SF Commentary 80A

August 2010

SCANNERS

1990–2002

Doug Barbour
Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)
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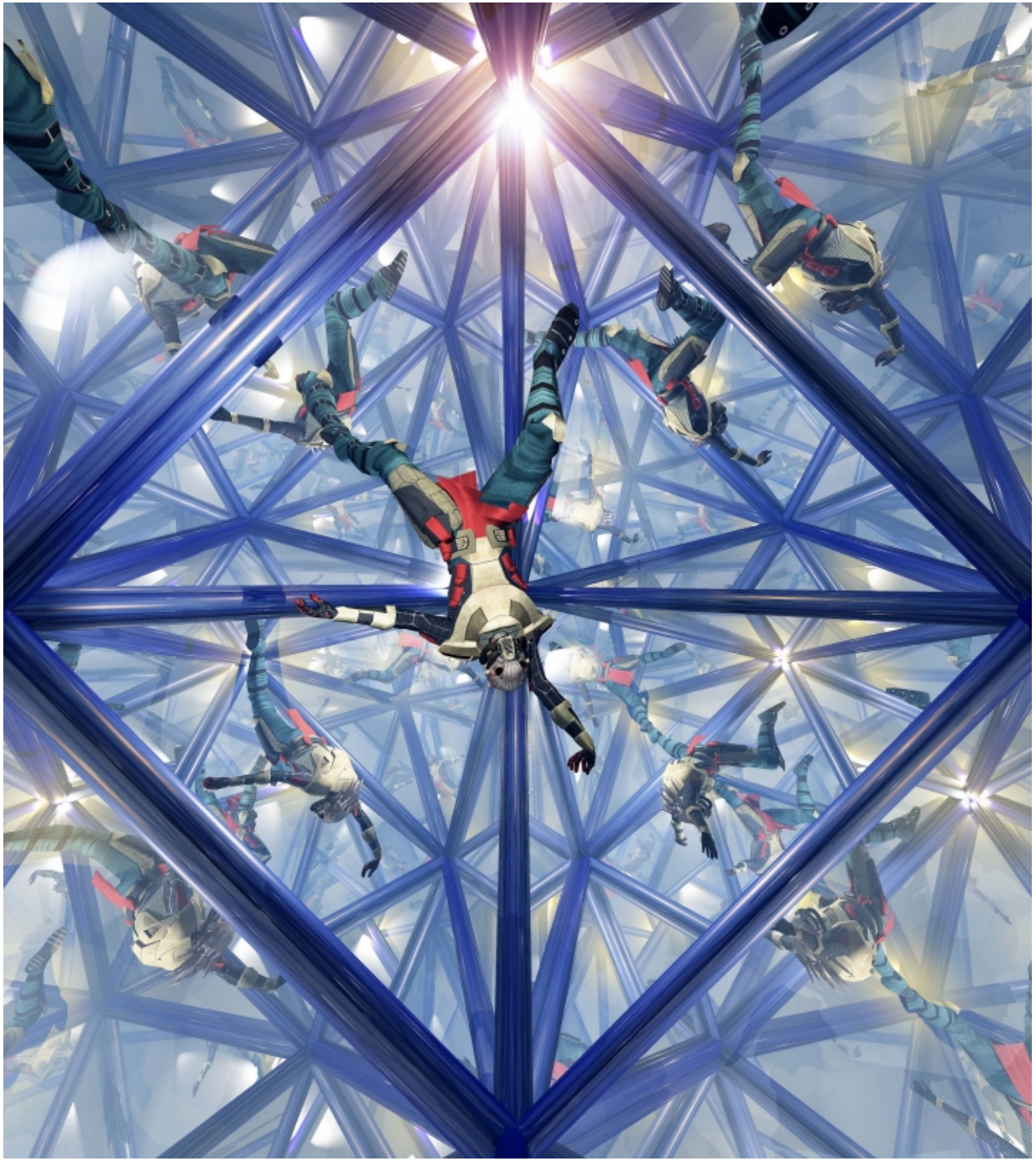
Paul Ewins
Alan Stewart



SF Commentary 80A

August 2010 118 pages

Scanners 1990–2002

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This is an orphan issue, comprising the four 'Scanners' columns that were not included in *SF Commentary* 77, then had to be deleted at the last moment from each of *SFC*s 78 and 79. Interested readers can find the fifth 'Scanners' column, by Colin Steele, in *SF Commentary* 77 (also downloadable from eFanzines.com). Colin Steele's column returns in *SF Commentary* 81.

This is the only issue of *SF Commentary* that will not also be published in a print edition. Those who want print copies of *SF Commentary* Nos 80, 81 and 82 (the combined 40th Anniversary Edition), should send money ($50, by cheque from Australia or by folding money from overseas), traded fanzines, letters of comment or written or artistic contributions.

Thanks to **Ditmar (Dick Jenssen)** for providing the cover at short notice, as well as his explanatory notes.

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Scanners

Books written or edited by the following authors are reviewed by:

'The Alien': the cover graphic

DITMAR (DICK JENSSEN)

Almost every Friday evening a small group of SF fans, friends and family meet for dinner at Ciao Restaurant in downtown Melbourne. Elaine Cochrane joins the group whenever possible, and a few months ago sent me the following email:

At Ciao last night, Vida (Yvonne Rousseau's mathematician daughter) said she'd been trying to puzzle out a reflection problem.

> If you stood at the centre of a (regular) pentagonal room with mirrored walls, how would your reflection(s) appear?
>
> She says she's been in a equilateral triangle room and the effect is of being in a kaleidoscope.
>
> Is this the sort of thing that Vue's ray-tracing ability could model?

The 'Vue' *to* which Elaine refers is a world-3D-modelling software package from E-on Software (http://www.e-onsoftware.com/), and which is available in a multiplicity of forms, ranging from *free* to US$2290. The version which I have is way down the ladder at US$600, and since it was an upgrade, cost a mere US$200. It does *more* than I really need, and produces images which I am more than happy with. From my experience with the software, it seemed quite certain that my Vue 8 Complete would do the job, and likely would not force me to exercise my wits too greatly — as I have said before, I enjoy a challenge and tend to respond (provided, of course, that I think the task will be successfully completed — easily, if possible).

The first graphic was a simple triagonal vertical tube of three mirrors, with mirrors for the base and top. For a focal point of interest, I situated a spaceman in this chamber. A point light (essentially a naked bulb) was placed just below the ceiling; a spotlight played on the human; there was a light mist in the tube; and the camera was placed either at the centre of a wall, or at a wall join — and it used a very wide angle lens: 12 mm. The resulting image was surprisingly pleasing, and I sent Bill Wright a copy. He asked for it to be the next *Interstellar Ramjet Scoop* cover (his fanzine), and you can find this at: http://efanzines.com/IRS/index.htm: it's the June 2010 issue.

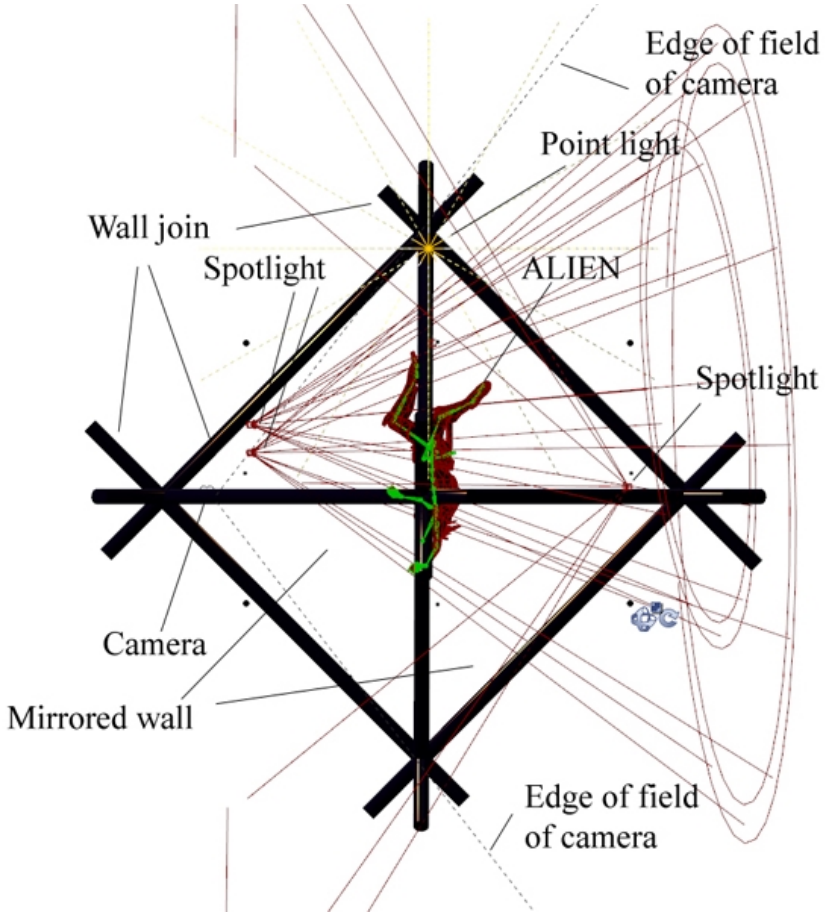
I emailed the triagonal image to Vida, together with an alternate version in which I replaced the human with an alien spacefarer. Vida responded with two wonderful comments. She felt that the *geometry*, the *architecture* of the chamber would be greatly enhanced if the joins of the walls could be delineated. She also — bless her — preferred the alien to the human.

I say 'bless her' because the alien was an idiosyncratic tribute on my part to Murray Leinster, who wrote one of my favorite SF stories — and one which I consider to be canonical — 'First Contact'. As David Drake, Eric Flint and Jim Baen point out in their anthology *The World Turned Upside Down*, Leinster wrote other stories on the 'first contact' theme, and they printed his 'The Aliens'. The aliens were called *plumies* due a feathery-appendaged head, and lived on a methane-hydrogen planet circling a star of vastly different temperature, and knew only of bronze or light metals, not iron or steel. An unfortunate accident brings humans and plumies in contact with each other — *literally* when their two spaceships touch and *fuse* together. How the ships are separated, and how a mutual acceptance of each other is effected, is the thrust of the story. If you look carefully at the cover graphic you might be able to see the *feathered* helmet of the alien.

The Vue working window is effectively divided into four sub-windows (there are menu rows above, and a 'catalog list' on the right), but these windows are the main work areas. There is a view from above

the ‘world’, one from the side, and one from the front. The fourth area gives a very-low-resolution image of what the camera ‘sees’. A click of the mouse, however, gives a much higher resolution image — still small — in a minute or so inside this fourth window.

As an example, the view from the top of the world setup for the cover graphic is given below. The alien is inside an octahedral chamber — although it is relatively easy to construct such an enclosure in Vue, I made sure that the angles of the walls would be *exact* by importing the Platonic Octahedral Solid from Mathematica 7, as a three-dimensional object, into Vue’s world. (It also saved some time ...) The octahedron was then given a mirror surface. Fortunately the Mathematica model is *not* solid, so the camera and the alien could be placed inside it.



Because I have a warped outlook on the world, I had the alien doing a hand-stand. A point light was placed at the apex of the octahedron, and three spotlights were aimed at the alien to bathe him in as uniform a light as possible.

Some mist was added. The main work involved was in making the wall joins obvious. For this, twelve, long cylinders were placed at every join. Not a difficult task inasmuch as Vue makes exact placement and exact slopes a relatively easy task.

The diagram should make things a bit clearer — the camera is not easily seen because it’s partly hidden by one of the horizontal wall join cylinders.

Finally just a word or two about what might be the story of the image. The Plumie is undergoing astronaut training in a zero-gravity chamber. His ‘hand-stand’ is an exercise to test both his agility and his ability to retain a stable view of his surrounds — how susceptible is his equilibrium to a rapidly distorting environment. He sees the universe as much bluer and brighter than we do, and because of this the chamber is a much harsher, more inimical confine than the graphic would suggest (we see it with our eyes, of course). Well, that’s the story rationalisation of why blue predominates — the truth is that Bruce Gillespie has a weakness for blue (ever since he saw Hitchcock’s *The Birds*), and I *never* dispute the wishes of anyone who is generous enough to use my graphics.

— Dick Jenssen, July 2010

Scanners

BRUCE GILLESPIE

Most of these are mini-reviews, written mainly in response to lively discussion in the two apas (amateur publishing associations) of which which I am/was a member, Australia's ANZAPA (Australia and New Zealand Amateur Publishing Association) and Britain's Acnestis. The impetus came from Alan Stewart, who still lists all the books he has read in every ANZAPA contribution. In 1990, I began to list my own Books Read. Joseph Nicholas, when he was a member of ANZAPA, suggested forcefully that lists of books were not much good without being accompanied by mini-reviews. I began to write my own reviews, but received very little response in ANZAPA. The stimulus to keep writing them came mainly from the members of Acnestis, an organisation that disappeared in 2005. Some longer pieces were written for journals such as *Australian Book Review* and *The Melburnian*.

The reviews are grouped according to the year in which the books first appeared, and then by (very) broad category, *not* by the year in which the review was written.

Partly out of laziness, and partly out of historical interest, I've retained the prices of the editions I read. No wonder Australian readers are buying fewer books and going broke faster.

1990

AMERICAN FANTASY

TEHANU: THE LAST BOOK OF EARTHSEA
by Ursula K. Le Guin
(1990; Atheneum 0-689-31595-3; 226 pp.; $A22.50
Gollancz 0-575-04870-0; 219 pp.; £9.95)

SEAROAD: CHRONICLES OF KLATSAND
by Ursula K. Le Guin
(1991; HarperCollins 0-06-016740-8; 193 pp.; $A28.50)

Tehanu is, I suppose, 'fantasy', and ***Searoad*** is not. *Tehanu* and *Searoad* are records of delicately traced deep personal experience. Little matter that the former takes place on the planet of Earthsea, and the other in a small holiday hamlet somewhere up the American Pacific coast. Le Guin nestles inside minds, inhabits nerve ends, and fills her worlds from the inside out.

Tehanu is the story of Tenar, now much older than she was in *The Tombs of Atuan*, and widowed. Living on the island of Gont, she has tried not to be affected by her background in magic, but the very old Sparrowhawk (Ged), now stripped of his mage's powers, arrives on Gont, seeking her help. Their encounter with the dragon is one of the most intense scenes I've read for many years. Reread the three 'Earthsea' books, then read *Tehanu*, and you see how far Le Guin has increased the range and colour of her writing since the early 1970s.

The writing in *Searoad* is, if anything, even more subtle and vivid than in *Tehanu*. A small number of characters who live in the seaside resort of Klatsand circle around each other while trying not to get too involved with the others' half-glimpsed problems. People who live there only during summer provide extra complications to an already intricate social scene. My favourite story is 'Hand, Cup, Shell', which reveals an entire family history in 21 pages.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

THE MOTION OF LIGHT IN WATER: EAST VILLAGE SEX AND SCIENCE FICTION WRITING 1960–1965
by Samuel R. Delany
(1988; Morrow 0-87795-947-1; 302 pp.; US$18.95/ 1990; Paladin 0-586-08910-1; 581 pp.; $A16.95)

If, like me, you find the style that Delany adopts when writing fiction is too baroque, you might find that *The Motion of Light in Water* is an enjoyable light read. However, like me, you might find this account of pre-AIDS gay subculture rather alien; *Motion* often seems more science-fictional than most SF books.

