (2017)
 Roseanne Cash: I'LL REMEMBER EVERYTHING (2018)
 David Crosby: HERE IF YOU LISTEN (2018)
 Shane Howard and friends: EXILE: SONGS AND TALES OF IRISH AUSTRALIA (2018)
 Farm Dogs: LAST STAND IN OPEN COUNTRY
 Southern Culture on the Skids: COUNTRYPOLITAN FAVORITES (2007)
 Various: STRANGE ANGELS: IN FLIGHT WITH ELMORE JAMES (2018)
 Neil Young: SONGS FOR JUDY (1976/2018)
 Hurray for the Riff Raff: THE NAVIGATOR (2017)
 Rodney Crowell: ACOUSTIC CLASSICS (2018)

Special item:

Roy Orbison and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra:
 UNCHAINED MELODIES (2018)

Other four-star contenders, in order of hearing:

Various: HIGHWAY PRAYER: A TRIBUTE TO ADAM CARROLL (2017)
 Katie Melua: CALL OFF THE SEARCH (2003)
 Various: THE VILLAGE: A CELEBRATION OF THE MUSIC OF GREENWICH VILLAGE (2009)
 Various: A TRIBUTE TO JOHN D. LOUDERMILK (2017)
 Greg Brown: HYMNS TO WHAT IS LEFT (2012)
 Joan Baez: WHISTLE DOWN THE WIND (2018)
 Stills and Collins: EVERYBODY KNOWS (2018)
 Gregg Allman: SOUTHERN BLOOD (2017)
 Son Volt: NOTES OF BLUE (2016)
 Johnny Winter and Dr John: LIVE IN SWEDEN 1987 (2016)
 Lindi Ortega: LIBERTY (2018)
 Mia Dyson: IDLEWILD (2015)
 Kasey Chambers and Fireside Disciples: CAMPFIRE (2018)
 Courtney Marie Andrews: MAY YOUR KINDNESS REMAIN (2018)

This list is deceptive, because it implies that I enjoyed the items in the rest of the Top 20 less than each other, and 'Other four-star contenders' less than those in the Top 20. Not so. I place the Top 2 (and my 'Special Item') way above everything else. The rest of the CDs could well be listed as



‘Equal No. 3’. But then I would have less fun making my list.

If Dick Jensen is the shadow who hovers over most of my lists, two other people are the shadows who hover over my popular music lists.

One is **Dave Clarke**, music buyer for **Reading’s Records and Books** in Carlton. Most of the time I need merely give him a list of CDs that I want to buy, and he tracks them down. (Sometimes he can’t find them, but not often.)

The other is **Brian Wise**. The only way I can hear on radio the music I really like is on ‘**Off the Record**’, 3RRR, every Saturday morning at 9. 3RRR is what Australians call a ‘community station’ and Americans call a ‘college station’. It began in a couple of rooms in RMIT in the centre of Melbourne over forty years ago, and now occupies a complex at the northern end of the Nicholson Street tram line in East Brunswick. Like the other community stations in Melbourne, it takes in some advertising, but the station as a whole depends on listener subscriptions. I have no idea how Brian Wise earns his own income, but somehow he can afford two or three trips per year to various music festivals in USA. He sees lots of acts we will never see, and returns with a swag of interviews. His range of interests is about the same as mine, but I am not quite as keen on New Orleans-based blues as he is, and I’m more more keen on alt.country (as it used to be called) and alt.blues than he is. Over the years the US music industry has invented a category to cover our interests — Americana, which includes plenty of Australian, British, and European performers. My definition of Americana (the ‘good stuff’) is: popular music that is never played on commercial radio. Better still, popular music without bloody synthesisers. Such music was once played on the ABC in Australia, but such programs disappeared two years ago.

Brian Wise also edits *Rhythms*, Australia’s magazine about ‘the good stuff’, filling it with articles and reviews of people rarely mentioned elsewhere. Each year, he and his contributors, mainly music broadcasters and journalists, submit their Top 10 music lists to the February issue.

Jimmie Dale Gilmore was one of the three members of one of the greatest American folk/country/ rock groups ever, the **Flatlanders**. All three of them — **Joe Ely**, **Butch Hancock**,

and **Jimmie Dale Gilmore** — have found it difficult to make new CDs in recent years. All three come from a small area in Texas around Lubbock, an area that has provided a roll call of successful performers in American popular music, including **Buddy Holly**, **Pat Boone**, **Roy Orbison**, and the three **Flatlanders**.

Dave Alvin comes from a place called Downey, Texas. So the album he’s made with **Jimmie Dale Gilmore** is called *Downey to Lubbock*. Dave Alvin has big, deep voice, and plays very big, deep lead guitar. Jimmie Dale Gilmore has a high voice that ranges from ethereal to wispy to almost Orbison-ish. Put the two together, plus a magnificent set of songs, and you have the perfect Americana CD.

Americana music is made all over Europe as well. **Klara and Johanna Söderberg** are sisters who perform under the name of **First Aid Kit**. Together they make the most delicious sound made by women’s voices, and the songs are also excellent. In recent years they have also been recognised by commercial radio. *Ruins* is their best CD so far. I say this because of the anthemic blow-the-top-off-your-brain quality of the last three songs on the album.

A main feature of my 2018 list is the roll call of female performers. You might not know the names of **Dawn Landes**, **Olivia Chaney**, **Amy Helm**, **Katie Melua**, **Lindi Ortega**, and **Courtney Marie Andrews**, but if they were only performers left alive, we would be lucky indeed. They follow in the tradition of **Mary Chapin Carpenter**, **Emmylou Harris**, **Gillian Welch**, and many others, and they should be much better known.

The women I’ve just mentioned perform in the ‘high lonesome country’ style of traditional American music (as do **First Aid Kit** and Australia’s equivalent group, **OhPep**). To match them are the great female singers who perform in the low-sexy-intimate style that is in the tradition of **Peggy Lee**, **Patsy Cline**, **Nina Simone**, and **Mavis Staples**. **Betty Lavette** is one of that generation. She disappeared from the music business for 40 years, but her career has sprung into life in recent years. *Things Have Changed*, her CD of almost unrecognisable ‘cover versions’ of **Bob Dylan** songs, is a highlight of 2018.

Among chocolate-voiced singers a leading performer is now **Mary Gauthier**. Her *Rifles and Rosary Beads* is a collection of songs with dangerous narrative lyrics, a passionate outcry of someone you would not want to take issue with.

Lucinda Williams now occupies a central ground. She began as an aggressive rock and roll-country-blues singer. Over the years her voice has lowered in tone, and her songs have become slower and more intense. In *Vanished Gardens*, she combines forces with the band of 80-year-old jazz saxophonist **Charles Lloyd** to offer a concert that combines the best features of jazz and country.

Over the years **Marianne Faithfull**’s voice has moved from the high and ethereal category into the gravel-voiced vocalists category. This adds to the authenticity and strength of her lyrics. On *Negative Capability*, just to remind us of how far she’s travelled, she offers us a new version of her most famous hit, ‘As Tears Go By’. The other songs show that she has undergone some pretty hard days recently.

My favourite male singers for 2018 can also be divided between those in the country-white-folk tradition and those in the blues-jazz tradition. Among the best performers of 2018 is Castlemaine’s own **Broderick Smith**, my favourite Australian singer. His *Man In His Time* is the title of both his latest CD and a handsome new autobiography. The songs on the CD are quiet and intense, ideal for re-listening. I keep

hoping he will make another CD with the Dingoes, the greatest Australian group, but I doubt that will happen.

On the list you'll see many of my favourite white blues and alt.country singers, each of them returning with an unexpected performance. Take *Springsteen on Broadway*, the soundtrack of a video shown on Netflix (so I haven't been able to see it, because it has not appeared on DVD). **Bruce Springsteen** spent a year of his life performing in a small Broadway theatre his musical autobiography, eight shows a week. The combination of anecdotes and songs is very intense, very funny in the first half and perhaps too earnest in the second half. On these songs I can catch in the lyrics much that was not audible when the songs first appeared.

Six years ago **Ry Cooder** said he would not record another CD, mainly because members of his concert audience would not buy his CDs. Nobody is quite sure what made him change his mind, or why he chose black gospel music as the subject of *Prodigal Son*. Some of the songs are revivals, but his own new songs have a special personal edge that makes them very attractive. As Ry says of himself, he couldn't sing for peanuts during his heyday during the 1970s; his guitar told his stories for him. Now Ry has become a very versatile and interesting singer — and he is still one of the five best electric guitarists in the world.

Ben Harper is a new discovery to me. His voice has a distinctive Sam Cooke chocolate-and-cream quality, and most of his songs are excellent. It was a brainwave to team him with the blues' greatest living harmonica player **Charlie Musselwhite** on *No Mercy in this Land*, a lament for the destruction of the best features of the land they both love.

John Prine has been very ill over the last ten years, but he returns with *The Tree of Forgiveness*. His lyrics have lost none of their sharpness or quirkiness, and his voice has sort of survived the rigours of cancer.

I could go on, but you catch my drift. What, for instance, can one say new about **Willie Nelson**? He's 86 years old, he still performs all over America, still produces at least two CDs a year (and often three), and his song-writing (with Gus Cannon) is sharper than ever. On *Last Man Standing* he presents some rueful songs about growing old and the friends he's lost, but he also sings that are just plain funny. And Trigger, his battered old guitar, sounds as good as ever.

So who is **Kamasi Washington**, No 3 on my list? I still buy the

music magazines, including *Uncut*, *Mojo*, and *Rhythms* (in the popular music field) and *Limelight* (Australia's classical music magazine). Both *Uncut* and *Mojo* attach to the cover each month a little CD of the 'best' songs of the month. Usually these tracks are anything but the best, but in December 2018 the *Mojo* disc included an extraordinary nine-minute track combining jazz, soul, and orchestral/choral music, by Kamasi Washington, a performer about whom I had never heard. The double drumming on the track is especially impressive, as each drum is doing something quite different. The same issue of *Mojo* named Washington's 2018 double-CD *Heaven and Earth* as its No. 1 album of the year. In my local JB Hi Fi store I found a copy of his 2017 CD *Harmony of Difference* (so it's here on my list), but I couldn't track down *Heaven and Earth* until Christmas Eve (at Readings in Carlton). I'm not sure why Brian Wise hasn't discovered this great performer yet — perhaps the tracks are too long for radio.

Earlier in the year, I heard on radio some concerts by **Joseph Tawadros**, ace ood player, and found a copy of *The Bluebird the Mystic and the Fool*, an electrifying combination of minimal classicism, Mediterranean music, and jazz.

And what of my Special Item, **Roy Orbison's** *Unchained Melodies*? Roy is, as you know, one of my touchstone performers. What can I make of a 'fake' album that works? Members of the Orbison family (five of them are listed) have stripped Roy's vocals from his 1960s recordings and combined them with backing tracks from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London. This is part of an overall project that has worked well for Aretha Franklin. In the case of Roy Orbison, the first combination CD, *A Love So Beautiful*, didn't work. The double-drumming on the Monument tracks (1959–64) was one of the strengths of those songs. To replace the drum tracks with orchestral arrangements was a failure. On the second such CD, *Unchained Melodies*, the Orbison crew have stripped away the poorly produced rhythm backings from the MGM tracks (1965–1970), and replaced them with new rhythm and orchestral backings. My favourite track is Roy's version of 'Danny Boy'. He sings the entire lyric, which one rarely hears, accompanied by the swelling large-orchestra sound that the song deserves. This CD also revives my favourite pop song ever, 'The Crowd', from 1962, but it's not as effective as the original.

Favourite popular boxed sets bought during 2018

- 1 Tom Petty: AN AMERICAN TREASURE (4 CDs)
- 2 Rolling Stones: STICKY FINGERS: LIVE AT THE FONDA THEATRE 2015 (+ DVD)
- 3 Beatles: WHITE ALBUM PLUS ESHER DEMOS (3 CDs)
- 4 Bob Dylan: MORE BLOOD, MORE TRACKS: BOOTLEG SERIES VOL. 14
- 5 Fats Domino: THE COMPLETE HITS 1950–1962 (3 CDs)
- 6 Various: CONFESSIN' THE BLUES (2 CDs)
- 7 Chick Corea: THE MUSICIAN (3 CDs)
- 8 Jimmy Smith: 5 ORIGINAL ALBUMS (5 CDs)
- 9 Box Beiderbecke: BIXOLOGY 1924–1927, VOL. 1 (4 CDs)

- 10 Kinks: ARE THE VILLAGE GREEN PRESERVATION SOCIETY (2 CDs)

Other four-start items, in order of purchase:

Various: TAKE ME TO TOWN: AN AUSTRALIAN ALTERNATIVE COUNTRY COMPILATION (3 CDs)
Various: NEW ORLEANS: BLUES, SOUL AND JAZZ GUMBO (2 CDs)
Various: RHYTHMS MAGAZINE MUSIC SAMPLER
Michael Franks: ORIGINAL ALBUM SERIES (5 CDs)
Various: THE REAL ... CLASSIC FILM (3 CDs)

I've run out of puff, so I will merely recommend these boxed sets or double CDs as a group.

Recently we lost one of my favourite performers, **Tom Petty**, at the age of 65. In 1979 and 1980, he seemed to be the only rock and roll performer heard on Top 40 radio. Since 1980, each of his CDs contains brilliant new songs. To

add to your collection of several previous boxed sets of Petty's lifetime's work (and the four-hour bio-documentary that Peter Bogdanovich made), add *An American Treasure*, four CDs of songs that are either previously unreleased or have been released in other versions.

Favourite classical CDs heard for the first time in 2018

- | | | |
|---|--|----|
| 1 | Charles Mackerras (cond.)/London Philh. Orch./Geoffrey Mitchell Choir: Mozart: The Magic Flute (2 CDs) (2005) | |
| 2 | Jascha Horenstein (cond.)/London Phil. Orch./Margaret Price (sop.): Mahler: Symphony No 4 (1971/2010) (Mahler The Complete Works CD 6) | 7 |
| 3 | Riccardo Chailly (cond.)/Jacques-Yves Thibaudet (p.)/Takashi Harada (ondes martenot)/Royal Concertgebouw Orch.: Messiaen: Turangalila Symphony (1993/2003) | 8 |
| 4 | Vladimir Ashkenazy (p.): Beethoven: Andante FAVORI/Piano Sonata No 29 ('Hammerklavier')/Piano Sonata No 21 ('Waldstein') (1975/1980/2013) (Ashkenazy 50 Years on Decca CD 28) | 9 |
| 5 | Tonu Katjuste (cond.)/New Wroclaw Phil. Orch.: Arvo Part: Symphonies Nos. 1–4 (2018) | 10 |
| 6 | Krystjan Jarvi (cond.)/Radio Symph. Orch. | |
| | Berlin/RIAS Chamber Choir: Arvo Part: Stabat Mater for Choir and String Orchestra/Symphony No. 3/Canticles Des Degrees for Choir and Orchestra (2010) | |
| | Andrew Manze (cond.)/Royal Liverpool Phil. Orch.: Vaughan Williams: Symphonies 5 and 6 (2018) | |
| | Pierre Monteux (cond.)/London Symph. Orch.: Sibelius: Symphony No 2/Dvorak: Symphony No 7 (1959/1969/2015) (Decca Sound The Analogue Years CD 45) | |
| | Leonard Bernstein (cond.)/Israel Phil. Orch./Gidon Kremer (v.): Bernstein: Serenade after Plato's Symposium/Fancy Free ballet (1979/2013) (Leonard Bernstein Collection Vol. 1 CD 19) | |
| | Istvan Kertesz (cond.)/London Phil. Orch.: Dvorak: Symphonies 4, 5, 6 (Dvorak Symphonies CDs 3 and 4) | |

The great tragedy of 2018 was the disappearance of **Thomas**, the last classical music shop in Victoria. It leaves only one such shop in the whole of Australia, **Fish Fine Music** in Sydney. No longer can I browse for hot new items and tempting boxed sets. I can order music from Readings locally, but their display range is not very large, or buy from Presto Classical in the UK. But I can't browse anymore! Is there any hope left for Australia's musical life? Not much.

The result is that I've been sampling the many boxed sets I've bought in previous years. Occasionally I have bought a

new CD, based on reviews, but I have no idea whether I can buy some of the delicious music, especially by Australia composers, that ABC Classics FM has been playing recently.

You can't buy it anyway, because the secondhand CD stores have disappeared along with the secondhand book stores, but I will recommend one of the very greatest versions of **Mozart's The Magic Flute**. Elaine and I have owned more than twenty versions of the years, none of them perfect, but finally we got around to listening to Sir Charles Mackerras's version, in English, and it is near perfect.

Most of the other contenders are fresh and interesting new versions of long-familiar music. But **Arvo Part's Stabat Mater for Choir and String Orchestra** and **Symphony No. 3** are new to me, and complement a CD I bought of Part's four symphonies. You are either nuts about Part's music, which touches base somewhere between the twelfth century and the twenty-first century, often in the same phrase, or you're not. Time-travelling for beginners.

I can also recommend **Mahler: The Complete Works**, from Warner Classics (inheritor of the EMI catalogue). Someone of great taste has chosen some of the truly great performances of Mahler's orchestral works, especially the **Jascha Horenstein** version of the **Symphony No 4**.

— Bruce Gillespie, 10 February 2019



Jennifer Bryce is a Melbourne writer. After a career in educational research, she recently completed her first novel, *Lily Campbell's Secret*. She has won awards, including the Australian Science Fiction Foundation's Continuum Short Story Competition, and her stories have been read on Vision Australia's radio program *Cover to Cover*. Jenny was a founding member of Elwood Writers (<http://elwood-writers.com>) and has her own literary blog (<http://jenniferbryce.net>).

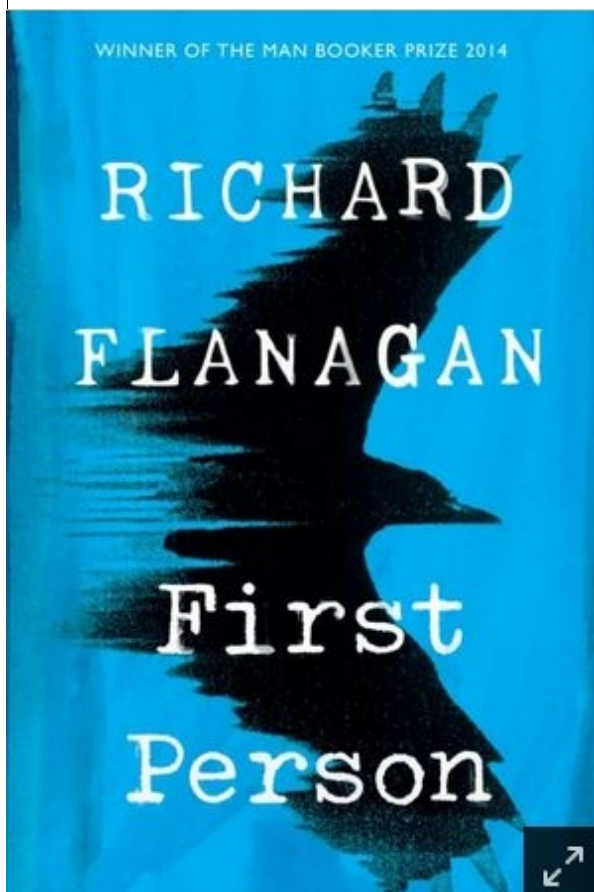
Jennifer Bryce

Favourites for 2018: Ten books, ten concerts, seven movies

Books

1. Richard Flanagan: *First Person*

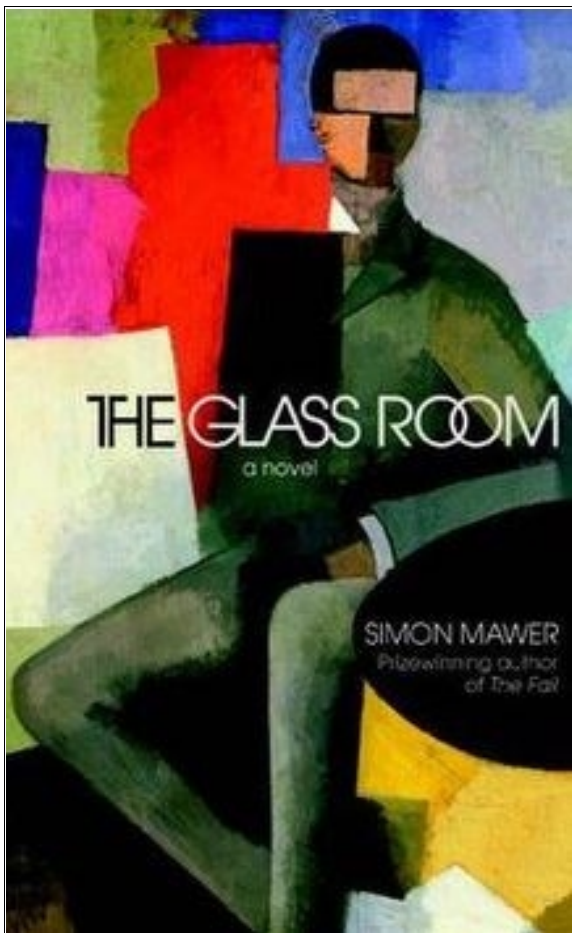
Some years ago I read Virginia Duigan's novel *The Biographer*, which raises issues about the extent to which it is ethical to reveal personal details in a biography —



the tantalising problem is that these are often the most fascinating aspects of a person's life: how far can you go? **Richard Flanagan's** *First Person* demonstrates another, not unrelated, matter: if you ghost-write someone's autobiography, to what extent might you be captured or taken over by elements of that person?

First Person is partly memoir, partly fiction. Some years ago Flanagan did ghost-write the autobiography of conman John Friedrich — and at the time Flanagan's wife was expecting twins. In the book, a young as yet unsuccessful writer desperately needs money. He has little choice but to accept a job ghost-writing the autobiography of conman Siegfried Heidl, who is about to be jailed for his crimes. Heidl also needs the money he will get from the book but he won't open up to the young writer, Kif Kehlmann — not one bit. Early on Heidl says, 'I have been missing since I was born.' For much of the story, Kehlmann and Heidl are confined together in an office of a publishing house in Port Melbourne. The atmosphere is at times stultifying. Part of the contract is that they must go to work there every day. Kehlmann is utterly frustrated by his inability to get anything of Heidl's story and Heidl spends most of the time in avoidance behaviour or going out to what are probably fake meetings and lunches. At weekends Kehlmann goes home to his heavily pregnant wife and three-year-old daughter in Tasmania and is confronted by the pressing need for money.

One of the many things that Flanagan does well in this book is to explore inherent brutality in men's relationships: the bleakness of an alcohol-fuelled mateship, the naïve ruthlessness of mates trying cross Bass Strait in a dinghy. The family in Tasmania is probably intended to be a kind of back-drop — the reason for the desperate need for money. But that's what kept me reading. Not surprisingly, the marriage fails, but Kif has a warmth, tenderness, and respect for Suzy: 'later in the night [he] spooned into Suzy's back'. For me, the drama was: she's eight months pregnant with twins, with threatening pre-eclampsia, they've been given a tour of the neonatal intensive care nursery — oh, hell, he's not



going to be there when she goes into labour! And he's not. Everyone survives. Suzy seems too tolerant, too earth-motherish.

This callous self-absorption and irresponsibility is all a part of Kif's transformation into the subject of the autobiography he is ghost-writing. He becomes more and more like Heidl — lacking principles and morality, rather than being the impoverished but genuine writer we first see. By the end of the book, there is no going back to that original home-spun life.

Heidl dies. It would spoil the story for those who haven't read it to say how and by whose hand. This is the drama of the book and Kif is infused with the harsh bleakness of the bush.

2. Simon Mawer: *The Glass Room*

The Glass Room, a famous modernist house, actually does exist in Brno, Czechoslovakia. It has been said that the architecture of the house is also the architecture of the book. All characters pass through the house, built for the wealthy Landauers in the late 1920s; the interior is like being inside a crystal of salt. And the use of the house changes with history. It was built for the Landauers when they were a very well-to-do young couple. As Czechoslovakia experiences the threat of Nazi occupation in the late 1930s, the Landauers, now with two children, a nanny, who happens to be the husband's mistress, and her daughter, flee to Switzerland. So the house is left to be used by the Nazis as a scientific laboratory. After the war, with the Communist take-over, the house is used as

a gymnasium. Then, in the end, with Czechoslovakia having suffered extensive decline, the house is restored pretty much to its original state and made a museum.

I learned a great deal about the occupation of Czechoslovakia and, when a widowed and almost blind Liesel Landauer returns to what might have been her home, I felt sympathy for the once privileged, once well-connected woman.

3. Michael Ondaatje: *Warlight*

'Warlight' was the dim light that helped emergency traffic navigate London's streets during the blackouts of World War II. Most of this book seems to be dimly lit.

With the book's opening sentence, the reader is thrust into post-World War II sinister murkiness: 'In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals.' The two children, fourteen-year-old Nathaniel (the main narrator of the story) and his sixteen-year-old sister Rachel, understand that their parents are travelling to Singapore for a year for the father's work. He boards a plane and they never see him again. The mother will follow shortly — she makes a show of packing her steamer trunk.

The children are left in the care of a rather scruffy man and his associates. They nickname their main minder 'the Moth' — I assumed that he must hover around, but Nathaniel says he was 'moth-like in his shy movements'. An ex-boxer, 'the Darter' becomes a significant second father figure for Nathaniel, indulging in clandestine activities such as late night smugglings of racing grey-hounds down shadowy waterways in a mussel boat. Rachel is taken along on many of these activities, but she is bereft and never forgives her mother for abandoning her.

Then the children discover their mother's steamer trunk. She didn't take it. She didn't go. But where is she? Some things are gradually revealed. The mother's code name, associated with espionage, is Viola. We follow Nathaniel through his teenage life — abandoning school, falling in love, working in a restaurant, and then working for 'the Darter'. But pulsing away beneath all of this, like the murky canals and back lanes he traverses,



Michael Ondaatje.

are questions about his mother.

There is an attempted kidnapping. A turning-point. Suddenly Nathaniel is in his late twenties and working in intelligence — mainly so that he can find out more about his mother. And suddenly there is light when we find ourselves at the mother's country house called White Paint — there are bees, there is thatching, it is all seemingly wholesome and English. But no. The mother, the spy, is shot in her summerhouse. More about the mother's background is unearthed. When Nathaniel ultimately catches up with 'the Darter' (they were separated at the time of the attempted kidnapping) he discovers something that brings a heart-wrenching twist to the end of the story.

This book was a page-turner for me — and yet I left it slightly dissatisfied. I was an observer. I couldn't get inside or even feel some small degree of empathy for any of the characters — not even the poor abandoned Rachel. Maybe we can be no more than witnesses to that distant, dimly lit time. In many ways, reading the book was rather like watching a movie of the 1940s — it was definitely in black and white.

4. Kamel Daoud: *The Meursault Investigation*

In Camus's *The Outsider*, a nameless Arab is killed on a beach in Algeria. He is killed by Meursault, a man who seems to be totally lacking emotion. The first words of the novel, narrated by Meursault are: 'Mother (or Maman — translated from French) died today.' Stark and devoid of grief. Much later in the book, Meursault happens to be walking on a hot beach, holding a gun. He sees the Arab man and kills him. My sense was that it was just because the man happened to be there and Meursault happened to be holding a gun — some say it was because the sun was in his eyes. There is no apparent motive. Callous indifference to Arab life? It was 1942, a time of resistance to the French rule that would continue until 1962.

Some 70 years later, **Kamel Daoud** wrote *The Meursault Investigation*. It is from the viewpoint of Harun, the younger brother of the Arab who was killed on the beach in Camus's novel. The Arab, who is nameless in Camus's book is given a name: Musa. And the opening sentence is: 'Mama is still alive today': a kind of helix, echoing Camus's opening. Indeed, much of the book describes the mother's desire to seek revenge even 20 years after her oldest son has been killed.

Harun was only seven when his brother was killed. The body was washed away, so there could be no funeral. Over 20 years (the book is set in 1962), the killing has dominated Harun's life. He is now a drunk — his story is narrated from a bar, he is lost and a stranger in his own country — indeed, the implication is that Algeria has lost itself: Harun wants to 'bellow' his 'impieties'. For him, God is a question not an answer. The choices of nationalism or religion are meaningless.

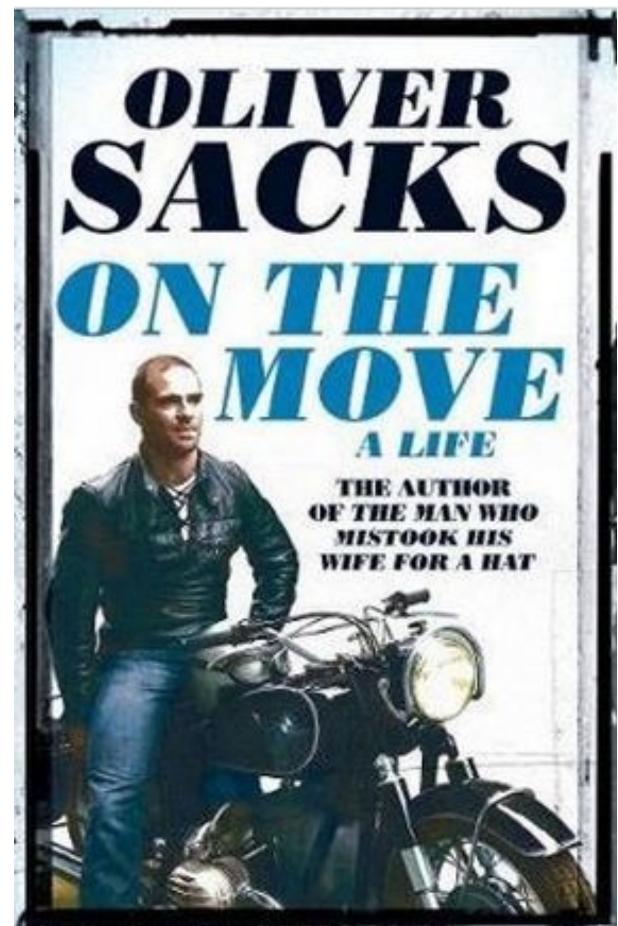
Harun ultimately enacts his revenge by killing a French settler just after the cease-fire in the War of Independence. Had he killed the man before the cease-

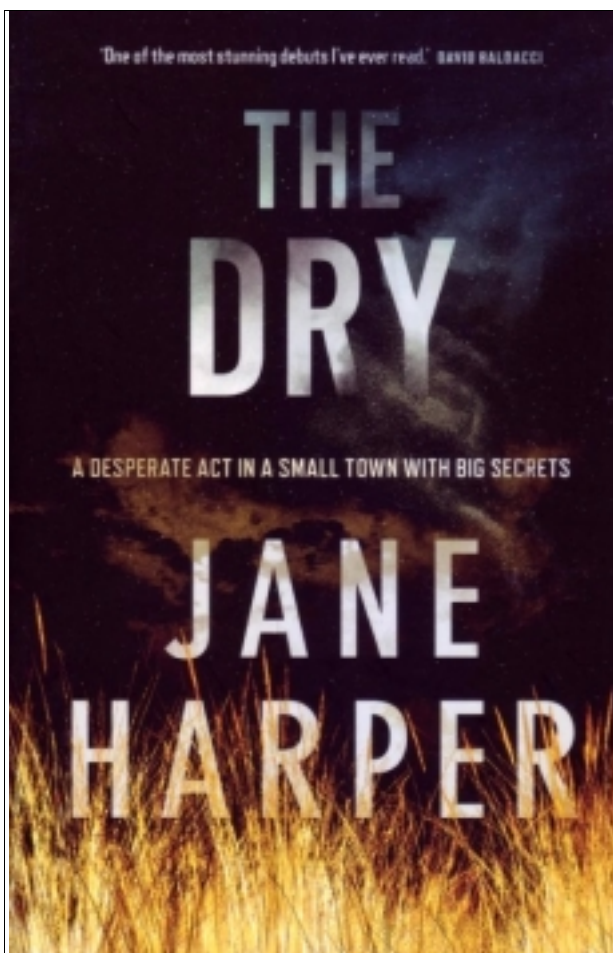
fire, he would have been a hero. He certainly doesn't seek notoriety. After murdering the Frenchman, Harun is taken by soldiers and questioned, but he isn't questioned about the murder. Instead, he is interrogated as to why he never joined the fighting for the resistance. Harun feels cheated when he is set free with no punishment for the murder.

According to Wikipedia: On December 16, 2014, a death threat against Daoud was issued from a Facebook page that is now locked. Daoud was labelled 'an enemy of religion'. Defending himself against the charge of blasphemy in a TV interview, Daoud said: 'It was a fictional character in the novel who said these things, not me. If we judge people on the basis of characters in their books, we will be facing dark times in Algeria.'

5. Oliver Sacks: *On the Move*

'On the Move' refers to **Oliver Sacks**'s enjoyment of riding his motor bike — various bikes during his life — long distances. When he was living in Los Angeles he would sometimes ride 500 miles to the Grand Canyon and another 500 miles back in a weekend. I have admired Sacks's writing ever since reading *Awakenings*. He combines formidable scientific knowledge and observation with an ability to enter into the skin of people as he writes lucid case studies that come to life. I had understood that Sacks was a bit of a loner — an eccentric, excessively shy scientist. To some extent this is true, but throughout his life he maintained extensive letter-writing with colleagues, friendships with many people and a loving





closeness to his family of brothers and physician parents. We learn about this, and his inspirations, his disappointments, his achievements from his many books and scientific papers. *On the Move* is written in a chatty, easy-to-read style, although it quite often tackles details of Sacks' extensive interests in neuro-psychology — visual perception, how we think, how we perceive ourselves. In his seventies Sacks fell in love — perhaps his first serious long-term love, and it is good to know that he was presumably not a loner when he died in 2015, a little after this book was published.

6. Julian Barnes: *Before She Met Me*

Beautifully written, this book certainly kept me turning the pages. We start with a very commonplace phenomenon: Graham Hendricks, a middle-aged married man (a history professor), leaves his wife for a younger woman (Ann). However the fascinating aspect of this is that, after marriage, he becomes infatuated with her — it gets worse and worse, a kind of pathological jealousy. He is infatuated about her earlier relationships. It's impossible to go on holiday anywhere she might have gone with a former lover. Graham has to go, obsessively, to the B Grade movies in which she acted. And ultimately the pathology becomes dire. Graham, the rather conventional academic, in a ghastly display with a butcher's knife, kills a friend he thinks Ann may still be having an affair with (she isn't). I did wonder how a history professor could find so much time to go to B Grade movies.

But the idea of this kind of obsessive infatuation drove the novel.

7. Maggie O'Farrell: *I Am, I Am, I Am*

The title of this astonishing memoir is taken from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*: 'I took a deep breath and listened to the old/brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.'

Maggie O'Farrell has had seventeen brushes with death and she describes them; not in chronological order. Each one is separated by a heading describing the part of the body at risk — such as the neck, when on a lonely walk, a sinister man slung his camera strap around her neck. Maggie had a childhood illness from which she was not expected to survive, and one of the most terrible experiences was when, at the age of eight, she was lying in a hospital bed late at night and she heard a nurse say to another child that he must be quiet because a little girl is dying in there. Maggie did survive although she retained some neurological problems that sometimes got her into near death situations — almost drowning and not being able to distinguish up from down. She went on to have two children — not easily, there were miscarriages. Her son seems to be fine, but her daughter has frightening allergic reactions, frequently taking her close to death. Somehow, Maggie manages to weather this and to write exquisitely: when your child is ill, 'the world shuts up and you are reduced to a crystalline pinpoint, to a single purpose: to keep your child alive' (page 252).

8. Jane Harper: *The Dry*

This book won the Australian Book Industry Award for 2017 and the Premier's Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript in 2015. The novel explores areas that demand more exploration in Australian literature: the lot of farmers when there is severe drought, and the consequences of addictive gambling. These were the things that made it a compelling read for me, more than the unravelling of two main crimes, seen through the eyes of Aaron Falk, a Federal policeman who works on finance. Falk was raised in the town of Kiewarra, and returns there for the funeral of his once best mate, who, deranged by the drought, appears to have shot his wife and son and then turned the gun on himself. Falk is suspected of having a hand in an earlier death by drowning. It's good crime fiction — there are various leads and we need to solve the two crimes. By the end of the book, both crimes are solved, conclusively. But it is the atmosphere of drought, madness, and desperation that make this a great read.

9. Brian Aldiss: *Comfort Zone*

I took a little while to get into this book, in which we are confined by the daily routines of an 80-year-old man living in a village on the outskirts of Oxford. But the writing is beautiful, with an underlying wit and honesty

about what it's like to be shuffling around in your eighties. At one point **Brian Aldiss** finds the need to jump into the text and tell us that the main character, Justin, isn't him. In parallel with coping with life: the end of a love affair, an adult disabled son, the need for a medley of medications, Justin works on a thesis about the evils done by religions in the world today and the suggestion that everything is governed by chance.

I loved: 'windows with their pouting sills' (page 8), 'complaint crept in like a hungry slug among lettuces' (page 32) 'a woman of bustling corpulence' (page 78), 'his rickety old voice' (page 122), and 'the suited man whinnied with laughter' (page 290).

10. Eddie Ayres: *Danger Music*

I am a great fan of **Eddie Ayres**. This started when I read *Cadence*, written as Emma Ayres, about cycling from England to Hong Kong on Vita, her trusty bicycle taking a violin with her so that she could communicate through music to people in what most of us would regard as incredibly dangerous countries for solo female travel. Emma was unhappy in a female body and this book, written as 'Eddie', describes a desperate need to be male and by the end of the book the first part of the transition process has been undertaken.

Most of the book is about a time, still as 'Emma', when Ayres worked as a teacher in a music academy in Kabul. It describes poignantly how impossible it is to gain a real understanding of a foreign culture. Emma loves these children and shares their musical triumphs — which seem incredible, given the environment in which they are working; bombs constantly thudding in the distance. It must take tremendous courage to work there when you're never quite sure what is going on.



The book also shows how music is a means of communicating and a means of giving these young people a purpose and a sense of achievement. The music played is both Afghani and Western. It is a beautiful and open account of that time in Eddie's life.

Concerts

1. Music for Armistice Day — first concert

11 November 2018 was the centenary of the signing of the Armistice — the armistice that ended fighting in World War I between Germany and the Allies. The Armistice came into effect at 11.11 a.m., French time, on the 11th day of the 11th month. It marked a victory for the Allies and defeat, although not a formal surrender, by Germany. The war was so brutal and so shattering for most of the Western world that 100 years on, it continues to be represented in all kinds of art forms. I attended two concerts that commemorated that day.

In the afternoon of 11 November, at the Meat Market Centre, Melbourne, I heard the Australian contribution to '100 for 100': a celebration of the centenary of the rebirth of a free Poland, which occurred as a result of the signing of the Armistice.

Daniel Clichy, Director and Editor-in-Chief of a publishing house that has aimed to preserve and promote Polish music over the past 100 years, explained in program notes that for this enterprise 100 works written since 1918 by Polish composers would be presented throughout the world. Concerts took place at roughly the same time in 11 venues outside of Poland: Chicago, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, London, Lviv (Ukraine), Milan, New York, Paris, Tokyo, Vienna, and Melbourne, and at 11 venues within Poland. So there we were, sitting in the Meat Market Centre, participating in this celebration of Polish freedom and culture. Programs were different in the various venues, but all concerts were of Polish music composed since 1918.

In Melbourne we heard *Contragambilles*, composed in 2014 for string quartet, by **Andrzej Kwieciński** (b. 1984). Program notes suggested that, for Kwieciński, instruments and performers are melded as one whole. The piece is influenced by dances of Rameau, where the composer focused on the gestures of musicians as well as sounds. For Kwieciński, the program notes tell us, 'the noise of the bow rubbing against the strings — the very techniques of sound production become music'. At the end, the violist threw away a tambourine he had been playing, the sound and gesture being an integral part of the music.

Jagoda Szmytka's (b. 1982) piece *Inane Prattle* was written in 2013. The piece is for solo trumpet, accompanied by flute, piccolo, transverse flute, oboe, clarinets and strings, with a tape of distorted sounds of an Arab

doctor describing a skin disease — the inane prattle that surrounds us in everyday life.

We also heard **Kazimierz Serocki's** (1922–1981) *Phantasmagoria* for piano and percussion, composed in 1970–1971, **Dominik Karski's** (b. 1972) *Motion + Form*, composed 2003 — Karski lives in Australia, as does **Dobromila Jaskot** (b. 1981), whose piece for two flutes, *Hgrrrsht*, explores the borderline between flute sounds and human voice and breath. The piece included chattering teeth and tongue clicks.

There was also a homage to Poland's most famous (although pre 1918) composer, Chopin — *Sighs*, by **Marcin Stańczyk** (b. 1977). The 'sigh' refers to the technique (not notated by Chopin but used when performing his piano music) of slowing down the tempo according to 'the naturalness of musical phrase and gesture' (from the concert program) — a technique known as rubato. I have recently read Paul Kildea's *Chopin's Piano* (Penguin Random House, 2018), where, discussing performance of Chopin's piano music, rubato is described: 'the best rubato is like a golf ball hovering on the lip of a hole for that interminable moment before it tips in' (page 263).

Whilst the horrific slaughter of World War I will not be forgotten, it was invigorating to be a part of a celebration of a positive outcome and to sense that in 22 other cities, audiences were, almost at that very moment, listening to and honouring Polish music with us.

2. Music for Armistice Day — second concert

The second concert was held at the Church of All Nations in Carlton, where the **Arcko Symphonic Ensemble** presented a concert in remembrance of 11th November 1918. I suppose 100 years ago, festivities would have focused on victory, but this concert was one of remembering.

The first item, *Meditation on Der Krieg* (war) was composed in 2018 by **Rohan Phillips** in response to seven of fifty works created by German artist Otto Dix that captured scenes with which he was confronted as a soldier in World War I. The music was reflective and, according to program notes, almost liminal — outside of time. The next piece, for solo piano, provided a strong contrast with action and jarring rhythms. *The Drumfire was Incessant* was composed in 2012 by **Andrew Harrison**, after reading an account of the Battle of Pozières, in which his great-great uncle was wounded. **Helen Gifford** composed *Menin Gate*, also for solo piano, in 2005. The Gate, in Belgium, is a tribute to the 350,000 allied soldiers who died in battles fought at Ypres. The program notes include Siegfried Sassoon's reference to 'The unheroic dead who fed the guns'.

These two pieces for solo piano were followed by a piece for *If Not In This World*, composed in 2018 by **Andrew Harrison**, for soprano, tenor, and chamber orchestra. This was like a miniature opera based on letters written by relatives of the composer: Leslie, a young farm labourer, describes his experience in the trenches while trying to placate his mother's anxiety

ending, 'Till we meet again, if not in this world, in the next.' Leslie was killed. His voice is contrasted with the authority of correspondence from the Australian War Office, and his mother's pleading for them to find a good luck ring she had given her son. Not surprisingly, the ring is never found, and she is left a broken-hearted lonely mother. As the composer states in the program notes, 'The end of the war did not bring closure, but opened up a gaping wound that tore at the internal fabric of society.'

The final item in the concert was a poetry reading of excerpts from **Frederick Phillips' An English Vision of Empire** (1919). The poet was the grandfather of Arcko's founder and conductor, **Timothy Phillips**. Frederick Phillips, like so many WWI soldiers, returned with shell-shock or what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and after many years of suffering ultimately killed himself. As the program notes say, 'His story and the poem stand as a testament to the long reaching shadow that war casts over people's lives.'

People left the concert quietly, probably many, like me, poignantly aware of that long reaching shadow.

3. Benjamin Britten at the Australian National Academy of Music (ANAM)

Benjamin Britten (born in 1913) was a child prodigy with an ambitious mother — determined he would be the fourth of the great 'Bs' — who were, in her view, Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. He must have been a very good pianist and also played the viola. He composed a great deal, even when at primary school, and started to study composition with Frank Bridge when barely 14 years old.

On 7 September, at a morning concert at ANAM, we were treated to some of Britten's early works. This academy provides an ideal facility for exploring work of this kind in depth. Vitality and a high standard of performance can be relied upon and students seem to thrive



on these in-depth excursions into particular areas of music. Britten died of heart problems in 1976 at the relatively young age of 63.

We heard the *Phantasy Oboe Quartet*, which, the program notes suggest, Britten composed for oboe because, at this early stage in his career, he didn't want to place himself in competition with the monumental body of string quartets by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. A further reason is most likely that Britten was studying at the Royal College of Music where he would have met oboist Leon Goossens, who, with his beautiful mastery of the difficult instrument, had demonstrated its potential. He was, arguably, the greatest oboist of the early twentieth century, and had many works, like this one, written and dedicated to him.

I had never heard Britten's *Three Divertimenti for String Quartet*, composed from 1933 to 1936. We were told that these were arranged from 'character pieces' based on memories of Britten's school days. With movements headed fairly conventionally 'March', 'Waltz', and 'Burlesque', the 'comic grotesquerie' was a surprise and it was easy to imagine the young British schoolboys who had inspired this music.

The earliest piece on the program was *Movement for Wind Sextet* (1930), composed when Britten was only 16. There was no sense that this was an immature piece, although it is apparent that he was trying out ideas from the Second Viennese School — that wellspring of inspiration from Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg. We were told that Britten intended to write further movements, but they never eventuated.

The final item on the morning concert's program was Britten's *first string quartet*, composed in 1941, by which time he had moved temporarily to America — escaping war-torn England — he was a pacifist. The work conveys an unsettled mood — tempo changes, harmonic tensions that might be interpreted as a yearning for England. The last movement is optimistic and indeed, fairly

soon after completing this work he returned to the country he obviously loved.

4. Ensemble Françaix at Macedon Music

On a glorious autumn afternoon in May, we gathered at a private home — Lowland Farm, Mount Macedon — to hear a concert by **Ensemble Françaix**, an unusual combination of instruments: oboe, bassoon, and piano.

Three pieces in the Ensemble Françaix repertoire have become old favourites for me: the **Trio** by **Jean Françaix**, which started this concert, and later the **Trio** by **Francis Poulenc** and the final piece, the excitingly jazzy **Trio** by **André Previn**.

We heard a new piece, *Ricercare* by Queensland composer **Chris Healey**. Indeed, it was a world premiere. 'Ricercare', or 'searching', is a term usually associated with baroque music — music of a contrapuntal style that often weaves around a theme, teasing it sometimes, then ultimately establishing it. For me, one of the best-known baroque examples of this device is the theme of Bach's *A Musical Offering*. In Chris's work there were fugue-like passages, but he said he used the idea of 'ricercare' as a kind of launching pad. Then we heard the Australian premiere of *Waharoa*, by New Zealand composer **Ben Hoadley**. Ben travels a lot from New Zealand to Australia and the piece was, to some extent, a blending of these cultures. For example, a motif inspired by the New Zealand bellbird, and another, the Australian grey butcher bird. The title of the piece is a New Zealand place in the Waikato region. Another piece new to me, but not a premiere, was *Terra Incognita* by **Katia Beaugéais**. The piece has two movements, the first, 'misterioso', depicts the mystery of the 'unknown' land that Europeans of the time before the seventeenth century believed must exist somewhere in the south. The second movement, 'appassionato', suggests the land and its

Ensemble Françaix.





Inventi Ensemble.

native bird life. One interesting device was to have the oboe and bassoon blow into the open grand piano — the open lid deflected the sound in an eerie way. The concert finished with André Previn's Trio and we went home refreshed by its jaunty final movement.

5. Inventi Ensemble at the Melbourne Recital Centre

This concert was a part of the 'Local Heroes' series. The **Inventi Ensemble** is certainly locally bred. **Ben Opie**, oboist, and **Melissa Doecke**, flute, met when they studied together in Canberra. But their experience extends well outside Australia, as they have performed an extraordinary array of different kinds of music (Bach from a three-tonne truck, BBC Proms, London's Southbank) in places such as Bahrain, Prague, and San Francisco.

The concert featured twentieth- and twenty-first-century music. It was entitled '**Jonathan Harvey and his Contemporaries**'. **Jonathan Harvey** (1939–2012) was a British composer who took up an invitation of Pierre Boulez to work at the Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music (IRCAM), linked to the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris, where, among other things, Harvey became involved in speech analysis — applying this knowledge to some of his music, including a symphony.

The concert opened with Harvey's *Ricercare una Melodia* (1984), which can be played by various solo instruments and tape delay system. Just coincidence, I think, that I heard in quite quick succession two modern pieces using the idea of 'ricercare'. On this occasion the piece was performed masterfully by oboist Ben Opie, with Melissa Doecke operating the tape delay. This was followed by **Oliver Knussen's** solo flute work, *Masks* (1969), performed by Melissa Doecke.

We then had an amazingly dexterous and jazzy piece for solo oboe by English composer **Michael Finnissy**, *Runnin' Wild* (1978). Inventi Ensemble is essentially Ben and Melissa — they nearly always invite guests to work with them and on this occasion the guest was pianist **Peter de Jager** who, like Ben and Melissa, can play brilliantly across a wide range of genres. Peter played

Jonathan Harvey's *Vers*, composed to celebrate Pierre Boulez's seventy-fifth birthday. The next piece was by **Edwin Roxburgh**, and I expected it to be for oboe, as I had heard of Roxburgh as an oboist (indeed he held various positions such as principal oboe for Sadlers Wells), but this was for flute and piano — and the piano was particularly described as 'accompaniment'. Ben played an oboe solo, *First Grace of Light*, (1991) by **Peter Maxwell Davies**, composed in memory of English oboist Janet Craxton and inspired by a poem, *Daffodils*, by George Mackay Brown.

The final item in the concert, *Run Before Lightning* by Jonathan Harvey, was performed by Melissa Doecke, who had

worked with Harvey when he was composing the piece. Altogether, it had been a feast of new music that embraced a diverse range of forms and genres.

6. Piano and 'Cello at Mount Macedon

Melbourne-based performers **Blair Harris** ('cello) and **Caroline Almonte** (piano) gave an inspired and interesting performance on a Sunday afternoon at Mount Macedon.

A new experience for me was to hear an electric 'cello, on which Blair Harris performed *Sept Papillons* for solo 'cello by Finnish composer **Kaija Saariaho**. These seven brief descriptions of butterflies seemed to suit the electric 'cello — light and flighty. The main difference I noticed in the electric instrument is that the finger board seems to be more responsive than that of an acoustic 'cello. This was followed by a piece of Australian composer **Peter Sculthorpe** (1929–2014) for 'cello and piano, which depicts ducks on a billabong — very appropriate for our rural setting.

Then we heard local composer **Caerwen Martin's** *Heart of Yours, Heart of Mine*, composed especially for Blair and Caroline and publicly performed on only one other occasion. Before interval we also heard **Arvo Pärt's** *Spiegel im Spiegel* (*Mirror(s) in the Mirror*), composed in 1978. Minimalist music, the title suggests infinity and the idea of reflection, with the 'cello and piano playing scale passages in opposite directions: as the 'cello ascends, the piano descends, etc. The piece was originally written for violin and piano. It has been used in theatre and film — including a short film by Jean Luc Godard.

After interval (wine and sandwiches on the lawn), we were reminded that 2018 was the centenary of the ending of World War I with a piece written by **E. J. Moeran** (1894–1950) when he was convalescing from a WWI injury. After this came the major work: **Frank Bridge's** (1879–1941) 'cello sonata in D Minor H125, composed over the years of the war. There are two movements. The first starts with an ascending 'cello scale that maybe suggests hope, but this is not maintained. The second movement has been said to express Bridge's despair over

the futility of war and the general state of the world at that time.

7. Anne Sofie von Otter at the Adelaide Festival

Anne Sofie von Otter's concert started with some composers I hadn't heard of, **Ture Rangström**, **Wilhelm Stenhammar**, and **Wilhelm Peterson-Berger**; all late romantic Swedish composers. She then sang five songs by **Sibelius**, and after a piano solo (a movement of a sonata by **Stenhammar**, played beautifully by her accompanist **Leif Kaner-Lidström**), some well-known **Schubert** lieder, finishing with *Who is Sylvia?* Anne Sofie von Otter's voice is mature and controlled, with what seemed to me just the right degree of vibrato.

After interval there was a tribute to composers who died in the Nazi concentration camp Terezin. During the war von Otter's father attempted, unsuccessfully, to spread information that he had received from an SS officer, warning about these camps. Terezin was decked out as a 'show piece' and before visits from the Red Cross, children were fed and everything was cleaned up — but only for the duration of a visit. This segment of the concert was fittingly closed with a piano solo: **J. S. Bach's Prelude in E Minor, Komm Süßer Tod (Come Sweet Death)**.

I wish that the concert had ended on that note, with that sentiment. But instead there were songs of **Abba** and the audience was encouraged to sing along. I suppose the aim was to leave the audience in a happy frame of mind. There's no way von Otter, with guitar and sometimes piano accompaniment, could replicate the mood of the famous rock band from her country. I wish she hadn't tried.

I was surprised when von Otter sat to present the second half of her concert. A singer usually stands, to allow for better breath control. I assumed she was tired, or maybe unwell and was coping as one would expect a great professional to do. How shattering to learn that just a few days later, von Otter's husband of nearly 30 years, **Benny Fredriksson**, who was accompanying von Otter on her tour, committed suicide. Terribly sad, and one can only try to imagine what von Otter was coping with when she gave that concert.

8. Tombeau de Claude Debussy, ANAM

25 March 2018 was the hundredth anniversary of the death of **Claude Debussy**, a composer whose works were a seminal force in the music of the twentieth century. To pay tribute to this great composer, ANAM put together a concert of works that in various ways acknowledge the pervasive influence of Debussy's work on all kinds of twentieth-century music — George Gershwin 'devoured' the music of Debussy and Debussy influenced not only significant 'classical' composers such as Schoenberg and Bartok, but also modern jazz.

Each item on the program had a relationship to Debussy's music, although only two pieces were actually



composed by him, and each piece had its first performance in 1920, after Debussy's death. The first item was **Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune***, orchestrated by **Benno Sachs** — particularly beautiful wind playing by **Eliza Shepard** (flute) and **Owen Jackson** (oboe). The other piece by Debussy was an arrangement of his flute solo *Syrinx* for three flutes, and was followed by **Hirokazu Fukushima's Fantasia on a theme of Syrinx for three flutes**, composed in 2015.

Maybe stretching the realm of Debussy's influence a little wide, was inclusion of an oboe solo, *Studie über Mehrklänge (Chordal Study)* by **Heinz Holliger**. It was performed by ANAM director, **Nick Deutsch**. It is a compendium of every effect possible on the oboe (or, at least every effect considered possible when it was composed in 1971). Multiphonics, circular breathing, triple and flutter tonguing were ably demonstrated by Nick, showing how music developed in the 50 or so years from Debussy's death. Other tributes to Debussy were songs, *Quatre petites mélodies* by **Satie**, sung by guest mezzo-soprano **Shakira Dugan**, an exciting sonata for violin and 'cello by **Ravel**, and *Homenaje for guitar* by **Manuel de Falla**.

Piano works that paid tribute to Debussy were by **Roussel**, **Malipiero**, **Eugene Goossens**, **Dukas**, **Bartok**, **Schmitt**, and **Stravinsky** — the latter giving the basic chord structure for Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, which, conducted by **Richard Mills**, provided a fitting end to the program.

I came away from the concert with an expanded sense of Debussy's role in shaping twentieth-century music. I have always loved his use of the whole tone scale and had been aware of his interest in Asian music — unusual for nineteenth-century Eurocentric composers. But I realise now how he opened up a fresh palette of sound that made possible the wealth of 'classical', jazz, and other styles of music that continue to enhance musical composition 100 years after his death.



9. *Stalin's Piano*, Adelaide Festival

Gough Whitlam spoke in B \flat Major — so I learned at the Ukaria Cultural Centre in the Adelaide Hills where I was attending an **Adelaide Festival** event, *Stalin's Piano*. The music/creation is a collaboration between composer **Robert Davidson** and pianist **Sonya Lifschitz**. Robert Davidson said that hearing political speeches as music assists him in hearing meanings beyond the words — a deeper emotional communication: find the music in the speech and let the piano provide a frame in which to place the music.

In this one-hour concert, **Sonya Lifschitz** played piano and occasionally read as film was projected to draw our attention to the speech of nineteen political and artistic leaders. These ranged through **Brecht**, **le Corbusier**, **Frank Lloyd Wright** (whose speech was very dry and percussive), through **Joseph Goebbels**, **Percy Grainger** (who said that music is derived from screaming), **Jackson Pollock**, the inevitable **Donald Trump**, ending with **Julia Gillard**, whose voice and phrasing, I discovered, is far more musical than I'd realised. One of the most moving parts of the performance was when we were reminded of Stalin's treatment of **Shostakovich**; threatening the composer and stifling his voice and banning many of his works. Stalin's favourite piano concerto is said to be Mozart's 23rd. When Stalin heard this piece on the radio played by his favourite pianist, **Maria Yudina**, he requested the recording. But a recording had not been made that evening, so orchestra and pianist were assembled again to produce what the feared leader demanded. (If you have seen the movie *The Death of Stalin*, you will be familiar with this.) It is said that when Stalin died he was listening to this recording. In a section of *Stalin's Piano*, Sonya Lifschitz played along with some of that old recording made by Maria Yudina. The present-day and 1953 pianos were remarkably in tune, I thought, but the fact that they were slightly out set the audience on edge, appropriately.

10. Cybec Twenty-first Century Australian Composers

Each year since 2003, the **Cybec Foundation** has supported a program whereby four young composers are selected to write ten-minute pieces for a particular orchestral combination that is performed by the **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO)**. Each composer has a mentor, an established Australian composer, who works with them during the composition process. One of these young composers is chosen to be the MSO's Young Composer in Residence for a year and commissioned to write more pieces.

The first piece, *Rituals of Heartland*, was by **Catherine Likhuta**, who was wearing a beautifully embroidered shirt from her mother-country, the Ukraine. Her composition is program music — it has a story, influenced by Catherine's four-year-old daughter: a fairy-tale about a brave young girl from Medieval Ukraine and her puppy, lost in an enchanted forest — the puppy had to be rescued from a witch, which provided opportunity for use of the considerable battery of percussion available to these composers. Catherine had made use of Ukrainian folk dances, which are described as having 'angular' rhythms. The music was easy to listen to and at times playful.

We then heard the work of Adelaide-based **Daniel Thorpe**, *From Above*, which took us from a clearly outlined fairy-story to something very intimate; exploration of queer culture from a personal perspective. Of the queer body, Daniel says, 'we have to re-learn our intuition, carve space for ourselves to understand our bodies on their own terms'. Daniel speaks of the 'wordlessness' of touches, and some of the music was so soft it seemed to be at the extremity of human hearing — a tiny shimmer from a harp, or magical soft bowing of strings.

May Lyon's piece, *Ignition*, is a dedication to a close friend who passed away in May 2017. The music reflected his 'mercurial' personality and his love of driving — he is described as having an 'enigmatic' character. The music was very exciting and engaging, making great use

of the contra bassoon and percussion. It reminded me very much of Bernstein's *West Side Story*, particularly 'the Jets are in gear'.

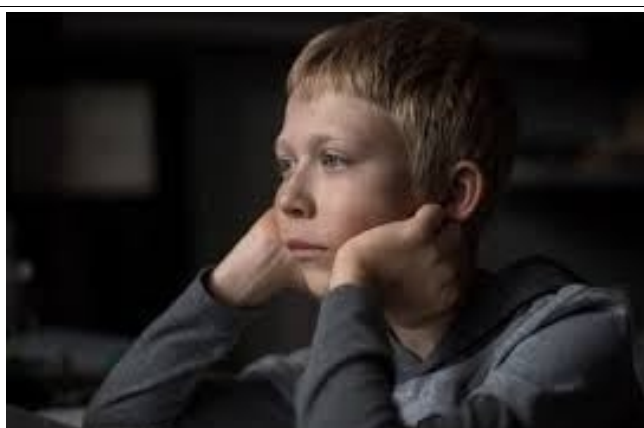
Mark Holdworth's *L'appel du vide*, (the call of the void), uses the phenomenon of suicide ideation as a framework for examining the human proclivity to self-destruct. This is inspired by consideration of 'the declining global socio-political climate, and the pervasive depiction of violence and depravity in the media'. The piece depicts the seduction of good by evil. There was plenty of percussion and rough bowing (it seemed to me like scraping) of strings, use of instruments such as piccolo and cor anglais was subtle. Influenced very much by its compelling framework, I did find it the most interesting piece of the evening.

Films

1. *Loveless*

Apparently the title of this Russian film comes closer to 'Non Love' than 'Loveless'. There is absolutely not one speck of love. The beginning is arrestingly bleak: slow shots of a snow-covered river bank with piercingly clashing splinters of music. When will we see some life? I wondered. After quite some time we see a brief shot of some ducks on the river with their young, then the camera dwells on an unwelcoming concrete building with a flag over the door. We wait — and at last, people — it is a school and the children burst out of the doors at the end of a school day. One of these children is twelve-year-old Alyosha.

This portentous opening immediately reminded me of another Russian movie I saw in 2012: *Elena*. Its opening is slow-paced and tense, with wonderful use of sounds — to start with, the early morning sounds as we watch a well-to-do apartment in Moscow gradually coming to life:



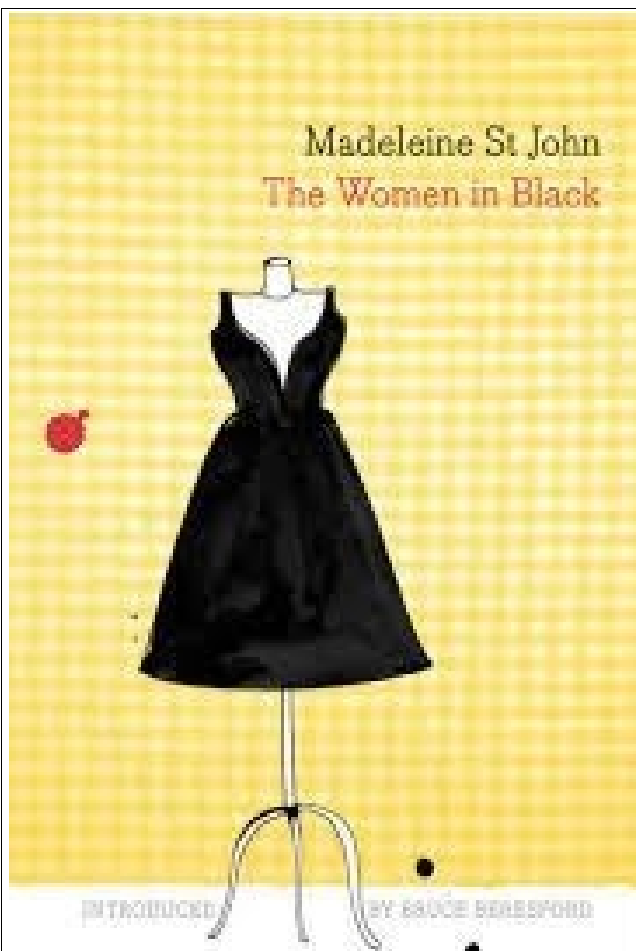
bird sounds, then traffic sounds, an electric razor. Philip Glass's third symphony pounds through the film, helping to create an atmosphere of tense desperation. Both films were directed by **Andrey Zvyagintsev**.

Alyosha's parents are separating. Each has a lover. They must stay in the apartment — Alyosha's home — until they can sell it. They argue about what to do with Alyosha — he is an inconvenient piece of property — his mother doesn't want him. She never wanted him in the first place. The father thinks that a child is the mother's responsibility. Alyosha overhears this argument. We see him hiding behind a door, contorted with anguish.

I wondered whether it is possible for parents to have absolutely no feelings for their child. I also wondered whether her lover could continue to love this woman who, towards her child, is so stonily unloving. The mother comes back to the apartment late one night after an evening with her lover. She doesn't even check that Alyosha is okay. She learns that he is missing when the school reports his absence. And when the father hears of this (he was also spending the evening with his pregnant girl-friend), he doesn't show any signs of guilt.

As we watch the bitter exchanges between Alyosha's parents and then, when he has been reported missing, the prolonged searching by volunteers (the police department is useless), there is a counterpoint that draws attention to the hollowness of present-day affluent Russian society: plenty of wine, selfies, sex happening everywhere — amazingly (to me) Alyosha's father is worried





that he will be fired from his comfortable job if it is known that he is divorcing. In that workplace the boss instils a kind of Sharia Christianity — one must be married, one must have children, the façade must be preserved at all costs. A news broadcast refers to a Mayan prediction of the apocalypse due on 21 December and there are other bulletins describing how the world is in turmoil.

The search for Alyosha is thorough, thanks to the volunteers. He is never found. I had been worried that we might find he had hanged himself from one of the bleak trees by the river as early on there are a couple of references that suggest hanging: on his way home from school, walking along the riverbank, Alyosha throws some leftover construction tape over a high branch of a tree. In his room there are some small rings hanging from ropes. But the film is too subtle for such revelation. At the very end we see the construction tape still in the tree, blown by the wind.

Some years after Alyosha's disappearance, we observe that the removal of their son from their lives has been no assistance to the parents, who are now living with their respective lovers. The father is obviously repeating the 'mistake' he made with Alyosha. He and his lover now have a blond-haired toddler, who looks like a young version of Alyosha, but the father, who seems to be unemployed, is irritated by the young child and treats him roughly. And the mother, living with her lover, spends her time on a gym treadmill — boring, repetitive, on the sleety balcony. Her tracksuit top suggests that, with this dull routine, she represents Russia. And, years

later, there are still signs pasted around a severe, dismally cold city advertising that a twelve-year-old boy is missing.

2. *Ladies in Black*

A Melbourne-dweller, I visited Sydney — a family holiday — in 1960. My mother had worked there during the war and she enjoyed showing us around. We went to Coogee Beach on a tram and ate lunch at a Repin's Coffee Lounge. So, I remember the Sydney of 1959, depicted fondly by **Bruce Beresford** in his film, *Ladies in Black*.

Lisa is 16 years-old, much the same age as I was on that 1960s holiday, and, having just finished school, she has a Christmas job at Goode's department store, which is very similar to David Jones. In those days we didn't have a David Jones store in Melbourne — everyone went to Myer's or if you needed something really special, you went to Georges — mentioned disparagingly by some of the Goode's 'Ladies'; Melbourne/ Sydney rivalry was very strong in those days.

I mainly remember Georges for a make-up consultation I undertook with my friend Caroline in the school holidays when we were 16. Her complexion was analysed as peaches and cream, whereas mine was banana (the consultant clearly had no imagination!). Desolated, in rebellion I bought a face-powder called 'dark Rachel', which I plastered over my pale olive face.

Ladies in Black can be seen as a coming-of-age story. Sixteen-year-old Lisa (brilliantly played by Angourie Rice) is very bright, but her father is strongly against a

young woman going to university where one comes in contact with such despicable sorts as communists and libertarians. Lisa's parents call her Lesley, which she doesn't like because it is also a boy's name. During the story, as she works in the dress department of Goode's, she asserts her right to use 'Lisa', stops wearing her spectacles and becomes quite sociable in adult company. Much of this transformation is aided by Slovenian 'reffer', Magda, a potentially terrifying manager of Model Gowns. Magda sees that with her intelligence, a little make-up, the right clothes, Lisa can make something of herself. Through Magda, Lisa and her fellow worker Fay meet other European migrants, who are viewed as rather intriguing. 'Do you speak English?' Fay asks the young man who, in the end, will be her husband.

I remember learning in a similar way from an Italian 'reffer', Mrs Tosti, who ruled the typing pool at my father's business where I worked in the school holidays. Mrs Tosti taught me how to eat spaghetti — real spaghetti, not the stuff you had on toast out of a can.

Most of us enjoy a nostalgia trip, but *Ladies in Black* is far more than that. It reminds us of the kind of Aussie mateship that prevailed in male company around the 6 o'clock swill (I think maybe by the 1960s New South Wales was a little more civilised, with 10 o'clock closing, and Victorians would cross the border to get an alcoholic drink after 6 p.m.) Although all of us except the First Australians are migrants of some kind, the European refugees who settled here after the war were 'refferos'; foreigners who ate strange food like salami and olives, and who were, it seemed, a little more relaxed in mixed company.

I had read Madeleine St John's book, *Women in Black*, some years ago. When I came out of the movie, I felt a little flat. I had thought that there was more drama about Lisa going to university (she gets excellent Leaving results) and between Patty and her husband Frank who seems so daunted after ultimately having such a passionate time in bed with his wife (they have been married some years) that he leaves home in a kind of shock and returns weeks later. I had remembered their relationship as being more fraught — but I was wrong.

The film follows the book faithfully. I re-read it after seeing the movie. Most of the dialogue is straight out of the novel. The only exception is that, when Patty visits a doctor because, after all this time, she hasn't conceived, in the movie the doctor talks of 'relations', whereas in the book it is 'intercourse' — a term used widely even amongst early 1960s school-girls. I'm not sure why the prudish euphemism was used, but maybe it was felt that the cataclysmic changes in attitudes to sex that have taken place since 1959 needed to be emphasised.