The odd thing about this book is that it gives few clues as to why Delany became a science fiction writer. The young Delany shown in this book is ferociously restless and is willing to try all forms of experience, hardly the hazy dreamer you would expect from the early SF novels. He tells us (or claims to tell us) exactly what happened to him; the usual Delany pontificating is reserved for the last section, added for the British paperback edition. You would expect this Delany to produce *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, not *Empire Star*.

Given that this *is* a kind of *Last Exit to Brooklyn* recollected in middle-aged tranquillity, it's a dazzling narrative. The young man revealed here does not know what drives him; the older writer looking back cannot really account for the bisexual nature of that young man (Delany married poet Marilyn Hacker when he was very young, at the same time exploring the New York beat) or the bicameral nature of his writing mind (his early novels are logorrhaic versions of *Star Wars* rather than poetic masterpieces) but one can see the older writer trying to make a comprehensible pattern.

1991

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

FULL SPECTRUM 2 edited by Lou Aronica, Shawna McCarthy, Amy Stout and Patrick LoBrutto
(1989; Doubleday Foundation 0-385-26019-9; 465 pp.; $A26.95)

FULL SPECTRUM 3 edited by Lou Aronica, Amy Stout and Betsy Mitchell
(1991; Doubleday Foundation 0-385-41801-9; 537 pp.; $A28.50)

Spectrum is the anthology whose editorial team sounds as if it were drawn from the staff in the lunch room on the day. This was almost the last of the Big General Anthologies.

If you detect a lack of overbrimming enthusiasm, you're right. Too many stories here, too many pages, too few shining pages. Although some stories have quality, there is no succulent flavour to the whole reading experience.

In **Volume 2** I liked (but can remember little about) Joseph Gangemi's 'The Painted Man', Carolyn Ives Gilman's 'The Game-maker', Deborah Million's 'Then I Sleeps and Dreams of Rose', Michael Swanwick's 'The Edge of the World' and Greg Bear's 'Sleepside Story'. Major stories that actually do linger somewhere in the ramshackle mansion I call my brain are Karen Haber's 'A Plague of Strangers' (by far the best twist on the 'plague' theme that has infected SF during the late 1980s and early 1990s), Mike McQuay's 'Re: Generations' and Patricia A. McKillip's entrancing fable 'The Doorkeeper of Khaat'.

In **Volume 3** I gave four stars to a whole lot of stories, but I must admit that the only ones I remember are Greg Benford's 'Matter's End' (big-bang-and-a-half cataclysmic end-of-the-world super-science story) and Michael Bishop's stake-in-the-heart for apartheid South Africa, 'Apartheid, Superstrings, and Mordecai Thubana'. Bishop is *so* good when he's good: the disappearance of the political system that nominally inspired this story does not reduce the impact of the story.

AMERICAN FANTASY

BOY'S LIFE by Robert R. McCammon
(1991; Pocket Books 0-671-74226-4; 440 pp.; $A30.95/ 1992; Penguin 0-14-015998-3; 538 pp.; $A12.95)

Boy's Life is one of those rich books that ends up as much more than its starting points. It's a tale of growing up in the Deep South; it's a ghost story; it's a murder mystery. These elements, intertwined, enrich each other. The novel left me with a sense of having fully lived in a land much more interesting than the actual South, yet a territory that's never fake. McCammon has a talent for spooky surprises, but in telling Cory Mackenson's story he also shows a sensitive appreciation of those growing-up surprises that one can never avoid without staying childish. Nothing arty here, but nothing badly done; an all-round delicious meal of a novel.

A WHISPER OF BLOOD edited by Ellen Datlow
(1991; Morrow 0-688-10361-8; 287 pp.; $A30.95)

I genuflect at the name of Ellen Datlow — oh great editor of original fiction anthologies! Like Jack Dann, Kathryn Cramer and a very few others, she draws from authors stories that are much better than the seed subject usually deserves.

Having said that, I confess that I did not find in ***A Whisper of Blood*** the consistent quality of stories that I found in (say) *Blood Is Not Enough*. Perhaps two anthologies on vampirism too close together is a bit much, especially as each author works hard at an original take on the subject.

A Whisper of Blood certainly has its triumphs, including Thomas Tessier's 'Infidel' and Jonathan Carroll's 'The Moose Church', which became the centre of the novel *From the Teeth of Angels*. 'The Ragthorn', by Robert Holdstock and Garry Kilworth, is one of the great fantasy stories of recent years, combining as it does magic and the threat of suffocation.

The other stories in the collection would be in most anthologists' First Eleven (especially Suzy McKee Charnas's 'Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep', Melissa Mia Hall's 'The Pool People', Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's 'Do I Dare to Eat a Peach?' and Pat Cadigan's 'Home by the Sea') but seem oddly unbrilliant in a Datlow collection.

THE HEREAFTER GANG
by Neal Barrett Jr
(1991; Mark V. Ziesing 0-929480-54-6; 348 pp.)

This may not be the oddest novel I've read, but I'm struggling to think of one that's odder. (Leonora Carrington's *The Hearing Trumpet* leaps to mind, but that's nothing like ***The Hereafter Gang***.) I may be real dumb, like Doug Hoover, the main character of this book, but only the title gives much idea of what is happening here — Hoover spends much of the novel dead. The trick is to guess at which point he leaves what is usually called 'life' and enters the 'hereafter'(which is some kind of limbo, not heaven). Hoover, who sets out on the roads of Texas after leaving his wife, has never been well connected to ordinary reality. An amazing combination of grog, weed and other substances keeps him perpetually wired. When he enters a limbo Texas, accompanied by the sexiest woman he's ever met, it never occurs to him that things might have changed. It didn't to me, either, until towards the end of the book, when he settles in a little town. He keeps meeting dead people, live acquaintances he hasn't seen for years, and legendary Western folk heroes. Even his cat turns up. (The

cat is the real hero of the book.) This would all be tedious for the reader if Neal Barrett Jr were not a brilliant writer. The book is very funny until near the end. The real hero is the Texan language. Did Barrett set out to write a Texan *Finnegans Wake*? I suspect so.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

THE EIGHTH STAGE OF FANDOM by Robert Bloch (Wildside Press; 1991/1962; 208 pp.)

This is a 1991 reprint of Bloch's book of fanzine articles originally published by Advent in 1962. His pieces from the late 1940s and the 1950s are models of fannish writing: amusing and filled with puns, but also filled with affection for that small band of happy rogues who made up fandom during the fifties. Harry Warner Jr told us all the facts in his account of the period, but it's left to Bloch to pour out the true spirit of fandom (especially in the inspiring 'A Way of Life') and draw sketches of the personages of the period (Willis perhaps captured better than Tucker, although the whole book can be seen as an *hommage* to Bob Tucker). Short essays about the advent of the beatniks, the death of pulp magazine SF, the rise of the influence of TV, and the first boom in filmed SF (twenty years before 'media fandom') let us step back into the fifties more effectively than a perusing a book of *Life* photos. Bloch's convention reports show us how far convention-going has deteriorated since the early fifties. Unexpectedly, Bloch ends with a tribute to James Joyce and two poems based on Lewis Carroll. 'Jabberwocky for Fandom' and 'A Non-Lewis Carroll' should be reprinted often. But so should most of these articles. No trace here of Robert Bloch the boring horror writer or Robert Bloch the fairly boring fantasy and SF writer. Here is the work of a master, and should be read by anybody who tries to write well for fanzines. (Thanks to Alan Stewart for lending it to me.)

1992

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

CALL TO THE EDGE by Sean McMullen
(1992; Aphelion 1-875346-06-6; 245 pp.; $A12.95)

Although Sean McMullen has published two novels since ***Call to the Edge***, to me this collection of stories is still his major achievement. It includes several of the best SF short stories yet published in Australia. As a whole it has a robust energy that is more than the sum of its bits. 'The Colours of the Master', with its masterly first sweeping phrase, 'I first heard Chopin perform the night that I had just been ordered to cancel my flight back to New York ...', has a love of speculation and music combined with a healthy appreciation of one-up-manship. 'The Eyes of the Green Lancer' and 'Destroyer of Illusions' provide us with our first look at the world developed in McMullen's novels. 'The Deciad' and 'Pax Romana' show us a world as it might have been if the Romans had had a greater appreciation of the power of technology. And 'The Dominant Style' in 20 pages introduces us to a world and way of viewing life that are quite at odds to our own.

AND DISREGARDS THE REST by Paul Voermans
(1992; Gollancz 0-575-05143; 256 pp; $A32.95)

Paul Voermans was a stage and television actor around Melbourne before he went off to London to make his fortune. Surprise! Paul did not become the second Peter Finch. Instead he swallowed large draughts of London fog, settled at his keyboard, and produced two publishable science fiction novels. ***And Disregards the Rest*** was the first of them to appear from Gollancz.

London weather might be held responsible for the wonderfully detailed sense of the Australian bush that shines through *And Disregards the Rest*. That's what I like best about the book, although the people live and the story cooks nicely.

Voermans's characters are (surprise!) a group of actors who have been lured way out into central Australia to stage a secret production of *The Tempest* to a nonexistent audience. The secrecy is the point of the expedition — but unfortunately someone has whispered something somewhere. Ill luck dogs the company. Malignly magic events seem to happen. What is the true situation?

We don't find out until near the end of the book, because Voermans writes, in interleaved chapters, the story of the survivors of that expedition. Kevin Gore has hardly spoken to Martin Leywood since they were escaped a Terrible Fate. Very weird events begin to afflict Kevin. His blood turns blue, for a start. He goes in search of Martin (certified as mad during some of the intervening years) to put together the bits of the puzzle.

Somewhere inside this energetic narrative is a rickety science fiction story about a device that was designed to communicate with aliens — and the relentless FBI agents who were determined to destroy the device. Less rickety is the time-loop theme. The broadcast play of *The Tempest* reached the aliens, and they've been on their way to Earth ever since. But that, in turn, will affect the far future, whose inhabitants want to reverse the events that are already happening in this novel.

Sounds too complicated for you? It's not really. Voermans has an unerring ability to create lively, funny characters and vivid scenes. You want to know the fates of these people long before you can puzzle out what's happening to them. They live, and so does the scenery, which means that you don't worry too much of the SF gimmickry is a bit fuzzy.

QUARANTINE by Greg Egan
(1992; Legend 0-7126-5347- 3; 219 pp.; $A37.95)

The main character of ***Quarantine*** is a private investigator in a near-future world in which it is almost impossible to keep a secret. Nick can, though. His main weapons are computer programs, operated by nanotechnology, that plug in directly to the brain.

Commissioned to find a near-braindead girl who has disappeared from impregnable custody, Nick plugs in more and more of the ubiquitous programs until he doesn't quite know who he is. At the end of the quest he finds an organisation that in turn recruits him for its own grand plans. Its engineers install what seems like the ultimate program: one that guarantees Nick's unquestioning loyalty to the company. But, as in any great science fiction book, there is an even more ultimate program that Nick discovers. Its theory and effects are based on the implications of quantum mechanics theory. More I will not say. *Quarantine* is, above all, a novel of suspense.

Egan takes Nick and the reader on a journey that is both melodramatic and aesthetically and logically pleasing. Every permutation arises clearly from the one before, but nobody could guess the direction of the whole. In taking us on Nick's journey, Egan wipes out the conventional ideas of 'personality' and 'character', although he uses an 'I' character to tell the story. Nick's 'character' is so minced and misdirected by the multiple layers of the programs that he almost lets us lose faith in the concept of 'human personality'.

Like Philip K. Dick and Stanislaw Lem before him, Egan is a valid link between the world of genre science fiction and that of the sceptical novel. Many writers, such as Gerald Murnane and Nicholson Baker, have approached the same problems from a different perspective. The beauty of Egan's prose is that he puts no barriers in front of the reader's understanding. He has none of the arrogance of the conventional writer of fiction. I was no sooner seduced by the clarity and apparent naivety of the writing than I realised that I had become part of a game that would not let me go. But the end is no game; it's the

furthest extension of today's urban culture, which we believe offers us some sort of security. *Quarantine* removes this cloak of security and sets us free to participate in Egan's extraordinary dreams.

AUSTRALIAN HORROR

INTIMATE ARMAGEDDONS edited by Bill Congreve
(1992; Five Islands Press 1-875604-03-0; 144 pp.; $A14.95)

I wish I could like *Intimate Armageddons* better than I do. Bill Congreve is one of a band of enthusiastic writers and editors who are seeking to make horror fiction a major force in Australian writing. ***Intimate Armageddons*** includes most of the people are currently working in the field. If their enterprise is to succeed, they will need to make major improvements.

Perhaps the fault lies in this particular reviewer. When it comes to horror fiction, I represent the general reader, not the aficionado. It seems to me that there are certain clichés of the field that the diehard horror fan expects and enjoys. These clichés are littered through these stories: gory death that is signalled so that you can enjoy it when it arrives; the ritual stalking of the innocent victim; the catch in the writer's throat as his hulk is about to hurl itself at you.

The kind of horror story I like is the piece of fiction in which all seems safe on the surface; in which the surface is troubled, then broken only in the most subtle patterns; in which the true horror of emerging nemesis bursts upon the reader only in the story's last few sentences. Subtlety is all.

Few of Congreve's authors have heard of subtlety. Murders are violent, graphic and inconsequential. Horrors don't mean much. The only satisfying story in the book, Rosaleen Love's 'Holiness', is so subtle that it should not be called a horror story at all. Terry Dowling ('They Found *The Angry Moon*') does his best with creaking material, but even his skill cannot patch together a story out of tattered rags. The others? It's their choice to write junk. It's my choice to recommend other people not to read it. If Congreve's authors want to appeal to an unformed adolescent mind whose ideas of life and death are derived entirely from late-night movies and old comics, they can go in that direction and sink. If they have any ambitions to break into the general literary market, they will have to improve enormously.

BRITISH FANTASY

'WAS . . .' by Geoff Ryman
(1992; HarperCollins 0-00-223931-0; 356 pp; $A29.95)

Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden* has become one of the most highly praised British fantasy novels of the last decade. In ***'Was...'*** Ryman moves sideways from fantasy, producing a novel *about* fantasy. The result is a book that has more magic and sense of wonder than most of the plodding adventures that bear the 'fantasy' label.

Although Ryman has been based in Britain for some years, he is a Canadian who is fascinated by the United States of America. *'Was...'* poses the question that has fascinated many critics: why have some of the world's greatest fantasies been produced by writers from one of the world's flattest and dullest landscapes — the farmlands of central USA?