Madeleine St John was a part of Bruce Beresford's group at Sydney University. She died some years ago of emphysema and related illness. Beresford says in his introduction to the recent Text edition of the book (2018): 'I certainly underestimated Madeleine St John in our student days. It was only when I read *Women in*



Black that I became aware of Madeleine's powers of observation, her understanding of character, the insights behind her wit, her rather unexpected warmth.' The film that Beresford has made is utterly faithful to the book and a warm and fitting tribute to a writer who died far too young.

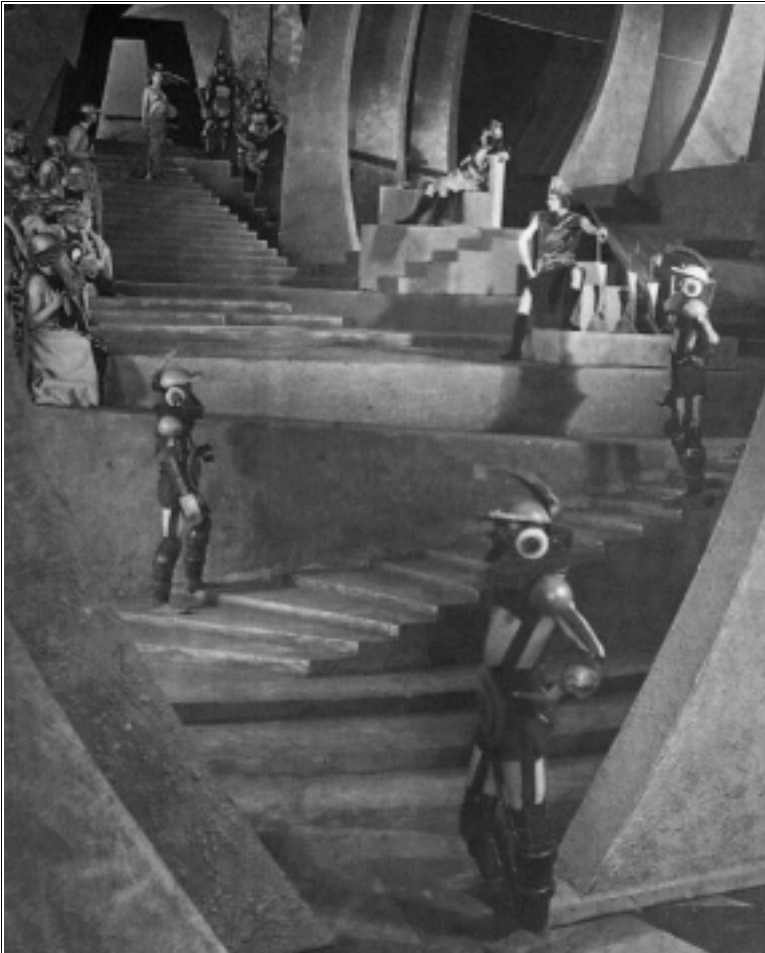
3. *Aelita, Queen of Mars*

Aelita, Queen of Mars (1924) is billed as being the first Russian science fiction film. It was directed by **Yakov Protazanov**. A silent film, it was screened in Melbourne recently, thanks to the Australian National Film and Sound Archive, with a new musical score presented live by **The Spheres**. Apparently early screenings in Russia were accompanied by Shostakovich playing his own score on piano. I would have preferred the whole 1920s deal as, on this occasion, I didn't find the music of the Spheres helpful or memorable.

What I found most interesting was the 1924 fantasy of life on Mars and the relationship that this had to Leninist Russia, seven years after the Revolution. The Martian sets and costumes are breath-taking (incidentally, they didn't bother too much about a lack of oxygen on Mars). My view of a 1920s Russia full of peasants burdened with heavy manual work trudging through snow in inadequate shoes was moderated by this — and it didn't just happen in the fantasy-land of Mars; in Moscow, there was a ball scene and women abandoned their heavy coats and gumboots to reveal sumptuous gowns, chic hairdos and elegant footwear to be swirled around a glittering dance floor ... Or was this really more of the fantasy?

The film is about a young man, Los, an engineer who dreams of travelling to Mars. In 1921, a mysterious wireless message is received at various stations. The text of the message is: *Anta Odeli Uta* and a colleague teases Los by suggesting that the message has come from Mars. This sends Los into a spin where he daydreams about Mars. Aelita, the queen of Mars has a telescope powerful enough to view earth — she sees him and falls in love with him.

In his dream, Los shoots his wife and builds a rocket ship in which he escapes to Mars with a friend and a



stow-away. It doesn't seem to take much time to get there. When they arrive, Tuskub, the king, orders them killed, ignoring Aelita's pleas for their safety. On Mars aristocrats rule and slaves are confined underground and frozen and kept in cold storage when not required.

Los's friend tells the slaves of his own country's revolution and inspires a revolt. Tuskub is overthrown and Aelita takes command. But she instructs her soldiers to fire on the workers. Los is horrified and kills Aelita (who takes on the guise of his wife as he does so). Suddenly we are back on earth. There is a poster on a wall, it reads: *The only tyres worth your money are Anta Odeli Uta*, so the provocative wireless message had been an advertisement! Los's wife is alive and well. He promises to stop daydreaming about Mars and to go about working towards a good communist society. The film has been described as 'a revealing embodiment of the aspiration and uncertainty that characterised Soviet life in the early 1920s'. It was also influential on later futuristic movies such as Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and possibly even *Flash Gordon*.

4. *Jules et Jim*

Why is it that this film has remained one of the most significant movies I have seen? It has been there, in the background of my life, ever since I first saw it at the age of about 20. A part of this is a sweet nostalgia for university days — I would have seen it at a late-night screening on campus. But other films viewed in those seemingly

carefree times haven't stayed with me like *Jules et Jim*. I saw it again recently.

Directed by **François Truffaut**, the context of the film isn't really very important. It is set before, during, and after the Great War. Jules is a shy writer from Austria, who forges a friendship with the more extroverted Frenchman, Jim. They share an interest in the arts. They also share women. One woman they meet at this time is Thérèse, who has an extraordinary way of smoking (so daring for those times), blowing out the smoke like a train. Truffaut must have known someone who smoked like that.

At a slide show, the young men become entranced with a bust of a goddess and her serene smile, and travel to see the ancient statue on an island in the Adriatic Sea. After encounters with several women, they meet the free-spirited, capricious Catherine, whose smile reminds them of the statue. Both men are affected by her attitude toward life. And this is what interests me. Later in the film, Catherine (accompanied on guitar by a lover) sings a song, *Le Tourbillon de la vie* (*The Whirlwind of Life*), and this seems to be what Catherine's life is like.

Throughout the film a narrator tells us of Jules and Jim's thoughts, but we never get inside Catherine's mind. She seems to have to make statements — out of frustration? She dresses up as a boy, Thomas, 'because only men are free to do as they want'. And

one time when the three have been to see a Swedish play together (maybe *The Dolls House*?), walking home the men are discussing it together when Catherine suddenly jumps into the Seine to gain their attention. The movie is very much about Catherine. About feeling restricted by convention. Yet the title is *Jules et Jim*.

The two men are separated by the war and must fight on opposing sides. Each fears that he might have killed his friend. Jules and Catherine marry and have a daughter, Sabine. After the wartime separation, Jim visits, and later stays with Jules and Catherine in their house in the Black Forest. Things are a little awkward at first, they sit together in silence: 'Un ange passe'.

Jim senses tensions in the marriage. Jules tells Jim that Catherine has had numerous affairs, and she once left him and Sabine for six months. He is unbelievably calm and tolerant of her behaviour — a loving acceptance. Catherine ultimately seduces Jim, who has never forgotten her. Jules, desperate that Catherine might leave him forever, gives his blessing for Jim to marry Catherine so that he may continue to visit them and see her. Jules seems to understand Catherine's 'whirlwind' nature, he says, 'She expresses herself in cataclysms. Wherever she is, she lives surrounded by her own brightness'. For a while, the three adults live happily with Sabine in the same chalet in Austria, until tensions between Jim and Catherine arise because of their inability to have their own child.

After a time, Jim runs into Jules in Paris. He learns that Jules and Catherine have returned to France.



Catherine tries to win Jim back, but he rebuffs her. Furious, she pulls a gun on him, but he wrestles it away and flees. He later encounters Jules and Catherine in a movie theatre. Jules's loving fondness is expressed when he gently adjusts Catherine's scarf as they come out of the movie. The three of them stop at an outdoor cafe. Catherine asks Jim to get into her car, saying she has something to tell him. She asks Jules to watch them and drives the car off a damaged bridge into the river, killing herself and Jim. Jules is left to deal with the ashes.

There are hints at this ending throughout the film — metaphors of bridges — significant scenes. There is a sweeping circular, very French, theme — the 'circular' rhythm suggests the wheels of the bicycles that the three ride from time to time and of course the wheels of Catherine's car. When there are tensions in relationships, tensions are built into this sweeping music — slight discords, the harmonies are tinged with dissonance. Truffaut described this movie as 'a hymn to life and death'. It is far more than a failed *ménage à trois*: a gem of a movie.

5. *The Favourite*

Five years ago, I had the pleasure of seeing *The James Plays*, by Rona Munro, at the Edinburgh Festival. These

plays depict the lives and times of three generations of royalty in fifteenth-century Scotland. As I watched these plays, I became aware of the power and influence of women in the Scottish court at that time. (I'm aware of the fact that these plays are written by a woman!) But throughout history, exceptional women have been powerful: Joan of Arc, Queen Elizabeth I, maybe Queen Victoria, and think of Shakespeare's women characters: Goneril obsessed with overthrowing King Lear, and Lady Macbeth goading her husband into grasping power.

The film *The Favourite*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, does not aim to be an exact depiction of the times of Queen Anne (who reigned in early eighteenth-century Britain), but it does help us to imagine what it might have been like to be in her position in those days. Lanthimos underlines his intended lack of historical fastidiousness by playing around with some of the court dancing and having costumes that are almost right, but not made of contemporary fabrics. Most of the music has a degree of authenticity (Queen Anne loved the music of Handel), and incidentally there is glorious singing by Angela Hicks.

Anne was married to a Danish prince, but the film opens after he died and Anne (played by Olivia Colman), who would have then been considered 'middle-aged', is a sickly and in many ways lonely woman, tormented by the memories of her 17 children whom she lost through miscarriages or early childhood death. In the film, these children are cleverly represented by 17 'cute' rabbits, kept in her bedchamber. When Anne plays with her rabbits she becomes playful and maternal, but overall she is a troubled woman.

Sarah Churchill (Duchess of Marlborough, Rachel Weisz) did play a significant role as an advisor to Queen Anne. In the film, when out of the eye of officialdom, Anne and Sarah at first behave like the childhood friends they were. Sarah, pushing Anne in her wheelchair, asks if she wants to go fast, and they race back to her chambers. Clearly, they confide in all kinds of things and Sarah is in a position to influence Anne in making political decisions; Sarah aligning with the Whigs whereas Anne,



when she is well enough to concern herself, is more disposed towards the Tories.

In the film Anne and Sarah's relationship is sexual. This seems quite plausible — the lonely queen — Sarah probably now the only person to whom she is close. However, when Abigail Masham, a new servant, comes on the scene, Anne is clearly attracted to her. Sometimes it is Abigail who is invited to the royal bedchamber. Jealousy flares. In the film, Abigail is shown as scheming. Through her relationship with Anne she marries a nobleman and from her fallen state (she is a cousin of the Duchess) she resumes a position in keeping with her previous status. We might at first have sympathy for Abigail. She is intelligent. She is not cut out for scrubbing floors ... But one time, in the Queen's chamber, when the rabbits have been released to play, we see Abigail press her foot destructively on a rabbit at her side. Anne, feeling unwell at the time, does not notice. History suggests that Anne and Sarah fell out over political differences. This is mentioned in the film, but far stronger are the jealousies of a lesbian love triangle.

The ending of the film is by no means definitive. This is apparently typical of other movies directed by Yorgos Lanthimos. There is a shot that merges images of Anne, Sarah, Abigail, and the rabbits — maybe Anne's state of mind? The film shows the influence that could be wielded by women at that time. As one reviewer says, 'The male politicians stand around in their peacock finery trying to exploit what opportunities they can find, but it is the women who hold all the cards and are not afraid to deal them'.

6. *Filmstars Don't Die in Liverpool*

This film is based on a book written by **Peter Turner** who had the extraordinary experience of being the lover of film star **Gloria Grahame** — 28 years his senior. Grahame was at her peak of fame in the 1950s in films such as *Oklahoma* (1955), *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), and *The Greatest Show on Earth* (1952). This movie focuses on the end of Grahame's life when, in 1981, she died of peritonitis, the result of breast cancer that she refused to have treated.

I came away from this movie thinking of the abrupt contrasts in Grahame's life, particularly her fall from the glamour of Hollywood to occasional roles on the stage in her later years (she was 57 when she died). The film opens showing the time when, due to her illness, she doesn't respond to her stage-call in a performance of *The Glass Menagerie* in Lancaster. Rather than a suite in a state-of-the-art hospital, Grahame seeks the care and warmth of Turner's middle-class family in Liverpool.

We are familiar with the plight of ballet dancers who often can't continue to work much after their mid-thirties, and, because Grahame's film roles were dependent on her looks, she seems to have been unable to adjust, as some other actors have done, to cinema acting of more recent years. Vanessa Redgrave who, at 81, plays Grahame's mother in this movie, has very successfully made this adjustment.

Grahame was married four times — not so extraordinary for a film star. But what was remarkable was her final

marriage to her step-son (the son of her second husband). Apparently she and the step-son first had sex when he was 13, and she was still married to his father (the marriage ended when the father caught them in bed together). Grahame didn't marry Peter Turner but clearly, once again, she was attracted to a much younger man.

The relationship with Turner is depicted in the movie as, for most of the time, passionate and fun. However, one of the best scenes in the movie concerns a stormy separation that occurred in New York. It is one of the few times that the film plunges below the surface to explore the thoughts and motivations of the characters. Grahame and Turner are staying together in Grahame's New York apartment. She leaves early one morning and Turner finds a note saying that she is having breakfast with her agent. She ultimately returns, vague and disturbed. After questioning and receiving fiery, violent responses, Turner can only assume that she has been seeing someone else. The fracas ends with him being thrown out of her apartment and he goes back to England. The scene is then re-run from the point of view of Grahame. She had a medical appointment that morning and was told the devastating news that breast cancer had returned, it might even be too late for chemotherapy — which she refused initially because she didn't want to lose her hair. She doesn't want people — even Turner — to know that she has cancer and she has the delusion that she can cure herself by eating well.

The whole area of denial is a fascinating one — if only it could have been explored further. I assume that the movie keeps faithfully to Turner's book and, because Grahame wouldn't talk to him about her illness, he doesn't know why she very definitely did not want treatment. In the end, after Turner has tried to keep faithfully to Grahame's wishes of no medical intervention, he contacts her family because she is so terribly ill. Her son comes immediately from the US to Liverpool. The last Turner sees of the woman who has been central to his life is in a taxi, on a special invalid chair, being whisked away to the airport at 4 am. Apparently she was admitted to a New York hospital but died later that day. By only a matter of hours, she missed dying in Liverpool.

7. *Fantasia*

I hadn't seen this movie since I was four years old: **Walt Disney's** *Fantasia*, made in 1940, an innovative and extremely expensive venture (particularly given that it was just before the US entry into World War II) made in collaboration with renowned conductor **Leopold Stokowski** and the **Philadelphia Orchestra**. Stokowski was so keen on the project that he gave his services free of charge. I expected to loathe the film — someone else's idea of visual representations of sound. I went because the movie was being shown at my local cinema, the appropriately Art Deco Astor, and I wanted to test my memory — I had vivid recollections of scenes from the *Nutcracker Suite*.

The film comprises eight presentations, each introduced by a master of ceremonies. At the beginning and at 'interval' we see and hear the orchestra tuning up and,



at interval, jamming. Leopold Stokowski stands on a podium with fabulous lighting of various hues. This was the first commercial film with stereophonic sound. The restored film was digitally projected. It didn't seem to be 78 years old.

Segment 1 is Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*. Composed for organ, it had been orchestrated. To my amazement this was possibly the segment I liked best. Firstly, I usually don't like music played by orchestra when it has been composed for some other instrumentation (in this case the organ). And secondly, I prefer not to have my own thoughts disrupted by someone else's visual interpretation. But the visuals for this piece were amazing. Starting with an outline of orchestral players, the images became abstract, but related to the actual sounds being made. And the fugue part, using colour, depicted the blending of the various lines of music — very accurately, it seemed.

Segment 2, Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*. This is a suite from the ballet, developed for the concert hall. It was the main memory from my four-year-old viewing — the ballet segments appeal to a little girl: the sugar plum fairy scatters her mist over flowers and wakes them up, little Chinese people are depicted as red-hatted mushrooms, for some reason the Russian dance is performed by characters that look like Scotch thistles and the

Arabian Dance is an underwater ballet — beautiful except cartoon fish always seem to have long eyelashes!

Segment 3 is perhaps the best known: the *Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Dukas. This was the catalyst for the whole project. Disney was making a film of this story and it was proving too expensive — the short film wouldn't make enough money to recoup expenses, so the canny Disney decided to incorporate it in something bigger.

Segment 4 is Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. I am fascinated that it was included in this 'family' movie only 25 years after its riotous first performance in Paris. The ballet is intended to depict pictures of 'pagan Russia' in celebration of the advent of spring. A young girl is sacrificed by dancing herself to death. At the first performance in Paris in 1913, there was derisive laughter and those members of the audience who stayed drowned out the music with their shouting and thumping. Disney used the music to describe the formation of the planet, volcanic eruptions, floods, earthquakes, the emergence of primitive water creatures and dinosaurs who ultimately succumb to drought. Whilst different from Stravinsky's intention, this did fit appropriately with the 'primitive' theme expressed in the music.

Segment 5 is Beethoven's Sixth ('Pastoral') Symphony. Beethoven had a 'program' in mind when he wrote this symphony, the full title of which is: *Pastoral Symphony: Recollections of Country Life*, and this is described in the headings of each movement. To some extent Beethoven's program is followed — the merry gathering is Bacchanalian, there is a storm, everything settles peacefully after the storm. It reminded me rather of *Bambi*, and I found it hard to reconcile this interpretation with the music I know so well.

Segment 6 is Ponchielli's *Dance of the Hours*. By this stage I was a bit sick of laughing at fat hippopotamus-like creatures and flirtatious ostriches (the film runs for a bit over two hours). Segment 7 is Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. A terrifying devil summons a dance of evil spirits, and restless souls arise from their graves — white pliable skeletons. Ultimately the angelus sounds and everything is calmed — but when I was four, I am told, I screamed so much at the sight of the devil that Mum had to take me out. Segment 8: everything is at peace with Schubert's *Ave Maria*.

I enjoyed seeing this movie far more than I expected. Even when some of the Disney characters seem incongruous cavorting around to Beethoven, the animation follows the music with almost pedantic accuracy. *Fantasia* is well worth seeing.

— Jennifer Bryce, December 2018

Michael Dirda is a prominent book critic for the *Washington Post*. He has won several several major awards for his works, including the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. Unlike many literary critics, he loves science fiction, and popular fiction in general. His latest book, *Browsings: A Year of Reading, Collecting and Living With Books*, is a collection of essays about his passion for books, written in a personal tone.

Michael Dirda

Tales of Love and Death by Robert Aickman

Discussed:

TALES OF LOVE AND DEATH

by Robert Aickman: 2018 (Second) Edition, 243 pp.; Tartarus Press, £32.50;
Michael Dirda's introduction also in
The Washington Post, 25 April 2018)

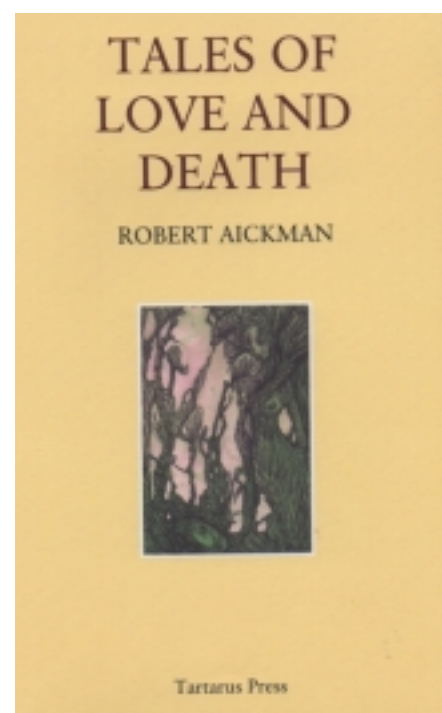
Readers sometimes grouse that Robert Aickman's stories are inexplicable or unresolved, that they fall into a kind of Heisenbergian realm of undecidability. Such 'literal-minded observers', as R. B. Russell has called them, 'prefer a story to be brought to a neat conclusion, a comfort that Aickman steadfastly refused to provide.' It's noteworthy that the writer's more obvious and marginally more traditional tales — such as the World Fantasy Award-winner, 'Pages from a Young Girl's Journal' — are far less prized by admirers than his deeply enigmatic ones, such as 'The Trains' and 'The Inner Room'.

Along with Walter de la Mare, Elizabeth Bowen, and a few others, Robert Aickman belongs to the Chekhov school of the weird tale. Such writers recognise that stories don't require pat endings. They don't need to close with the snap of an O. Henry trapdoor, or the ironic twist of a Maupassant. A short story can actually convey a more haunting depiction of the human predicament by avoiding any kind of artificial conclusiveness. Life is messy, not neat; most problems are never clearly resolved, but only lived with; people act unreasonably for no apparent reason. In effect, this sad, fallen world is simply what it is. As Peter Straub has said, summarising both Aickman's ontology and his oeuvre, 'Because there are no logical explanations, there can be no resolutions.'

Like Chekhov, Aickman seldom attempts to rouse our emotions: He sets down what happens without narrative histrionics. Not even the most astonishing turns of event elicit much surprise or wonder. As a result, that affectless, unruffled tone adds immeasurably to his work's distinctive, unsettling eeriness. Odd or horrible things occur but they do so without fuss, and they are observed with a dispassionate, Olympian clarity. As Aickman himself emphasizes — in describing 'Meeting Mr. Millar' — his stories aim 'to illustrate the extremely disturbing,

remarkably inexplicable things that go on everywhere and happen to everyone, but are fully discerned only when we look at life with as much detachment and objectivity as we can bring ourselves to muster'.

On the surface, Aickman presents his narratives less as ghost stories or supernatural chillers than as records of human misfortune. We finish them feeling wonder at the events and pity for the characters, those two reactions traditionally associated — by Aickman himself — with the purgative power of classical tragedy. Aickman's protagonists seldom 'deserve' their fates. They are merely unlucky, or they suffer from some trivial weakness of character, or they decide to go off the rails just a little and just once. Alas, as the mysterious Roper says in 'The Trains', 'it is difficult to leave the rails altogether and still keep going at all.' More often than not, what people imagine will bring them happiness results in their undoing. Yet as Aickman observes of the blighted heroine of 'The Inner Room,' 'which of us would have



behaved otherwise?’

In his preface to the first *Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, Aickman summed up his dour view of the human condition with a phrase from King Lear: ‘Like flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: They kill us for their sport.’ Sport here is the mot juste. Insofar as the author is a Joycean god, indifferent, paring his fingernails, Aickman conveys — just beneath the surface placidity — a certain sporty jauntiness about his puppets and the unnerving events he describes. At its most overt, this takes the form of outright humor.

Consider some examples from just this book. ‘Growing Boys’ is fundamentally a kind of Grand Guignol comedy, featuring a trigger-happy and clownish retired colonial officer and a pair of moon-faced doltish giants who, like all fairy-tale giants, are constantly ravenous. The portrait of the twins’ feckless father Phineas — a self-deluding vegetarian who resembles a cross between Lytton Strachey and a long anchovy, ‘seeping tiredly over the settee’ — is as good as anything in Evelyn Waugh. In ‘Marriage’ a man named Laming goes lame. In ‘Residents Only’ a committee’s gung-ho chairman attempts high oratory, but fails: ‘The audience of four (including the secretarial man) was really too small for the purpose. Only a professional revolutionary could have achieved the proper flights under such conditions.’

Aickman regularly inserts these feather-light touches of sour wit. The Don Juanish narrator of ‘Wood’ observes that ‘it is no joke being a married woman in East Anglia, if the woman has the smallest imagination.’ The desperate Colin of ‘Compulsory Games’, fleeing to the countryside by train, keeps hearing a buzzing noise outside. ‘The fact that to him it certainly each time sounded exactly the same, probably implied (or confirmed) that his mind was giving way: now a quite minor consideration.’ Even in the middle of the rather overwritten prose poem, ‘Le Miroir’ — with its plot straight out of EC Comics’ *Tales from the Crypt* — we suddenly learn that at Mr. Burphy’s retirement, following generations of service with the firm, ‘the rest of the staff had subscribed to buy him a small electric clock, which had taken him completely by surprise, and particularly when Mr. Daniel himself had found a few moments to participate in the presentation!’ Mr Burphy’s intrusion, amidst a harrowing descent into madness, may well be an Aickmanian variation on the humorous ‘knocking at the gate’ scene in *Macbeth*: It highlights the horror by reminding us of the bland, ordinary life going on just outside the bloody chamber.

After all, that ordinary life is always present for Aickman — at least to start with. Each of his stories opens in our familiar, dully quotidian world, and then crosses quietly, or sometimes dramatically, into the Twilight Zone. A weedy young fogey encounters a casual female acquaintance in a public park — and she suddenly begs him to have sex with her immediately, right there in broad daylight:

‘I want you,’ said Ellen. ‘Please take me.’ She lifted his left hand and laid it on her right thigh, but under her skirt. He felt her rayon knickers. It was the most wonderful moment in his life.

Like that seemingly lucky young man, we have

entered a dream-realm of wish-fulfilment and nightmare. In the pages of *Tales of Love and Death* the readers encounters monsters, primal Freudian scenes, modernised folk tales, marionettes reminiscent of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s Olympia, heterodox sexual liaisons, zombies, witches, and macabre fates of various kinds. ‘Marriage’, for instance, is a tale of sexual mirrorings and reversals that recalls the erotic French novel *The Image* and the perverse dramas of Jean Genet. Aickman repeatedly explores the primordial beneath the trappings of the modern, using the psychoanalytic and mythic to lay bare the human heart. *Tales of Love and Death* might itself be an alternate title for Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Certainly Aickman’s work relates comparable stories of innocents victimised by the daemonic (within or without) and myriad instances of ‘bodies changed to various forms’.

Consider ‘Growing Boys’ again: Aickman presents a narrative that, reduced to précis, might be a Greek myth, involving as it does giants born to a human mother, rape and pillage, incest, cannibalism, and threatened matricide. There are even allusions to Proserpina and Charon. Early on, when Millie reflects on the phrase ‘biting their heads off’ — which is what the boys complain their Uncle Stephen is doing in correcting them — she visualises ‘a dreadful transaction; like ...’ Given the context, the ellipses suggest castration. But Millie might also be reminded of Goya’s horrific image of Saturn devouring his sons. It depicts the gigantic bug-eyed god ... gruesomely biting a boy’s head off.

Again and again, the subversive Aickman upends the props supporting our solid-seeming world. What had seemed real turns out to have been only only a Potemkin Village, a prettily painted façade disguising unacknowledged desires and unpalatable truths. As Glen Cavaliero stresses, Aickman’s stories ‘undermine the very idea of normality itself’. And yet, as a result, a terrible beauty is born. In that first Fontana preface, Aickman also quotes Hesiod’s line about the element of strangeness inherent in all beauty. Had he known of them, I suspect that Aickman would have agreed with those Russian formalist critics who built an entire aesthetics around the notion of *ostranenie*, often rendered as ‘defamiliarisation’ but more accurately translated as ‘enstrangement’. In life our senses have been dulled by routine and repetition and familiarity: Those who live by the sea no longer hear the waves. But art short-circuits any kind of automatic response to experience. Significantly, it does so by impeding an overly quick or too easy understanding of things. We are forced to interpret what we are seeing, hearing, or reading. Elements may be described in unexpected ways. The meaning of events may be left ambiguous. Plain sentences might be replaced by metaphorical ones, the Heimlich revealed as Unheimlich. All such stylistic devices transmute the ordinary into the extraordinary and allow our wondering eyes to behold the world afresh.

This is, of course, one of the essential missions of Romanticism — to recover a deeper connection with the spiritual and with Nature, to pierce through the veil, to see a world in a grain of sand, to recognise, finally, that there is more to life than mechanistic modern society. Life is, in effect, suffused with a natural supernaturalism. ‘The real wonder’, as Aickman writes in ‘Into the Wood’,

'lay in taking only one short step and lighting upon an entire world so different.' As Jeremy Dyson stresses, Aickman offers 'tantalizing glimpses of the atmospheric mystery that is all around us, his fiction confirms what we suspect deep down: that the world we are presented with, the materialistic joke that is paraded before us daily on our TVs and in our newspapers is, of course, the artifice. The reality, which may be unknowable, but is infinitely preferable, hovers just beyond reach, but is there all the same.'

In 'The Stains,' Stephen speaks for nearly all of Aickman's characters when he mournfully recognizes that 'Like everyone else, he had spent his life without living.' Clearly Aickman, that melancholy fabulist, belongs in that line of mystical poets and sufferers from Sehnsucht that extends from Novalis and his elusive Blue Flower, through the visionary gleams of Wordsworth and Keats, to the spiritual odysseys described in the fiction of George MacDonald, Algernon Blackwood, and the various Inklings.

As Aickman writes, with a telling mention of this book's title, the ghostly tale or strange story 'is a great reconciler within the basic realms of love and death; the only things that really matter. Accordingly, the ghost story is very much a work of art: only an artist can induce the essential frisson and purgation. In a world ever more bound down and weighed upon with 'facts', the good ghost story offers the freedom of a lyric poem.'

Yes, but. What is striking about the figures and events in *Tales of Love and Death* is their overall tawdriness. One looks in vain for the soul-thrilling operatic power of Isolde's *Liebestod*. Virtually all the principal characters are shallow, vulgar, and common. Here on display are — to use Mark Valentine's phrase — 'the powers of greyness.' As Valentine explains, 'Few Aickman stories are free from this pervasive sense of the forces of greyness at work and in their dry, dreary, dulling way they may convey horror even more effectively than the startling supernatural images he evokes.' Those few characters in *Tales of Love and Death* who could have represented Aickman's personal ideals of Edwardian 'magnificence, elegance and charm' are either clownish (Uncle Stephen in 'Growing Boys') or deluded (Celia in 'Le Miroir').

In this grey world, only love seems to offer a possible escape from death, or death-in-life. Or does it? Never does Aickman depict what one might call ordinary sexual relations. Infantilism is rampant. When Millie flees to her uncle's, she is treated as a baby. At one point, she actually says, 'Carry me to bed, Uncle Stephen.' In other contexts that request might seem brazenly erotic; but here the voice is that of a frightened, spoiled child. In 'Marriage', kinky sex games lead to death and eventual retreat to an incestuous coziness. The protagonist of 'Le Miroir' never grows up, only mad and old. Celia fails that first crucial step toward adulthood: The recognition that the figure in the mirror is oneself. In 'Compulsory Games' dull, safe Colin remarks of his sexless marriage that he 'had never for one moment had the slightest inkling of how dependent upon Grace he had become for almost everything (though with physicality nowadays far, far down the list — as was to be expected).' In 'Wood' marriage is treated as grotesquerie, as a virtual death sentence. Much better

to stay a solitary hermit or a village Don Juan. As John Clute has emphasised in a brilliant Jungian analysis, Aickman's older men and women turn away from the midlife imperative to become psychically integrated human beings, ready to accept death as well as love, and this failure leads to either a blighted life or destruction.

Critics like Clute or Gary William Crawford (in his monograph *Robert Aickman: An Introduction*) have clarified the obsessions and lessened the supposed opacity of Aickman's work. That said, I do think its difficulties have been much exaggerated. We have a pretty good idea of what happens in each story — at least as much as we do of what happens in many of the poems we love. As William Empson first pointed out, poetry — to which Aickman likened the ghost story — is packed with deliberate and unconscious ambiguity, with divergent possible interpretations, with inexhaustible mystery. Yet we don't complain. To the contrary. We return to Shakespeare and Coleridge and Dickinson because we never can do more than just partially understand them.

What we respond to most, of course, is the beauty of their language. So too with Aickman. He is endlessly rereadable. S. T. Joshi rightly stresses Aickman's 'exceptional gifts as a writer — a prose style of impeccable fluidity, urbanity and elegance.' I've already cited some instances of Aickman's humour, but his courtly, often aphoristic prose possesses a tart astringency as refreshing as a gin and tonic: 'It is always dangerous to put anything second to the need we all feel for love.' 'One bought such things in Paris, and its capture had been an impulse of the instant, as is everything that is in any way real.' One detects occasional buried allusions, as when Celia — echoing the Emperor Augustus on the loss of his legions — cries out 'Give me back my eleven days!' 'Residents Only', some have argued, meanders too long from its central portrait of a blasted landscape, one almost as malignant as that in Lovecraft's 'Color Out of Space.' But those middle pages describing the cemetery committee are a comic delight:

Local councillors have this in common with African kings: at first they are popularly voted in and on all sides pampered with sweetmeats; but it is upon the unmentionable understanding that ultimately they are to be maltreated and slain. When things go well, all parties enter with enthusiasm into each act of the drama; giving little thought to the acts that follow.

Someday all of Aickman's scattered nonfiction will be collected. There's not a lot, but his comments on supernatural storytelling rival those of M. R. James in their astuteness and insight. He repeatedly maintained that 'the ghost story draws upon the unconscious mind, in the manner of poetry, that it need offer neither logic nor moral; that it is an art form of altogether exceptional delicacy and subtlety'. The total effect of the best such tales, he adds, is suggested by the German word '*Ehrfurcht*, or reverence for what one cannot understand'. Any reader of Aickman's own haunting stories will know precisely what he's talking about.

— Michael Dirda, April 2018

John-Henri Holmberg is a Swedish author, critic, publisher, and translator, and a well-known science fiction fan. He was Fan Guest of Honour at the Helsinki Worldcon in 2018. In the early 1960s he edited *Science Fiction Forum* with Bertil Mårtensson and Mats Linder and published over 200 science fiction fanzines of his own, in addition to his professional career as editor, translator, and critic.

John-Henri Holmberg

Many have missed the theme of *Frankenstein*: Celebrating *Frankenstein*'s two hundredth birthday

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is not about the potentially catastrophic consequences of science, as often claimed, but about the risk that we will create human monsters through prejudice, fear, and hate. Today is exactly 200 years since the first fully realised, bona fide science fiction novel was published.