In *'Was...'*, Ryman travels to Kansas. He takes on the 'Oz' books of L. Frank Baum, especially as they were popularised by the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

His main character Jonathan, who is dying of AIDS, believes that the 'Oz' books tell of a real person who lived near near Zeandale, Kansas, late in the nineteenth century. Jonathan devotes his last few months to finding the exact place where Dorothy and her aunt and uncle lived during the events described in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Much of the rest of the novel tells the story of the 'real' Dorothy: a

girl who was dumped on her mother in 1875, who endured the stupidity of her Aunty Em and the cupidity of her Uncle Henry, whose dog Toto was killed by her aunt, who met an itinerant teacher and writer named L. Frank Baum and told him her story, and who later went mad and was confined to an institution.

And another section of the book, echoing Dorothy's, tells the story of a precocious girl named Frances Gumm who was taken by her mother to Hollywood to become Judy Garland and see all her ambitions and dreams disintegrate before she died an early death. In other words, '*Was...'* is a cheeky, daring novel that mixes known fact and pure whimsy in a seamless way. It works because Ryman combines the abilities of a comic writer, a fantasist, and a realist. As he writes in his afterword ('Reality Check'), the realism deflates the myths, but the fantasy 'reminds us how far short our lives fall from their full potential'. '*Was...'* is the story of three comic tragedies, three lives that are blighted by American facts of life that our outside their control.

Jonathan believes in freedom, but has always felt blighted by the way he was treated as a child. He finds love with Ira, only to be struck down by AIDS. He triumphs through his belief in the fantasy of Oz.

Dorothy is treated cruelly by Aunty Em and Uncle Henry, forced further and further into isolation by their self-righteousness and fundamentalism. She doesn't find an Oz to visit, and nobody in this book finds the Wizard, but her fate is not mournful, only strange.

Frances Gumm's fate — the legendary life of Judy Garland — is the most pedestrian fate of all, yet the energy supplied by her mother's maddening belief in success somehow gave us a fantasy that sustained all of us.

And what of L. Frank Baum, who started it all? He barely appears in the novel, although he wrote the 'Oz' books. Ryman seems to argue that the Oz legend is much bigger than the 'Oz' books, which might easily have disappeared early this century. It was the world's need

for Oz itself that eventually gave immortality to the books, the author, the film star, and Dorothy. And, as you will find to your delight in the magnificent last few pages of the book, to Jonathan himself.

ANGELS & INSECTS by A. S. Byatt
(1992; Vintage 0-09-922431-3; 290 pp.; $A14)

Like many readers, I came to ***Angels and Insects*** soon after reading A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel *Possession*, and was very disappointed. Surely, it seemed to me, the two novellas 'Morpho Eugenia' and 'The Conjugial Angel' that comprise *Angels & Insects* were written before *Possession*, not after it?

Several months after reading both books, my sense of disappointment has not diminished. *Angels & Insects*, both of whose novellas are set in mid-Victorian Britain, arises from the same interests that gave enormous energy to *Possession*. But why is *Angels & Insects* very much the inferior book of the two?

In both *Possession* and *Angels & Insects*, A. S. Byatt is concerned with that conflict between highmindedness and sensuousness during the mid-nineteenth century, a conflict that broke people apart and often made them seem mad when they were trying to be audacious and serious. In *Possession*, sexual fidelity and poetic ambition were the millstones that crushed its Victorian lovers. In 'Morpho Eugenia', sexual fidelity is part of a three-cornered contest of which the other two contestants are scientific ambition and the mundane need to survive. In 'The Confugial Angel', madness and sanity contend. Madness is represented by spiritualism; sanity, again, by a mournful kind of sexual fidelity.

In *Possession*, however, Byatt finds a perfect story to contain all the forces she lets loose. The story of the modern lovers, whose researches lead them to found out about the Victorian lovers, contains mystery upon mystery, with each revelation leading to further questions and surprising answers. In *Angels & Insects*, neither story is strong enough to make use of its material.

In 'Morpho Eugenia', William Adamson is a scientific explorer who needs to raise funds for his next expedition. He studies exotic insects. Without funds, he finds himself adopted by the Alabasters, a rich family who occupy an estate in the country. The adoption becomes permanent; he marries Eugenia, one of the daughters of the family. Somehow he never quite returns to his voyages. He continues his researches, however, and comes to realise that the household that has absorbed him resembles an ant's nest. At the end of the story he discovers the horrifying truth of this metaphor.

The trouble with the story is that Byatt's principal interest, like Adamson's, is the world of insects. Take away the metaphor, and the story and its characters become part of a very conventional romance with a twisted 'surprise' end. The people have little of the independent life that Byatt gives her characters in *Possession*.

'The Conjugial Angel' is even more difficult to like. Lilias Papagay is a down-to-earth spiritual medium who finds herself surrounded by loony clients. The works of Swedenborg are their Bible; spiritualism has taken over the energy that many Victorians earlier gave to conventional religion. Swedenborg's world is densely populated by angels, demons, and the wandering souls of the dead. When these souls begin to take shape during Mrs Papagay's seances, she becomes distressed, and so does the reader. The monstrous angels are very weird; since I don't know my Swedenborg, I can only guess their significance. In places sanity disappears from the narrative.

Again, Byatt seems to have become so entranced by Victorian researches that she has had great trouble integrating esoteric information into a coherent structure. In 'The Conjugial Angel', the story disappears for pages at a time. So did my attention.

BRITISH HORROR

NARROW HOUSES, VOL. I
edited by Peter Crowther
(Little Brown 0-316-90395-7; 1992; 460 pp.)

So I'm only a few years behind in reading Crowther's anthologies. I'll catch up soon. Here are lots of very conventional horror stories, with a leavening of fine pieces. Two great, very strange stories are Nicholas Royle's 'Glory' and Pat Cadigan's 'Naming Names', but I also enjoyed 'The Tale of Peg and the Brain' (Ian Watson), 'Bleeding Dry' (Stephen Laws), 'From a Narrow House' (William F. Nolan) and 'The Landlady's Dog' (James Lovegrove). Jonathan Carroll's 'Learning to Leave' has appeared as part of one of his novels.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

KEEPERS OF THE FLAME:
LITERARY ESTATES AND THE RISE OF BIOGRAPHY
by Ian Hamilton
(Pimlico 0-7126-5970-6; 1992; 344 pp.)

Britain's Maureen Speller, who put me onto ***Keepers of the Flame*** by discussing it in Acnestis, will realise the irony of my reading it just a week after I discovered that I've been made George Turner's literary executor. Executors are the baddies of the literary world. They burn old diaries, destroy caches of letters or hide them in attics, and never, never let a truthful word be said about their 'charge'. Hamilton goes on the trail of horrors and perfidies perpetrated by executors, and has delicious fun with what he finds. Boswell's diaries lie deep within the bowels of a country house for nearly two hundred years; as much truth about Hardy as possible is obliterated by his widow. The war between executors and biographers is fought down the centuries. Hamilton traces brilliantly the connection between executorship, biography and hagiography. How does all this affect me? Already I had found that Judy Buckrich, George Turner's biographer, had said some things about George that would have annoyed the hell out of him, but I did not object too much, since Judy did a fine job. George destroyed his own letters and cut his own ties before he died. Secrets, secrets.

CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION

THE HARVEST by Robert Charles Wilson
(1992; NEL 0-450-58694-4; 489 pp.)

Both Dick Jenssen and Race Mathews recommended Wilson's wor, so I expected to admire ***The Harvest*** more than I did. I enjoyed it a lot, but it's a bit of a mess: too long, too many elements just flung in; and an inability to come to terms with its ostensible themes.

An alien spaceship visiting Earth circles overhead. It does nothing for a year. At the end of the year, it puts the Earth's population to sleep and offers them eternal life, if they will metamorphose into a different sort of human being. Some people — one in 10,000 — refuse the offer. *The Harvest* is their story, although we are told the stories of a a few of the people who accept the aliens' offer. Wilson just keeps evading the issues he's set up. The book is not really about eternal life, since the people who accept the offer must change, and eventually join the aliens. The book is not really about nanotechnology, which here is merely the magic method of changing humans into Something Else. The book could have been about transcendence, but instead stays with the characters who choose not to transcend. So in the end it's about being good solid Americans who refuse to become airy-fairy aliens. This would be really boring if the group of Americans didn't include some people of the type that might have persuaded the aliens that humans needed a bit of transcending. The mayhem provides a sort of story; far more interesting are the *Earth Abides* landscapes and cities emptied of people. Wilson's talent is visual; he's not too bad at dealing with people; but he'll do anything rather than deal with a solid idea.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

DOOMSDAY BOOK by Connie Willis
(1992; Bantam 0-553- 35167-2; 445 pp.; $A17.95)

Doomsday Book received many awards in America, then inspired much grumbling in Britain, mainly because of Willis's tourist's-eye picture-book version of the city of Oxford. Its first half annoyed me because it is a bit cumbersome; it could have been cut in half without losing any of its impact.

Doomsday Book is a story of two plagues, one that races through twenty-first century Britain, and the one that crippled fourteenth-century Europe. The connection between them is a time machine. Kivrin is the woman who travels to fourteenth-century Europe, and survives more than any of us would want to suffer in any century.

Nobody in any other review seems to have commented on the real impact of the book. At the end Kivrin's colleagues from the twenty-first century finally work out the snafu in the time machine and arrive in the fourteenth century to pick her up. The Kivrin who emerges out of the forest to meet them bears almost no resemblance to the person who set out a few hundred pages before. Rarely in any book do we gain an outsider's view of the impact of events on a main character after we have undergone those events with that main character. A mirror is held up to our own faces.

MEETING IN INFINITY: ALLEGORIES AND EXTRAPOLATIONS
by John Kessel
(Arkham House 0-87054-164-1; 1992; 309 pp.; $A36.95)

Kessel's story 'The Lecturer' has been a favourite of mine since I read it in Michael Bishop's collection *Light Years and Dark*. I had hoped that the rest of the stories in this collection might match the quality of that story. (I suppose it's an allegory of some sort; Kessel's outdoors lecturer, unstoppable for year after year, is a memorable image.) Most of the other stories, although deftly written, have a mean obviousness about them; they're twisted to suit some ulterior purpose. Apart from 'The Lecturer' the only other standout stories are the novella 'Another Orphan' (Kessel's moving Nebula Award winner about the time traveller who finds himself on the *Pequod* just as Captain Ahab begins the final chase for that damn whale) and 'Buffalo'.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

A HANNES BOK TREASURY
edited and introduced by Stephen D. Korshak
(1993; Underwood-Miller 0-88733-157-2; 90 pp.; US$17.95)

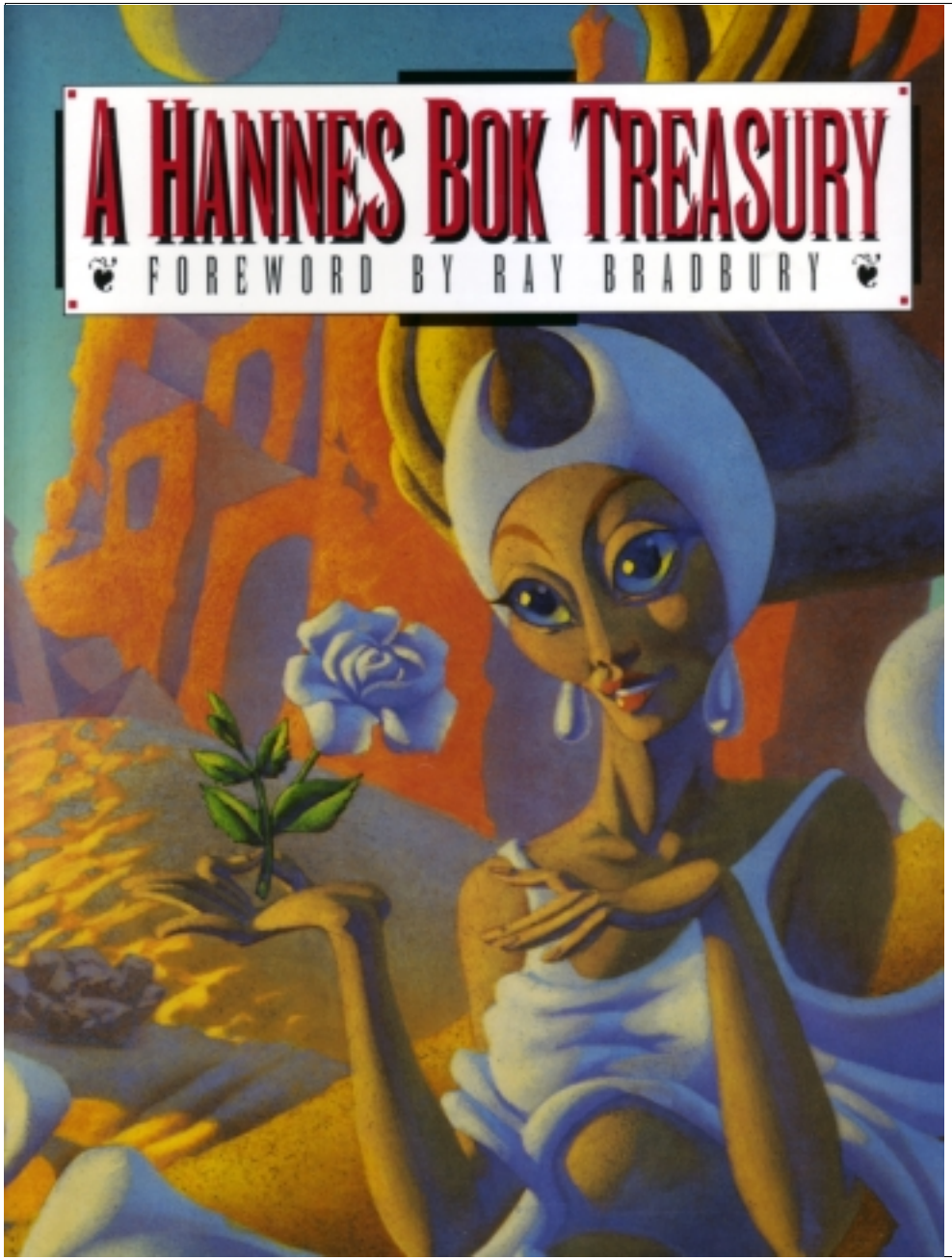
WOMEN OF THE AGES by Virgil Finlay
(1992; Underwood-Miller 0-88733-137-8; 147 pp.; US$14.95)

VIRGIL FINLAY'S STRANGE SCIENCE
(1992; Underwood-Miller 0-88733-154-8; 149 pp.; US$14.95)

Of all the books I'm reviewing here, these are the best, apart from NESFA Press's two-volume Cordwainer Smith collection. They are tributes to the two finest artists who ever graced the science fiction and fantasy magazines, and a tribute to Underwood-Miller, a great small press that has already disappeared.

I don't have the elegance of language to do justice to the art of Hannes Bok (born Wayne Woodard) or Virgil Finlay. That's why I talk little about illustrative art in my magazines. I do know that Hannes Bok's finest cover, which is also the cover of ***A Hannes Bok Treasury***, was for Roger Zelazny's first major publication, the story 'A Rose for Ecclesiastes' (*F&SF*, November 1963). Seeing that cover for the first time was one of those transcendent SF moments.

Perhaps an ever greater moment was in 1961, when I opened the copy of the first *Galaxy* I bought to find Virgil Finlay's illustration of



the unimaginable: the reshaped prisoners of Cordwainer Smith's 'A Planet Named Shayol'. That's still my favourite Finlay piece, although many of his covers were technically finer.

Much of Bok's art gave the impression of being moulded, rather than painted. This was because, as Korshak's introduction explains, each layer of his paintings was meticulously glazed. Bok worked so slowly that he could never have earned more than a tiny annual wage for his work, yet he never compromised. Little wonder that he had been dead for several days before he was found in a rented room in 1964. He was aged forty-nine. Bok was science fiction's greatest surrealist artist.

I suspect that Finlay worked more often, and earned more than Bok. Gerry de la Ree's introduction to ***Women of the Ages*** gives a clear account of Finlay's working methods, which were just as meticulous as Bok's, and tells how much of his income disappeared with the closing down of the pulp magazines in the early 1950s. Still, Finlay's work was still appearing regularly when I began buying the SF magazines. The appearance of a Finlay black-and-white always gave an issue of a magazine a distinguished air, no matter how badly the piece of art was printed.

Finlay was fond of the shape of the human body. He made it into a magical chalice. Without actually breaking the censorship rules of newsstand magazines, his 'solutions' are often amusing, making his *Women of the Ages* seem much sexier than if they had been portrayed as nudes.

More various is the work in ***Virgil Finlay's Strange Science***. Many of the near-nudes are here too, including many males who seem to lack their vital equipment. Finlay did not seem to have time for machines. Like Bok, his career began in the pages of the great fantasy pulps of the 1930s and 1940s. His ghosts and ghoulies are among his greatest creations. And bodies, always these amazing bodies, projecting magicality rather than carnality, created by an exuberant observer.

I hope that either Underwood or Miller (now separate publishers) still has copies of these books for sale.

AMERICAN FANTASY

THE SONGS OF NOAH AND OTHER STORIES
by Jack Cady
(1992; Broken Moon Press 0-913089-40-0; 149 pp.; $A22.50)

It's awhile since I read ***The Songs of Noah*** and the details of individual stories have slipped away from me. The back cover describes these stories as 'magic realism', but a better label is 'rural fantasy'. They are allusive, elusive, illusory stories about solid events with unsolid endings, given credence by Cady's mastery of the language of northwestern USA. 'Tinker' begins, 'There were troubled Augusts once, back when our grandmothers were still alive, and when dog days panted slowly toward busy Septembers.' In 'Patriarch', my favourite story in this volume, one character says 'God is a character, but picky where he puts his hills.' Take nothing for granted; if the country doesn't get you, the country people will.

AFTER SILENCE by Jonathan Carroll
(1992; Macdonald 0-356-20342-5; 240pp.; $A35)

Carroll's recent novels, especially *Outside the Dog Museum*, seemed to be shaking apart under the pressure of their wonderful fantasy ideas. Carroll needed to take stock. He did, and ***After Silence*** is the result.

After Silence is the first Carroll novel without any overt fantasy elements. I suspect that he needed to prove to himself, let alone us, that he could do it. Carroll's fantasy ideas have always been so brilliant and outrageous that they have out-glittered the other elements in his stories. Strip them away, and I find that Carroll is an even better writer than I had suspected.

In *After Silence*, Max Fischer, successful cartoonist, meets and begins living with Lily Aaron and her nine-year-old son Lincoln. As in other Carroll novels, the love affair leads to immediate bliss. As in other Carroll novels, bliss is a prelude to disaster. In other Carroll novels, however, the disaster strikes quite unexpectedly through some magic agency. In *After Silence*, the disaster is inherent in the situation from the beginning. Fischer's mistake is to search for the truth of that situation.

After Silence revolves around three critical events. Each is the searching of the room. Each search is carried out because a character suddenly becomes suspicious of the facts that support the structure of 'ordinary life'. Each search leads to a truth that is strange and disturbing.

It's enough to say that Lincoln, Lily's son, comes between the two, but not in any expected fashion. Nothing is expected in a Jonathan Carroll novel. Partly that's because of the compactness of Carroll's style. Reading Carroll spoils the reader for almost all other modern fiction. No Carroll novel has been longer than 80,000 well-chosen words. Read every sentence carefully because the next sentence might upset your preconceptions.

In the end, would we have done any differently from Max Fischer? Of course not. Is *After Silence* a cruel joke at our expense, or a wonderfully effective method of telling truths? Read the book to find out.

IRON TEARS
by R. A. Lafferty
(1992; Edgewood Press 0-9629066-2; 219 pp.)

A disappointing Lafferty collection, especially compared to his early successes, such as *Nine Hundred Grandmothers*. The only distinctive stories are 'You Can't Go Back', about people who occasionally revisit a tiny moon that hovers above a canyon, and 'Or Little Ducks Each Day'.

SCANDINAVIAN THRILLER/SCIENCE FICTION

MISS SMILLA'S FEELING FOR SNOW by Peter Høeg
(1992; Harvill/HarperCollins; 409 pp.; $A35)

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

1993

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

THE DESTINY MAKERS by George Turner
(1993; AvoNova 0-688-12187-X; 321 pp.; $A29.95)

In ***The Destiny Makers*** all the action occurs within 48 hours sometime next century, and most of it takes place inside the residence of Jeremy Beltane, the Victorian Premier, who has his problems. He has arranged for his father to be given age-reversal surgery. This is illegal in a world with massive overpopulation problems. His vote at a national level is crucial in deciding the measures that the world might take to 'solve' its problems. Beltane does not want the responsibility of making such a decision, so he co-opts some unwilling people to help him make it. The viewpoint character, Harry Ostrov, a policeman, would prefer not to be involved.

George Turner's specialty is portraying the paranoia of situations in which people are placed under extreme pressure. In *The Destiny Makers*, we become completely part of this small circle of people who must make the most important decision in the world. In the final section of the novel, Turner draws us down into the characters' mind. The result is a wonderful passage of virtuoso melodrama that tells us much about ourselves.

The Destiny Makers is a disturbing and absorbing reading experience. When you finish it, you will probably agree with me that it should be read by every Australian, not just people lucky enough to find a copy in the specialist bookshops.

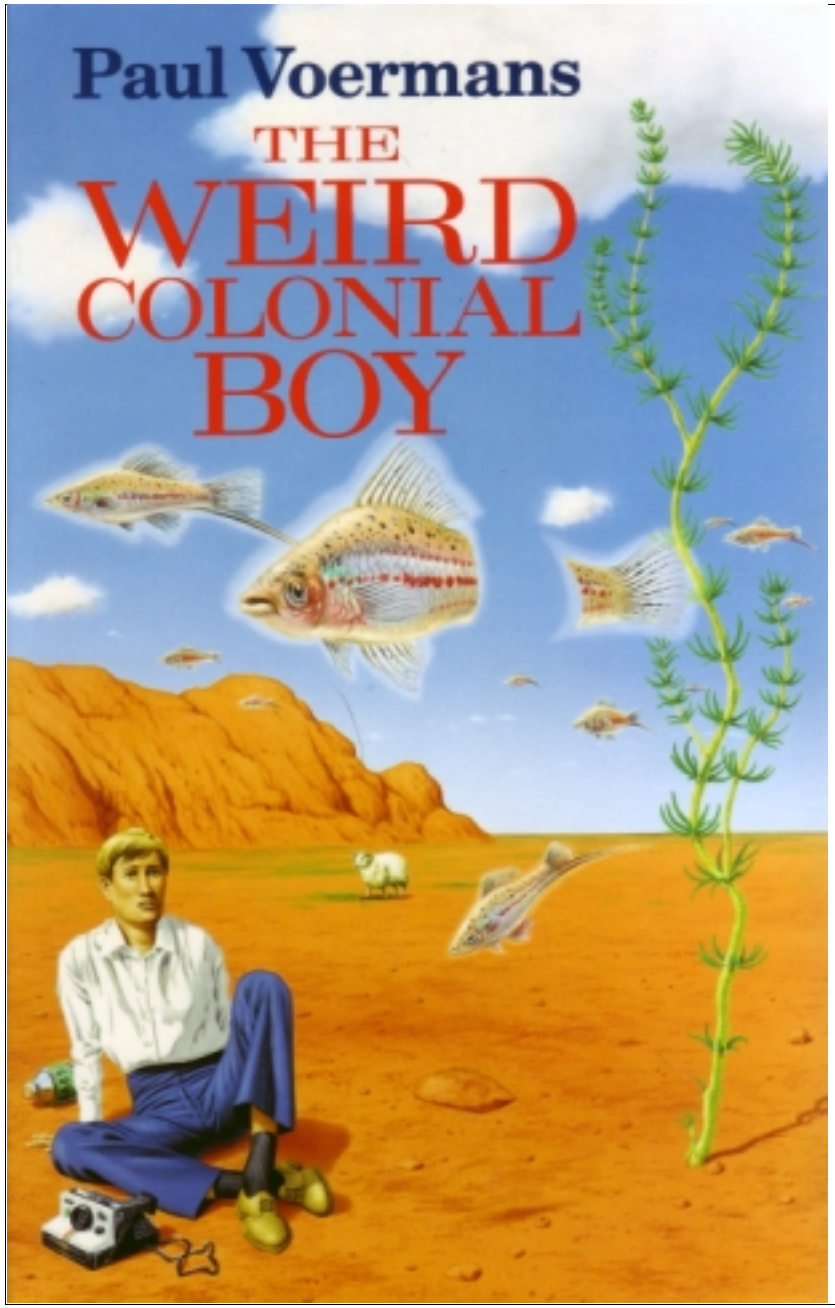
THE WEIRD COLONIAL BOY by Paul Voermans
(1993; Gollancz 0-575-05325-9; 302 pp.; $A32.95)

With his second novel, ***The Weird Colonial Boy***, Paul Voermans continues to show that he is one of Australia's most able new writers. This new book is thought-provoking and merry, dense and entertaining.

Voermans asks the question: what the hell are we doing frittering away our time on this rich continent at this end of the twentieth century? Are we asleep, and must be woken up?

Nigel Donohoe, the book's main character, is a sublimely naïve teenager floating along in the directionless world of Australia 1978. He's nuts about punk rock and tropical fish. When he buys a tank full of very rare fish, he finds that one of them keeps disappearing. Convinced that the fish is disappearing through a 'gate' into outer space or some other time-space dimension, Nigel devises a way to travel through the gate. He is shocked at what he finds.

At first it seems that Nigel has been the victim of a fairly standard science fiction ploy: the trip into an alternate time stream. He finds himself in Australia 1978, but a painfully different country from the one he has just left. Its British masters, steeped in a Catholic–



Mahommedan worldview that took over Europe in the sixteenth century, have never allowed the continent to become much more than a convict settlement. Most Australians are convicts or guards, each group dominated by the lore of the prison. There are some rich landowners and, of course, some people who huddle in rather ramshackle 'cities'. Much of the country is still unexplored.

Quickly Nigel discovers that he looks just like a famous bushranger of the district. Clapped into irons, he suffers every pain and indignity that might afflict any convict without actually killing him. Once his back begins to heal after suffering 100 lashes, he learns how to survive in this cruel yet vivid society.

Voermans tells his grim story with a much humour as well as pathos. Nigel can't help taking the mickey out of the people he meets, which is why he's always in trouble. At the same time, he learns to love life itself in a way that escaped him when he was a gormless drongo in our suburban Melbourne 1978. He discovers how these rough characters preserve their humanity despite every temptation to lose it. He discovers two purposes in life: to return to Catherine Samuelson, the girl he meets at the beginning of his pilgrimage; and to find a way to subvert the rusty conservative viewpoint of this world.

Not that Voermans is saying that our world is the 'right' one while the alternative Australia is a disaster. In the alternative Australia Nigel discovers that every breath of life is precious, that every day promises excitement and humour as well as possible disaster. In 'our' Australia, Nigel's life had seemed pointless. In the'other' Australia, everything has meaning, but anybody might die pointlessly at any time.

Voermans preserves the conventions of the alternative-world story while subverting its assumptions. As you might expect, eventually he returns Nigel to our world, where he finds he can use the knowledge he gained from his rite of passage. But so successfully has Voermans rendered the other Australia that he makes the reader reluctant to leave it.

As he did in *And Disregards the Rest*, Paul Voermans writes with a Shakespearean delight in the multiple possibilities of language. Humour and disaster, adventure and epithets tumble over each other. The Australian countryside and people burst out of the pages, yet we are always reminded that this is an alien Australia, one that destroys any complacency we might have about our current assumptions.

MORTAL FIRE edited by Terry Dowling and Van Ikin
(1993; Coronet 0-340-60854-4; 334 pp.; $A12.95)

Mortal Fire is, as I recall, the fifth collection of 'the best' of Australian science fiction short stories. (Paul Collins's later *Metaworlds* was the sixth.)

More than twenty years ago, when John Baxter produced the first two of them, the *Pacific Books of Australian Science Fiction*, he was probably struggling to find an even two dozen stories that could be considered for inclusion. It seemed unlikely that there would be further volumes. The problem, then as now, is that the most encouraging markets for science fiction are in Britain and USA, not in Australia. Traditionally, overseas magazine and book publishers have been kinder to our writers than the locals.

In other words, *Mortal Fire*'s editors Terry Dowling (from Sydney) and Van Ikin (from Perth) have not had to scratch hard to find candidates for 'the best'. Seventeen authors appear here, and I'm sure the editors could have included many more if they had been allowed the room.

Among science fiction readers, a book like *Mortal Fire* raises the question of whether the style and tone of Australian SF is different from that of American or British SF. This question seems uninteresting to me. It's far more important to compare these stories with any 'best' in the literary short story field. Given a fair contest, *Mortal Fire* would win well.

For sheer narrative drive, it would be difficult to find a better story than Cherry Wilder's 'The Ark of James Carlyle'. Seemingly a story of alien-planet exploration, it is actually a moving parable about the reconciliation between coloniser and colonised, between the unwitting oppressor and the agonised oppressed.

George Turner's 'The Fittest', which he later turned into his prize-winning novel *The Sea and Summer*, is another kind of parable. In the lives of a family of the near future he traces all the failures and desperate hopes of post-war Australia. Turner offers no comfort, but a mere trace of desperate bracing hope.

I can merely list those stories I enjoyed most. They include Philippa Maddern's 'Inhabiting the Interspaces' (surely one of Australia's best short stories of the last fifty years), Sean McMullen's 'The Colours of the Masters', Leanne Frahm's 'A Way Back', Damien Broderick's 'Coming Back', Van Ikin's 'The Juronka Validation', Michael Wilding's 'The Man of Slow Feeling', John Baxter's 'Apple' and Lucy Sussex's 'My Lady Tongue'.

I could have chosen a different story from each of these authors and still concocted an equally impressive 'best'. The Australian SF field is now strong enough to sustain a series of volumes as interesting as *Mortal Fire*.