Background history is well known. In the summer of 1816, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley and the two young women he two years earlier had eloped with to the continent, Mary Godwin and her step sister Jane Clairmont, stayed in the Villa Diodati at Lake Geneva, rented by Lord Byron and his physician John Polidori. 1816 became famous as 'the year without summer', whose cold, compact clouds and catastrophic malnutrition were caused by Tambora on Sumbawa in the West Sunda Islands in 1815 having the largest known volcanic eruption in 1600 years, throwing perhaps 100 cubic kilometres of dust and ashes into the atmosphere.

At the fireplace, the company read out loudly from German ghost stories in French translation. One evening in early June, Byron suggested that they each write a similar story. After a while, the 18-year-old Mary Godwin got the idea of a story about how a researcher gives life to a creature composed of dead flesh. In December 1816 she married Shelley and in 1817 she completed the novel.

On 1 January 1818 was published anonymously *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in three volumes by Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones in London. The first printing was 500 copies.

Most reviewers were positive. Individuals were condemnatory, especially the two who apparently knew the author's identity. One of them wrote in *The British Critic*: 'Here there are signs that indicate an unusual sharpness of mind, but they fight against an abundance of absurdity that so often approaches the wicked and immoral that we hardly dare to pronounce even this limited praise. We understand that the author is a woman, which further exacerbates the predominant deficiency of the novel. But although our author can forget about the mildness of their sex, there is no reason for us to do that, and consequently we reject the book without further com-

ments.'

But *Frankenstein* quickly became a success. A French translation came in 1821, several theatre plays were based on the novel, and in 1823 it was printed, now with Mary Shelley named as the author. 1831 came an unfortunate revised version, but it is still usually the first and less moralising text reproduced in new editions. During the 200 years since the first edition, *Frankenstein* has never gone out of print. There are over 650 cartoon series versions, some 80 stage dramatisations, and close to 100 film titles, an opera, and a ballet. And the pastiches, parodies, and 'sequels' are countless, as are references to it in literature, popular culture, and fiction texts — although the character of Victor Frankenstein is often confused with the 'monster' to which he gives life. Mary Shelley did more than wrote an impressive debut novel: she created a modern myth.

And she also did more than that. On good grounds, it can be argued that *Frankenstein* is also the first full-fledged, undisputed science fiction novel.

As initial quote for the novel, Shelley chose three lines from John Milton's *The Lost Paradise*, as translated by Frans G. Bengtsson: 'Do I inspire you, o Creator, to mold me out of the dust? Did I ask you to lift me out of the dark?' These lines are very well chosen in their ambiguity. In Milton, Adam is asking the question to God. But transferred to *Frankenstein*, the question must be seen as posed by the monster, and directed to Victor Frankenstein. In other words, Mary Shelley chose to emphasise the changing role of man, from creation to potential creator, as well as the novel's artificially created creature as a new Adam, the beginning of a new species, already on the first page of her novel.

It is impossible to approach *Frankenstein* without taking into account the age when it was written and the perceptions that characterised the author. In the second half of the eighteenth century Europe was penetrated by the ideas of enlightenment, which in turn gained its political expression in liberalism. While systemic philosophers as late as the seventeenth century attempted to unite faith in a divine power with a dawning natural science, the enlightenment offered a rational world

image without room for supernatural elements. The revolutionary thesis of enlightenment was the perception that people acquire knowledge of the outside world only through their senses and then can achieve secondary knowledge by analysing and merging primary knowledge. Or in other words: all primary knowledge is empirical; all secondary knowledge is achieved through rational thought.

The explosive in the enlightenment becomes apparent if it is set in contrast to what people had earlier taken for granted. What does the thesis that all knowledge is empirically based imply for the allegations of religions to owning absolute truth, or the belief that knowledge can be gained through divine insight?

The enlightenment thinkers also went further. They regarded man as governed by his intellect. But what did that mean for faith in innate convictions or divine determination? The thought of the individual as capable of forming his destiny through his own work and his own choices was at the same time a rejection of that political system which rested on the divine right of kings. Liberalism drew that and other consequences from the enlightenment philosophy and demanded freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, economic freedom, the abolition of hereditary privileges, the equality of women, and the abolition of slavery.

Mary Godwin grew up as daughter of two of British Liberalism's most famous representatives, author William Godwin, who attacked contemporary political institutions, advocating individualist anarchism, and Mary Wollstonecraft, one of the first pronounced feminists advocating a new social order based in reason and equality between the sexes. Like the parents, Mary Godwin was a free thinker, enlightenment enthusiast, and a revolutionary, an attitude she shared with poet Shelley, relegated from Oxford for his pronounced atheism, whose most highly regarded work became his verse drama *Prometheus Unbound*, where he let the gods fall and Prometheus triumph.

In the preface to the first edition of *Frankenstein* is stated: 'Doctor Darwin [naturalist Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather] and some of the physiology-writers in Germany have claimed that the event on which this story is based is not impossible. / ... / The event that may make the story interesting is distinguished from the disadvantages of a story that only deals with ghosts and similar magic wonders. / ... / I have thus tried to stick to the truth about the basic principles of human nature, but have not hesitated to invent news in the form of combinations of these.'

In other words, Mary Shelley very consciously chose to write a speculative novel whose innovation was founded in science-based theories. She lets Frankenstein himself reflect on his desire to find a way of giving life to dead tissues in enlightenment terms: 'Life and death seemed to me to be imaginary boundaries that I would break through and a stream of light would be transmitted in our dark world. A new species would bless me as

its creator and source.'

The fact that speculation is founded on science is emphasised by the break between modern science and older approaches. At the University of Ingolstadt, Victor Frankenstein meets the natural philosopher Krempe, who 'asked me several questions about my progress in the various scientific fields that are related to the natural philosophy. I / ... / stated the names of my alchemists / ... / Professor stared. "Have you", he said, "really devoted your time to study such nonsense? / ... / You have been filling your memory with disproven systems and worthless names.'" Later Frankenstein meets the chemist Waldman, who states: 'Ancient practitioners in this science promised impossibilities and accomplished nothing. Its modern champions promise very little; they know that metals can not be transmuted and that the elixir of life is a mirage. But these thinkers, whose hands seem to be created only to stumble in the dirt, whose eyes are endlessly staring at the microscope or on the melting gel, have truly brought about miracles ...'

And the 'monster' is fully described in accordance with the enlightenment perception of humanity. When it comes to life, it's a *tabula rasa*, an unwritten page whose development and feelings are guided by the information it receives from its world. Or, in other words, it is an amoral intelligence. Through self-study it develops the ability to appreciate art and philosophy, but the response it meets, not least from Frankenstein himself, fills with hatred: 'I should be your Adam, but rather I'm your fallen angel, as you drive away from all joy without committing any deed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone is irrevocably excluded. I was filled by good will and kindness; misery made me wicked. Make me happy, and I'll be good again.'

Many have seen *Frankenstein* as a horror story or a late Gothic novel. It is true that it borrowed language and many effects from the Gothic tradition, but in the core of Gothic literature was fear of the supernatural. *Frankenstein* replaces it with something completely different: the idea that we are the ones who create human monsters through hatred and fear of the stranger.

But also many of those who read *Frankenstein* as science fiction miss a central point of the novel, I suspect. They have seen it as a warning, as a story about a researcher who wants to do good but creates something monstrous: a book about the unforeseen but potentially catastrophic consequences of new achievements. But what Mary Shelley actually wrote was a novel about a scientist who fully succeeds in his intention to create life, but is too bound by his prejudices to realise that this new human being, despite its terrifying exterior, is capable of goodness, beauty, and insight — if it is treated on equal terms and given the opportunity to develop to its full potential. And in that, *Frankenstein* was not only a full expression of the ideas of enlightenment, but remains a book of an urgent message for all ages.

— John-Henri Holmberg, 1 January 2018

Criticanto

Daniel King is a Western Australian writer. His short story collection, *Memento Mori*, won Interactive Press's IP Picks prize in 2010; and his poetry collection, *Amethysts and Emeralds*, was published by Interactive Press on 15 May 2018. Recent poetry, some of which appears in PN Review 245, concerns Kalki, the tenth avatar of Hindu God Vishnu (the Preserver), incarnating this time and forever together with Shiva (the Destroyer). He holds a Doctorate in Philosophy. Daniel's hobbies include surfing, skateboarding, and listening to the music of Mike Oldfield and Project System 12.

Daniel King

Galactic Pot-Healer: Philip K. Dick's 'Sympathy for the Devil'

All references are to the Pan Science Fiction 1969 edition of *Galactic Pot-Healer*.

Galactic Pot-Healer is one of Philip K. Dick's later books, written in 1968. It tells the story of Joe Fernwright, a potter who — typically of PKD — leads a glum, unsatisfying life in an alienating future world. The novel opens with a quotation from D. H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake'. In my opinion this epigraph is vitally important for an understanding what Dick was trying to do in the novel. In this essay I shall in fact argue that *Galactic Pot-Healer* is a science fiction defence of Satan. Along the way I shall also make some remarks about Dick's use of language, for in *Galactic Pot-Healer* this use is to a certain extent 'laid bare'.

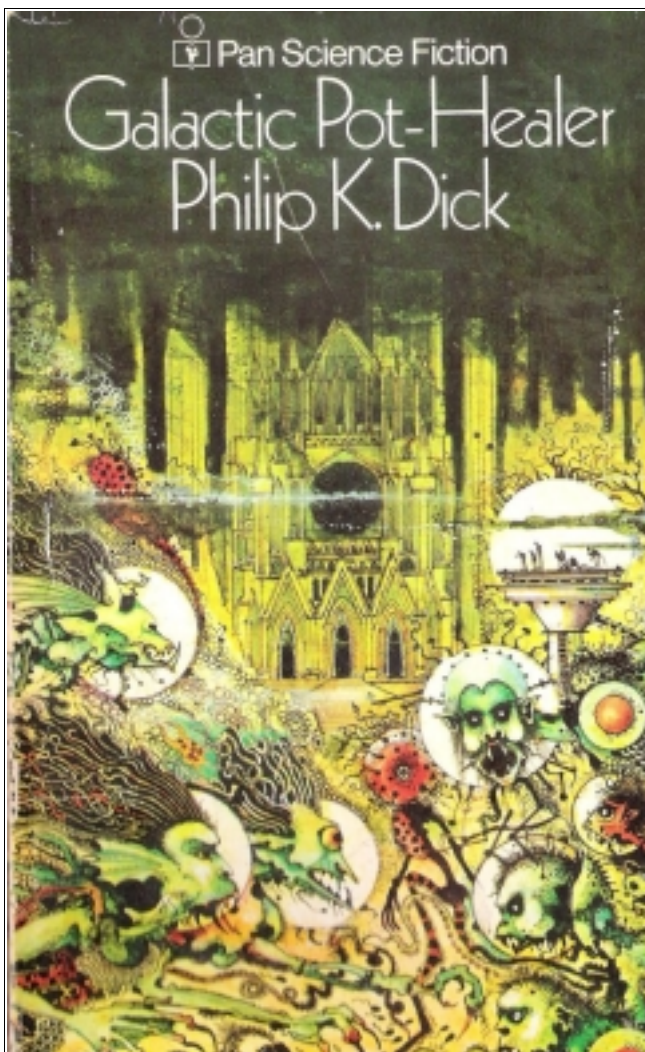
Given what I have just said about D. H. Lawrence's 'Snake', it is clearly important to say a few words about this poem. Briefly, its dramatic fiction is of a protagonist who witnesses a snake drinking at a trough. The protagonist holds ambivalent views towards the snake: on the one hand he is repelled by and frightened of it — 'The voice of my education said to me/He must be killed' — while on the other he says he 'liked' the snake and is 'honoured' by its presence, comparing it with a 'king in exile'. There is the sense that the snake embraces inseparable polar opposites, positive and negative, and in a sense transcends them. As I shall argue, this interpretation is crucial to understanding *Galactic Pot-Healer*.

One obvious interpretation of the poem is that it reflects Lawrence's musings pertaining to humanity's relationship with Satan. Dick is coy with regard to his quotation from 'Snake'. Its title is not cited; and we merely read:

And truly I was afraid, I was most afraid
But even so, honoured still more
That he should seek my hospitality
From out the dark door of the secret earth.

I think the reason for this coyness is as follows. Dick was very interested in theology: his next novel, the masterly *A Maze of Death*, for example, presents an attempt to 'develop an abstract, logical system of religious thought' predicated on the 'arbitrary postulate that God exists'. In *Galactic Pot-Healer*, however, I suspect he wished to look at the other side of the theological coin, so to speak, without inducing in the reader any kind of knee-jerk reaction that might result were any kind of 'sympathy for the devil' to be suspected.

Chapter 1 of the novel opens with a very glum Joe Fernwright preparing for another empty working day. Pottery work is scarce; and Joe formerly has passed the time playing what he refers to as 'The Game' with a number of acquaintances in other parts of the world. The Game requires each player to translate, by means of a computer, the title of a book into another language



and back again, and then to ask the recipient what the original title was. The Game depends on the fact that the translations are laughably defective. One example Dick gives is 'Bogish Persistentisms by Shaft Tackapple'. Although Dick doesn't provide the solution to this one, it is a 'translation' of 'Martian Chronicles by Ray Bradbury' ('Marsh' = 'bog'; 'apple' = 'berry/bury' etc.)

In the following chapters the Game recedes into the background, and is replaced by a kind of challenge: a marine being called 'Glimmung' (perhaps a rearranging of 'glum' and 'ming', as in Ming vases) is seeking to raise from the seabed of his home world, Sirius 5, a long-submerged cathedral called Heldscalla, and is recruiting various artisans, scientists, and engineers who may be able to help with the project. Glimmung appears in a number of forms, but a particularly awe-inspiring one has him surrounded by rotating hoops, one of water and one of fire. Joe is one of those selected for Glimmung's team, and he soon finds himself on the way to Sirius 5 (also known in the novel as Plowman's Planet).

Glimmung is presented as an angry deity. In Chapter 4, we read the following passages pertaining to him:

[Glimmung] glared with the force of a sun. The face cursed at him, cursed in a language he did not know. He shrank back, appalled by the anger of Glimmung. (Dick, 1969, p. 41)

'he came on like the day of judgment' (Dick, 1969, p. 49)

'Glimmung has the power and nature of a deity' (Dick, 1969, p. 50)

'He knew ... about my life. He knew it from the inside, as if he were inside it with me, looking out.' (Dick, 1969, p. 52)

This presentation of Glimmung as an angry inquisitor who knows everything about us suggests that he is in fact Satan, and that the raising of the submerged cathedral is a metaphor for restoring Satan's kingdom and kingship. As I shall show, Dick develops the narrative in such a way that he is able to make a number of important and sophisticated theological observations not only pertaining to this but also to the relationship between good and evil.

The novel proceeds to describe the arrival on Sirius 5. We learn that Glimmung's power is 'sharply curtailed by a mysterious book in which, it is alleged, everything which has been, is, and will be is recorded' (Dick, 1969, p. 69). This book, written by beings called Kalends, is thus a kind of bible, and it is hard not to read it as a metaphor for the Bible, especially as — given my thesis that Glimmung is a representation of Satan — we are told that Glimmung considers the Book to be his antagonist and that he plans to undermine it once and for all. Significantly, the Book predicts that Heldscalla will not be raised from the sea, the Mare Nostrum. I note in passing that the word 'Heldscalla' is packed with meaning. As I have already indicated, Dick uses the Game to prime the reader that attention should be paid to the novel's language. The first syllable of 'Heldscalla' is, of course, 'Hel[l]', while 'Held' is German for 'hero' and 'scala' is Italian for 'ladder'. If the reader needs persuading that such wordplay is 'really there' — although the blurb by the *Evening Standard* actually says Dick's play on words '[is] as potent as ever' — here is another example. The main female character of *Galactic Pot-Healer* is named 'Mali Yojez'. On the face of it this is an absurd name, but a little rearranging of its letters gives us 'I'm lazy joe'. Dick is thus here identifying formally with Joe Fernwright, his state of mind and preoccupations (such as wordplay).

As the narrative progresses we learn that Heldscalla was devoted to worship of the god 'Amalita'. Etymologically, 'Amalita' is related to Amalthea, the foster mother of Zeus; she is sometimes represented as a goat. Given the widespread association of Satanism with goats, Dick appears to be implying here that Satan is prior to God. This is not so very different from the position of, say, the Pythagoreans, who asserted that Chaos gave life to the primordial germ. Pythagoras was one of the Ionian philosophers; and the author amusingly alludes to this when he says that the scoop which is to raise Heldscalla is made of 'Ionian' material (Dick, 1969, p. 104). The Pythagorean path becomes more like that of the Kukeans, however, when Dick says that Amalita, seeking the satisfaction of primordial impulses, gives rise to his opposite, Borel. Borel is said to be 'evil', but care needs to be taken not to read this in any absolute way; Dick

means that Borel is evil merely in the sense that she takes up an oppositional relationship with regard to Amalita. Yet when Dick muses that Glimmung (as I have argued, a metaphor for Satan), with his goal of separating water from land, is like God, PKD is very, very slyly edging towards the view that God and Satan — at least at the beginning, before the perceived primordial split — are the same being, just as the snake in D. H. Lawrence's poem embraces diametrically polar characteristics within its one being.

It is when Joe and Mali descend into the ocean to view Heldscalla for themselves that this theme of splitting and doubling really comes into focus. The descent is against Glimmung's express wishes. The robot Willis, who helps Joe and Mali with their preparations, observes 'the ocean ... is the actual primordial world, out of which every living thing came a billion years ago' (Dick, 1969, p. 96). And just as, primordially, Amalita in his oneness split into Amalita and Borel, so in the primordial ocean Joe finds not only a double of himself — a decaying but still sentient corpse — but also a double of Heldscalla: a 'Black Cathedral'. But Dick takes an almost Derridean deconstruction-of-oppositionalities stance when he observes of Joe and Joe's corpse:

'the distinction isn't really complete between the two of you. Some of it is merged in you; some of you remains in it. They are both you; you are both of them' (Dick, 1969, p. 102).

And while the implication is that God and Satan are still in a sense the one being, Joe's descent into the Mare Nostrum and seeing everything split into opposites undermines this, threatening Glimmung's unified existence.

Given the above, it is no surprise that a terrible battle soon begins between a 'Black Glimmung' and the authentic one. In the course of the battle, the Black Glimmung leaves Mare Nostrum and attacks the spaceship in which all of Glimmung's team (except Joe) are attempting to leave Plowman's Planet. The team members, however, escape; and while the Black Glimmung is injured, we soon learn that the authentic Glimmung is injured too. Nevertheless, Glimmung, having destroyed the Black Cathedral, decides to proceed with his plan to raise Heldscalla. To do this he creates a polyencephalic mind comprising all the team members and blends these minds with his own consciousness. There is the sense that, metaphorically, this polyencephalic mind has been God's/Satan's plan all along, for Glimmung muses:

And once again, he decided, I will absorb you. All of you. Once more you will be parts of me as you are now (Dick, 1969, p. 143).

Mali and Joe regard the experience not without a certain wistful longing:

'A group mind. Except that we were subordinate to

Glimmung. But for a little while —' She gestured. 'All of us, from at least ten star systems; we functioned as a single organism. In some ways it was exciting. To not be —' 'Alone,' Joe said (Dick, 1969, p. 145).

Glimmung, on his first attempt, fails to raise Heldscalla, and the polyencephalic mind releases its constituent beings. Eight days later, however, when he has regained his strength, Glimmung tries again — and is confronted by a 'Fog Thing' from antiquity that cautions him that if he is to succeed he must be prepared to 'bring back to life the worship of Amalita and, indirectly, Borel' (Dick, 1969, p. 151). Glimmung accepts this: and this time Heldscalla is successfully raised; briefly it takes on the form of a child.

What is Dick saying here? Why does Glimmung have to embrace Amalita and Borel? I think the answer is that as long as there are opposites regarded as opposites — opposites such as Black/Authentic and Good/Evil — the primordial deity is fractured and cannot complete his work. This seems a very mature, persuasive view. The Abrahamic religions posit a fairy-floss Heaven where there is 'only good': but this is incoherent, rather like positing a positive without a corresponding negative. (And even the Catholic Church, following Aquinas, accepts that God is subordinate to the laws of logic.) It is probably no coincidence that the world's most ancient religion, Hinduism, posits two deities, Lord Shiva (the Destroyer) and Lord Vishnu (the Preserver), who are aspects of the one being.

At the close of the novel, all beings except Joe and an extraterrestrial choose to remain as part of the polyencephalic mind. Glimmung is greatly dismayed that Joe chooses to reject him; and there is the sense that Joe has indeed made a terrible mistake for which he will be punished: he attempts, for the first time, to make a pot of his own, and the last line of the novel is 'The pot was awful' (Dick, 1969, p. 159).

It is significant that the final chapter contains the only explicitly Satanic description of Glimmung: on page 148 he is described as 'Luciferous'. Shortly after he is described as 'becoming once more what he had long since ceased to be ... powerful, wild, and wise' (Dick, 1969, p. 151).

There are many red-herring references to the Faust narrative in the novel but they are all contradictory, sometimes uttered by extraterrestrials whose cartoonish presentation warns us not to take the views seriously. Given the interpretation I have provided, it is clear that Dick cannot have a favourable view of the Faust story: if anyone is Faust, it is Joe, but he withholds his 'soul' at the last moment and loses eternal oneness with God/Satan, for which he is punished.

I hope this essay has shown what an excellent novel *Galactic Pot-Healer* is. It seems never to be ranked among PKD's 'best', yet his material is controlled and his message is profound. Dick is probably a much better writer than even his most ardent supporters suspect.

— Daniel King, December 2018

Guy Salvidge's intermittently award-winning fiction has squirrelled its way into such esteemed publications as *The Great Unknown*, *Westerly*, *Award Winning Australian Writing*, and *Stories of Perth*. When he's not writing, Guy moonlights as an English teacher in rustic, rural Western Australia.

Guy Salvidge

Amethysts and other treasures

AMETHYSTS AND EMERALDS: : 58 +1 Poems

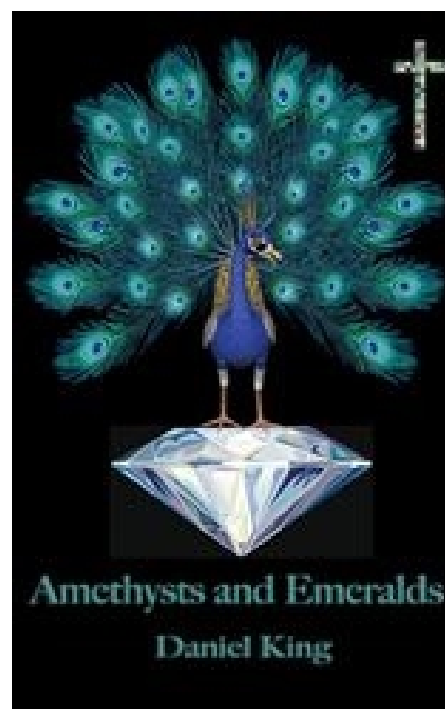
by David King

(Interactive Press, an imprint of IP (Interactive Publications Pty Ltd); 2018; <http://www.ipoz.biz/portfolio-single/amethysts-and-emeralds/>)

Daniel King is the author of award-winning prose fiction, some of which is collected in *Memento Mori* from Interactive Press, but he's a critically acclaimed poet too. His latest collection, *Amethysts and Emeralds*, features '58+1' poems, some of which first appeared internationally in the likes of *The London Magazine*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, and *Poetry Salzburg Review*. In Australia, King's poem 'King Henry X' won the 2017 FourW Award for Best Poem. The poems range in form from free verse to villanelle and sonnet, and cover a vast intellectual and spiritual territory. Fourteen of the poems concern Kalki, 'the tenth and final avatar of the Hindu God Vishnu (the Preserver), incarnating this time and forever together with Shiva (the Destroyer)' (p. ix), and others address Christian and Ancient Greek mythology.

King's work is dense with allusions and will reward careful reading and re-reading, but a number of poems and images caught my eye during my first foray. In 'Io', I enjoyed images such as of 'The Ionian Sea!/The dark night cliffs, the lines of waves/Like sentences in some mysterious calligraphy,/Delimited by distant future Italy' (p. 14), whereas, in 'Narcissus', 'My tears, a line of tiny spheres, are like an ellipsis,/Pointing to my omissions;/Their ripples form the circles of a target/At which I never aimed' (p. 19). In 'Cadmium', the spectre of World War II is invoked alongside Greek mythology: 'Ensnared by Ares — but what was not, in Fascist 1941?/The regents with their razor-wire regalia;/The salinelle of stinking plasma:/The fount of propaganda my protective coating could not reach,/Nor my poison' (p. 23).

Of the poems concerning Hinduism, 'Sonnet for Kalki' is among my favourites, and begins: 'A rider of the white-horse waves, I came/To surf. My wild blond hair is matted like Shiva's./I wander continents for men to tame/And men to love' (p. 49). In 'Sonnet for the Watchers', an astronomical perspective is provided: 'The galaxies now asterisks, footnotes,/The stratosphere's long lockstep learned by rote' (p. 22). *Amethysts and Emeralds* closes with 'Hymn to Kalki': 'Spirit and Christ,



Great Kalki, we hail you as one born of/the Ocean/And we worship you our way, Lord:/Your infinite time-line, crafted by Kalra, and your three-/circled crown, your journey from the stars' (p. 71).

I enjoyed those poems that were on astronomical themes, such as 'Ixion': 'Borne on the gusts of planetary rust,/We surely can engender life among the dark brass-/coloured stars,/Semi-bestial though its early stages may be,/If we seduce the air and rape the rocks./It's not too late to leave a sewer world:' (p. 26). 'Alpha Crucis' (the brightest star in the Southern Cross) contains stanzas of beauty and wisdom such as 'The Logos is regained as a bright flux,/A still, white diamond that never dies./With the Diamond the sky instructs/The Greeks with tropes, with semiotic conduct' (p. 37). In a different mode again is the award-winning 'King Henry X', which ends: 'For Roland Barthes to the White Tower came/To write Morte D'Author, explorer-entwined/So home rule's peacock-coloured skies proclaim/The Word, and King and INRI X the same' (p. 61).

As perceptive readers will no doubt appreciate, Daniel King is a poet of great intelligence and spiritual

feeling. *Amethysts and Emeralds* is a formidable and insightful collection and well worth your close attention.

DEAD SEA FRUIT

by Kaaron Warren

(Ticonderoga; 2010; 424 pp.; \$A35.00)

Kaaron Warren's collection *Dead Sea Fruit*, which was released by Ticonderoga Publications in 2010, is quite simply one of the best single author collections I've read. In his introduction, Lucius Shepard (no slouch in the art of short story writing himself) claims that Warren is one of the few writers who is both a stylist and a storyteller, and he's right. Some of these stories are not only technically masterful, but emotionally gruelling, horrific, and just plain awesome.

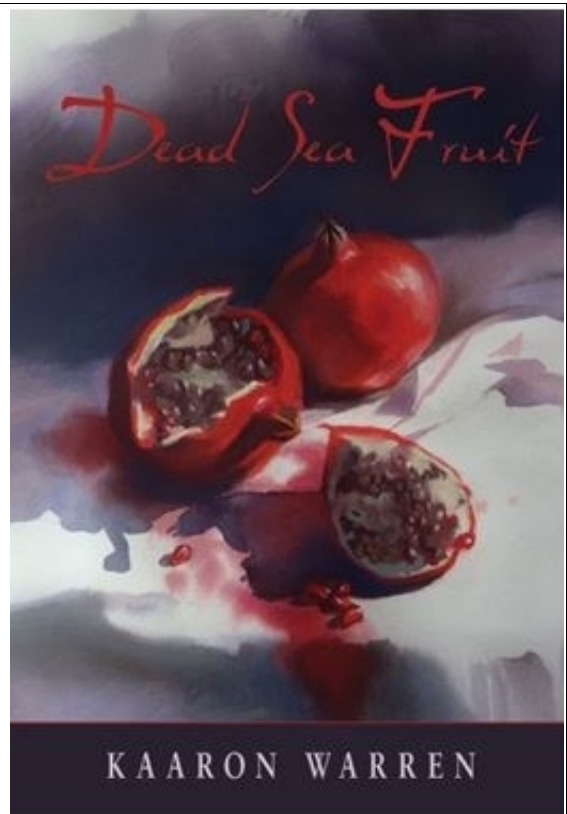
In the title story, 'Dead Sea Fruit', the protagonist is a dentist given the task of visiting the ward of the Pretty Girls, women so weak from anoxemia that 'they don't have the strength to defecate' (p. 21). The fabled Ash Mouth Man seems to be the source of the Pretty Girls' worries, as once he kisses them (and nobody can resist) everything they eat tastes of ashes. Not even our protagonist is immune to the Ash Mouth Man's charm, despite her expertise in oral hygiene.

'Down to the Silver Spirits' is similarly impressive in its treatment of childless, IVF-failure couples who will go to any length to fall pregnant, even if the child within isn't entirely theirs, or even entirely human. Lured by the words of the trickster Maria Maroni and her strange son Hugo, the couples are coaxed below ground to Cairness, the city of the silver spirits. Here I was struck by Warren's seemingly effortless control over the tropes of several genres: science fiction, fantasy, horror, and realistic fiction.

'Cooling the Crows' is urban fantasy, I suppose, but the genre elements are handled far more subtly than they would be in the hands of a lesser writer. Here Geoff is tasked by Management with 'cooling' a certain night-spot that has attracted an unwelcome clientele. He's had his difficulties with certain situations before, and this time it seems he's bitten off more than he can chew, not least the vampiric Bailey.

'Guarding the Mound' is particularly effective in the way that it weaves fantastic and science fictional elements. Upon losing his family, the diminutive Din is forced to stand watch over the vaguely Egyptian-seeming Chieftain for all eternity. During this time, Din is given access to the inner worlds of his descendants down the centuries, but the future seems neither transcendent nor enlightening, casting into doubt the usefulness of Din's sacred pact with the dead Chieftain.

I actually had to stop reading 'The Grinding House' at one point, not because I was bored, but because I couldn't go on. Thomas Disch's first novel *The Genocides* springs to mind as something similarly unrelenting in its depiction of the end of humanity through the most disgusting and pitiless of scourges. Worse, no one in this story seems especially to care about that or the dire state of the world they are inhabiting. This novella-length work is the tale of Rab, Nick, Sasha, Bevan, and the bone grinder himself, the odious Jeremiah, in their flight from



the bone disease that threatens to consume them all. I've read some disturbing stories in the past, and it seems I'm pretty much impervious to actually becoming horrified by horror, but 'The Grinding House' is one of the nastiest things I've had the (mis)fortune to read. Very few writers can match this kind of intensity.

'Sins of the Ancestors', which is new to this collection, is set in a future time where the Department of Unsolved Crime has the authority to put to death the descendants of murderers who were never brought to justice. Yolanda is a woman with a nasty trade: she's paid by rich men to scare them half to death, and subsequently suffers their scorn and abuse. In the course of her attempts to clear her ancestor's name (and her own) of the murder she feels he never committed, Yolanda uncovers the identity of the true murderer, after which point the shoe is very much on the other foot.

And then there's 'Ghost Jail', another emotionally onerous tale set in an unspecified time and place that might be our own unwelcome future. In it, the beggar woman Rashmilla sells peas at funerals, but her real strength is in subduing the vicious ghosts that seem to hover everywhere. Lisa is a journalist with a belief in free speech and the power of Selena, a DJ with the gumption to say all the things that Lisa is too afraid to write. Things turn sour when Lisa pushes the local Police Chief too far, after which she is consigned to the ghost-ridden Cewa Flats, where not even Rashmilla can save her.

Dead Sea Fruit came as a complete surprise to me. I expect every single-author collection published in this country to be good, but not this good. You owe it to yourself to give *Dead Sea Fruit* your full attention if you haven't already.

— Guy Salvidge, 2018

Dr David Rudd is former Professor of Children's Literature and Director of the NCRCL (National Centre for Research into Children's Literature) at the University of Roehampton, UK. He is currently Emeritus Professor at the University of Bolton, where he first introduced Children's Literature courses in the 1990s. He has published around 100 articles and three monographs on children's literature, besides editing *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature* (2010). He was editor-in-chief of the journal *Children's Literature in Education* 2018. Most infamously, he is a world expert on Enid Blyton (*Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature*, 2000).

David Rudd

A doublet of early fantasy fiction from Bengal

Discussed:

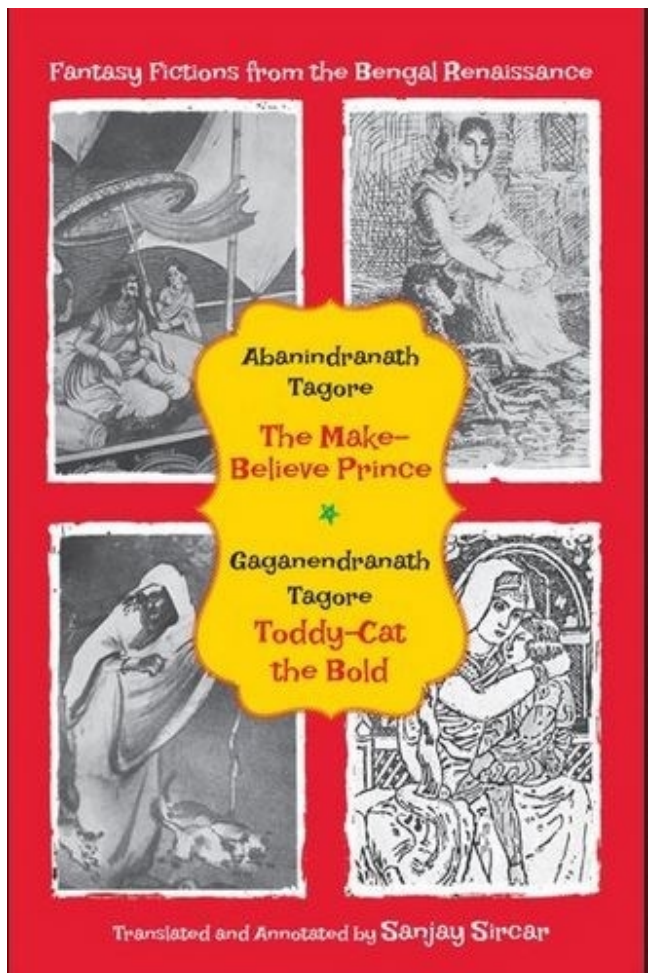
Fantasy Fictions from the Bengal Renaissance

Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore; translated and edited by Sanjay Sircar; introduction by Peter Hunt (Oxford University Press; 2018)

This is a most welcome new publication from OUP, though the primary texts that are its subject matter were both written in Bengali long ago, and printed in Calcutta (now Kolkata). They are 'The Make-Believe Prince' (*Kheerer Putul*, 1896,) by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and 'Toddy-Cat the Bold' (*Bhondar Bahadur*, 1926) by Gaganendranath Tagore (1867–1938), the latter being a text that has never before been translated into English. Though both are early examples of Indian fantasy fiction, the latter also has more than a few science-fiction touches:

What, did our fathers and grandfathers ever believe that humanity would be able to fly in the air like a Jatayu-bird [of epic], that they would be able within a mere glass to turn a mosquito as big as an elephant and thus see its thousands and thousands of eyes, and that they could, in that very same glass, bring the moon and sun close to home, see what is in them and write it down in thick volumes? Do you not know that these days everybody sits at home, puts their ears to the skies and listens to the songs of famous singers and eminent musicians from home and abroad? Just the other day I went to a great man's house where I saw the trees and plants of his garden inscribing their life-histories on smoked glass (290–1).

The brothers who wrote these works, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, are perhaps best known in the West today as painters, helping to shape the Bengal School of Art. In doing so, they were also promoting the



values of the Swadeshi Movement, which was an early attempt to assert Indian values and traditions in a bid for independence from the British. The brothers were the nephews of one of the most famous Indian writers, Rabindranath Tagore, who, in 1913, was the first non-

European to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. While the nephews were better known for their visual art, Abanindranath was also a well-known writer of children's books, and especially of *Kheerer Putul* (1896), a story based on a tale he found in an exercise book belonging to his aunt (Mrinalini Devi, Rabindranath's wife), wherein she recorded folktales. The story, regarded as 'a little jewel of Bengali literature' (p. xxiii), has been translated under various titles: 'The Cheese Doll', 'The Sweetmeat Doll', 'The Caramel Doll', 'The Condensed-Milk Doll', and 'The Sugar Doll', amongst others (pp. 32–7).

Sanjay Sircar gives a good account of the reasons that folktales have played such an important role in the establishment of a country's national identity, as was most famously demonstrated in Germany with the Brothers Grimm. But, in Bengal, and more generally in India, as Sircar relates, the situation was more complex, given that the colonialists were also interested in learning about their subjects' culture all the better to rule them, and for some Indians, regional/linguistic interests seemed to be of greater import than national ones. Nevertheless, this attempted colonial appropriation/utilisation of the indigenous culture goaded South Asian writers more fervently to establish their own voice and character.

Sircar's own translation attempts, as he puts it, 'to reproduce something like the flavour of the authors' styles and their rhythms in English'. Whilst I have no knowledge at all of the Bengali originals, I can attest to the feeling of authenticity that Sircar creates, without in any way making the texts sound overly exotic. As Sircar himself says, he always prefers 'ease of reading' to 'the scrupulously highbrow robes worn by the Hobgoblin of Foolish Consistency' (p. xxv).

Sircar has thus chosen to retitle *Kheerer Putul* 'The Make-Believe Prince', tying it more overtly to its tale type, 'The make-believe son (daughter)' (AT/ATU 459) (p. 36). As he notes, this tale type is not generally known in Europe, though it is common in North India and the Middle East. In discussing the way that tales morph from place to place, Sircar uses the delightful term 'oikotypification', which literally means 'moving into a new house' (p. 16), adding, with some swagger, 'I make no apology for any lickspittling colonial-style appropriation/adaptation of foreign literary terms here' (p. 18). And, speaking of appropriation, this is obviously a two-way street, for Sircar notes the possible influence of Lewis Carroll on Abanindranath's tale, which is unusual in its inclusion, at the climax, of a number of nursery rhymes (pp. 30–2).

Carroll's influence comes even more to the fore in Gaganendranath's story, 'Toddy-Cat the Bold', which

uses the convention of a protagonist falling asleep in order to experience a fantastic sequence of events, chiefly involving an anthropomorphised animal, Bhondar, who gives the work its original title. Though Sircar chases down details of many of the possible resemblances between Carroll's work and Gaganendranath's, most convincing is the claim for the overall Carrollian flavour, and I think Sircar is right to stress that this Bengali work is 'not a "mere" Alice imitation in a foreign language with a little local top-dressing' (p. 232). It is a delightful tale in its own right, which in some ways makes it an interesting contrast to the work of that Victorian don and mathematician. Gaganendranath's work is, as Sircar puts it, "In the Manner of Lewis Carroll", but a Very Different Matter' (p. 177).

As Sircar notes, Carroll's Alice is concerned with growing up and dealing with the mysteries of the adult world, whereas 'Old Boy' (the Everyman name that Sircar has given the anonymous narrator) is, as this designation suggests, at the other end of life. The latter is therefore a tale about 'growing down' rather than 'growing up', a 'regression in the service of the ego' (p. 228) as Sircar puts it, quoting Freud. Hence Old Boy dreams of returning to a simpler life, when he was a youngster. It is also a tale with a more pastoral feel, as we see in the initial shift in the narrative from city to country. Gaganendranath's work is also far more like a mock epic in its plot (Sircar mentions Thackeray's *The Rose and the Ring* as being, in some regards, a cousin as close or closer than *Alice* (p. 196)), with Old Boy and Bhondar trying to rescue the latter's son, who has been kidnapped by a demon. However, though the quest is of interest, the tale is more focused on the sense of communal enjoyment that the characters enjoy. It is certainly a more linear tale than Carroll's often enigmatic and circuitous narrative.

Overall, this is an excellent addition to OUP's list, and to scholarship generally. Sircar's translation reads effortlessly, and certainly has a feeling of authenticity without in any way appearing slavish to the source-texts. Beyond the stories themselves, the detailed introductions and annotations contain almost an embarrassment of riches. They will be of interest to anyone with a cosmopolitan interest in folktales, fairytales, or early examples of science fiction from the East. Sircar's scholarship is prodigious, and he chases down each and every association that might be of possible interest to readers. So, apart from the tales' own engaging narratives, Sircar's commentaries themselves take us on intellectual journeys that are well worth the undertaking. And finally, mention should be made of Peter Hunt's valuable Forward, from which I have borrowed my title.

— **David Rudd**, 2018

Colin Steele, Emeritus Fellow at the Australian National University, has been for many years the SF/fantasy reviewer at *The Canberra Times*. He is also *SF Commentary*'s longest-serving continuous contributor. His column of reviews has appeared here for over 30 years.

Colin Steele

The field

Books about books and readers

SCIENCE FICTION: A LITERARY HISTORY
edited by Roger Luckhurst (The British Library;
£20)

Roger Luckhurst is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Literature at Birkbeck College at the University of London. In *Science Fiction: A Literary History* he has brought together eight academic contributors, including himself, to provide a history of science fiction (hereafter SF).

It's not entirely clear whether the book is intended

for an academic audience or the general reader, but it certainly provides a stimulating historical overview of the genre within a literary context. Media SF coverage would clearly require another volume.

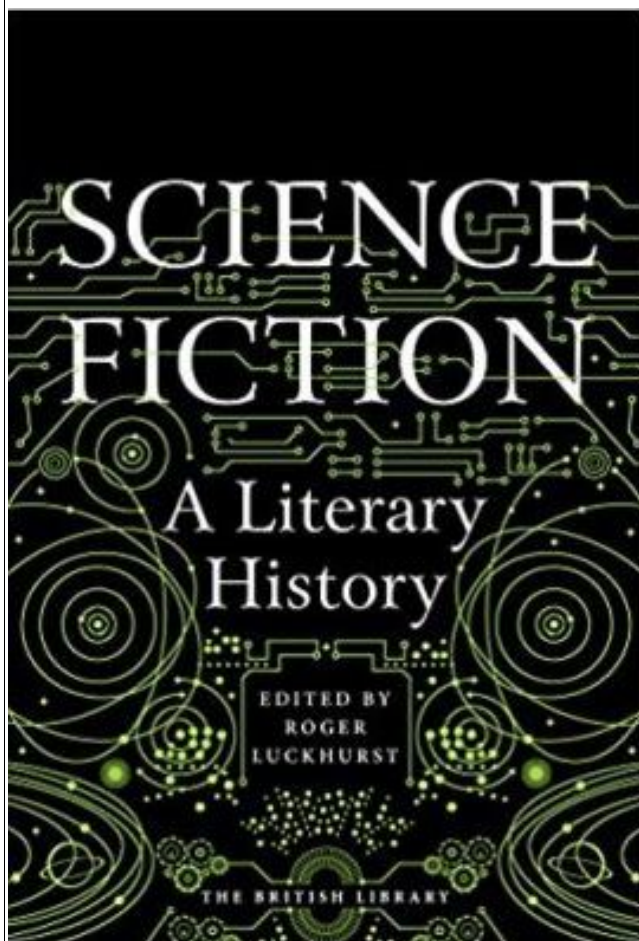
Professor Adam Roberts notes, in his rather brief Preface, that even defining SF is difficult because of the 'diversity of the mode'. Roger Luckhurst reflects, in his Introduction, that the 'true pioneers of SF history writing only really started in the 1960s — Kingsley Amis, Brian Aldiss and Darko Suvin'. According to Luckhurst they kept 'a tight rein on definitions'. Suvin said that 'fantasy and the Gothic was opium for the masses', but now genre boundaries have clearly been relaxed, both in SF and media frameworks.

In eight chapters, academics Arthur B. Evans, Luckhurst, Caroline Edwards, Mark Bould, Malisa Kurtz, Rob Latham, Sherryl Vint, and Gerry Canavan take the reader through 'Early Forms of Science Fiction', 'Scientific Romance to Science Fiction 1870–1914', 'Utopian Prospects 1900–1949', 'Pulp SF 1918–39', 'After the War 1945 to 1965', 'The New Wave 'Revolution 1960–76', 'From the New Wave into the Twenty First Century', concluding with 'New Paradigms after 2001'.

The eight essays are roughly chronological, with each ending with a list of recommended reading. Coverage is largely of Western SF, although there are occasional analyses of SF in non-Anglophone countries. Presumably publication costs restricted the illustrations to black-and-white rather than colour, which is a pity, as SF magazines and covers have significant colour impact.

The first two chapters by Arthur Evans and Roger Luckhurst cover what might be called 'SF prehistory', leading the reader through the extensive imaginary voyages and early attempts to illustrate science in fictional form, such as Sir Thomas Moore's *Utopia* (1516), Johannes Kepler's *Somnium* (1634), Cyrano de Bergerac's *Other Worlds* (1657), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752). It is too long a stretch to call any of these SF, and the first SF is usually seen as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

In the late nineteenth century, there is the massive impact on the genre of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells, covered in the chapter by Roger Luckhurst, while H. Rider Haggard could be seen as a terrestrial precursor of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Other well-known names



featured here include Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle. Evans also brings less well-known figures to the fore, such as the French author Albert Robida.

Caroline Edwards, in 'Utopian Prospects, 1900–49', provides an excellent coverage of utopias in that period, including feminist utopias such as Perkins Gilman's *Herland*. Other famous novels include Karel Kapek's *R.U.R.* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's influential *We*. Edwards summary of pre-revolutionary and early Russian utopian SF is particularly of value.

1918 to 1939 was a period that saw the significant rise of the American SF pulp magazines, covered in Mark Bould's essay, and the importance of the classic works of Huxley and Orwell. As ever, SF reflected contemporary issues, well explored by Bould in his thematic approach.

Malisa Kurtz and Rob Latham cover the period 1945 to 1976. Kurtz argues that the 1950s, situated between the SF Golden Age of the 1940s and the New Wave of the 1960s was, in fact, an exciting period for SF, contrary to accepted wisdom.

Latham confirms the 1960s were a period of change and excitement, with the SF New Wave reflected in Britain by Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* magazine and in America by Harlan Ellison's *Dangerous Visions* anthologies. From that period, J. G. Ballard's inner space books are still classics. This period is also marked by Ursula Le Guin's groundbreaking SF novels such as *The Left Hand of Darkness*, as well as her Earthsea novels in the fantasy genre, which was then taking off after the success of the American paperbacks of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

Sherryl Vint and Gerry Canavan cover SF from the 1980s to the current decade. This was a much more diverse creative period. It included William Gibson's groundbreaking cyberpunk novels and the environmental novels of Kim Stanley Robinson. It is good to see Australian author Greg Egan singled out by Vint for Egan's rigorous extrapolations of hard science into his SF writing.

SF also began exploring issues of female liberation, overpopulation, and the environment, for example, in the novels of Octavia Butler, Harry Harrison, and Kim Stanley Robinson. SF themes began trickling into the mainstream literature, although without the literary recognition that novels by Kurt Vonnegut and Margaret Atwood attained.

Judith Merrill once said that SF in America in the 1950s became 'virtually the only vehicle of political dissent'. That was certainly the case in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, and now, the same is occurring in China in the twenty-first century. In his chapter, Gerry Canavan cites, in particular, the writings of Cixin Liu.

Now dystopian fiction proliferates, reflecting, in particular, Trump's America and Brexit Britain. Climate change and artificial intelligence are also prominent themes, as writers reflect ecological crises and the global downsizing of traditional industries. The digital era also sees a breakdown of the publishing formats which had traditionally been in print until the present era.

ScienceFiction. A Literary History is an essential work for libraries, especially whose universities and colleges include SF in cultural and literary courses. It will appeal to SF fans looking for an up-to-date one-stop print refer-

ence source, and will be a useful vade mecum to those new to the genre.

LITERARY FESTIVALS AND CONTEMPORARY BOOK CULTURE

by Millicent Weber (Palgrave Macmillan; \$139)

Literary festivals have boomed globally in the last three decades, with apparently more than 450 held annually in the UK and Australia alone. In that context, **Millicent Weber's** *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* is most welcome. It began life as a 2016 Monash University PhD, and while it still contains the trappings of an academic publication, in its language and tropes, it is by and large accessible to a general reading audience.

That is, if a general reading audience can access its content. Many publishers produce academic works in limited print runs at high cost. Sadly, Weber's book falls into that category. While it is priced, at the time of this review, at \$139, other websites have it at prices beginning as high as \$277. This is not the fault of the author. Young academics are put under significant pressure to 'publish or perish' and they are consequently fearful of publishing with cheaper options, or indeed open access presses, which would allow greater global distribution of the content.

Weber states, 'This is the first extensive qualitative study of literary festival audiences.' Weber has included up some updates from her thesis, but essentially the methodology and chronological analyses of the Australian literary festivals remain from the thesis. This, however, does not affect the overall conclusions and commentaries, which remain constant over time.

Weber does not analyse the long-running Adelaide Writers' Week, although, it should be noted, this literary festival has been covered up to 1998 by Ruth Starke's book *Writers, Readers and Rebels*. Nor is there any mention of the Canberra National Word Festival, which ran from 1983 to 1997 and which, for most of the 1980s, was the only literary festival in Australia (along with Adelaide) until Melbourne began in 1986. The NWF brought to Australia authors such as Doris Lessing, Raymond Carver, Melvyn Bragg, and Richard Ford, and the then young authors Kate Grenville and Tim Winton in 1985, as well as featuring established Australian authors such as Elizabeth Jolley and Thomas Keneally.

Weber provides in-depth case studies of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, the Port Eliot Festival, the Melbourne Writers Festival, the Emerging Writers' Festival, and the Clunes Booktown Festival. Building on interviews with audiences and staff, buttressed by an online survey of literary festival audiences globally, she juxtaposes a scholarly investigation of literary festivals with respect to the complex and contested terrain of contemporary book culture.

In her Introduction, Weber writes, 'Despite the recent explosion of literary festivals, there is little extant research that explores these festivals' significance within the context of contemporary book culture. What do they offer and what do they mean to the people who attend them? How are they situated within local and digital literary ecologies? What impact might they have in these spaces, and what ethical questions does this raise for

organisers and public-and private-sector sponsors?’

Weber effectively explores how audiences engage with literary festivals, and analyses these festivals’ relationship to local and digital literary communities, to the creative industries focus of contemporary cultural policy, and to the broader literary field. She writes, ‘The audience of the literary festival, however, is typically represented as a body of populist and popularizing consumers, uncritically engaging with the mass-culture produced and propagated in the festival setting. Researchers have begun to refute such claims, demonstrating that members of festival audiences exhibit a deep and critical engagement with literature; but beyond this demographic-based research, little work has been conducted capable of interrogating audience experience, or mapping the broader culture of festival attendance’. This is certainly true.

She states in a 2018 ANU interview, ‘I was interested in understanding what people — individually, and as a community — get out of literary festivals. I wanted to know why people personally attend them and value them, what they do for specific communities of writers, and how they tap into bigger debates happening in the media or online’.

She goes on, ‘Literary festivals serve a variety of functions. Depending on the festival, and the specific festival events that you’re looking at, they celebrate and market books and writers, offer space for public debate, and perform important social functions as public events. They are closely attached to celebrity authors — individuals who are very much in the public eye — and they also have strong connections with communities active in print and social media. Consequently, when scandals flare up at literary festivals—and they often do, for a variety of reasons—these are widely publicised. This has the effect of revealing to public scrutiny some of the tensions and power structures that exert pressure on the field of literary culture. Having said all this, it’s important to remember that these festivals are also not inherently ‘functional’ entities — as cultural objects, they have value to us that goes beyond their direct political or social utility. Assessing the value or the function of cultural objects is a matter of ongoing debate among researchers, which is another reason why literary festivals make for rich objects of study.’

Weber is an excellent source on the increasing digital social outreach of festivals and notes their enthusiastic adoption of digital technology: uploading podcasts of author talks, posting videos of panel sessions to video-sharing sites such as YouTube, inviting guest bloggers to comment on proceedings, and encouraging live-tweeting as a means of reinforcing audience members’ participatory agency. Certainly audiences across Australia have enjoyed the live streaming of sessions to selected venues from the Sydney Writers’ Festival.

The social media context can work both ways. In Australia, the role and function of a literary festival has become a matter of significant public debate. Controversy now seems to stalk the Brisbane Writers’ Festival; for example in 2016, with Lionel Shriver and the discussions of cultural appropriation, and the 2018 ‘disinvitations’ of Bob Carr and Germaine Greer. Junot Diaz was a 2018 withdrawal from the Sydney Writers Festival, and

2017 saw Michael Cathcart’s controversial interview of Paul Beatty. These incidents stimulate public debate far beyond the original Writers’ Festival presentations or non-presentation.

The act of literary creation is essentially an individual one, and yet writers are expected to be public performers. Peter Carey is one who is now somewhat reluctant to attend literary festivals for that reason. I remember a young Ian McEwan attending the 1986 Adelaide Writers’ Festival and participating fully. But two decades later he arrived for his session at the Adelaide Writers Festival in a limousine car, signed books for an hour, and then left.

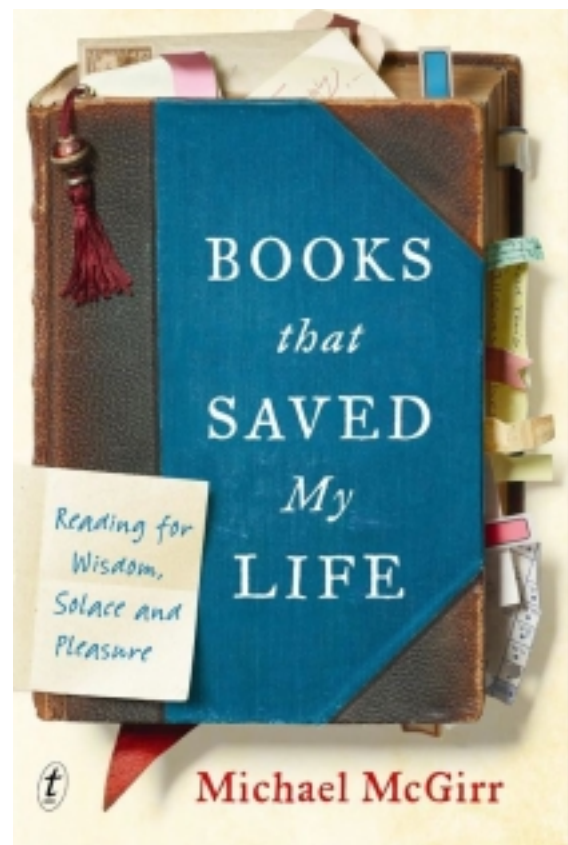
Weber indicates that while festivals, have ‘clear commercial and populist imperatives’, they also increasingly cater for varied groups in society beyond their white middle-class and largely female base. Weber covers several alternative festivals.

Weber’s book is a valuable addition in that it provides considerable detail and analysis on literary festivals and their relationship to book culture and social mores which are now increasingly debated, but rarely analysed in depth until now. Just a pity that the price and presumably small print run will inhibit the deserved wide access to its content.

BOOKS THAT SAVED BY LIFE: READING FOR WISDOM, SOLACE AND PLEASURE

by Michael McGirr (Text; \$34.99)

Michael McGirr is a Melbourne high school teacher and the bestselling author of *Snooze*, *Bypass*, and *Things You Get for Free*. *Books that Saved My Life: Reading for Wisdom, Solace and Pleasure* is a wonderful celebration of reading through 40 personal vignettes of books and their impact



on him.

McGirr's book is a 'celebration of some of the books that have brought wisdom and pleasure to my life and the lives of many others ... reading is as much a part of investing in yourself as are gyms, financial planning and relationships ... will talk about my connection with a certain number of books and, often enough, with the people and circumstances that brought them into my life.'

McGirr's forty books constitute a fascinating and eclectic list. He begins with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he explored with schoolchildren. He notes, however, that one student, Antonio, who got one of the best grades, revealed that he had only read the plot summary on Google. McGirr takes this on board, but then offers advice as to why the book should be read in full.

Shakespeare is explored through a chapter on Margaret Atwood's *Hag Seed*, while other books examined include *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Virginia Wolfe's *Mrs Dalloway*, Nelson Mandela's memoirs, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Annie Proulx's *Close Range*, and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Writing about Rowling, he 'must have been the last person to join the Harry Potter bandwagon': a discovery that he made by listening to a radio discussion in the middle of the night in a noisy 'insalubrious hotel in the Southern Highlands' of New South Wales.

Many of the books are linked to events into McGirr's life, such as when he left the Jesuit order and his subsequent marriage. In his chapter on Tim Winton's *Eyrie* and *Cloudstreet*, he relates to his visit to Winton just after *Cloudstreet* was published; they discussed theology as well as taking a precarious tinny boat trip.

In discussing Thea Astley's *Reaching Tin River*, McGirr recalls his relationship with Thea Astley's older brother, Philip, with whom McGirr lived for six years. McGirr recalls that as Philip died, he acknowledged that he was homosexual: 'Philip was lightened by innocence: Thea was burdened by guilt'.

Another personal relationship is documented in his chapter on Les Murray's *An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow*. They first met when McGirr was at university, and their friendship continued in later life after McGirr left the Jesuit Order. 'Les was vexed and sent me an unpoetic fax to express his disappointment'.

Travels also inspire coverage of books, such as his visit to Howarth and Brontë country in his analysis of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. His love for Jane Austen, which he covers in an analysis of *Persuasion*, began at school, via his English teacher, a card-carrying member of the Bona Mors Society, an organisation whose members prayed for a good death.

His chapter, 'My Tears Have Become My Bread' — a 'taste of the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an', begins with an account of his father's death when McGirr was eighteen and moves on to his teaching students various theologies, including 'a more sympathetic account of the mysticism of Islam than they are likely to get from the media at large'.

McGirr also covers some lesser-known works, such as

Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1952). Day died in 1980 when McGirr was a naïve nineteen-year-old old, a young Jesuit novice helping homeless people in Melbourne. Genelle Guzman-McMillan's *Angel in the Rubble* (2011), he admits, 'is not a great work of literature', but he treasures his conversation with her in 2011. Genelle was the last person rescued alive from the wreckage of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001.

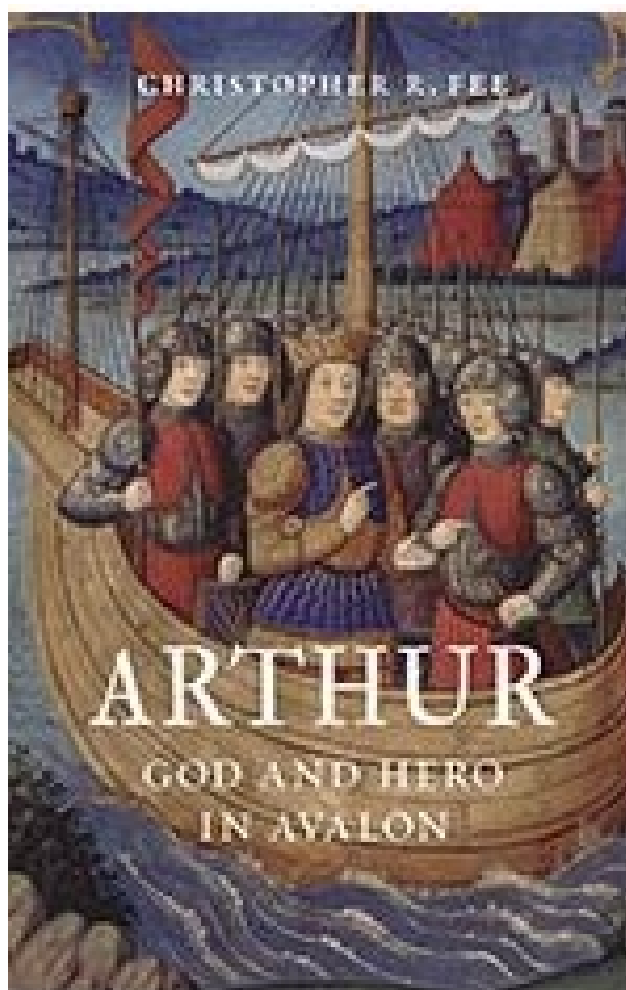
Background themes in *Books that Saved My Life* are the changing nature of reading, but nevertheless its continued value and the decline of support for school libraries by funding authorities. Overall, McGirr is a moralist, but a moralist with humour and insight and compassion. He is never prescriptive and always insightful, often on a personal level. He believes that 'books help people develop empathy and compassion'. Do follow McGirr through his 40 books, reading as the cover says 'for wisdom, solace and pleasure'.

ARTHUR: GOD AND HERO IN AVALON

by Christopher R. Fee (Reaktion Books; \$39.99)

Who was King Arthur? The literature on this topic is immense, and **Christopher Fee**, Professor of English at Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania, lists many of the key books in the bibliography of his detailed and well illustrated *Arthur: God and Hero in Avalon*.

Fee cites two books in his bibliography by Nicholas Higham. Higham's latest book, *King Arthur: The Making*



of the Legend (Yale University Press) was published, however, too late to be referenced in Fee's book.

Professor Tom Shippey's review of Higham's book in the December 2018 issue of the *London Review of Books* begins with the words, 'Modern academic historians want nothing to do with King Arthur.' 'There is no historical evidence about Arthur; we must reject him from our histories and, above all, from the titles of our books,' David Dumville wrote in 1977; and he was backed up by, for instance, J. N. L. Myres in 1986: 'No figure on the borderline of history and mythology has wasted more of the historian's time.'

Shippey continues, 'And what, finally, of the non-historical or romantic Arthur? Even more powerful than Geoffrey of Monmouth's rather tedious chronicle was the string of romances that also began to appear in the 12th century, and which transferred Celtic tales to an up-to-date French setting: Chrétien de Troyes's Erec, Lancelot, Perceval, Yvain. It was these which introduced the Waste Land, the Holy Grail, and above all the doomed romance of Lancelot and Guinevere to the European imagination. In the English imagination they powered Thomas Malory's 15th-century *Morte D'Arthur*, created the Victorian vogue for William Morris's 'Defence of Guenevere' (1858), Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859–85), and returned in T. H. White's *Once and Future King* (1958) and the Disney movie based on it in 1963, with a dozen successors, including John Boorman's 1981 film *Excalibur*'.

Higham's book is set within a decidedly academic context, while Fee's book, although scholarly, is a work addressed to 'the vast general audience interested in all things Arthur, and it is therefore designed to be accessible, engaging and illuminating for students and readers who would like a solid grounding in the myths and legends of King Arthur, as well as in aspects of comparative mythology as these can inform a study of Arthur and his world'. In this it succeeds admirably.

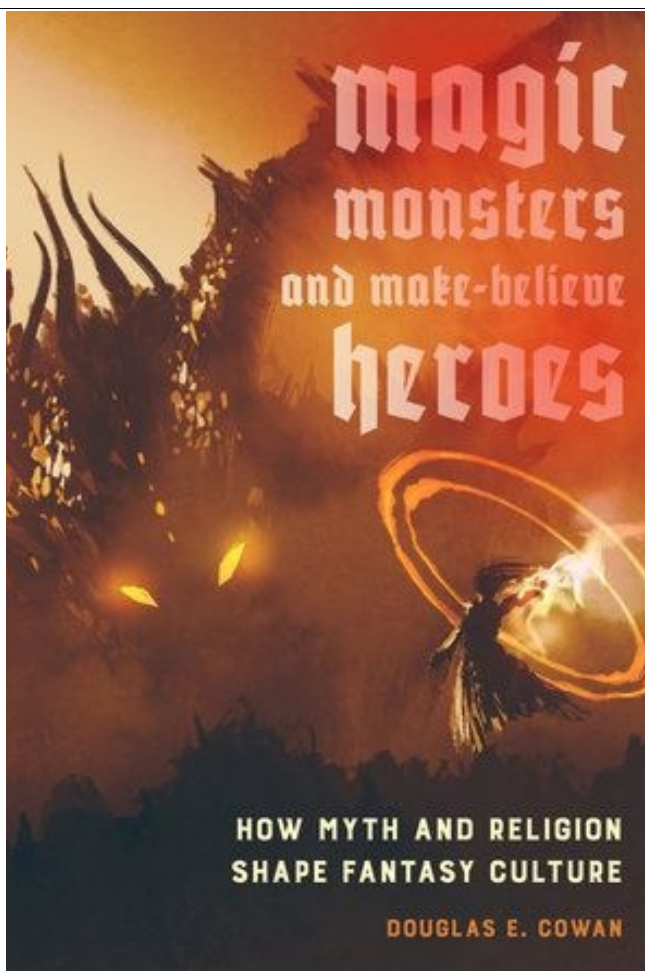
Fee follows the story of King Arthur, from the earliest Welsh/Celtic versions of the story, to the sources listed in Shippey's summary, ending with a comprehensive coverage of film and television adaptations. Fee also follows the Arthurian Trail across Britain, for example, via Tintagel, Glastonbury, and Stonehenge, using archival sources and data from relevant archaeological excavations.

Arthur: God and Hero in Avalon is an attractive and useful vade mecum covering all the Arthurian bases, especially Camelot, Avalon, Merlin, the Round Table, the Holy Grail, Excalibur, Lancelot, and Guinevere.

MAGIC, MONSTERS AND MAKE-BELIEVE HEROES: HOW MYTH AND RELIGION SHAPE FANTASY CULTURE

**by Douglas E. Cowan (University of California
Press; \$47.99; available from Footprint Books)**

Douglas E. Cowan's *Magic, Monsters and Make-Believe Heroes* has a particular brief in that it focuses on the way stories are told and interpreted, with the emphasis on reader/watcher reactions, rather than the content of the stories themselves.



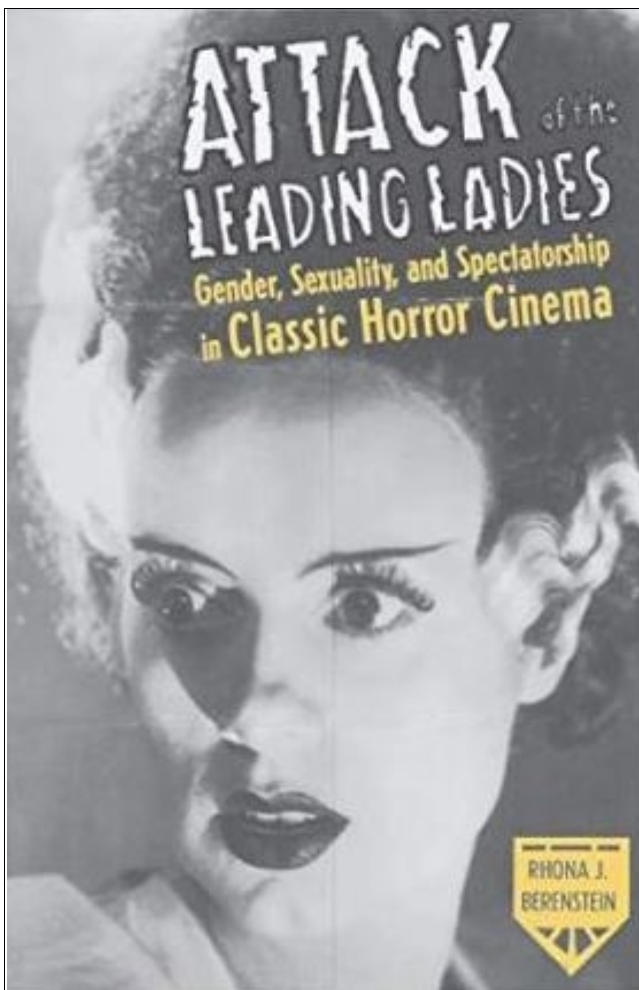
Cowan, Professor of Religious Studies and Social Development Studies at Renison University College, says his book 'takes the broad spectrum of fantasy film, television, and participative culture as evidence of our ongoing need for a mythic vision, that is, for larger frames of meaning into which we continually write ourselves and through which we often give our lives direction and purpose'.

In such a wide framework, Cowan has to be selective in his coverage of film, television, books, online and role-playing games, etc. He says his choices are 'exemplary perhaps, but hardly comprehensive. They are meant to encourage readers to explore those aspects of fantasy culture that excite them — Pathfinder instead of Dungeons & Dragons, or the Marvel cinematic universe (about which an entire book could easily be written) as opposed to Asian martial arts films — rather than consider that my choices bound out other explorations'.

Cowan ranges widely from *Buffy* to *Mad Max*, *Superman* to *Peter Pan*, the *Brothers Grimm* to Disney, *Crouching Tiger* to *Drunken Master*, *Camelot* to *Zardoz*, as myth, religion and fantasy intertwine in storytelling over the centuries, with often the same themes reinterpreted.

Three chapters cover the mythic hero in the East, with a focus on martial arts, the West, and also the Warrior-Heroine. Cowan is assiduous in his wide coverage of female involvement in the topics addressed.

Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes occasionally lapses into the wording of academia, so his overall storytelling can become a little muffled. Nonetheless, he



comprehensively reaffirms why myth, religion, and fantasy play such important cultural roles. He concludes, 'Put simply, storytellers tell us who we are, and more importantly, they remind us who we can be.'

Books about media

ATTACK OF THE LEADING LADIES: GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SPECTATORSHIP IN CLASSIC HORROR CINEMA

by Rhona J. Berenstein (Columbia University Press; \$58.99; available from Footprint Books)

Rhona J. Berenstein's *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, first published in 1996 is now reissued because of its continuing relevance to understanding the gender dynamics of classic horror films. Berenstein says in her introduction that the book, which focuses on horror films from Hollywood from 1931 to 1936, is 'a study of classic horror's terrified women ... But it is also a book devoted to interrogating popular assumptions about horror's representation of gender'.

She argues that films such as *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Dr. X*, *Dracula*, *King Kong*, *Mad Love*, *Svengali*, and *White Zombie*, while seeming to portray terrified on-screen women viewed through the perspective of 'sadistic male gaze', in fact indicate gender categories less rigid than initially conceived.

Berenstein places her analysis of the horror movies, supplemented by many black-and-white photographs, within three principal subgenres: hypnosis films which include vampires, zombies and mummies; mad doctor movies; and jungle horror pictures. Her interpretations, outlined in six chapters, are supplemented by the analysis of related promotional material, reviews, publicity kits, and fan magazines, such as *Photoplay*, *Picture Play*, and *Screenland*, and censorship files.

Although couched at times in overly sociological language, *Attack of the Leading Ladies* remains a significant contribution to classic horror film gender and sexuality analysis. Berenstein's comments still remain pertinent 23 years after the book's original publication.

Books about science

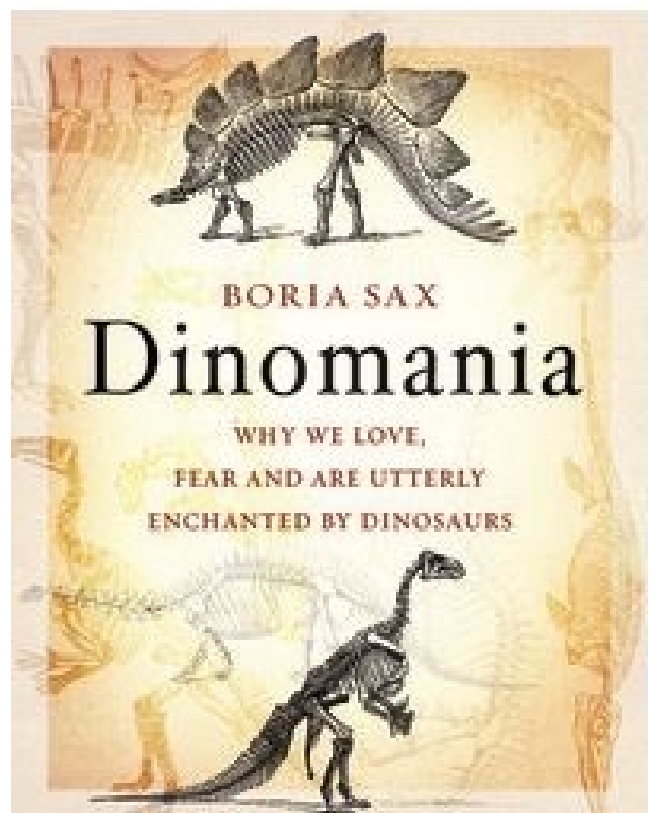
DINOMANIA

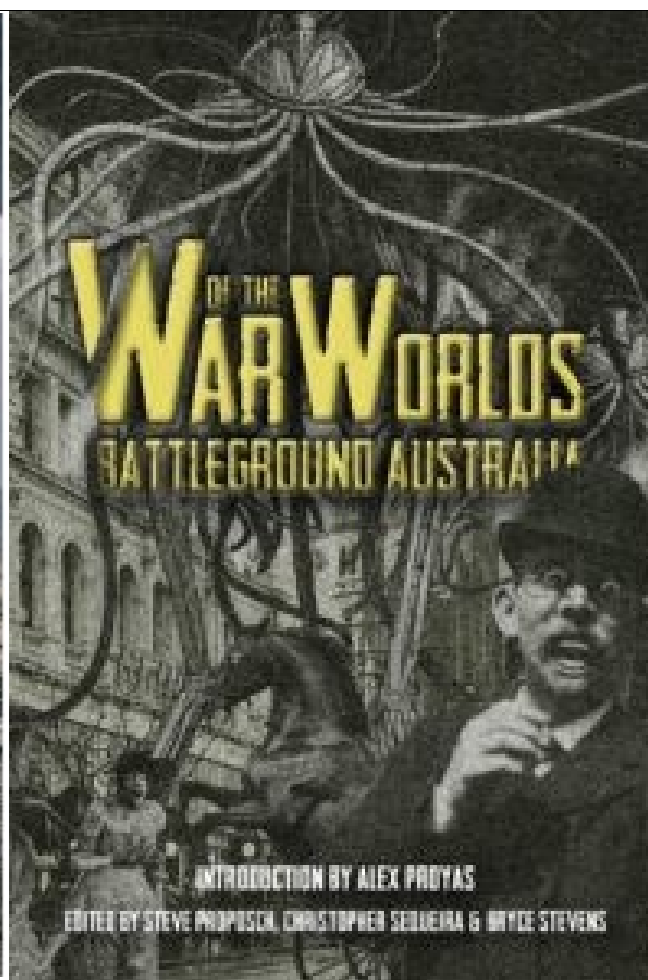
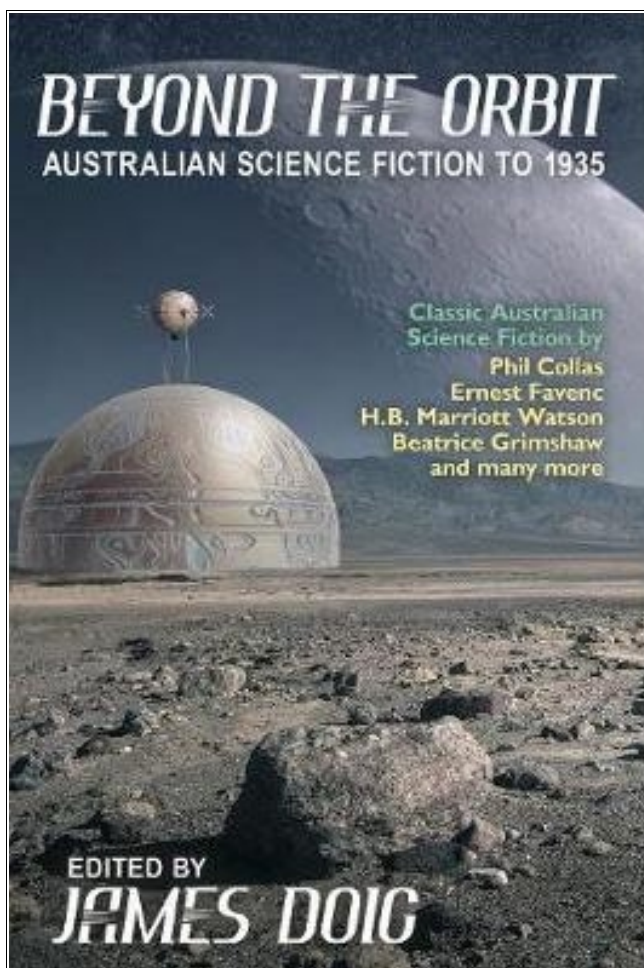
by Boria Sax (Reaktion Books; \$49.99)

Boria Sax, a lecturer in literature at Mercy College, New York, has published numerous books on human/animal interactions, including *Imaginary Animals* (Reaktion, 2013) and *Lizard* (Reaktion, 2017).

Dinomania, subtitled 'Why We Love, Fear and are Utterly Enchanted by Dinosaurs' is an informative, superbly illustrated and printed book on dinosaurs from various perspectives, including history, science, popular culture, and mythology. Sax says the book 'uses dinosaurs to talk about, among other things, transience, the nature of time, totems, extinction, science, art, modernity and the unhuman destiny of humankind'.

Sax shows how dinosaurs have been interpreted in different ways through history. At the beginning of the





nineteenth century, it was in the context of geological discoveries. Now, apart from their scientific impact, they stand as a symbol of extinction in a world afflicted by climate change.

That nineteenth-century discovery of dinosaur bones stimulated a new scientific awareness that saw dinosaur exhibits proliferate in many natural history museums around the world. The search for dinosaur remains is as active as ever, in, for example, Australia from Winton in Queensland to Broome in Western Australia. As well as scientific exhibits in museums, we have a growing number of what might be termed dinolands and parks. Canberra has a dinosaur Museum that mixes entertainment and scientific enquiry.

Sax notes that, through periods of history, dinosaur interpretations have become mixed with those of the dragon. This can be seen, for example, in a 1718 engraving from Matthaus Merian, which Sax reproduces.

Sax covers well the impact of dinosaurs in popular culture. He cites early films and genre fiction, including a superb full-colour illustration from the pulp magazine *Amazing Stories*. Other SF and fantasy authors, especially Ray Bradbury, who is cited, helped fix the image of the dinosaur in the popular imagination.

Sax also covers the science of palaeontology and the reasons for the dinosaurs' mass extinction.

Dinomania adroitly juxtaposes scientific fact and popular media interpretations, but always returns to the central question, 'What is a dinosaur?'

Australian science fiction

BEYOND THE ORBIT: AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION TO 1935

by James Doig (Wildside Press; \$23.70)

WAR OF THE WORLDS: BATTLEGROUND AUSTRALIA

edited by Steve Proposch, Christopher Sequeira, and Bryce Stevens (Clan Destine Press; \$29.95)

Dr James Doig, Assistant Director at National Archives of Australia, is well known for his books showcasing little-known Australian fiction in the horror, ghost, gothic, and mystery genres. *Beyond the Orbit* collects 13 Australian SF short stories which, Doig argues in his introduction, constitute 'a neglected area of Australian literary history'. This is partly because the stories themselves are now difficult to find. Doig acknowledges his debt to the late Graham Stone in tracking down rare items in the National Library of Australia and private collections.

While the history of early Australian SF has been documented by authors such as Van Ikin and Sean McMullen, they have mainly focused on novels rather than the short story spectrum. Doig's appendix, containing extended biographies of his selected authors, is a particularly useful reference source.

Phil Collas (1907–89), published only one major SF story, 'The Inner Domain'. Published in America in

1935, it looks forward to 1985 and the discovery of a technologically advanced Aboriginal civilisation living below the Great Sandy Desert.

Ernest Favenc (1845–1908) spins off the European black death plague in ‘What the Rats Brought’, a plague that devastates mainland Australia. The disaster, however, knits ‘the states together in a closer Federation than legislators ever had forged’.

Beatrice Grimshaw (1870–1953), one of the ‘New Women of the 1890s’, draws on her South Pacific experience in ‘Lost Wings’, which follows the invention and loss of another form of flying, using the mysterious element pironite, years before the Wright brothers.

Alan Connell (1915–?), in ‘Dreams End’, postulates that our universe is simply a figment of the imagination of a super being.

Erle Cox (1873–1950), best known for his groundbreaking SF novel *Out of the Silence*, describes in ‘The Social Code’ a long-distance doomed romance between an astronomer at Mount Kosciuszko’s ‘Stellascopie’ and his female Martian equivalent.

War of the Worlds: Battleground Australia spins off H. G. Wells’ Martian invasion in *War of the Worlds* with 16 stories set in the 1890s and present and future Australia. Illustrations by Jan Scherpenhuizen and Sholto Turner complement the stories by Australian and New Zealand authors, who include Kerry Greenwood, Carmel Bird, Jack Dann, Dmetri Kakmi, Lucy Sussex, Sean Williams, and Canberra’s Kaaron Warren.

Renowned film director Alex Proyas (*The Crow*, *I Robot*, *Gods of Egypt*) notes in his introduction the impossibility of an overall connectivity in the 16 stories, other than taking inspiration from the original novel and the Australian locales.

The authors who cover the southern hemisphere invasion in 1898 have an easier task of linkages. Lucy Sussex, in ‘The Inconvenient Visitors Season’, sees the Martians in Victoria unable to cope with bushfires.

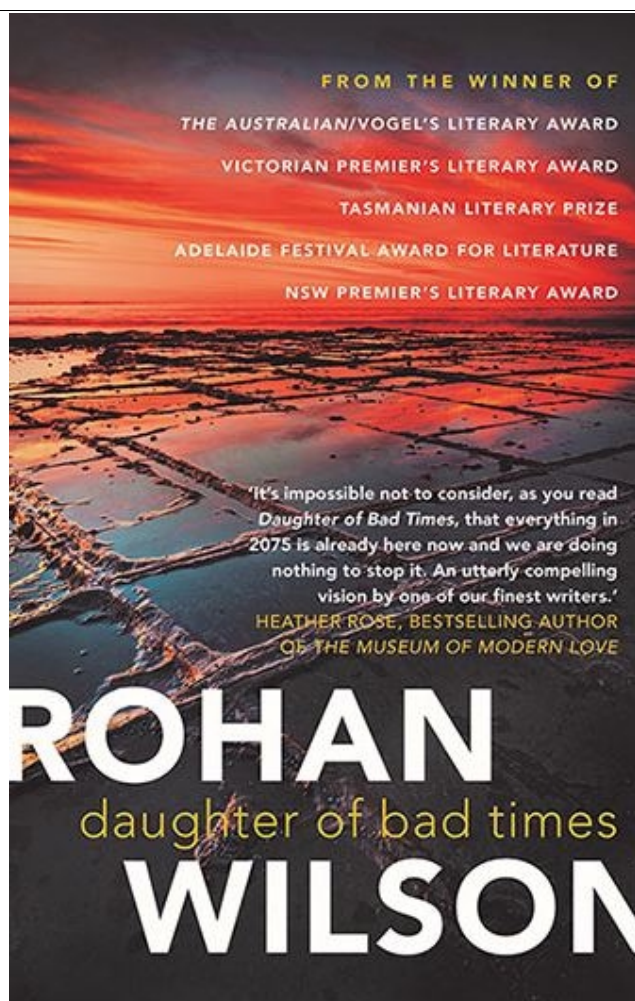
Lindy Cameron and Kerry Greenwood depict a devastated Melbourne in ‘The Salt Water Battle’, where women may hold the key to resistance.

Janeen Webb sets ‘Apostles of Mercy’ in the Blue Mountains, where a lone Martian is seen as a God by a naïve congregation, for whom the blood of Christ takes a sinister turn.

Wells had indicated that he used the fate of the Tasmanian Aboriginals as a model for his Martian invasion. This extinction is referenced by Lucy Sussex and more particularly by Carmel Bird in ‘Speed Bonny Boat’, set in present-day Tasmania, as a new Martian threat to humanity emerges.

In ‘The Sixth Falling Star’, Kaaron Warren takes us to a future Australia where a female captain of a barge picks up the dead from the side of canals to deliver to the Martians. Warren reflects on the implications of appeasement and the fate of the displaced before a dark conclusion.

In the final story, ‘The Second Coming of the Martians’, Sean Williams follows a man who tracks down the last Martian, who has survived in Antarctica. The story emerges from Williams’s Mawson Antarctica Fellowship, which will also result in a novel spinning off, as William



says, ‘a moment in Douglas Mawson’s diaries when he vividly compares Antarctica to Mars; my book combines the core issues of H. G. Wells’ masterpiece with the Heroic Age and Australian Federation — something that, to the best of my knowledge, no one has attempted before’. Probably an accurate statement!

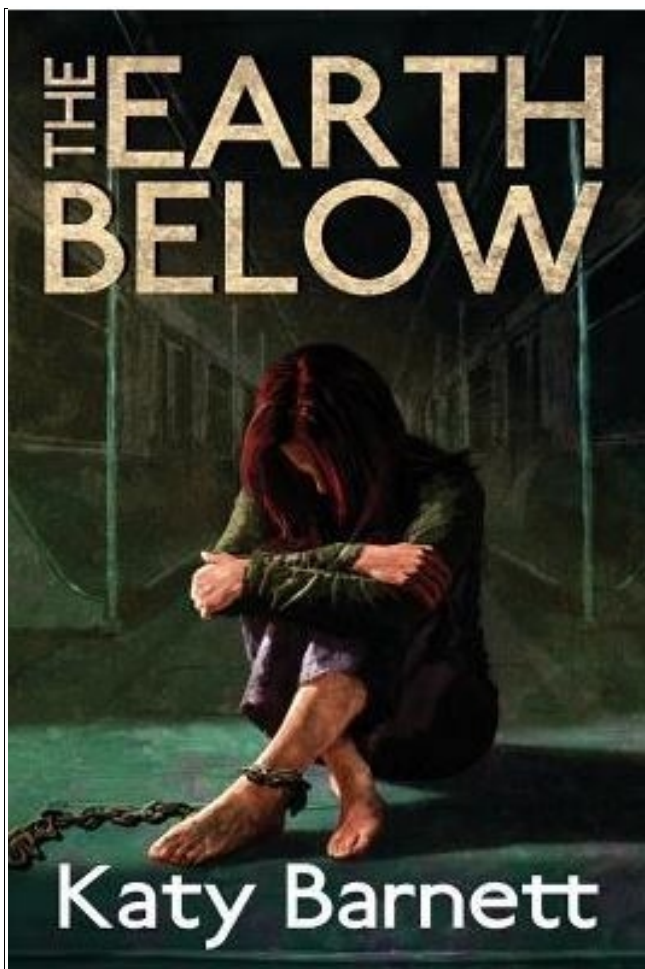
DAUGHTER OF BAD TIMES

by Rohan Wilson (Allen and Unwin; \$29.99)

Tasmanian born but now Brisbane-based author **Rohan Wilson** has won a number of Australian awards, including the Vogel and Premier’s Literary Award with his first two novels *The Roving Party* (2011) and *To Name Those Lost* (2014), set in Tasmania’s traumatic colonial history. Now he completes his trilogy with *Daughter of Bad Times*, set in the 2070s.

Wilson notes that his trilogy covers ‘the anarchy of the Van Diemen’s Land frontier to the emergence of the capitalist class and shareholder democracy to the consolidation of the corporatocracy a couple of generations from now’.

Daughter of Bad Times begins with Maldivian Yamaan Ali Umair trapped in Tasmania’s oppressive Eaglehawk Migrant Training Centre. Climate change has resulted in islands like the Maldives being flooded. Yamaan’s hopes of permanent resettlement in Australia are dashed when he ends up at Eaglehawk, one of five Australian immigrant detention centres run by multinational



Cabey-Yasuda Corrections (CYC).

The migrants are cheap labour for CYC robotic toy production. CYC admits, 'What better pitch than helping the refugees of the world? Who doesn't want to help refugees, right? The five Australian facilities are immigration detention centres, sure, but they're also manufacturing plants. That means two revenue streams for one facility. And we also clean up our image. We're not just a corrections company anymore — now, we're building communities, we're saving lives'. Yamaan reflects, 'We've been dumped in a legal black hole as citizens of nowhere.'

Yamaan had previously had an affair with Japanese-American Rin Braden, the daughter of the CYC CEO. Their relationship is told through a series of flashbacks. Rin believed Yamaan had not survived the Maldives flooding, but after finding him alive at Eaglehawk tries to extricate him. Transcripts from a 2075 Royal Commission report, instigated by the Department for 'National Integrity, Corrections and the Arts', indicates that this extrication will not go well, after a major riot at Eaglehawk.

Wilson successfully juggles the pre- and post-Eaglehawk flashbacks, but reader belief in the unlikely love affair between Yamaan and Rin is often stretched, as they become the platform for Wilson's political messaging.

Wilson has said *Daughter of Bad Times* is 'projected political fiction', and that it 'emerges from the need to understand what we face in order that we might start changing it'. In this context, contemporary concerns on



refugee policy, climate change, social inequality, and global corporatisation are clearly outlined.

THE EARTH BELOW

by Katy Barnett (Fi; \$27.49)

THE WARMING

by Craig Ensor (Impact Press; \$29.99)

Something of a coincidence to have to debut SF novels by eminent Australian lawyers. **Katy Barnett**, author of *The Earth Below*, is a Professor at Melbourne University Law School with extensive academic publications in private law. **Craig Ensor**, a partner at a leading Sydney commercial law firm, has published numerous short stories, but *The Warming* is his first published novel.

The plotline of *The Earth Below*, which is also available as a DRM-free e-book, is far from original. Barnett probably should have immersed herself in the plethora of dystopian novels that cover underground post-apocalyptic communities in order to avoid plot repetition. In this context, Hugh Howey's 'Wool' trilogy comes to mind.

The Earth Below begins underground, where child-bearing is encouraged but relationships are allowed only for limited periods. Children are brought up by the community. Eighteen-year-old Marri, already having had three children, has been imprisoned for attempting to maintain a relationship beyond the allotted time. Marri exists primarily as a symbol to reflect issues of female

oppression, sexual freedom, the nature of parenthood, civil rights, and closed regimes.

Marri's attempt to escape to the surface with her best friend Felix will result in execution if they are caught. The plot meanders somewhat, above and below ground, before a conclusion that foreshadows a sequel.

The Warming is a far more accomplished novel than Barnett's, but, as with many mainstream novelists attempting SF futures, Craig Ensor's imagined world is there as a backdrop for the development of the relationships between his main characters.

The Warming is set some 200 years in the future. Teenager Finch Taylor and his father live on the New South Wales south coast. Australia's population has fallen dramatically, with many migrating southwards, especially to Tasmania, New Zealand, and Antarctica, because of daily temperatures of 50 degrees.

'The warming had a momentum which no amount of political change or technological advancement could stop. The solution was simple: to move. As we had done for thousands and thousands of years. Move from land to land. Southwards. Or northwards, for those on the other side of the equator. Two choices.' Australian capital cities have been overtaken by rising seas and consequent devastation. Canberra, no longer the national capital, has only a few thousand people, Lake Burley Griffin is waterless, and Parliament House has been destroyed, with only the flagpole left standing.

The novel revolves around the interaction of Finch with April and William Speare, an acclaimed pianist and composer, who live in a nearby beach house. Musical motifs are reflected in the movements of the text. Finch initially idolises and then falls in love with April. Their 'warming' relationship over the decades is recounted retrospectively by Finch, a relationship standing as a symbol of pragmatic hope in a world that humanity has failed.

Australian fantasy

QUEENS OF THE SEA

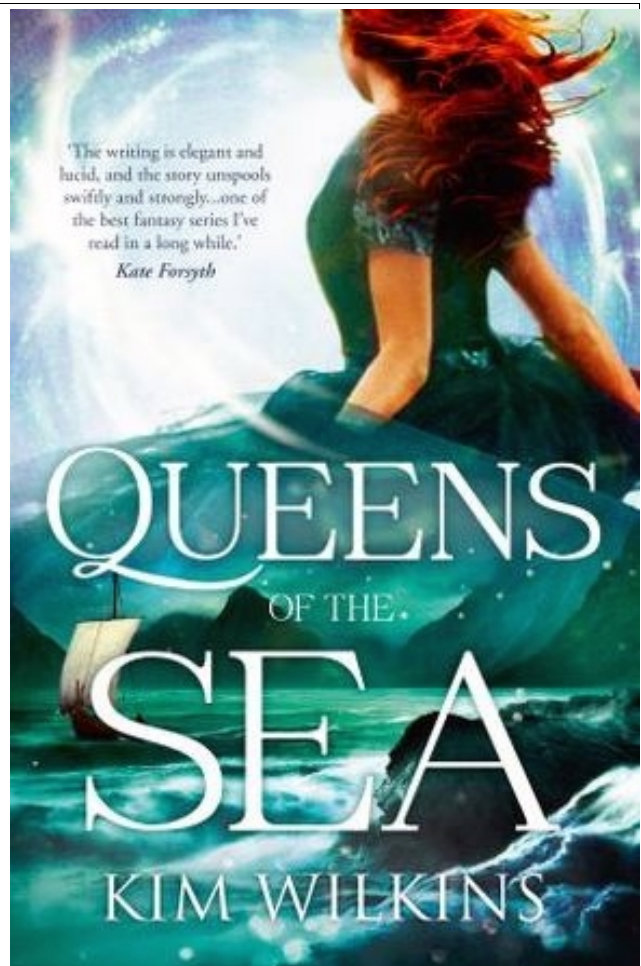
by Kim Wilkins (HQ Fiction; \$29.99)

Dr Kim Wilkins is an Associate Professor in Writing and Publishing at the University of Queensland. Under her pseudonym, Kimberley Freeman, she has published seven novels of epic women's fiction, and is particularly known for her award-listed fantasy novels.

Queens of the Sea is the final volume of her 'Blood and Gold' trilogy, set in an alternate Norse/Anglo-Saxon eighth-century England. Essentially a story about family, the trilogy follows the story of five daughters of a king.

In *Queens of the Sea*, the redoubtable, battle-hardened warrior queen Bluebell has lost her kingdom to Hakon, the Raven King, who is married to Bluebell's estranged sister, Willow, who is aided by the powers of the trimartyr god Maava.

Wilkins skilfully portrays the different personalities of the sisters, noting, 'How different they are, what their loyalties are, and how that in-fighting and love between sisters affects everything that happens'. Bluebell is a bit



like a female Jon Snow, surviving, however battered, from numerous battles. To survive, Bluebell and her sisters must draw on their courage, magic, giants, and their gods to seek victory over Hakon and Willow, but at what personal cost?

Australian young adult fiction

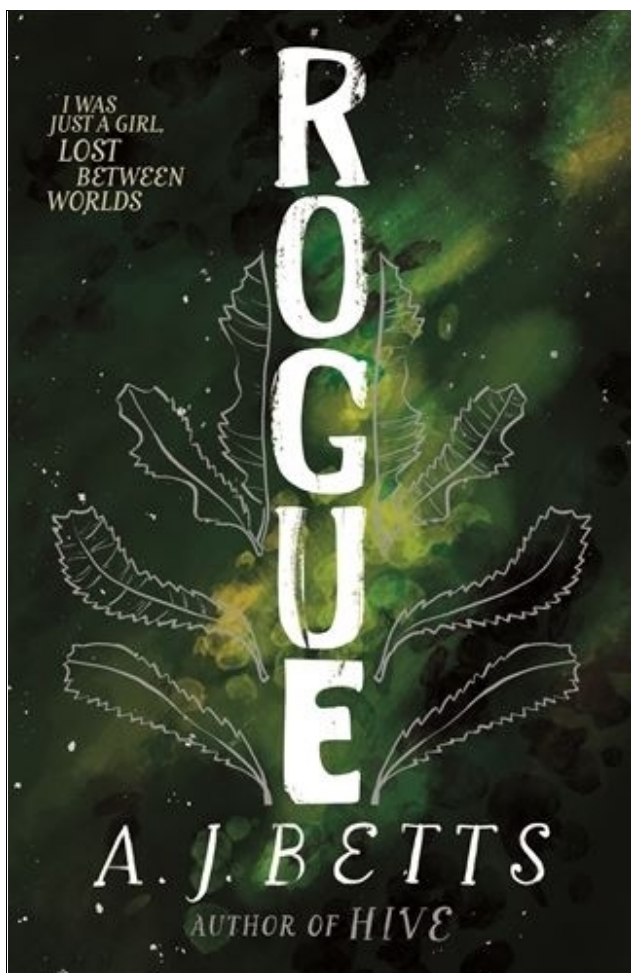
ROGUE

by A. J. Betts (Pan; \$16.99)

Multi-award-winning Australian YA author **A. J. Betts** completes her duology, 'The Vault', with *Rogue*. The first novel *Hive*, shortlisted for the 2019 Indie Book Awards and a notable book in the Children's Book Council of Australia awards, followed a 300-people community who never emerged from their seed vault, their refuge after an asteroid collision with Earth had precipitated a global crisis in 2020.

In *Rogue*, it's 2119 and Betts's main character, 15-year-old Hayley, has escaped to the surface from the vault, 'like a rogue bee who has left her hive and gone in search of another'. Hayley has escaped the detection by surveillance drones, but subsequently, after meeting up with Will, her friend from the vault, they are both captured and processed as refugees.

Tasmania, now called Terrafirma, is an island refugee prison. Here Betts alludes back to Tasmania's stark colonial period, as well as the current treatment of asylum seekers



on Manus Island and Nauru, a sentiment that is reinforced when Hayley reaches the Australian mainland.

Betts provides another absorbing YA narrative. The charismatic Hayley grows in responsibility as she seeks freedom and becomes a symbol of the rights of individuals to choose their own society.

British science fiction

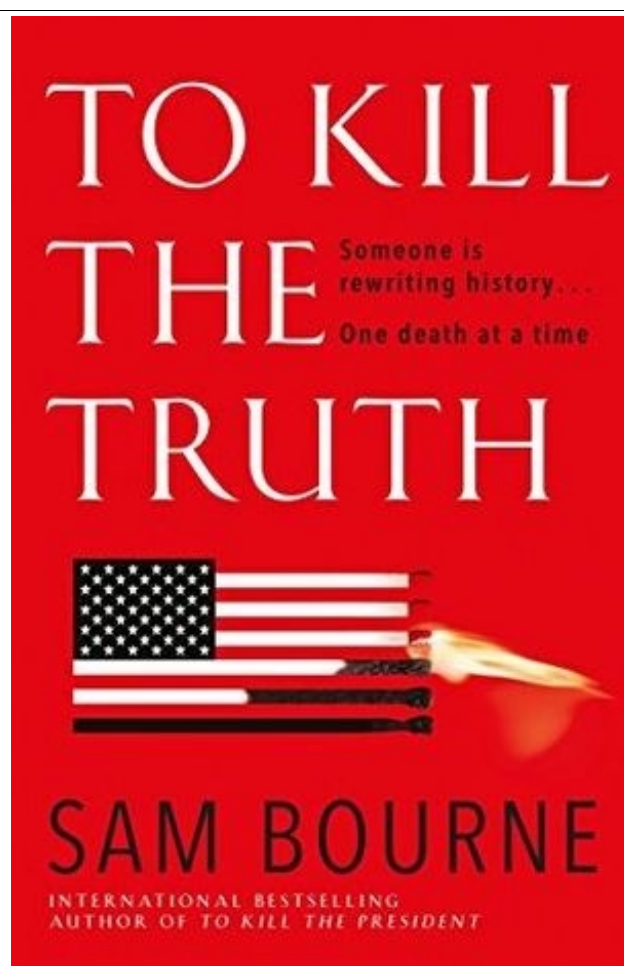
TO KILL THE TRUTH

by Sam Bourne (Quercus; \$29.99)

Sam Bourne, a.k.a. Guardian journalist Jonathan Freedland, follows up his bestselling novel *To Kill the President* with *To Kill the Truth*, once more featuring Bourne's often troubled political fixer, Maggie Costello.

Bourne has written another fast-paced narrative, but it does stretch the limits of reader credulity even in a fake news and post-truth global environment. Someone is trying to erase history, notably in relation to slavery and the Holocaust. This is to be achieved by killing key historians and, more particularly, by burning down the world's great libraries and their digital backups. As Maggie reflects, 'if no one can be certain about history', then 'history was whatever the powerful said it was'.

Contemporary settings in America do, however, provide a plausible fictional platform for alt-right motivations and the unwillingness to accept historical and

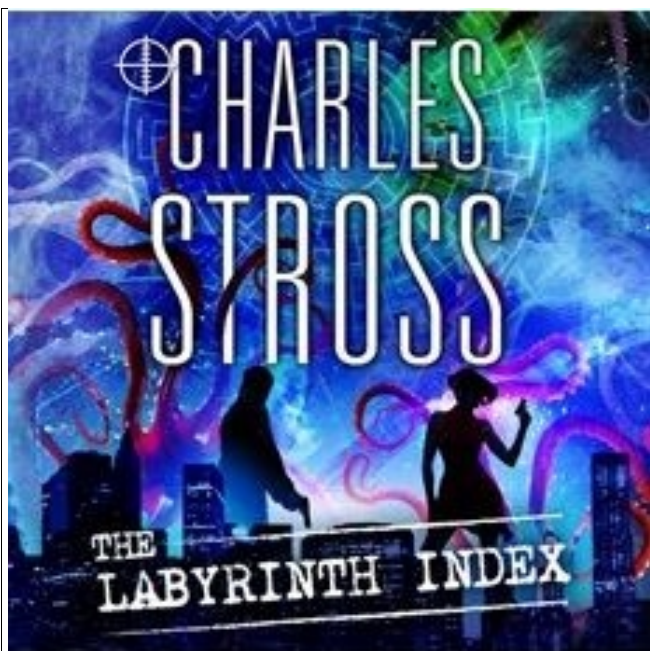


scientific truth. Bourne's Washington political framework echoes that of the Trump administration, while current totalitarian regimes elsewhere in the world seem to be moving to the concept that history can be changed or erased in a matter of keystrokes.

The proponents of the 'Bookburner Manifesto' begin by burning down the slavery collection of the University of Virginia Library. The destruction of major libraries continues apace, including the Bodleian, the British Library, the Chinese National Library, and the Russian State Library. It does seem incredible, even with the advanced technologies involved in the library destruction, that such sequential destructions could take place without the world's intelligence authorities having a clue as to how save the libraries foreshadowed for destruction on the Bookburner list. Amazon and Google are also compromised.

Maggie becomes involved through the Governor of Virginia, and plays a key role in uncovering the book-burners, but not without significant personal stress and danger. The targeting of her through fake web information sees her totally discredited before she takes matters into your own hands during a dramatic denouement at the Library of Congress.

Bourne reflects that an increasing reliance on digital records also has its dangers, and that books essentially constitute the permanent record of humanity. An underlying message would seem to be that an ignorance of history endangers both the present and the future.



THE LABYRINTH INDEX

by Charles Stross (Orbit; \$49.99)

The Labyrinth Index by Charles Stross, published in an attractive hardback, is the ninth in his 'Laundry Files' series. It is set some time after the events of the previous novel, *The Delirium Brief*.

Stross's novels have a background of Lovecraftian mythology and horror, ably blended with a mixture of satire, often documenting the nature of workplace relations and government bureaucracy.

While *The Labyrinth Index* could be read as a one-off,

it is probably fair to say that for new readers it would be better to start at the beginning of the series, which follows the activities of 'The Laundry', a British government agency fighting the occult with a mixture of mathematical magic and some strange characters of their own.

One such character is the vampire Mhari Murphy, who reports to a constitutionally elected Prime Minister, but who is also an Elder God. As Mhari writes, 'the denizen of number 10 is the avatar — the humanoid sock puppet — of an ancient and undying intelligent civilisation, who regards humanity much as we regard a hive of bees'. Not an ideal situation, but it's better than rebelling and finding that the only alternative is the destruction of the world.