EVOLUTION ANNIE AND OTHER STORIES
by Rosaleen Love
(1993; The Women's Press 0-7043-4343-6; 232pp.; $A14.95)

Melbourne writer Rosaleen Love's talent is so spry, subtle and nimble that sometimes I despair of her work while admiring it greatly. Rosaleen, stop dancing so hard! Stop weaving those spells so that we can find out the story you're trying to tell us!

Evolution Annie and Other Stories, published in Britain by the Women's Press, is Rosaleen Love's second collection of short stories. Science fiction fans claim her for their own, but her stories cannot be

placed in any category. They are fables, certainly, but you'd find it hard to summarise the moral of any of them. They might be called fantasies, but they are often based in a rigorous appreciation of scientific theory. Pressed for comparisons, I would offer Italo Calvino and Angela Carter, but unfortunately Rosaleen Love is not yet as famous as Calvino or Carter.

The longest story, 'The Daughters of Darius', reaches back from our world into that of Arabian medieval fantasy, then proceeds through Time Gates to offer a daughters'-eye tour of world history. The daughters' daddy was a visiting magic prince; in seeking errant Darius, they stir up much magic for themselves.

Most of the other stories have the same elusive quality. What is 'Holiness' about? Religion only? Religious madness? The beginnings of the universe? Or some interior madness that inhabits all human destiny? The point of the story is hardly its point; instead, we enjoy most the dazzling roller-coaster ride through Love's witty and beautiful sentences.

My favourite story, 'Turtle Soup', is a rigorously constructed yet elusive horror story. This is one of those stories that catch the main character and the reader by surprise. Coretta is a marine scientist who studies reef environments. Ever the objective scrutineer, she sets out to observe the reef creatures, only to find that they have been observing her. Looking upwards through her goggles from beneath the clear water, she sees that 'The ship sailed upside down, like a plane doing stunts, and she was the only person awake to know what was happening, sole witness to the inversion of the world'.

None of the other stories has quite the limpid majesty of 'Turtle Soup', although 'Hovering Rock', my other favourite, is a both a fantasy and a meditation on fantasy. Each story repays careful reading.

AUSTRALIAN HORROR

TERROR AUSTRALIS: THE BEST OF AUSTRALIAN HORROR
edited by Leigh Blackmore
(1993; Coronet 0-340-58455-6; 348 pp.; $A12.95)

As I remember, ***Terror Australis*** appeared just a bit later than *Intimate Armageddons*. Together, they appeared to signal a powerful push towards the publishing of horror in Australia. That impetus seems to have faded, except in the magazines, and Coronet/Hodder has not proceeded with a fantasy/SF publishing program.

Terror Australis is an ambitious anthology, but it does not have the historical perspective of, say, Van Ikin's *Portable Australian Science Fiction* (1982). Only two authors in *Terror Australis* are dead.

Several authors, such as Greg Egan ('Neighbourhood Watch'), Dirk Strasser ('Dear Reader') and Leanne Frahm ('Catalyst') are identified more with SF than with horror or fantasy. Still, along with Terry Dowling (the already famous 'The Daemon Street Ghost-Trap') and Cherry Wilder (the truly horrifying 'Anzac Day') they provide a backbone on which to hang quite a few names that have become familiar to me only recently.

Unfortunately, most of the 'horror people' have a very conventional notion of the genre. Comments I made about the stories in *Intimate Armageddons* would apply to most of the pieces here. You don't frighten readers by describing frightening events. You frighten readers by throwing them off balance. The essence of horror is to withhold signals: to let the horror creep up on the main characters as well as the reader. Since most of the stories here are obvious about their intentions, few of them satisfy me. If you are a fan of the kind of horror story that annoys me, you might get a lot out of *Terror Australis*.

STRANGE FRUITS: TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED
edited by Paul Collins
(1995; Penguin 0-14-024805-6; 235 pp; $A14.95)

Paul Collins has been editing science fiction and fantasy anthologies and novels since the 1970s, but his work has not been widely available until now. His new series of anthologies for Penguin gives him a chance to reach a wide audience of readers and to gain access to the full range of Australian writers.

Not that Penguin would ever admit that ***Strange Fruit*** is a collection of horror and fantasy stories. It is described in the introduction as a collection of 'tales of the unexpected' and stories of the 'bizarre, the unnerving, the outré'.

Strange Fruit is a collection of horror stories of various types and quality, and most of them are enjoyable.

Richard Lunn's 'Roger' is a particularly quiet, succulent story about a man whose life meant nothing until one day he saw a man in a crowd who looked exactly like himself.

Also understated, and all the more effective for that, is James McQueen's 'Holding Hands'. He tells with quiet sympathy how the understandable obsession of a plain girl who found a lover for the first and only time can lead to the story's final chilling line.

Hysterical rather than quiet, Dorothy Porter's 'The Arrows' is a brilliant variation on the old horror idea that ... No, I won't tell you. The traditional horror writer would have told the story from the viewpoint of an uninvolved observer. By telling the story from the viewpoint of people struck down unexpectedly by supernatural forces, Porter makes the reader part of the experience.

Most of the other authors in *Strange Fruit* are writers better known in the fantasy and horror field than in general Australian literature. Their contributions are just as impressive as those of the big names.

Cherry Wilder is a New Zealand writer we claim her for ours and who writes with authority about the harshness of the Australian inland. In 'Back of Beyond', the best story in *Strange Fruit*, she introduces us to psychic investigators, Mr and Mrs Mandeville, who have been asked to divine the whereabouts of the son of a squatter couple. All the omens are against the enterprise. The Mandevilles, retired, take on the task with great reluctance, and only at the insistence of Mrs Mandeville. Although the story of the quest has its own hidden horrors, the real story is hers. By presenting a story of danger hidden within danger, Wilder spins a tale of extreme tension in a wonderfully cryptic, unforgiving style.

Jack Wodhams makes 'Jade Elm', the story of an elm tree told from the viewpoint of the tree, into a tale of pathos that transcends the fantasy genre. A solitary tree hidden in a large forest can experience the whole sorry path of human history. Thanks to Paul Collins for reviving this story, which was first published in 1978.

The ghost stories written in traditional horror mode are much less interesting. I've never quite seen why a reader should proceed with a story that implies from its beginning, 'the ending of this story will be really *horrible*, so settle down and enjoy it'. Stories like Steven Paulsen's 'Old Wood' and Robert Hood's 'Peeking' are skilful enough, but a bit of a letdown after reading the rest of the collection.

Other authors appearing in *Strange Fruit* are Thomas Shapcott, Garry Disher, Morris Lurie, Michael Wilding, Nancy Cato, Rick Kennett, Kaaron Warren and Lucy Sussex. Strange fruit? Yes, but also rich, flavoursome and satisfying.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

NOMANSLAND by D. G. Compton
(1993; Gollancz 0-575- 05422-0; 286 pp.)

I had put off reading ***Nomansland*** for more than a year because its premise seemed both unoriginal and likely to produce the worst in any writer. No boy babies have been born for 40 years. Women take over the world. Oh hell! Now we would get a high dose of that elegant but ill-disguised woman-hating that appears in much science fiction.

I can imagine any dozen other SF writers treating this subject as badly as it can be treated. But D. G. Compton is not just another any dozen SF writers. I had forgotten how good a writer he can be.

Nomansland is the story of a world that is subtly different from our own. We see it through the eyes of Dr Harriet Kahn-Ryder, who in The Attrition, Year 40, believes she has found a cure for MERS (Male Embryo Rejection Syndrome). Her male boss warns her against publishing the results of her research. Why? When she rejects this suggestion that she suppress her results, a police officer named Sergeant Milhaus breaks into her house, kills her cat, and threatens to kidnap her daughter Anna if she doesn't do as she's told. Harriet and her husband Mark plan to take Anna to a safe haven and publish the research anyway.

If that little bit of melodrama were all that you could find in *Nomansland*, it would have no interest. However, large sections of the book are flashbacks that show how Harriet and her brother Daniel came to be the persons they are, and how the world came to be the way it is. The writing is not too dense, but Compton's details of human living and coping are so deftly written that they make *Nomansland* an unexpected pleasure to read.

Melodrama must have its way, of course, but even the main narrative is twisted into an unexpected shape by the presence of Harriet's very peculiar brother Daniel. Daniel does hate women. He is trained to be a soldier, a dangerous man of the most old-fashioned kind. His destiny and his sister's collide with each other at the end of the book.

Compton's own allegiances are much more subtle. He leads you to support Harriet in her desire to return the world to a balance between the sexes. And then he writes a wonderful scene in which one of the

main characters tells Harriet that for the first time in umpteen thousand years, war has disappeared from the earth. There are not enough men left to fight wars, and women are not interested.

So do we welcome the eventual triumph of Harriet's efforts? I doubt if the author does. He has created a future world that is so interesting — an odd combination of melancholy and day-to-day getting on with life — that the reader can never quite come down on one side or another.

Nomansland is a major SF novel. It will prompt you to seek out Compton's other recent, unjustly neglected novels.

A TUPOLEV TOO FAR
by Brian Aldiss
(HarperCollins 0-00-224033-5; 1993; 200 pp.)

Here's Aldiss sloughing off an older style of story-telling and discovering the approach that would emerge at its dazzling best in *The Secret of this Book*. The 'new' Aldiss can be seen best in 'Ratbird', full of wild disconnections and tropical revelations. A previous, more obviously science-fictional Aldiss can be found in 'A Day in the Life of a Galactic Empire'.

REMEMBRANCE DAY by Brian Aldiss
(1993; St Martin's Press 0-312-09370-5; 269 pp.; US$21.95)

SOMEWHERE EAST OF LIFE: ANOTHER EUROPEAN FANTASIA
by Brian Aldiss
(1994; Flamingo 0-00-225000-4; 391 pp.; $A34.95)

Brian Aldiss writes on the copy of ***Remembrance Day*** he sent me: 'This story of England and Europe in the 1980s ...' During a meeting of the Nova Mob (Melbourne's SF discussion group) during the late 1970s we decided that one of the distinctive features of Brian Aldiss's work is that in each book he manages to put his finger unerringly on the pulse of Britain and Europe at the time of writing. These regions must now be volatile, for these books are very different from each other.

Remembrance Day is a sad book about sad people. We know from the book's beginning the characters whose paths we trace will be in a particular place some time in the future when an IRA bomb will kill some of them. We don't know which characters will die. Their lives sum up the new era of quiet (or in Dominic's case, not-so-quiet) desperation in the face of falling-living-standards Thatcherism. Not that politics is mentioned much here; instead we have a sense of people whose watch springs have broken. A bizarre twist to the novel is the ferociously self-confident theorist who at the beginning and end of the novel assures anyone who will listen that there is some pattern to so-called accidental events like terrorist bomb killings; that in some way this is the inescapable fate of the particular people killed. This is hardly Aldiss speaking; instead it's both a morbid focus for the fates unfolding in front of us, and a sharp satire of it's-your-fault economic theories.

By ***Somewhere East of Life***, Europe has become voracious in its capacity for death and destruction. The publication of the novel anticipated the Chechnyan war by only a few months, and its ethos is drenched in news from the Balkans. The Europe of this novel is a nightmare, but it's a nightmare from which some people might eventually wake up, able to take control of their lives.

I confess that I find a real sticking-point in the book's structure, although none in its prose. *Somewhere East of Life* is about, among other things, a man who has had ten years of his conscious life stolen by memory pirates. A wife he married during that time disappears from his experience. Another woman has just entered it. Yet at the end of the novel he gives up the woman he loves for the woman he married, although she is still a stranger to him. I don't quite see this, although everything else in the novel falls into place.

Structured as a travelogue through central Asia, *Somewhere East of*

Life tells of Roy Brunell's attempts to find the discs that contain his pirated memories. When he finds these pieces of 'himself', he attempts to re-remember them. This bit of pure science fiction, which is also a powerful account of experimental psychology, gives us Aldiss's most effective writing since the ghost sections of *Forgotten Life*. Layers of experience are written over deeper layers. Less effective, as I say, is the ending.

The human habit of forgetting experience has become a major theme of Aldiss's novels. Why else would entire populations of the 1990s allow themselves to be plunged backwards to the nineteenth century? What next might we expect from Aldiss? A grand historical novel to show us how we came to be travelling in entirely the opposite direction from the path we should have taken?

AZTEC CENTURY by Christopher Evans
(1993; Gollancz 0-575-05540-5; 352 pp.; $A17.95)

So you want to write a science fiction novel? Here is the basic plot that you should use if you want to write an average B-grade SF thriller, which is what 95 per cent of them are.

Take one hero (male or female, but still usually a male) who battles against immense odds to do something or prevent something dreadful happening, and succeeds, despite being astonishingly stupid, silly or morally loathsome (usually all three).

Why does he (almost certainly a he) succeed? Because some benevolent person or force has set up the situation from the beginning so that Our Hero cannot possibly lose. Inevitable boring triumph. End of plot.

Why do I like Christopher Evans' ***Aztec Century***? Because its plot is the opposite of that described above.

The hero is Princess Catherine of Britain. Despite the fact that she is intelligent and resourceful, she cannot beat the Aztec forces who, after slowly taking over the world since the fifteenth century, are in the late twentieth century finally gobbling up Britain. Her family dead or captured, Catherine survives by pretending to collaborate with the Aztecs. Extepan, the Aztec governor of the newly conquered country, protects Catherine and falls in love with her. Meanwhile she does her best to help the well-hidden rebels, who believe they can rid Britain of the Aztecs.

In all those *other* SF novels, Catherine would of course find a way to perform the impossible and take back the country. She thinks she is succeeding, but is shocked to discover the actual nature of the behind-the-scenes forces when they reveal themselves. She has been set up. Without realising it, she has become a dupe of the man who wants Extepan's job. By the end of the novel, she seems to have lost her entire world, not merely her own dominion.

Not that *Aztec Century* has a morbid ending. Annoyingly, it has no real ending. This is one of the new breed of SF novels — those that could have ended satisfactorily, but have not been allowed to do so. By the end of *Aztec Century*, we still don't know what the rebels are up to, or who is really manipulating larger events. We have not even been offered the necessary ends to some of the basic threads from the plot.

Despite the unsatisfactory nature of its ending, *Aztec Century* is a first-class read, the nearest thing to Golden Age science fiction I've read for a long time.

EINSTEIN'S DREAMS by Alan Lightman
(1993; Sceptre 0-340-58925-6; 179 pp.; A$14.95)

More a fanciful essay than a story, *Einstein's Dreams* is both a blithe satire of the Swiss and a compendium of great unused science fiction ideas. A delicate, oblique style gives weight to these beautiful notions.

WARPATH by Tony Daniel
(1993; Millennium 1-85798- 076-X; 295 pp.; £14.99)

Warpath is about a planet that has been mainly settled by those people we today called Native Americans. Technology is here, but it's the technology of magic. The first half of the book tells of a convincing amalgam of traditional values and interstellar hanky-panky. When war is declared, magic takes over entirely. The result is one of those loony phantasmagorias that one only finds in science fiction. There are sections towards the end of the book where I defy anybody to tell me what is going on. *Warpath* is not very convincing, but it is enjoyable for much of its length.

BRITISH FANTASY

THE HOLLOWING by Robert Holdstock
(1993; HarperCollins 0-246-13834-3; 314 pp.; $A32.95)

Take the twentieth century's most attractive unprovable theory — Jung's theory that we contain within our minds humanity's collective experience in the form of 'archetypes' that occasionally show themselves in our most vivid dreams. Make this theory come to life. Give it a playground. Give us Robert Holdstock's Ryhope Wood.

Holdstock introduced Ryhope Wood in his novel *Mythago Wood*. A small patch of undeveloped forest lies somewhere in the middle of England. People who enter the wood are forced to become explorers. Go for a stroll in the woods and you cannot leave it. Enter the wood and you find yourself hacking your way through trackless forest, attacked by violent primitive people. When you leave the wood, you find that years have passed in the outside world.

In short, the wood becomes the adventure playground of the Jungian unconscious of the people who enter it. Explorers meet Robin Hood, the Argonauts, or King Arthur's knights. These archetypes or 'mythagos' are not the neat little cutout characters of Disney films, but sweaty, stupid, murderous thugs.

The Hollowing is the fourth book set in Ryhope Wood. The main character is a child whose mind has been captured and absorbed by the fabric of the forest. When his father seeks his son, he finds nothing but the defences that the boy's mind has created. *The Hollowing* is a powerful tale, but its fascination is the way in which it adds to our knowledge of our geography of the territory. And the geography of the territory is language itself.

Holdstock's novels avoid the tired procedures of all those endless heroic fantasy series that clog the bookshelves. Those other series are designed to comfort their readers; Holdstock's fantasies terrify and disturb us. Yet the disturbance is not merely in the rather chaotic events that afflict the characters; the star attraction is the author's astonishing power of invention. 'Each hill hid a giant,' he writes, 'whose movement was reflected in cloud shadow. Each woodland stirred as creatures rode through the hollow trunks, inhabiting a world out of sight behind the bark. All rocks watched us with eyes behind the cracks and holes formed from frost and rain and water.'

Suspend your disbelief. Put on your sou'wester, fill your backpack, pull on your stoutest boots, and set off into Ryhope Wood.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

THE REDISCOVERY OF MAN: THE COMPLETE SHORT SCIENCE FICTION OF CORDWAINER SMITH
edited by James A. Mann
(1993; NESFA Press 0-915368-56-0; 671 pp.; US$24.95/$A39.95)

NORSTRILIA by Cordwainer Smith
(1994 (1975); NESFA Press 0-915368-61-7; 249 pp.; US$20.95/$A29.95)

If I were forced to pick one Desert Island Volume of science fiction,

the ‘Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith’ would have to be a top contender. (I’d also have to have *Hothouse*, and one or two Philip Dick novels, and *Fundamental Disch* . . .)

Look through ***The Rediscovery of Man*** and you find these first lines:

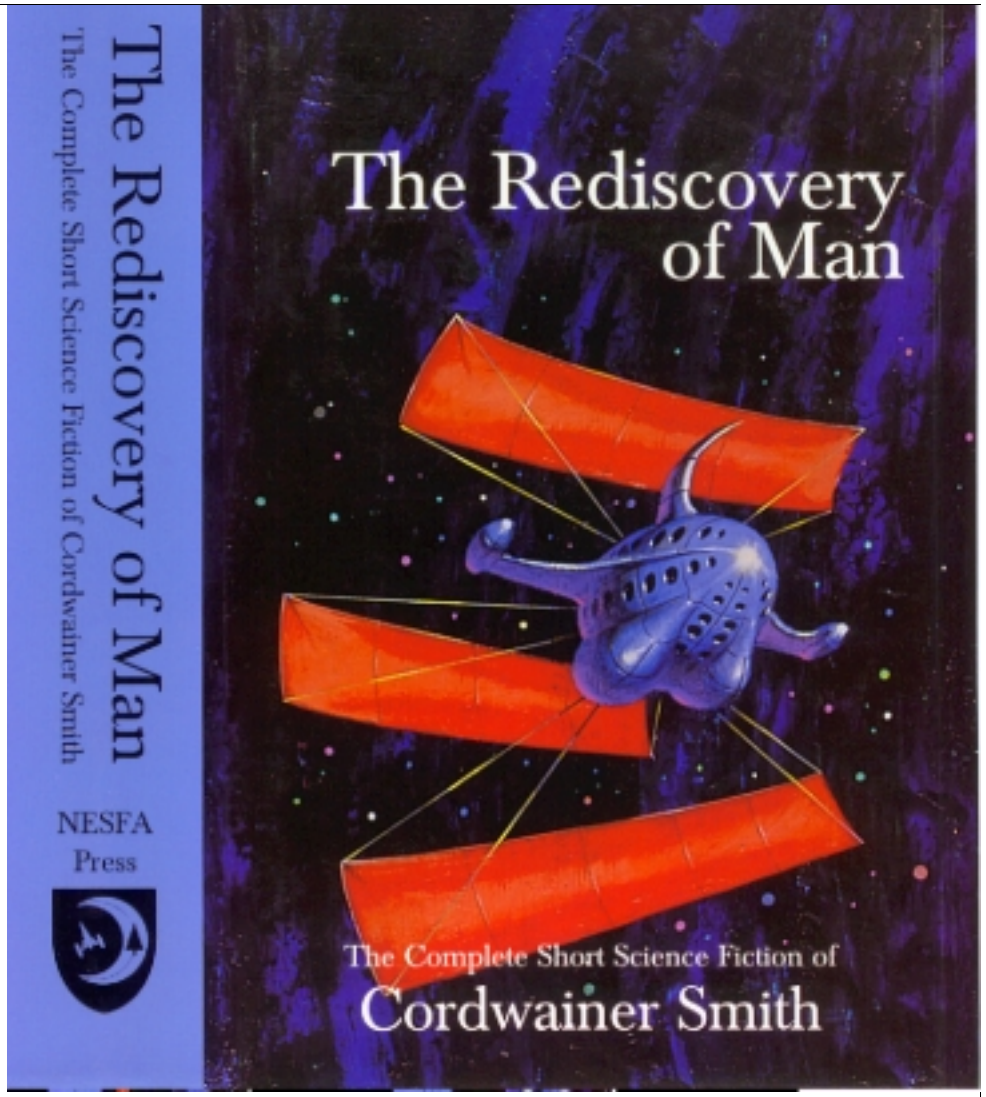
- ‘The story ran — how did the story run?’ (‘The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*’)
- ‘Pinlighting is a hell of a way to earn a living.’ (‘The Game of Rat and Dragon’)
- ‘Do not read this story; turn the page quickly. The story may upset you. Anyhow, you probably know it already.’ (‘The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal’)

and best of all:

- ‘You already know the end — the immense drama of the Lord Jestocost, seventh of his line, and how the cat-girl C’mell initiated the vast conspiracy. But you do not know the beginning ...’ (‘The Dead Lady of Clown Town’)

Which are more resonant — the first lines or the titles of the stories themselves?

Norstrilia is too broken-backed and odd to add up to much of a novel, but bits of it have their own strong magic. This edition has been reset, and I haven’t had time to compare the text with the Ballantine/Gollancz text. Since the novel and the book of short stories add up to everything ‘Cordwainer Smith’ published, you must have them. But wouldn’t it be good to have all of Paul Linebarger’s other books as well?



AMERICAN FANTASY

'THE GHOSTS' by Lord Dunsany
(Creative Education Inc. 0-88682-494-X; 1993; 31 pp.)

This is a very short story to which Creative Education have given sumptuous illustrations and a large type face. Dick Jenssen lent it to us to prove how useful mathematics can be in a difficult situation. I assume that the story itself turns up in Dunsany collections.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

UNITED STATES: ESSAYS 1952–1992 by Gore Vidal
(1993; Andre Deutsch 0-233-98832-7; 1295 pp.; £25/$A59.95)

This giant book demands a Major Review, which I don't have time to give it. Such a review would best be done by quoting Vidal's sharpest *bon mots*. Since almost every page includes a cracker, such a list would add up to hundreds of pages. Collectively, the essays in ***United States*** have three main propositions: that, in building a Roman-style empire since 1900, the USA has destroyed its pretensions to democracy, impoverished a high percentage of its population, and become a pain in the arse for the rest of the world; that the main method of enslaving or annoying ordinary Americans has been to use the country's law-enforcement facilities to put in jail people whose morals offend those in power ('victimless crime'), instead of prosecuting the true criminals, who run much of the country's economic activity; and that Americans should (a) read instead of watching TV or movies; and (b) should read for pleasure instead of reading authors such as Thomas Pynchon who (according to Vidal) write books to be taught in university not read for pleasure. Gore Vidal obviously counts SF, fantasy and children's literature as reading pleasures: *United States* includes long essays on 'The Oz Books', 'E. Nesbit's Magic', 'Tarzan Revisited' and 'Lessing's Science Fiction'. He mentions Le Guin favourably, but has not yet written a long essay on her work.

1994

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

ALIEN SHORES: AN ANTHOLOGY OF AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION
edited by Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch
(1994; Aphelion 1-875346-09-0; 603 pp.; $A19.95/US$15/£7.50)

METAWORLDS: BEST AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION
edited by Paul Collins
(1994; Penguin 0-14-023766-6; 220 pp.; $A14.95)

As I recall, *Alien Shores* and *Metaworlds* appeared within a few months of each other in 1994, and therefore tended to be confused with each other. They inspired some hope in the Australian SF community, and an equal amount of cynicism. We've been seeing the promise of a continuing Australian SF industry; it wasn't clear in 1994 that these anthologies, combined with the buoyancy of the new magazines *Eidolon* and *Aurealis*, did make it possible to talk about 'Australian SF' at last.

Alien Shores contains both new and reprinted stories. The presence of reprinted stories obscures the fact that this project began as an original fiction anthology to be edited by Jeff Harris. If it had appeared as scheduled in 1989 or 1990, it might have been too early. The revamped book, edited by McNamara and Winch, came at just the right time.

The major reprints include Greg Egan's 'The Caress', a haunting combination of art, science and obsession. It's my favourite of his short stories, and it keeps being reprinted. In *Alien Shores* you will also find Damien Broderick's 'The Magi', which also keeps reappearing in unexpected places.

It's hard to pick favourites among the stories that are new to *Alien*

Shores. The most memorable is Leanne Frahm's 'Land's End', a fitting companion piece to her earlier 'On the Turn'. Here the ocean is not rushing away from the land; the land is rushing forward to meet the ocean. A vivid apocalyptic drama, all the more effective for its compactness (20 pages).

Also memorable, if more explanatory than dramatic, is Sean McMullen's 'The Miocene Arrow', one of two stories that help to explain the world of his two published novels. (The other McMullen story necessary for reading his novels is 'An Empty Wheelhouse' in *Metaworlds*.)

Shane Dix's aquatic SF adventure 'Through the Waters that Bind' sits side by side with Lucy Sussex's 'Kay & Phil', a literary hallucination about alternate pasts that didn't take place, but might well have. 'Kay & Phil' has already won international recognition when reprinted in *The Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women*.

Other major stories include Paul Voermans' 'My Sister, Cristeta, Who Is Magic' (named by one *SFC* correspondent as his favourite Australian SF story ever), Wynne Whiteford's 'Jubilee' and Stephen Dedman's 'Desired Dragons'.

Metaworlds contains no new stories, and therefore might be seen as Penguin's contribution to a line of 'Best of Australian SF' books, mainly published by Angus & Robertson, that began with John Baxter's *Pacific Books* of the late 1960s. Collins's collection includes such favourites as Greg Egan's 'Learning to Be Me' (already a classic by 1994), David Lake's 'Re-deem the Time' and Rosaleen Love's 'The Total Devotion Machine'.

New to me when I read *Metaworlds* were Sean McMullen's 'An Empty Wheelhouse' (already mentioned) and George Turner's 'I Still Call Australia Home' which, like all of Turner's short stories, demanded a novel based on its theme. That novel is *Genetic Soldier*. Perhaps the most impressive story in the collection is Dirk Strasser's 'Waiting for the Rain', a convincing tale about becoming alien.

When writing about books like these I feel constrained to make generalisations about the nature of Australian SF. I don't feel up to offering any. Many contributors adopt an Australian chatty voice. Of the authors whose voices are more distinctive, only a few are represented in these collections. Philippa Maddern and Petrina Smith, Australia's two SF writers who write the best prose, don't appear in either volume. Many of these authors appear regularly in overseas magazines and books, but I doubt if non-Australians notice the elevated state of Australian SF. These are enjoyable collections, with few duds; what more can one say? Read them.

THE PATTERNMAKER edited by Lucy Sussex
(1994; Omnibus Books 1-86291-208-4; 164 pp.)

THE LOTTERY edited by Lucy Sussex
(1994; Omnibus Books 1-86291-209-2; 164 pp.)

In editing ***The Patternmaker*** and ***The Lottery*** for Omnibus Books, Lucy Sussex steps blithely through that old problem of categorisation. Officially these books should be placed on the Young Adults shelf.

She has selected a few stories, such as Sean McMullen's 'The Blondefire Genome' (*The Lottery*), that are aimed very much at 'teenagers' concerns' — in this case, sex and envy of another's success. The resulting story sits uncomfortably, since both its main characters seem like an adult's idea of Typical Teenagers.

She provides a necessary balance with a story such as Greg Egan's 'The Walk' (*The Patternmaker*). Neither of the two characters is a teenager, and the author has not softened the moral and existential implications of his central idea. Even by Egan's standards, this is a brutal story.

A story that also brushes aside categories is Michael Pryor's 'Home Free' (*The Patternmaker*). This is one of those rareties in SF: a funny story. Its characters are not teenagers, but it has a loopy, gentle, meandering humour that is both sweet and sharp.

I had heard that the two collections, *The Patternmaker* and *The Lottery*, were meant to be two halves of one project. When searching for examples of stories, I find myself dipping more often into *The Patternmaker* than *The Lottery*. For me, the former is a better collection than the latter.

In particular, *The Patternmaker* features 'One Last Zoom at the Buzz Bar', my favourite story from the two collections. Alison M. Goodman combines drug addiction, time travel, murder, and the fate of a feisty teenager into a mixture of great zest and originality. This is a welcome addition to the literature of time-travel paradox; it should have turned up in one of the 'Year's Best SF' anthologies.

Forget that these books are designed for a specific market. Lucy Sussex's own 'The Lottery' is an elegant time-paradox parable that could appeal as much to the readers of *New Scientist* as to those of *Pursuit*. Sam Sejavka's 'The Fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge and Good and Evil' (*The Patternmaker*) might well become the inspiration for a Nick Cave song lyric. Dave Luckett's 'The Patternmaker' is a memorable mind-teaser.

Other contributors are Gillian Rubinstein, Dirk Strasser, Leanne Frahm, Brian Casell, Gary Crew, Rick Kennett, Isobelle Carmody, Mustafa Zahirovic ('Everything', a hairy, visionary piece that will attract many readers to this new writer), Sean Williams, Paul Voermans and Sophie Masson.