Mhari, with a select group of Laundry agents and associates, is sent to the United States, where the President has literally been forgotten. The equivalent of the Laundry, 'the Nazgûl', has gone rogue and is attempting 'to bring about the Lovecraftian Singularity'. The bigger game lies beyond Earth and 'the worst hell human imagination can conceive'. It's now up to Mhari and her team to rescue the President and humanity.

Stross is an acquired taste, but, beyond the zany and fascinating plot lines are lots of cogent tangential issues, such as the relationship between the United States and Great Britain and contemporary issues such as Brexit.

FRANKISSSTEIN: A LOVE STORY

by Jeanette Winterson (Jonathan Cape; 352 pp.; \$29.99)

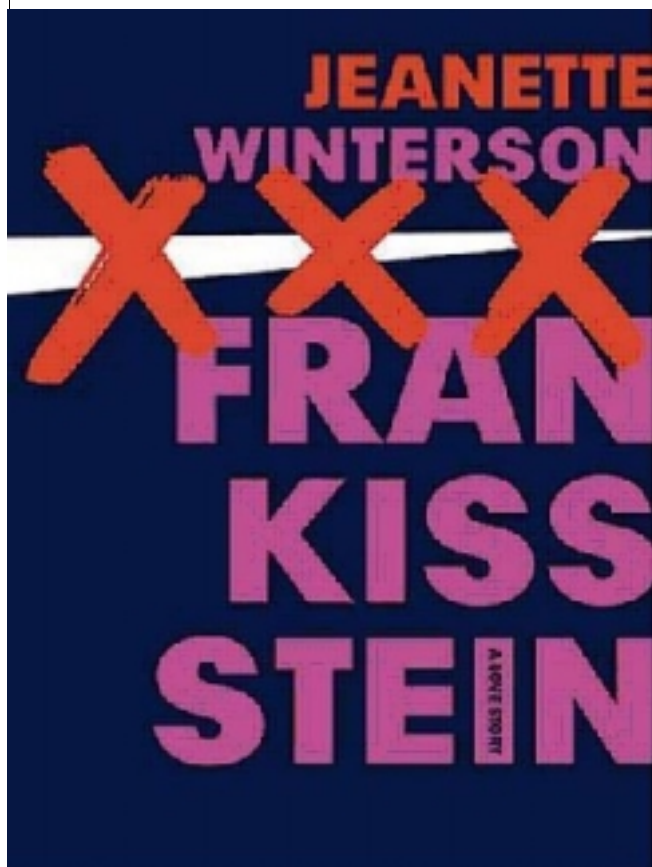
Novels from Jeanette Winterson are never dull. Her latest novel, *Frankissstein*, comes in two integrated parts. The first, in which Winterson, using Mary Shelley's voice, effectively relates Mary's back story and the creation of *Frankenstein*, following the famous 1816 Lake Geneva gathering with Mary's lover, Percy, Lord Byron, John Polidori, and Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont.

The second, and less successful part, is an exuberant over-the-top retelling of *Frankenstein*. Through an alternate past and present chapter framework, Winterson relates 'the quintessential story, which is how we relate to one another. Because of the hugeness of our lives and the forces that we can't manage and the things that happen to us whether we're good, whether we're bad'.

The modern version is told from the perspective of transgender medical surgeon Dr Ry (shortened from Mary) Shelley, who develops a relationship with celebrated AI brain specialist Professor Victor Stein. The reimagined leading characters include outrageous Welsh sexbot entrepreneur Rod Lord, echoing the Byron role, who is funding some of Victor's research, Polly D, a Vanity Fair journalist, and Claire, an evangelical Christian.

Winterson spends a lot of time documenting Rod's booming sexbot industry, allowing his voice to express her comments on contemporary society. Ron argues that with a sexbot behind every Catholic altar, there would be no need for priests to abuse orphans and choirboys. The AI sexbot's come in every colour, race, and size, including a 1970s feminist version called Germaine, but only 'rented by masochists and a few University professors'.

Despite the subtitle, *A Love Story*, there is not much



actual love about, although a form of love evolves after Ry begins an affair with Victor Stein. Like the sexbot descriptions, their relationship is decidedly unerotic, supplemented by the descriptions of Ry's physical transformations, including her much enhanced clitoris. *Frankissstein* could well be a leading contender for the 2019 British Bad Sex Book Award.

Winterson emphasises the blurring distinctions between male and female. Gender fluidity and roles are explored as well as an attempt to define what it is to be human, reflecting Mary Shelley's Victor 'who seeks victory over life and over death'. Winterson says she wanted to take readers into the 'wild world of AI and robotics, which is going to happen without most people even realising that their entire universe has changed forever'.

Victor Stein is secretly working, unbeknownst to his Manchester University employers, in an underground former nuclear bunker on experiments to 'upload consciousness to a substrate not made of meat'. Ry is appalled to see implanted hands scuttling on the bunker floor like tarantulas, but Victor responds: 'Race. faith. gender, sexuality, those things make me impatient, we need to move forward and faster. I want an end to it all.' In that context, Winterson provides a dramatic denouement in the underground labs.

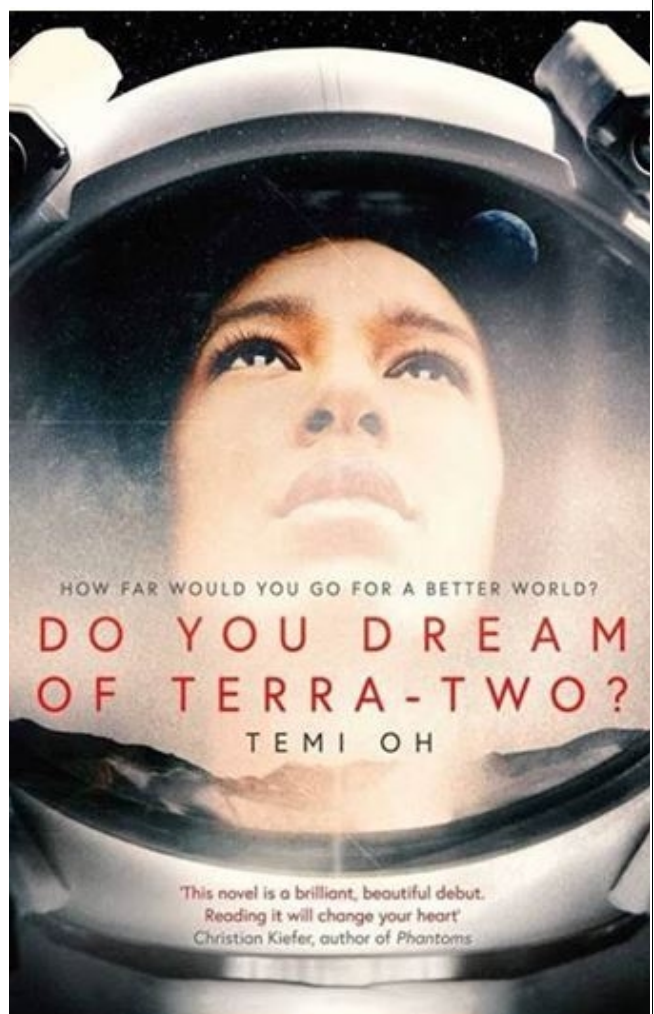
Like the 'monster' original, *Frankissstein* is a mixed body of parts. It's a heady, intoxicating mix, but one in which the narrative flow and coherence often lapses to accommodate the societal messages from Winterson. Victor, when accused of madness, responds what is sanity when we have 'Poverty, disease, global warming, terrorism, despotism, nuclear weapons, gross and equality, misogyny and hatred of the stranger'.

Winterson has said in an interview that she first read *Frankenstein* alone in a hut by the sea when she was 20. 'It frightened me and gave me courage. Frightened me because the vision was so bleak; humans seem unable to turn our ingenuity into lasting good. And hopeful because here was a young woman who really could write. And I wanted to be a young woman who could write'. Whatever the structural flaws of *Frankissstein*, Winterson can certainly write.

SUNFALL

by Jim Al-Khalili (Bantam; \$32.99)

Sunfall, the debut novel from Professor **Jim Al-Khalili**, British quantum physicist and TV science communicator, is set in 2041, when the Earth's weakened magnetic field is affected by coronal mass injections from the sun. Satellite communication failures cause havoc, including air crashes, turbulent storms increase, and the now omnipresent AI devices begin to falter. When high-energy protons increase radiation levels, the death rates soar into the millions, but global politicians do their best to play down the crisis. To make matters worse, an end of the world cult, the Purifiers, attempt, through murder and equipment destruction, to prevent the efforts of a group of international scientists to save the Earth. The scientists, Odin Project, becomes a race against time to avert Earth's destruction by reactivating the Earth's core using beams of dark matter. Al-Khalili's characterisation of the scientific team is not deep, but the plausible hard



science detail, which will attract the fans of Stephen Baxter and Gregory Benford, combined with a strong plot, ensures *Sunfall* is an enthralling and imaginative read.

DO YOU DREAM OF TERRA-TWO

by Temi Oh (Simon & Schuster; \$24.99)

British author **Temi Oh** has a degree in neuroscience and a Masters in Creative Writing, which she combines to great effect in her debut novel *Do You Dream Of Terra-Two*. In an alternative recent past, a British spaceship crew is on its way, as are spaceships from other nations, to Terra-Two, an earthlike planet beyond the solar system. The flight crew, who know that they will never see the Earth again, comprises four seasoned astronauts and six teenagers, the latter selected because the flight travel time will be 23 years and the astronauts will be old men by planet fall. The seasoned astronauts are essentially side players in the narrative, as the teenager's story is followed both before and during the flight. Even with their years of training at the Dalton Space Academy, the teenagers, with different skill sets and personalities, struggle to adapt both individually and collectively. Their physical and mental challenges grow even larger when technical malfunctions occur before they even leave the solar system and the mission seems doomed. *Do You Dream of Terra -Two* is not a spaceship saga per se, but rather an empathetic novel which constructs a framework for the examination of character and

the passage to maturity and adulthood.

THE SECOND SLEEP

by Robert Harris (Hutchinson; \$32.99)

Robert Harris is the author of twelve best-selling novels, including the 'Cicero Trilogy', *Fatherland*, *Enigma*, *The Ghost*, *The Fear*, *An Officer and a Spy*, and most recently *Munich*. His novels are always extremely readable, but also provide underlying reflections on contemporary issues. His latest novel, *The Second Sleep*, fits the pattern.

The Second Sleep, which has already been commissioned for filming, begins with the words, 'Late on the afternoon of Tuesday the ninth of April in the Year of Our Risen Lord 1468, a solitary traveller was to be observed picking his way on horseback across the wild moorland of that ancient region of south-western England known since Saxon times as Wessex.'

The solitary traveller is a young priest Christopher Fairfax, riding to a remote Exmoor village, where he is to officiate at the funeral of Father Lacy, the long-serving local priest. Fairfax doesn't believe he will be long in the village and expects to return soon to his Exeter Cathedral chapterhouse.

However, Lacy's death in a fall at the Devil's Chair, a rock-strewn valley, may not have been an accident. And was his death connected to the fact that Lacy has been collecting forbidden books and mysterious artefacts? These include, in a world in which plastic cannot be made, 'plastic cutlery, plastic bottles of all shapes and varieties' and an artefact that Fairfax finds, 'smaller than his hand, black and smooth and shiny, fashioned out of plastic and glass ... On the back ... an apple with a bite taken out of it'. What is an Apple phone doing in a mediaeval world with no technology?

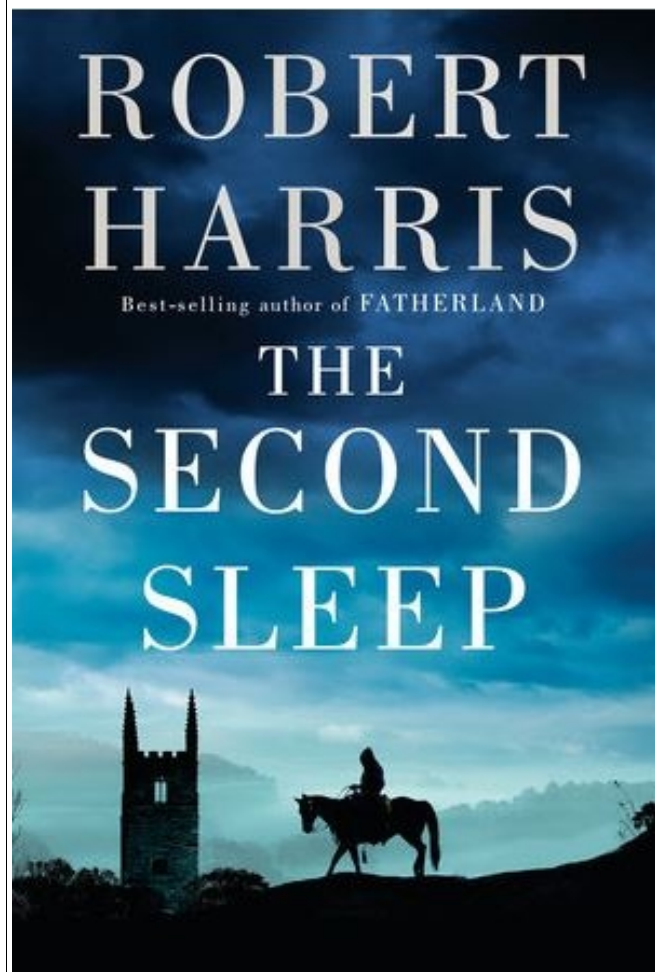
Harris has said an interview, 'I like playing around with time — and different universes' and that is certainly the case here.

Fairfax finds in Lacy's library a 2022 document from a British academic group headed by Nobel Prize winner, Peter Morganstern foreshadowing steps needed 'to prepare for a systemic collapse of technical civilisation' and outlining 'six possible catastrophic scenarios'. Morganstern concludes, 'all civilisations consider themselves invulnerable; history warns us that none is.'

Civilisation clearly collapsed soon after 2022. In a world now strictly controlled by the Church, pursuit of science is seen as 'the path to hell'. Here are implicit cross-references to the current denial of scientific evidence in political debates.

Fairfax's investigation into Lacy's evidence raises dangers for himself and his newly found associate Lady Durston, particularly when the key to the past is to be found at the Devil's Chair. But what will be the price for Fairfax and his associates from uncovering the truth?

Harris's conclusion, after such intriguing scene setting, is somewhat disappointing. Nonetheless, *The Second Sleep* is a riveting read and one hopes that it will encourage mainstream readers to find the numerous excellent SF dystopian futures, which also reflect on major issues confronting the contemporary world.



British fantasy

THE ILLUSTRATED GOOD OMENS

by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman; illustrated by Paul Kidby (Gollancz; \$65)

Good Omens, first published in 1990, is a cult classic. It has sold over five million copies and is now an Amazon/BBC television series scripted by Neil Gaiman, who wrote in 2006 that ‘the book is a funny novel about the end of the world and how are all going to die’. But it is not just a great story. It is a book of Swiftian satire infused with an ultimate belief in the essential decency of human nature.

Terry Pratchett, who died in 2015, and Neil Gaiman recount in epilogues to the book that they first met in a London Chinese restaurant in February 1985, when Gaiman, a promising graphic book writer, was interviewing Pratchett on the first book of Pratchett’s now famous Discworld series.

Obviously they struck a creative chord, because in 1987 Gaiman sent Pratchett the first 5000 words of ‘William the Antichrist’, which was inspired by Pratchett’s love of Richmal Crompton’s famous ‘Just William’ series. Pratchett built on that story for a published collaboration, largely conducted through floppy disks, which incorporates Pratchett’s signature footnotes and Gaiman’s mythological allusions, set within a decidedly British humorous framework.

The new hardback edition comes with 12 full-colour

illustrations of the characters in the TV series and five black-and-white line drawings by long time Pratchett illustrator Paul Kidby. Michael Sheen is the prudish, antiquarian bookseller angel Aziraphale, and David Tennant the cynical, yet softhearted, Bentley-driving demon Crowley.

Crowley was the serpent responsible for the fall of Adam and Eve, but his original conflict with Aziraphale over the fate of Earth has mutated into a comfortable status quo, since ‘our respective head offices don’t actually care how things get done’. It comes as a considerable shock when they learn that the Antichrist has arrived on Earth.

A Satanic-worshipping nurse, Sister Mary Loquacious, has, however mixed up babies, and the baby Antichrist is delivered to the wrong family. Adam Young, the intended destroyer of Earth, is thus raised as a normal child in the idyllic English village of Lower Tadfield, a setting that enables Pratchett to riff on the childhood gangs of ‘Just William’.

Matters come to a head when Adam is 11. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have been reincarnated as bikers with Pollution replacing Pestilence, because penicillin has largely reduced pestilence. Crowley and Aziraphale must combine to prevent Armageddon, but in the end it’s up to Adam.

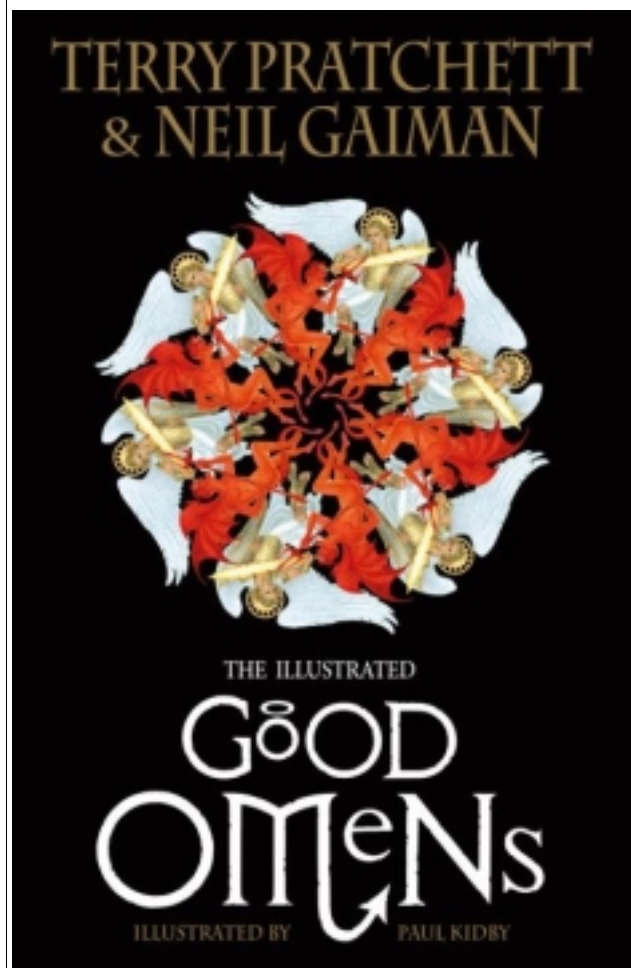
The satire and humour of *Good Omens* is as vibrant as ever, as indeed are issues like climate change. Adam says, ‘Everyone’s goin’ around usin’ up all the whales and coal and oil and ozone and rainforests and that, and there’ll be none left for us. We should be goin’ to Mars and stuff, instead of sittin’ around in the dark and wet with the air spillin’ away’.

Gaiman has said about the politics of the novel, ‘the weirdest thing is how a novel that was written literally 30 years ago feels really a lot more apt now than it did then ... The lovely thing about it being angels and demons is that you don’t actually have to be talking about the Tories or the Republicans or Labour or the Democrats or any specific political party’.

Martin Sheen has said in an interview, ‘People actually think that Trump is the coming of the Christ. Or the Antichrist. People are actually talking about this in fairly mainstream circles. That gives *Good Omens* a different context to when the book came out. You’ve got these two main characters who are very much in their own echo chambers — or should be. Yet the action of the piece requires them to break out of those bubbles.’

Some of the technology has dated, but the cassette music of Queen, which constantly plays in Crowley’s Bentley, M25 tailbacks, and references to James Bond are clearly still current. Pratchett’s footnotes range over a variety of topics including ‘Burger Lords’, childhood gangs, decimal currencies, and collecting of first editions.

My signed copy of the first edition of *Good Omens*, with annotations by Pratchett and Gaiman, now resides in the Rare Book Collection of the University of Sydney Library. It was interesting, in their separate Meet the Author events in Canberra, how they jousting over their roles in the writing of *Good Omens*. In the Foreword, Gaiman recounts bizarre happenings with fans at book signings, including one fan who had his arm signed and returned



half an hour later to show the inflamed ink signature tattooed by a nearby parlour.

Fans will relish what Gaiman has called a 'shiny new copy' of *Good Omens*, especially as Gaiman notes in the Foreword, 'if your previous five copies have been stolen by friends, struck by lightning or eaten by giant termites in Sumatra'.

THE OCTOBER MAN

by Ben Aaronovitch (Gollancz; \$26.99)

Ben Aaronovitch has assembled a significant global following and sales of over two million copies with his 'Rivers of London' series, which blends supernatural crime and dry British humour.

The October Man, a novella, sees Aaronovitch moving locale from London to Trier in Germany. Tobias Winter, a German police officer trained in magic, works for the Abteilung KDA, the 'Complex and Diffuse Matters' Department, which is Germany's version of London police supernatural crime unit, The Folly.

Winters is one of the few officially sanctioned police magic experts in Germany. He says he 'ended up learning magic because you can't trust the British to keep an agreement over the long term'. Perhaps a reference to the Brexit breakdown! The way magic has evolved is different in Germany, in part because of an occult battle with the Nazis.

Winter turns out to be a blander version of Aaronovitch's main character in the Rivers series, Peter Grant. Winter is aware of Grant, though not vice versa, which perhaps foreshadows Grant's interaction with him in a future book.

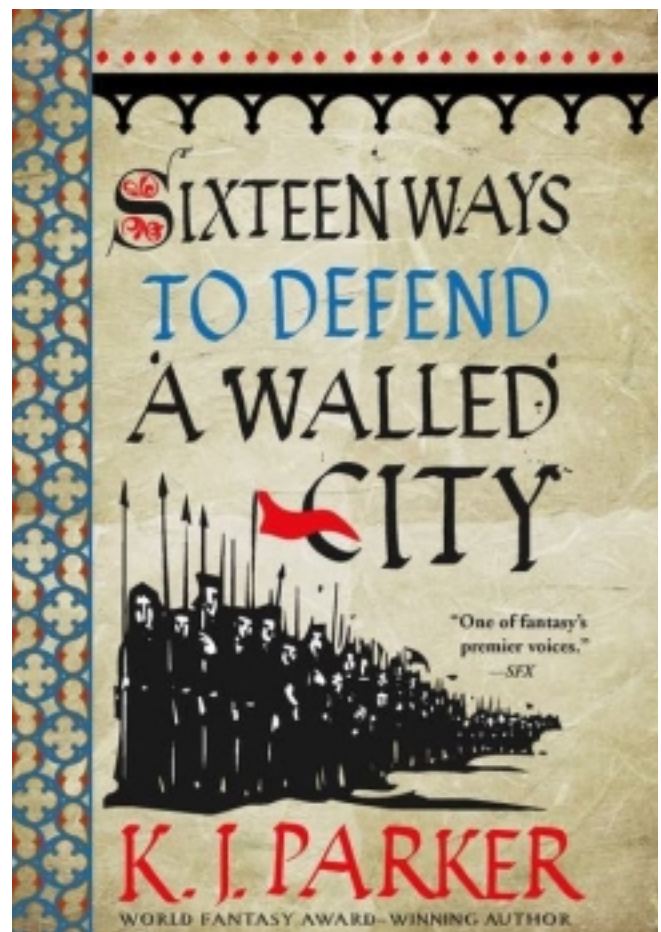
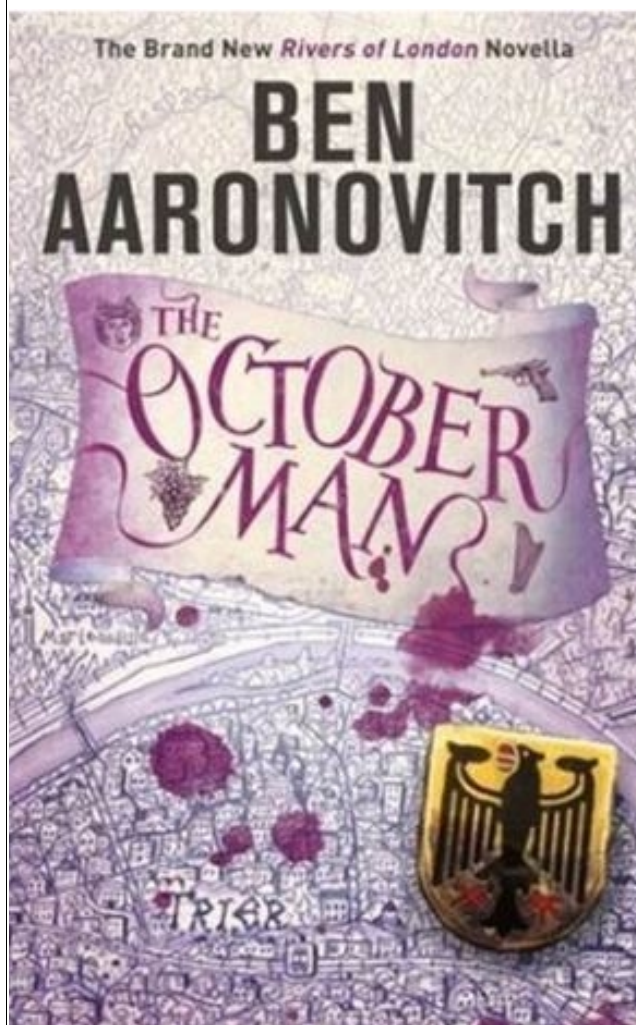
Winter is teamed with local detective and wine specialist Vanessa Sommer (it is just as well we don't get Herr Spring and Frau Autumn) to investigate a 'suspicious death with unusual biological characteristics'. The dead body is covered in grey fur, which turns out to be fungal noble rot, used in wine production around Trier. The botrytis fungus had spread to the lungs and stopped the victim breathing.

A tattoo of the face of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, on the murder victim's upper arm leads Winter and Sommer to a local wine group and the possibility that the murder may involve an evil revenant.

The investigations leads Winter to summon Kelly, goddess of the River Kyll, by dropping vintage bottles of wine into the river. When they meet, she brings along a precocious five-year-old French-speaking girl, Morgane, who is the new goddess of the Mosel River. Their interactions constitute one of the major highlights of the book.

There is, however, less supernatural verve than usual in *The October Man*. It's more of a whodunnit with amusing side reflections on German bureaucracy and local wine production and customs.

Aaronovitch quotes Goethe 'that life is too short to drink bad wine'. *The October Man* novella will probably be too short textually for Aaronovitch enthusiasts, but it certainly leaves a rich and satisfying aftertaste.



SIXTEEN WAYS TO DEFEND A WALLED CITY

by K. J. Parker (Orbit; \$22.99)

K. J. Parker, a.k.a. British satiric author Tom Holt, tells the story of Orhan, colonel of an unnamed city's Corps of Engineers, who try to devise *Sixteen Ways to Defend a Walled City*. The Byzantine-like city's ruling noblemen have fled from an invading army of 100,000, leaving Orhan and his team to defend the city.

Orhan is a former slave and a 'milkface', the wrong colour in a city in which the elite Robur are blue skinned. Given his low social status, Orhan wonders why he's defending a regime that has enslaved him. Matters become more difficult when he finds out the leader of the invading forces is his childhood friend.

Orhan is a reluctant hero and an unreliable narrator. The book is told from Orhan's archival account, which leaves the war unresolved. 'This story is ending abruptly. So is my life, so you'll have to forgive me if I can't tie up the loose ends ... say a proper goodbye to the men and women whose adventures you've been following.'

Orhan and thus Holt are not afraid to break the rules as they tease and delight in a darkly humorous novel.

US science fiction

HOW LONG 'TIL BLACK FUTURE MONTH?

by N. K. Jemisin (Orbit; \$22.99)



Three-time Hugo Award winner with her 'Broken Earth' trilogy, **N. K. Jemisin** brings together her first collection of short fiction in *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* The 22 stories, written between 2004 and 2017, several of which are published for the first time, straddle SF, fantasy, and cyberpunk.

Jemisin says in the Introduction that the short stories encompass her career as a writer in which she developed her ideas on race and identity. She writes, 'I notice that many of my stories are about accepting differences and change'.

She has said an interview: 'As a black writer I have a responsibility to try and create more space for black characters. I don't always do so. I also want to retain the space to write whatever I want to write because there is always the danger of black authors being forced to write black characters and that literally has happened in some genres.'

Her Hugo-nominated short story 'The City, Born Great' sees a young gay, black man become the reluctant avatar of New York City's rebirth against ancient enemies. Here, Jemisin is talking about the power of the downtrodden to stand up for what they believe in, especially in the face of racial and political intolerance.

'The Evaluators' exposes an alien presence through transcripts and messages from a first-contact mission, while 'Valedictorian', a post-apocalyptic story, sees a clever young girl ponder her graduation choices in a society isolated, but also manipulated, behind the 'Firewall'.

Showing her ability in the fantasy genre, 'The Storyteller's Replacement' follows a king who eats a dragon's heart to restore his virility, only to receive an ultimate comeuppance from his 'dragon' daughters. The story concludes with the timely words, 'So many of our leaders are weak, and choose to take power from others rather than build strength in themselves.'

In 'Red Dirt Witch', an emotionally satisfying story, Emmaline, a single poor black woman in Alabama faces difficult choices to save her children and grandchildren from the evil 'White Lady'.

Jemisin notes in her Introduction that in 2002 she thought she couldn't write short stories. *How Long 'til Black Future* definitively proves she can, and that she is one of the most interesting and stimulating figures in contemporary SF: 'Now I am bolder, and angrier, and more joyful'.

ROSEWATER

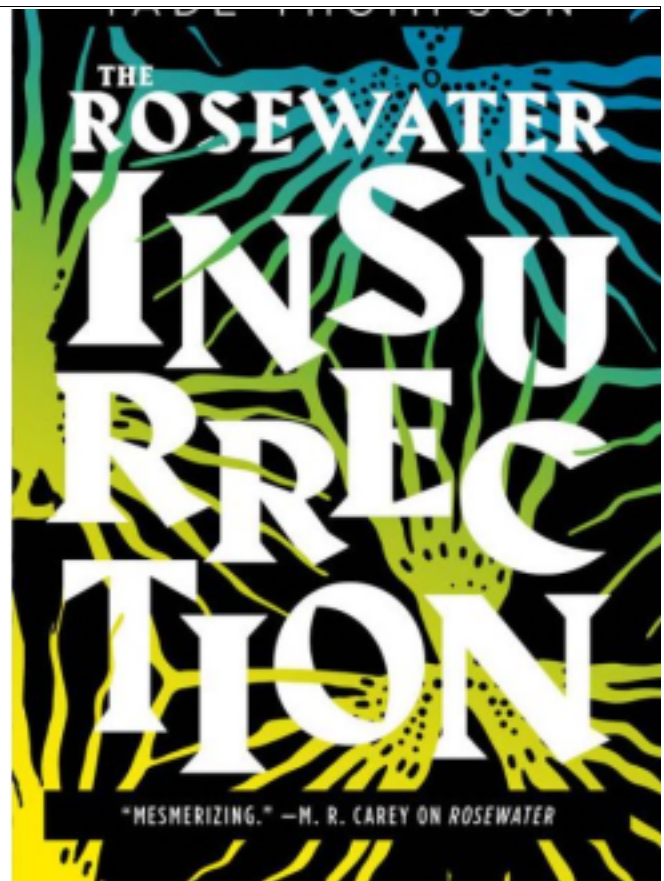
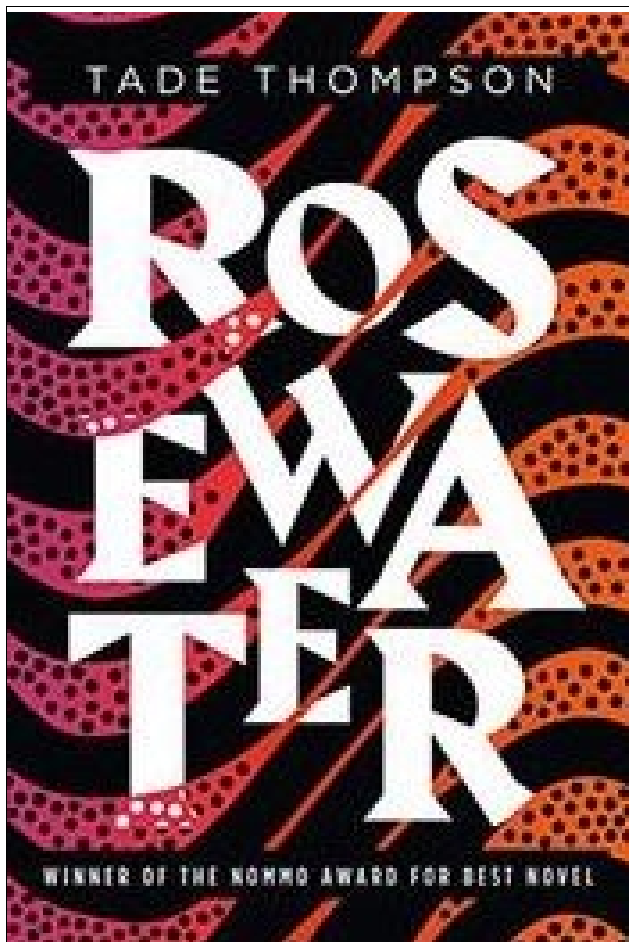
by Tade Thompson (Orbit; \$19.99)

THE ROSEWATER INSURRECTION

by Tade Thompson (Orbit; \$19.99)

Tade Thompson's debut novel, *Rosewater*, was first published in the US in 2016 by a small press. It was the first of a trilogy that is now getting deserved wider global distribution with Orbit. To date two volumes have been published in the 'Wormwood' trilogy, which may ultimately have biblical Revelation implications.

The setting is Nigeria 2066, after aliens have arrived and changed the world, a process that has rendered



America 'dark' and out of contact for four decades. The aliens don't interact with humanity, but they have created a telepathic 'xenosphere', which can be accessed by a small group of human 'sensitives'.