GENETIC SOLDIER by George Turner
(1994; AvoNova 0- 688-13418-1; 403 pp.; $A32.95)

If ***Genetic Soldier*** had been George Turner's last published novel, it would have been a major achievement to end on. Many of Turner's preoccupations are on show here — his major character, real name Atkins's Thomas, is baldly called Soldier — but so are all his strengths.

When a spaceship full of humans return to Earth, they expect a big welcome. Finding a planet emptied to only a few hundred thousand people, they claim a spot near the old Melbourne and settle there. Earth's new population, altered genetically during the years after the collapse of Civilisation As We Know It, tell the old terrestrials to hop it. They find ways to carry out their threats. Soldier is caught in the middle. Only he realises that the new human genetic code, designed to prevent the events of the twenty-first century from recurring, confers specific weaknesses on terrestrials in general, and a death sentence on Soldier in particular.

I say no more, since this is narrative writing of a high order. Turner appears to be merely ambling between characters during the book's first half; in fact, he's preparing the solid skeleton on which he hangs the rest of the book. Turner's world set-up is original and fascinating, yet it's the tension between his main characters that one remembers most clearly from the book. The very last scene, added between the time when I read the manuscript and when I read the published book, is George Turner's single best piece of writing.

PERMUTATION CITY by Greg Egan
(1994; Millennium 1- 85798-175-8; 310 pp.; $A19.95 tpb/
1995; Millennium 1-85798- 218-5; 310 pp.; $A12.95 pb)

This is a hard slog, even for an Egan fan such as me. Egan's images for the main characters' ideal city seem to be unoriginal and hardly worth exploring, while the splintering of viewpoints destroys most of one's interest in the story. For some other reader, the ideas and images might congeal into illuminating metaphors; for me, they just congeal.

VOICES IN THE NIGHT by Sean McMullen
(1994; Aphelion 1-875346-10-4; 306 pp.; $A12.95)

MIRROR SUN RISING by Sean McMullen
(1995; Aphelion 1-875346-14-7; 332 pp.; $A14.95)

These two books add up to one novel. It's hardly perfect, but it's

original and vivid, and the characters have a sit-up-and-take-notice-of-me quality which is unusual for this sort of narrative. In a far-future Australia, people have rebuilt a non-electronic civilisation, despite the difficulties of working with such technology and the fact that they are confined to the interior of the Australian continent. This is a story of a society in change, but I liked best the accounts of the society before it began to change.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

THE HITCH HIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY by Douglas Adams
(1994 (1979); Millennium 1-85798-201-0; 178 pp.; £4.99)

THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE by Douglas Adams
(1994 (1980); Millennium 1-85798-208-0; 196 pp.; £4.99)

LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING by Douglas Adams
(1994 (1982); Millennium 1-85798-209-6; 184 pp.; £4.99)

'Space is big. Really big. You just won't believe how vastly hugely mindbogglingly big it is. I mean you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist, but that's just peanuts to space.' Douglas Adams is as now as much part of the language as Shakespeare and Lewis Carroll. Open up these presentation editions (smaller-than-paperback hardbacks) of the 'Hitch Hikers Guide' series and you find one of your favourite quotes — whether you heard it first during the radio series, saw it on TV, or read it in earlier editions of the books.

'What are you supposed to do,' says Marvin, 'if you *are* a manically depressed robot?' Go to the end of the universe, then back again, guided by the Junior Woodchucks' Manual to Eternity, the *Hitch Hikers' Guide to the Universe*. Are these books science fiction? They owe much to a whole fleet of SF writers, especially Robert Sheckley. Are they fantasy? Only in a most philosophical and speculative way. Are they still fun? Yes, although they were much more fun when I first heard them on radio more than 15 years ago.

NEW WORLDS 4
edited by David Garnett
(1994; Gollancz 0-575-05147-7; 223 pp.; $A19.95)

Garnett does much beating of breast in introducing this, the last of the current series of ***New Worlds***, complaining of the failure of the public to support noble enterprises. The trouble with this argument is that Garnett has a keen eye for the concrete-booted story: drop it in front of us and it sinks without trace. Only one story here, Lisa Tuttle's 'And the Poor Get Children', has much going for it, unless you count Elizabeth Sourbut's 'The Last Phallic Symbol', a raspberry to what many men see as the feminist movement. Most of the other stories are unreadable British attempts at cyberpunk.

BRITISH FANTASY

GOING INTO A DARK HOUSE by Jane Gardam
Abacus 0-349-10661-4; 1994; 183 pp.)

MISSING THE MIDNIGHT by Jane Gardam
(Abacus 0-349- 11017-4; 1997; 181 pp.)

I can't describe how good these stories are, or how finely pitched is Jane Gardam's style. She's one of those great authors who leaves out everything but the essentials, then leaves out some of the essentials, or at least enough to make stories intriguing and uncomfortable in their implications. The best story in both volumes is 'Zoo-Zoo' (from *Going into a Dark House*), an anarchic trip with an old nun who meets a lion, and much else besides. This story includes some of the best-written paragraphs I've ever read. Gardam is particularly good at ghost stories that are not quite ghost stories, such as 'Old Filth', 'Dead Children' and 'The Meeting House'.

BRITISH GRAPHIC NOVELS

THE TRAGICAL COMEDY OR COMICAL TRAGEDY OF MR PUNCH: A ROMANCE by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean
(1994; VG Graphics 0-575-05318-6; unnumbered pages; £8.99)

TRAPPED by Dean Koontz, Anthony Bilau and Edward Gorman
(1992; EclipseGraphicNovels 0-586-21753-3; unnumbered pages; $A16.95)

MIRACLEMAN: THE GOLDEN AGE by Neil Gaiman and Mark Buckingham
(1993; EclipseGraphicNovels 0-586-21754-1; 158 pp.; $A19.95)

DRAGONFLIGHT by Anne McCaffrey, Lela Dowling, Cynthia Martin, Fred Von Tobel and Brynne Stephens
(1993; EclipseGraphicNovels 0-586-21752-5; unnumbered pages; $A17.95)

I felt deeply guilty when I received these 'graphic novels' for review. I stopped reading comic books when I was twelve, and I've never started again. I don't have much eye for artwork. I really would much rather read these stories as bunches of words — except for *Dragonflight*, which I suspect I once did attempt to read.

These books do start out as pieces of conventional fiction. In Neil Gaiman's case, he starts them out as very good pieces of fiction. What happens to them at graphic novel level can vary. ***Mr Punch*** is a highly experimental art item, full of photographs, collage, and wonderfully Gothic up-to-date colour panels. It's a pity that the graphic novel version is a bit too wordy; Dave McKean is an artist who should have been allowed to carry a lot more of Gaiman's meaning.

I don't even know where the graphic novel phenomenon started. I received only one of Gollancz's series before the firm cut me from its review copy list. I received three from HarperCollins. I suspect that HarperCollins's 'EclipseGraphicNovels' series started the British trend and Gollancz followed with its decidedly upmarket books.

The artwork in the three books from EclipseGraphicNovels looks much more like conventional comics art than that in *Mr Punch*.

Mark Buckingham's work for ***Miracleman: The Golden Age*** has some fine pages, and is even experimental within the rigid confines of the comic book's visual grammar. But grammar rules.

The artwork for ***Trapped*** and ***Dragonflight*** is just conventional: well enough coloured and executed, but adding nothing to the original stories.

About the only conclusion I can make after looking at these books is that if you're not at least as good an artist as Dave McKean, don't muck around with good fiction. Why stop here? Publish 'graphic novels' as £50 art objects with embossed gold leaf covers and make some money on them. Maybe somebody's already done this.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

THE BOOK ON THE EDGE OF FOREVER
by Christopher Priest
(1994; Fantagraphics; 56 pp.; $A12.95)

I read the first version of Christopher Priest's enquiry into the non-appearance of Harlan Ellison's anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions* in the last issue of Priest's fanzine *Deadloss* (1987). When that fanzine went on line, its story gradually became the text of this book-length edition, handsomely produced by Fantagraphics Books of Seattle.

Christopher Priest has proved to be a polemicist of 'Swiftian restraint' (Brian Aldiss, quoted on p. 49) and deadliness, taking his cues from Harlan Ellison's sometimes violent over-reactions to (a) authors

removing their stories from *The Last Dangerous Visions* (its first stories bought over 40 years ago; more than 25 of its contributors have died); and (b) people such as Priest who question Ellison's locking up of a vast store of unpublished stories. A rich vein of straight-faced humour underlies many of these pages, which are strengthened by Priest's remorseless research and willingness to engage with the underlying issues behind Ellison's actions.

In the end, however, Christopher Priest and his correspondents have not been able to shift the mountain of Ellison's real psychological difficulties. There has even been a cessation of the perennial announcement of *The Last Dangerous Visions* being sold to yet another publisher. Ellison and Priest may have suffered in quite different ways (according to rumour, several American authors have been ordered by Ellison to attack Priest physically), but in the end the permanent losers are the authors, the contributors to *LDV* who have seen examples of their work lie mouldering in a file somewhere for decade upon decade.

AMERICAN FANTASY

FROM THE TEETH OF ANGELS by Jonathan Carroll
(1994; Doubleday 0-385-46841-5; 212 pp.; $US22/$A32.95)

From the Teeth of Angels is Jonathan Carroll's best novel since *The Land of Laughs*, his first novel. It has a modest structure that works much better than the baroque castles of many of his recent novels. A person suffers from a mysterious fate, one that will certainly kill him. A woman meets the love of her life, and finds out the terrifying truth about her lover. In the process they, the readers, and, I suspect, Carroll discover something about Life that they had never before suspected. From what seems a gloomy tale one carries away an unexpectedly elated feeling. Not that there's much reassurance; it's just Jonathan Carroll telling us again that the world is much stranger that we can ever imagine.

AMERICAN HORROR

LITTLE DEATHS: 24 TALES OF HORROR AND SEX
edited by Ellen Datlow
(1994; hb Millennium 1-85798-014-X; 454 pp.; £16.99/$A39.95
pb 1994; Millennium 1-85798-254-1; 454 pp.; £5.99?$A12.95)

I've met Ellen Datlow. She doesn't seem to be a genius. Just your ordinary average American bright cookie who does deals and promotes fabulously successful anthologies.

But it takes some sort of genius to extract from authors the stories that Ellen Datlow receives for her anthologies. I can't even guess what kind of proposal she put to the people who appear in ***Little Deaths***. Given the slightest chance, most SF authors will plump for the fattest, most obvious cliché and hit it until they've beaten the pulp out of it. Not so in *Little Deaths*. It's almost as if the only note that Datlow gave these people was 'Be original, you bastards, be original!'

The connection between the horror story and the erotic story is so obvious that there have been umpteen collections of sexy horror stories (or horrible sex stories). But in most of the other collections sex = violence = horror = death. Datlow has persuaded her authors to delete the violence. In most of the *Little Deaths* stories, the connections are tenuous and bent, and so are the stories.

In her Introduction, Datlow claims Stephen Dedman's 'The Lady of Situations', the first story in the book 'is erotic and deeply disturbing yet has no onstage violence'. But Dedman's story, which is memorable, is also the least accessible metaphor in the book. I still don't know what he's on about, except that this is a brilliant extrapolation of an old SF idea: what would it be like to have total eidetic memory? (Oliver Sacks speculates about problems like this, but he doesn't come up with Dedman's solution.)

Lucy Taylor's 'Hungry Skin' is a great story because its central metaphor (a frigid woman's fascination for a sexy statue) works in an intricate way, and because the main character can in no way be described as the innocent sufferer of unwarranted torture. (Which is, after all, what most pot-boiler horror is about: torturing innocent people.) The main character welcomes her fate; we accede in this welcoming process, even while guessing her fate. Lucy Taylor is Someone To Watch.

Nicola Griffith's 'Yaguara' is a homoerotic tale about two women trying to survive in the Central American jungle, but that doesn't make any the less jungly or erotic. On the other hand, M. John Harrison's hetero tale 'Isabel Avens Returns to Stepney in the Spring' is so twisted and offbeat that you wonder what it's doing here at all. Great story; but what *did* Ellen Datlow say to her authors to garner pieces as diverse as 'Yaguara' and 'Isabel Avens'?

Lucius Shepard's 'The Last Time' seems to include everything that's luscious about the best of the rest of the stories, yet has a mad magic of its own. There have been plenty of stories and novels about sexual obsession, but Shepard finds an image that distils the experience of *sexual* obsession. (Most Western fiction assumes that a person could not get worked up about sex itself, and therefore sexual obsession must be about something else.)

Don't buy the American edition in preference to the UK edition. *Locus* reports that several of the best stories, including the Shepard, have been dropped, and only one (a new Simmons) added.

1995

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

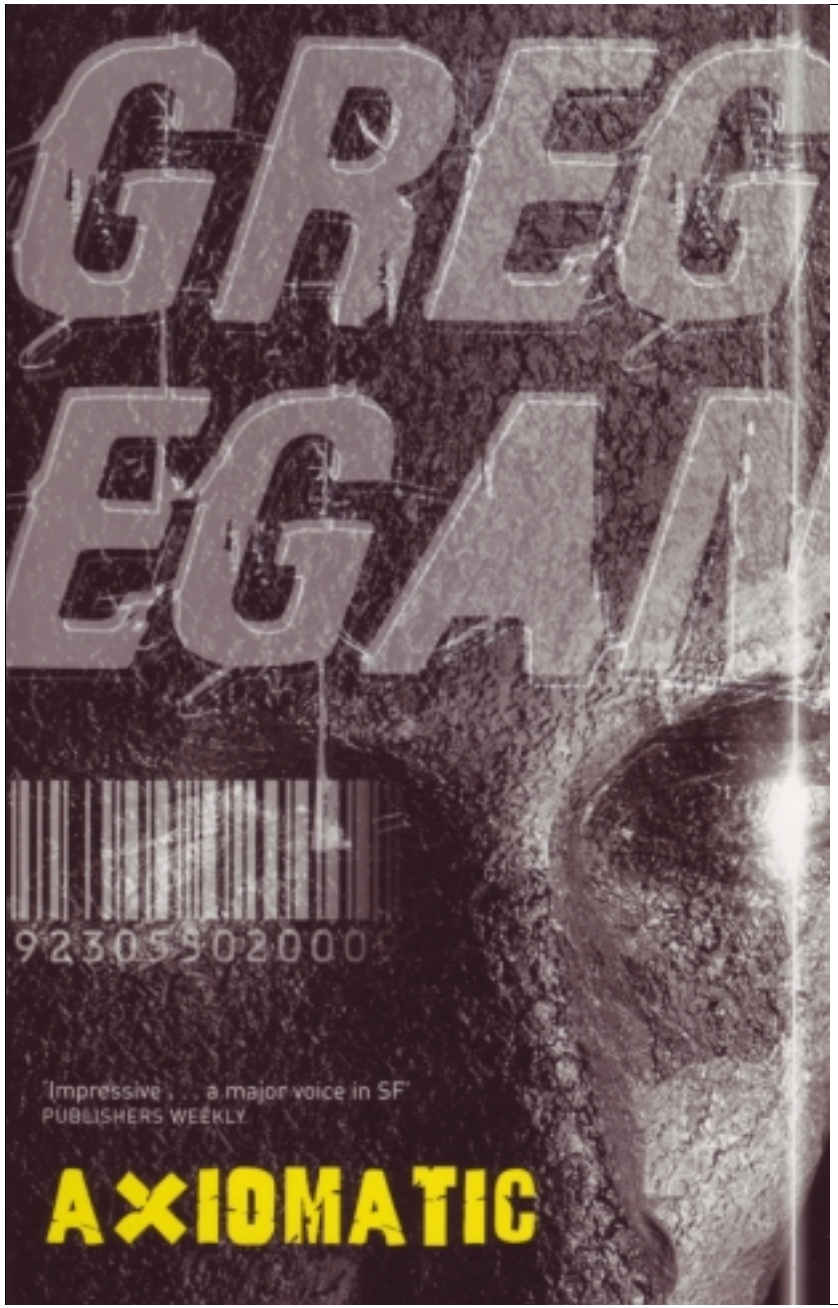
AXIOMATIC by Greg Egan
(1995; Millennium 1-85798- 281-9; 289 pp.; $A34.95 hb/$A19.95 pb)

For more than twenty years science fiction has broadly been divided between 'speculative fables', well written but a bit wispy in content, and 'hard SF stories', which have some scientific basis but are usually atrociously written. In his first short- story collection, *Axiomatic*, Greg Egan plants two giant fictional feet between these groups. His stories are based on the most interesting current scientific notions, and they are very well written.