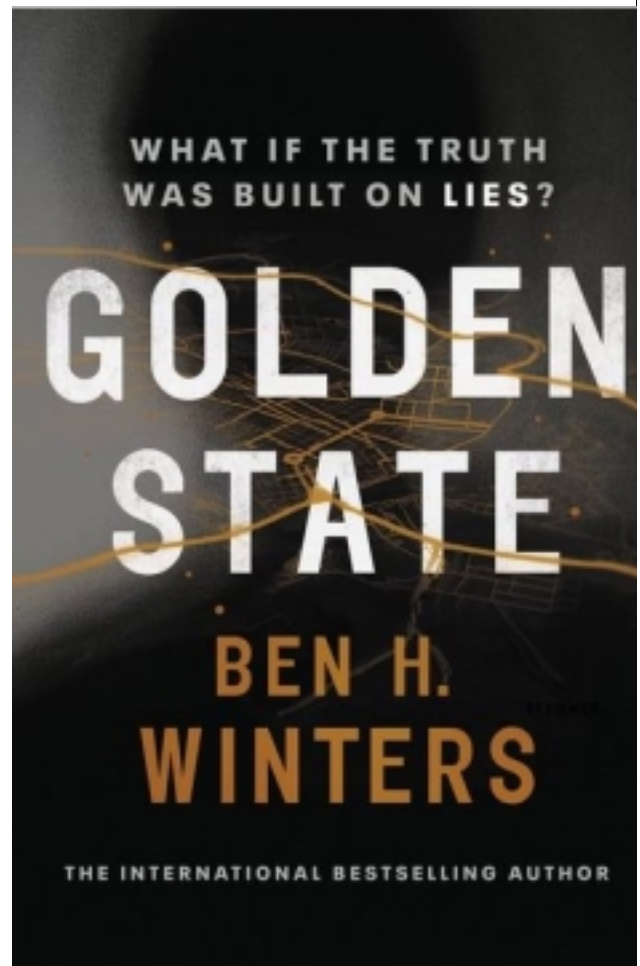
This alien biodome, Rosewater, is surrounded by a human settlement, 'Utopicity'. Once a year, the dome opens and the sick can sometimes be cured or, at worst, find themselves physically rearranged. Even the dead can be raised, but only as mindless zombies.

The main character Kaaro is a reluctant government S45 intelligence officer. Kaaro, who has a criminal record, is a 'sensitive'. The trouble is that he and other sensitives are becoming sick and some dying, and not by natural causes.

Thomson's narrative traverses three decades to provide a back story of Kaaro and his world, where 'China and Russia are squabbling over who will be the new United States'. Kaaro's investigation will impinge on the future of humanity and what the aliens really want in terms of assimilation.

The Rosewater Insurrection sees Rosewater mayor Jack Jacques declaring independence, which brings him into conflict with the Nigerian government, envious of the city's resources. Thomson here echoes the realpolitik of the economics of postcolonial Africa. Kaaro has only a small role in the second book, but an important one, in the search to find a human-alien hybrid woman who may be the key for the future of humanity.

The second book continues Thompson's significant



noir edge and non-linear narrative — an interesting and challenging examination of alien integration and human metamorphosis.

GOLDEN STATE

by Ben H. Winters (Century; \$32.99)

Edgar Award-winning author **Ben H. Winters** imagines an alternate dystopian California, in which every citizen has to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. Winters says he began writing *Golden State* after ‘the infamous incident of Trump’s inauguration crowd-size debate’ and the relationship of fake news to the truth. Residents of the Golden State have to start conversations with absolute truths, such as ‘2 plus 2 is 4’, as even the smallest lie can result in imprisonment by the surveillance security police state. The recording of adult personal activities echoes contemporary Chinese personal digital surveillance. The main character is grizzled truth detective Laszlo, whose role is to ‘detect and destroy the stuff of lies’. He is partnered in solving a murder with Aysa, a young rookie female detective. Their finding of a forbidden novel in a world where fiction can’t exist will ultimately lead them to expose the true reality of the Golden State. Winters effectively blends SF prediction with crime noir in a novel with echoes of Ray Bradbury and George Orwell.

THE DREAMERS

by Karen Thompson Walker (Scribner; \$29.99)

Karen Thompson Walker’s second novel, *The Dreamers*,

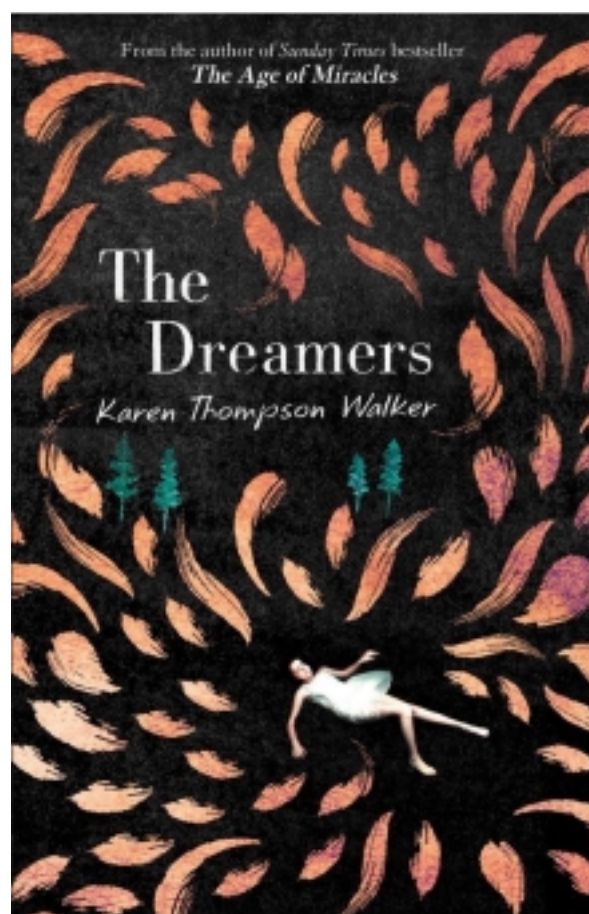
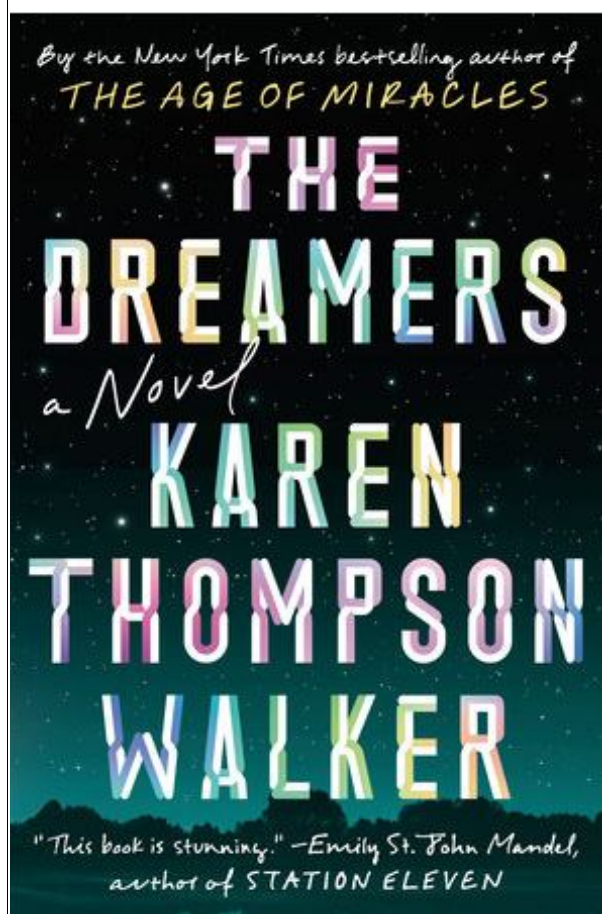
follows the impact of a mysterious viral illness that has an impact on Santa Lora, a small Californian college town. The virus either triggers death or long-term sleep for those affected. The National Guard cordons off the town as baffled medical authorities try to understand the nature of the virus. Eventually most of those infected wake up after some years, having experienced alternative lives. Have they been dreaming of the past or the future? One of the last to wake up, college student Rebecca gives birth to a daughter, but she can only all remember her sleeping years, where she had a son, is now old and her son is middle-aged. Walker ponders: do we live a separate life when we are asleep? Walker is here exploring the nature of sleep and dreams and what is reality, within the framework of the emotional and psychological responses to the crisis. *The Dreamers* is itself somewhat dreamlike in its pace, and ends too abruptly to be fully effective.

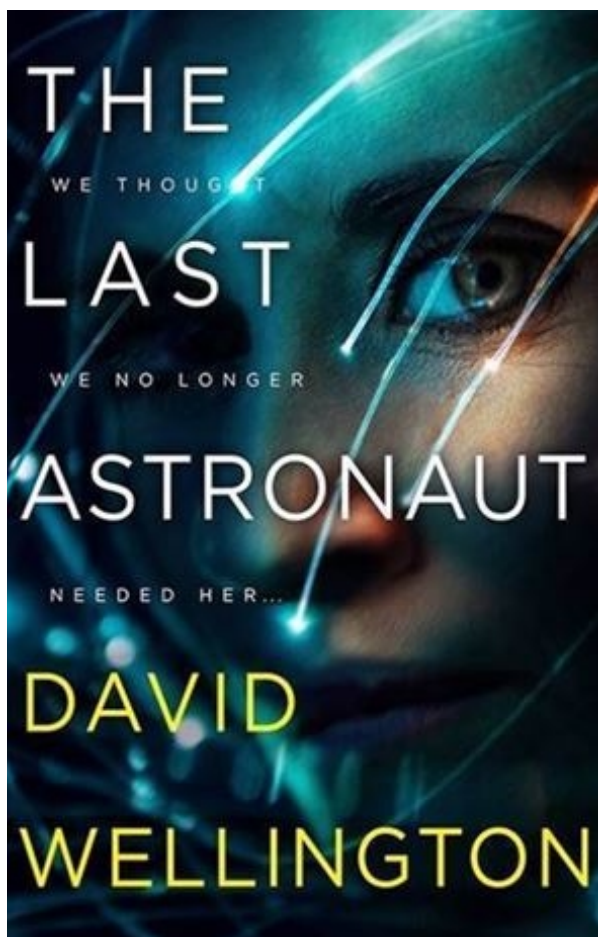
THE LAST ASTRONAUT

by David Wellington (Orbit; \$22.99)

Alien contact is a constant theme in SF novels, with novels by Arthur C. Clarke immediately springing to mind. **David Wellington’s** alien encounter is told through the mechanism of a retrospective 2057 publication, which follows the main participants investigating a huge alien object, named 21/ 2044 D1, heading directly for Earth.

Former NASA Cmdr. Sally Jansen is in retirement, scarred by having to abort humanity’s first crewed mission to Mars in 2034. This failure, and a loss of life, led to the consequent closedown of the NASA space pro-





gram. However, with a consequent lack of orbital experience in NASA, Jansen is recalled to lead a hastily assembled mission to Object 21.

NASA is, however, beaten to 21 by a ruthless commercial Singaporean space group, whose members have disappeared inside 21 before Jensen's team arrive. When Jansen's small team enters 21, they find a USB stick, which, inter alia, tells them of dangers encountered by the Singapore team and a warning to turn back.

Wellington racks up the tension — Jansen knows that if they don't find make contact directly with the decidedly alien life form, the American military will attempt to destroy the artefact.

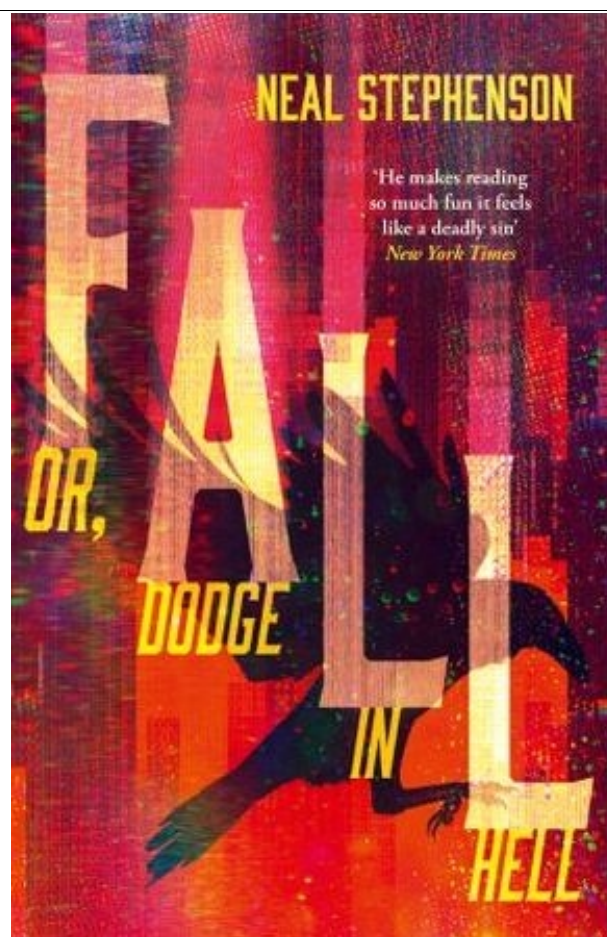
The Last Astronaut is a gripping novel, with impressive scientific biological underpinnings, but it needed editorial pruning, as the sense of initial wonder turns to overlong horror before a satisfying conclusion.

FALL OR, DODGE IN HELL

by Neal Stephenson (HarperCollins; \$32.99)

Cult American SF author Neal Stephenson rarely writes a short novel these days. *Fall* logs in at nearly 900 pages. Multibillionaire game developer Richard 'Dodge' Forthrust has arranged that, on his death, his brain will be scanned and uploaded into the Cloud until it can be reactivated. When this ultimately occurs, Dodge digitally enters the Bitworld, which can be construed as either heaven or hell.

In this context, *Fall* is a digital reinterpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, as Dodge reinvents himself in the



afterlife as an omnipotent God, Egdod, with an associated Pantheon. The other main component of the novel, which takes place between Dodge's death and his digital re-emergence, is a severe indictment of a post-truth America.

Dodge's digital world falls apart when Elmo 'El' Shepherd, a cryogenic billionaire, uploads new digital souls, including himself, into Egdod's cosmological universe. Egdod is eased out, becoming a version of Milton's Satan.

Unfortunately, Dodge is not a very compelling character, in life or death, which, coupled with Stephenson's weak ending, lets down these imaginative wanderings through AI and the nature of human consciousness.

EXHALATION

by Ted Chiang (Picador; \$29.99)

Ted Chiang is probably best known for his alien encounter/time travel, 'Story of Your Life', which was the basis of the 2016 Oscar-winning film *Arrival*. Now, in his second short story collection *Exhalation*, Chiang again stretches the SF boundaries with seven award-winning reprinted stories and two stories that are original to the collection.

The first story, 'The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate', mixes *The Arabian Nights* with time travel in a mediaeval Baghdad, where an alchemical shopkeeper offers time-restricted travel via tiny wormholes. Travelers cannot, however, change the future as their pasts and futures intermingle. Chiang is saying, as he does in other

EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION EXHALATION TED CHIANG

'Chiang makes us experience each story with immediacy and calm passion' China Mobile

stories, such as 'What's Expected of Us', that there is no such thing as free will.

In the title story, 'Exhalation', inspired by books by Philip K. Dick and Roger Penrose (as Chiang notes in an Afterword), Chiang documents the destruction of an advanced machine civilisation, through a 'gradual exhalation' that has implications for future universe explorers. Chiang's nine stories always challenge the reader, as they explore big picture issues such as the Fermi paradox and what it means to be human in a vast universe.

THE HEAVENS

by Sandra Newman (Granta; \$29.99)

The Heavens, Sandra Newman's stunning fourth novel, begins in New York in late 2000 where Kate, a Hungarian-Turkish-Persian artist, and Ben, a Bengali-Jewish PhD student, meet at a party and begin a relationship that blossoms into love.

It's initially a world in which President Chen, a woman and climate change activist, has been elected in the United States and peace treaties have been signed in the Middle East. It was 'the first year with no war at all, when you opened up the newspaper like opening a gift'.

But problems arise when Kate's dreams take her to a slightly alternate Elizabethan England in 1593, where she is Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady', Emilia Bassano Lanier, and mistress of a nobleman. Newman's linguistic richness expertly renders Kate's American and Elizabethan worlds.

The Will Shakespeare is in this world a minor playwright who dies in 1593, as does Emilia. But what if Kate's arrival means he lives and becomes 'our' Shakespeare, and the current world changes as Kate fears?

Emilia/Kate both have visions of a global disaster,



'the broken planet venting its innards in smoke ... A burnt dead world'. Kate believes she is 'the key to the salvation of the world', while Emilia/Kate wants to be 'a candle in the night, a bright seed of heaven'. Are Kate's dreams real and, if so, are they changing reality? Does the individual become universal? One version of New York is only months away from 9/11.

Is Kate mentally unstable or is the fabric of our universe collapsing? Kate knows that 'the dream was just what had happened to her. It was one of those things where the best you could do was to hide it from other people.' Ben increasingly worries about her mental state. Their relationship drifts apart as Kate is referred for psychiatric assessment.

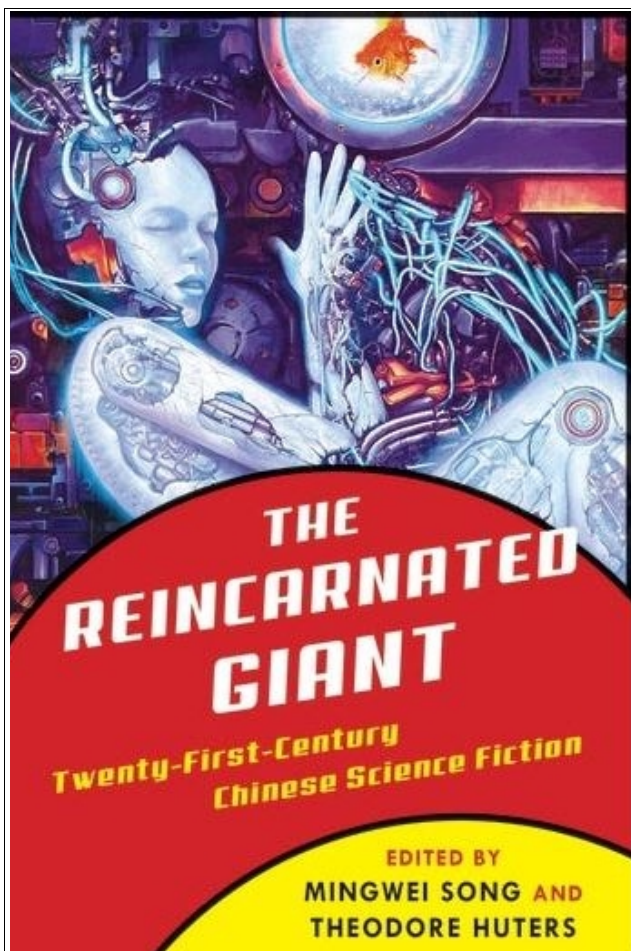
Ultimately, uncertainty remains, as Kate says to Ben, 'I think we could be happy, but there isn't any way to save this world.' In an interview, Newman has spoken of her desire 'to create a world where we behave toward others as we would have them behave towards us'.

There are nods to Ursula Le Guin's 1971 novel *The Lathe of Heaven*, but Newman is decidedly her own voice. In an almost existential conclusion, Newman reflects on the need simply to make the best of life as it is with all its faults.

Chinese science fiction

THE REINCARNATED GIANT: AN ANTHOLOGY OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION

edited by Mingwei Song and Theodore Hutners
(Columbia University Press; \$69; available from Footprint Books)



Chinese science fiction is booming, led by Hugo Award winner Liu Cixin with his trilogy 'The Three-Body Problem'. In English translations of his works, his name is given in the form Cixin Liu.

Good translators are nearly as important as the original authors. Eighteen translators feature in *The Reincarnated Giant*, which brings together an extensive and welcome compilation of Chinese authors, ranging from the established names such as Han Song and Wang Jinkang to perhaps less familiar names such as Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia, and Bao Shu.

The book is divided into three parts: 'Other Realities', 'Other Us', and 'Other Futures'. Wellesley College's Professor **Mingwei Song**, co-editor with UCLA professor Emeritus **Theodore Hutners**, provides a comprehensive introduction to the 15 stories, placing them within historical, political, and literary frameworks.

The stories from the authors from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong range widely from space opera to cyberpunk, utopias to dystopias, and virtual reality to the posthuman experience. Buried within the stories are often veiled critiques of China's current political framework and the obsession with national development — the dark side of the Chinese dream.

Han Song's 'Regenerated Bricks', the first story in the volume, describes bricks which 'were a product of three things: bodies, rubble, and wheat stocks' after a devastating earthquake in rural China. This brick technique expands rapidly from China even into outer space, but always there are the implications of the dead inhabiting

the constructs of the living.

Wang Jinkang's 'The Reincarnated Giant' follows a multi-millionaire who extends his life and identity by transferring his brain into a foetus, which results in a body that grows out of all proportion and can finally only live in the ocean, which becomes increasingly polluted, near Norfolk Island. This is a far from subtle criticism of the Chinese craving for unlimited development and the lust for power and wealth, which can have disastrous consequences, not least environmental.

Han Song's 'The Passengers and the Creator' sees passengers endlessly trapped on board a Boeing Jumbo jet travelling through perpetual darkness, with rigid hierarchical class divisions imposed between the passenger sections. Sex slavery and cannibalism are rife before a revolution breaks out. This story can be clearly interpreted as a criticism of the closed universe of the Chinese state.

Zhao Haihong's '1923: A Fantasy' reflects back via an 'aqua dream machine' to Shanghai in the 1920s and a female revolutionary, in a story that reflects on gender issues and revolution — saying that nothing is certain in recalling the memory bubbles of history.

The 15 stories represent just a slice of China's SF output, but it's an engrossing and stimulating window. SF often reflects concerns of the contemporary world. Chinese writers extrapolate their present into futures in *The Reincarnated Giant*, which may be ours if the global future is increasingly dominated by China.

Global fantasy

PAN'S LABYRINTH

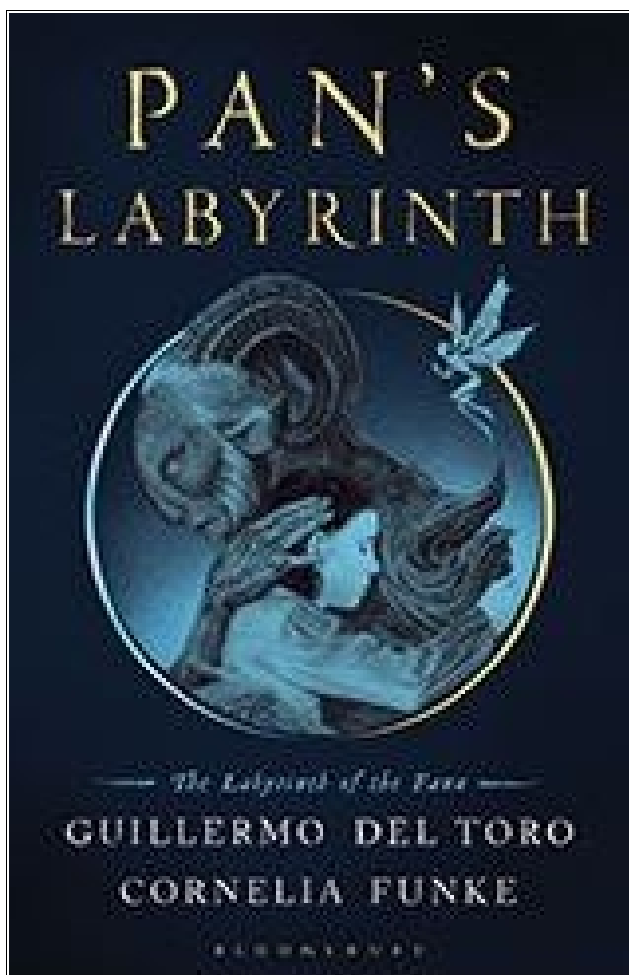
by **Guillermo Del Toro** and **Cornelia Funke**
(Bloomsbury; \$29.99)

Academy Award-winning filmmaker **Guillermo del Toro** and bestselling German author **Cornelia Funke** have collaborated in a novel inspired by del Toro's much praised dark fantasy film, *Pan's Labyrinth: The Labyrinth of the Faun*, released in 2006.

Set in a remote area of 1940s Spain, the novel, like the movie, follows the story of Ofelia, a young girl, whose pregnant mother has married a sadistic army captain. As her stepfather's brutality, both to her mother and the local resistance fighters, is revealed, the boundaries between reality and a fantasy underworld begin to blur.

Funke has said the movie, and thus the novel, 'demonstrates what I believe to be true: that fantasy is the sharpest tool to develop and unveil all the miracles and the terrors of our reality. It is both political and timeless, a rare achievement in storytelling'.

Allen Williams's black-and-white illustrations complement Funke's detailed back story vignettes, especially of the leading characters, such as Faun, who sets everything in motion with the tasks Ofelia must perform in the Labyrinth to prove she is the long-missing daughter, Princess Moanna, of the Underworld King.



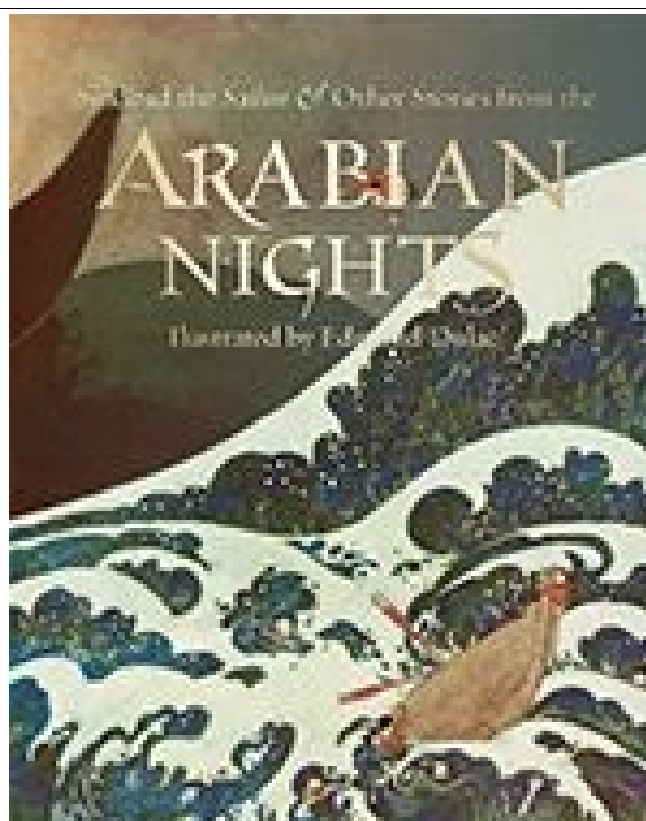
SINDBAD THE SAILOR AND OTHER STORIES FROM THE ARABIAN NIGHTS
(Bodleian Library. \$79.99; available from Footprint Books)

Everyone has heard of *The Arabian Nights*, magical tales of romance, adventure, and good triumphing over evil in a mythical Baghdad. Carpets soar, genies pop out of brass lamps, colossal birds fly in the sky and characters, such as Aladdin, Sindbad, Ali Baba, and Scheherazade, are locked in our imagination.

Most, however, of the nearly 200 stories that comprise *The 1000 Nights and a Night* are rarely read. Four of the most popular tales, 'Sindbad the Sailor', 'Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp', 'The Story of the Three Calendars', and 'The Sleeper Awakened', have now been republished in a sumptuous deluxe edition.

The Bodleian Library edition uses the now extremely rare 1914 edition featuring the translation by Laurence Housman and the watercolours by renowned French artist Edmund Dulac (1882–1953). In her Introduction, Professor Marina Warner provides biographical details of Dulac and Housman and notes that the stories included in this edition 'are among the most loved and familiar tales of the Arabian Nights'.

This is, according to Warner, 'an orient of the imagination, packed with romance and this chief, beauty and cruelty, improbability and oracles ineluctably fulfilled, humour and extremes of longing'. Dulac, strongly influenced by Persian and Indian miniature paintings and



Chinese art, reflected on exotic orient in his illustrations.

The stories, however, have never been regarded as a high point in Arabic literary culture. For many they were too diffuse in the coverage of genres and some were deemed obscene. The stories, many of which have oral origins, can be dated in part back to the eighth or ninth centuries, with Western translations stemming from Arabic versions of the early 1500s.

A printed translation first appeared in France in 1704 and an English translation, issued as 'Grub Street' chapbooks, appeared from 1706 onwards. 'Sindbad' appeared in this form in 1712 and 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba' in 1721–22. In the 1880s an unexpurgated and complete English translation, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night* by Sir Richard Burton, was published in 17 volumes.

Warner notes that 'orientalist glamour' has been attacked by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978), but that one should instead approach these books as 'wonder tales ... in a kinder light. Not as prejudiced, condescending caricatures but as tributes to a culture ... of wisdom tales of marvellous surprising twists and turns, which wonder at the inequities of existence and pose open questions'.

Late arrival

THE BOOK OF DUST: VOLUME 2: THE SECRET COMMONWEALTH
by Philip Pullman (David Fickling Books; \$32.99)

Philip Pullman's bestselling 'His Dark Materials' trilogy (1995–2000) has sold 18 million copies. Many Pullman fans were disappointed when the projected movie series

did not eventuate after *The Golden Compass* (2007) starring Nicole Kidman and Daniel Craig. This cancellation was partly due to criticism from US religious sources; for example, the Catholic Herald described it as ‘the stuff of nightmares’.

Good news comes with the £50 million BBC TV *Dark Materials* series, starring Dafne Keen as the child Lyra, Ruth Wilson as Mrs Coulter, and James McAvoy as Lord Asriel, which will be on Foxtel in November 2019.

Pullman’s main character Lyra Belacqua was an 11-year-old in the original trilogy. *La Belle Sauvage* (2017), the first volume of the ‘Book of Dust’ trilogy, was a prequel, documenting how baby Lyra was saved from the deadly agents of the Magisterium, the authoritarian and repressive church power. Her main saviour, inter alia, was a young boy, Malcolm Polstead, an 11-year-old living with his parents at the Trout pub outside Oxford.

Readers jump forward in time into the whopping 700-page *The Secret Commonwealth*, which, within a week of publication, toppled Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* from the number one spot on the British Bookseller list.

Lyra is now a 20-year-old student living in Jordan College and Dr Malcolm Polstead is a 31-year-old Fellow and part-time agent of the Oakley Street Secret Service. There is much in Pullman’s early pages on the alternate Oxford University, including hints of his dislike at the commodification of universities, exemplified in the new Magisterium-linked Master of Jordan College.

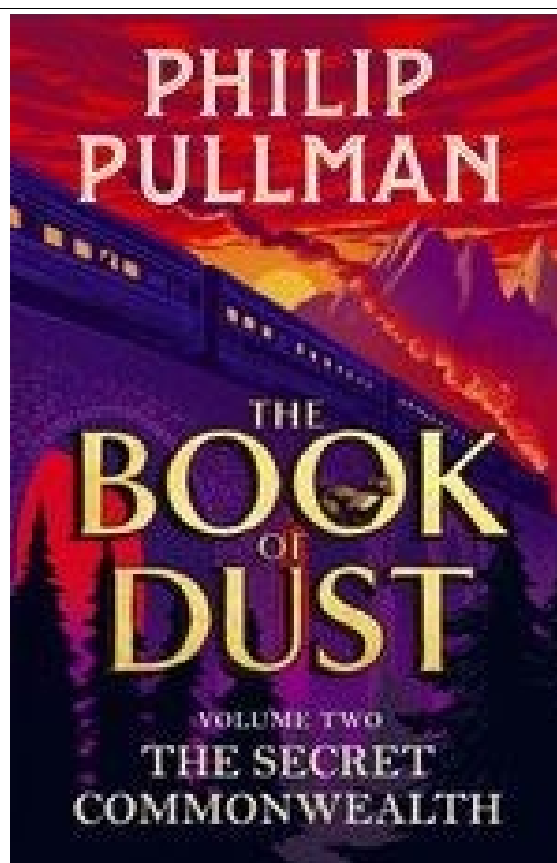
In the series, people have a daemon, an external soul in animal form. Pullman has said: ‘In *The Amber Spyglass*, Lyra and her daemon (Pantalaimon) learn to separate, which comes at a cost. A daemon is not a pet, it’s part of yourself.’

The Secret Commonwealth reveals the growing pains of Lyra’s transition to adulthood. Malcolm’s daemon refers to Lyra as having ‘Le soleil noir de la mélancolie’. She is troubled after reading books that emphasise the rational and illogical. Pan tells her that she has become ‘cautious ... anxious ... pessimistic ... I just can’t stand watching you turn into this rancorous reductive monster of cold logic’. To Pullman, intolerant rationality is as dangerous as intolerant theism.

Lyra and Pan are now constantly arguing, a relationship that deteriorates dramatically after Pan witnesses the murder of an Oxford botanist who had been investigating rose essence in central Asia, a sprinkling of which allows the eye to perceive the mysterious Dust.

Plan and Lyra become physically as well as spiritually separated, with the book becoming a series of quest narratives. Pan searches for what will help Lyra recover ‘her imagination’, as well as searching for a mysterious Central Asian daemon ‘Blue Hotel’. Lyra leaves Oxford to search for Pan, and Malcolm, who has more of an affection for Lyra that he would care to admit, searches after Lyra. Pullman’s debt to Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* can be seen clearly throughout the text.

Meanwhile the agents of the Magisterium, now dominated by the Machiavellian Marcel Delamere, Mrs Coulter’s brother, track all three as they travel, not without considerable danger, across Europe and Central Asia. Pullman says, ‘Their journey is going to take them far from their homeland towards a mysterious desert in



central Asia, where they hope to find, at last, the secret of Dust.’

The Waterstones bookshop website in Britain warns that *The Secret Commonwealth* is ‘Not suitable for younger readers’. It depends how young. Lyra swears a lot, including the F word, there is graphic violence, an attempted gang rape of Lyra, and references to Lyra’s awakened sexuality. Pullman has said that ‘it really isn’t a book for children ... I think the people who are likely to buy this are probably grown-up, and they probably know what they’re in for.’

There are also major contemporary issues reflected in the narrative. Pullman has said: ‘Reason on its own is a kind of devilish thing. Any political power that rules without being questioned is dangerous’. References to the various current authoritarian regimes here.

More real-world parallels come with events involving a ruthless global multinational corporation, people trafficking of refugees, and religious dogmatism. ‘Repression in the name of religion has become more dominant, so we need to be more and more on our guard,’ says Pullman.

The Secret Commonwealth is a riveting narrative, full of imaginative wonder and underpinned by a strong moral purpose. A character named Nur Huda el-Wahabi, named after a schoolgirl who died in the London Grenfell Tower fire, appears on the last page. She will clearly pay a part in Lyra’s dangerous journey across the central Asian deserts in the final volume of the trilogy. Pullman says, ‘If I am spared to write the third book, all will be made clear, I hope.’ This reader can’t wait.

— Colin Steele, August/October 2019