Not that Egan adopts the fancier curlicues of literary style that we find in the work of, say, Ursula Le Guin or Thomas Disch. His style is blunt and unadorned, but he scorns the forest of technical over-writing that spoils the work of people such as Greg Bear and Greg Benford. He puts no obstacles between the reader and the story; one can only hope that his style sets an example for many followers.

Not that Egan's style would be of interest unless he had something to tell us. Here's a writer whose whole life and energy are devoted to ideas and an adequate method of setting them down on paper. They start out as scientific ideas, often those discussed last week in *New Scientist*. But a scientific idea always transmutes into ideas about his characters, about us the readers, about us the world society.

Take 'Axiomatic', the title story of this collection. Egan begins with the same idea with which he began his novel *Quarantine*. Soon we will be able to buy software brain implants as a direct form of virtual reality. When installed, the ideas or impressions implanted in our minds will become part of our personalities. In turn, this will invalidate



many of our current notions of 'personality'. The protagonist implants himself with the ability to override all moral guilt. We watch as he watches himself, not only waiting for the moment when the implant works, but waiting to see whether or not he can detect whether it has worked. Mystery within mystery, giving the story enormous tension.

Similar ideas are explored in some other stories in the collection. 'I was six years old when my parents told me that there was a small, dark jewel inside my skull, learning to be me.' In this fable ('Learning To Be Me'), beginning just off the edge of current technology, an artificial brain inside one's skull takes over all functions of a person, and gives that person effective immortality. But what is actually made immortal? One's original personality, or a personality that steadily diverges from the original? You'll wake up in the middle of the night trying to solve the corollaries of this story.

Egan's mind is so fertile that sometimes it seems as scary as an overgrown jungle. In 'A Kidnapping', a man's wife is not kidnapped, but a virtual reality simulacrum of his wife. Despite the fact that the crime is not, according to today's standards, a real crime, Egan takes us inexorably on a path that shows us the reality of the crime. And all in 15 pages!

Egan is, on the surface, showing us something simple: that because of the rapidly changing nature of electronic information, we will shortly not know who we are. This is not just a metaphysical problem, but a rigidly practical problem that will drive us all crazy. Yet Egan never *says* anything as simplistic as this; he expresses his ideas in strictly fictional ideas, and leaves those little fictions to go off like bombs inside our minds.

Egan does not always stick to feasible notions. He makes mincemeat of some wonderfully over-the-top notions. In 'The Safe-Deposit Box', my favourite story, a man wakes up every day in the body of a different person. He has done this all his life. Fortunately, most of the people who unwittingly play host to him live within one city. By

accident, the man discovers a sort of explanation for his plight, but the explanation is more bizarre than the plight itself.

In 'The Infinite Assassin', the main character can flicker between alternate realities. An old science fiction idea, but Egan's presentation of it is original. The same can be said for 'Into Darkness'. Old idea: an alien artifact appears at random on earth, playing havoc with human society. Egan's approach is original, as he shows his main character trying to survive within one of the artifacts.

Axiomatic is a satisfying meal for anyone who loves ideas for their own sake. We are the victims of the ideas we take for granted. In *Axiomatic*'s stories, Greg Egan takes nothing for granted.

OUR LADY OF CHERNOBYL by Greg Egan
(1995: MirrorDanse 0-646-23230-4; 111 pp.; $A9.95)

Our Lady of Chernobyl is a well-produced chapbook of four more Greg Egan stories for those of us who believe that *Axiomatic* should have been much heftier. 'Our Lady of Chernobyl' is the best of the four. Where, still, is 'The Extra', or 'Dust'?

SHE'S FANTASTICAL
edited by Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich
(1995; Sybylla 0-708205-12-0; 260 pp.; $A22.95)

She's Fantastical is subtitled 'The First Anthology of Australian Women's Speculative Fiction, Magical Realism and Fantasy'. Why the need for an anthology of the particular contributions of women to these fields? Surely most of the best Australian SF and fantasy short stories of the last twenty years have been written by women?

That's what I thought. Unfortunately, a recent anthology of Australian science fiction contained only one woman author! Another giant anthology contained only a few women contributors. Here's one field where a bit of evening-up is in order.

Not that Lucy Sussex and Judith Raphael Buckrich are mere 'eveners-up'. Each is a noted author and editor. They've put together an anthology that works completely as an entity, rather than merely as an example of something-or-other.

From the striking, iconic cover to the high-quality paper and distinctive typefaces, *She's Fantastical* sets a standard that other anthologies will be struggling to match. It is a collection of stories and poems newly written, plus a small selection of earlier pieces (three from late last century and two from mid-century). Ursula Le Guin writes the Foreword, concentrating on the similarity between science fiction and women's fiction as 'outcast genres', 'a rebel's mode'.

From a collection of major accomplishments I can merely choose favourite items.

Philippa C. Maddern, for instance, has been a dazzling figure in the Australian SF and fantasy field ever since her debut in 1976, but she's had little time to write during recent years. Full marks to the editors for persuading her to contribute 'Not With Love', a tense thriller that suggests, through the experiences of a small number of characters trapped on a space station, enormous changes happening to the Earth to which they are marginally connected. Who are these people? Which of them is male and which female? (Maddern destroys that distinction without reducing their vividness as characters.) During a visit from Earth, the main character is given only a few minutes to find out the real nature of his (or her?) existence.

Aching ambiguity is the theme of two of my other favourite stories in the collection.

In Yvonne Rousseau's 'Possum Lover' the main character tells us she is a were-possum, and unravels just how difficult that situation might make life for someone.

In Petrina Smith's 'Angel Thing', the inhabitants of a remote farm must come to terms with a visitor who might be an 'angel thing' or (perhaps) an alien landed on earth or (more probably) a failed experiment from a research establishment. It matters not. The angel is the true human; its persecutors become the aliens. Tense story-telling from from one of my favourite writers.

Whoever your favourite Australian female writer, she's likely to be in here somewhere. Contributions from Carmel Bird, Isobelle Carmody, Maurilia Meehan and Alison Goodman seem well done but a bit quixotic for my taste. Ania Walwicz ('Flight') is almost incomprehensible when read, but when she performed her poem at the book's launch I found it very effective.

The most surprising item is a small section from the beginning of M. Barnard Eldershaw's 1947 novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. I've had this book on the shelf ever since Britain's Virago Press issued it a few years ago in the first complete edition. *She's Fantastical* sent me straight to the shelf. Thanks, Lucy Sussex and Judith Buckrich, for alerting me to one of the great Australian novels.

More favourites? I'm not sure whether Nadia Wheatley's 'Widow Wilberforce and the Lyrebird' is a complete success, but it contains the finest prose in the book ('At night, bushrats came into the pantry ... and every morning there'd be a trail of crumbs and havoc'). Sue Isle, by comparison, is a writer of plain prose but an excellent story-teller. If you like a memorable tale, read 'A Sky Full of Ravens'.

Editor Lucy Sussex reserves the best joke for herself. After Henrietta Dugdale's nineteenth-century piece of prophecy 'A Few Hours in a Far-off Age' she includes her own 'A Tour Guide in Utopia' about a nineteenth-century Australian woman writer who actually gains a glimpse of the late twentieth century.

I hope that Sussex and Buckrich can go on to other anthologies: a giant compendium of all the major SF and fantasy stories by Australian women writers, for instance, or an annual *She's Fantastical*. Able writers are out there waiting for recognition.

DISTRESS by Greg Egan
(1995; Millennium 1-85798-286-X; 343 pp.; $A32.95)

Distress should have won the Arthur Clarke Award, but wasn't nominated. It is a series of dramatic metaphors loosely connected by a plot. The first metaphor in the novel is that of the man who dies, is revived very briefly, and in that moment realises the full horror of his own mortality. The book's other vivid metaphor is that of the island that is made of living matter; the main character descends through the middle of the island, as it dissolves into its constituent living particles. The Theory of Everything, which seems to be the main point of the novel, is shown to be a McGuffin; the main character's experiences during his stay on the mid-Indian Ocean island give him a small key to understanding. A novel that carries echoes of Benford and Bear proves to be a refutation of everything they stand for.

THE MEMORY CATHEDRAL: A SECRET HISTORY OF LEONARDO DA VINCI by Jack Dann
(1995; Bantam 0-553-09637-0; 487 pp.; $A32.95)

In writing a novel that seems to account for Leonardo da Vinci's adventures during four years that are lost to historians, Jack Dann has avoided the temptation to write a Moorcock-style SF or fantasy novel. Instead he has attempted to recreate the contradictory chaos of Renaissance Italy, and later the sixteenth-century Ottoman and Arab world.

We know that many of Leonardo's inventions might have been built if somebody had had the money and vision to do so. When Leonardo falls foul of nearly everybody in Italy (this process is the most interesting section of the novel) he finds himself whisked off to help found a new empire based on his inventions. Most other SF writers would have made this into a wish-dream narrative; instead Jack Dann constructs an interpersonal labyrinth of betrayal and counter-betrayal. Despite all the adventures and derring-do, ***The Memory Cathedral*** is about trying to remain humane within a dehumanised world. It's a great yarn as well.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

DARK HOUSE edited by Gary Crew
(1995; Mammoth/Reed 1-86330-455-X; 264 pp.; $A9.95)

The weak stories in ***Dark House***, which aimed at the young adult market, stick too closely to the conventions of the horror or young adult genres. Only Arnold Zable's 'Beyond Night' escapes the limitations altogether; it's a major Australian short story. Other four-star stories are David McRobbie's 'Album', Jenny Pausacker's 'The Princess in the Tower', Carmel Bird's 'The Conservatory' and Isobelle Carmody's 'A Splinter of Darkness'.

CROSSTOWN TRAFFIC
edited by Stuart Coupe, Julie Ogden and Robert Hood
(Five Islands Press/Mean Streets Magazine; 229 pages; $16.95)

Australian fiction publishing often seems like an inverted triangle: heavyweight literary fiction at the top, trying to make ends meet by balancing on the tiny tip of popular fiction at the bottom. In other publishing centres, the triangle is the other way up: popular fiction pays the bills while literary fiction provides the glamour.

Crosstown Traffic is a new anthology that thumbs its nose at the old assumptions about Australian fiction. It is an enthusiastic celebration of genre fiction, produced by the editors of the exciting *Mean Streets* magazine.

Better still, it is a celebration of all types of genre fiction: mystery, crime, romance, horror, fantasy, science fiction and the western. The editors, Stuart Coupe, Julie Ogden and Robert Hood, asked their authors to contribute short stories that combine two or more of the popular genres. Since nobody in Australia has attempted this before, I find it disappointing to report that the experiment does not work consistently.

Marele Day and Garry Disher, who open the anthology, do not quite enter into its spirit. Day's 'The Kid and the Man from Pinkertons' and Disher's 'My Brother Jack' are more post-modernist meditations on genre fiction than genre stories in themselves. Day makes clever fun of the western; Disher makes fun of Wyatt, his own gritty hero. Entertaining but peripheral pieces.

Steve Wright's 'And Then She Kissed Him' is a very crude combination of *Pix/People* humour and a silly wish-fulfilment theme. Surely, I thought, no editor in the 1990s would accept a story as rotten as this!

Dominic Cadden's 'The Big Fairy Tale Sleep' is also crude humour, but of the poorly made variety rather than the semi-pornographic. Combine the crime story and the fairy tale, and you should get a better story than this.

Fortunately I did not give up in despair before I discovered Robert Wallace's 'Blue Groper'. This is one of the best Australian short stories of the year. Wallace introduces his forger/criminal/adventurer hero Essington Holt (*To Catch a Forger* and other crime novels) at the age of ten. How did Holt become an attractively twisted human being? As a child Holt is invited for summers at a secluded Portsea beach frequented by his rich patrons, the Cassidys. Holt nearly drowns in a rock pool, at the same time undergoes a visionary experience that maims his spirit permanently. Later, one of his hosts dies near the same pool. Wallace's sinuous prose only helps to undermine Holt's and our assumptions about what 'really' happened to him. 'Blue Groper' is a brilliant combination of mystery and literary fiction, with just a hint of the supernatural.

If more of the stories had been as well made as Wallace's, I would have liked *Crosstown Traffic* better. Only Bill Congreve's 'I Am My Father's Daughter', a vigorous and convincing Australian vampire tale, has anything like the same passion.

But if some of the stories are limp, the anthology is splendidly produced (if atrociously proofread) and the cover strikes just the right balance between self-mockery and strut.

(Other contributors include Jean Bedford, Peter Corris, Terry Dowling, Kerry Greenwood, Robert Hood, and Jan McKemmish.)

AUSTRALIAN NON-FICTION

THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN RESOURCE BOOK
edited by Ali Kayn
(1995; Ali Kayn & Associates; 180 pp.; $A14.95)

The beginning of 1995 was the most buoyant era in Australian fandom since the early 1970s. Its buoyancy was best marked by Ian Gunn and Kerri Valkova's *The 1995 Australian Fannish Diary: The most massively useful thing a fan can carry . . .* (long since sold out) and Ali Kayn's equally ambitious ***The Science Fiction Fan Resource Book***, which is still available.

Although Australian fandom has produced the occasional ambitious book, such as John Bangsund's *John W. Campbell: An Australian Tribute* (1971), no previous books have summed up our fannish ethos at a particular moment. I'm not sure whether the *Diary* and the *Fan Resource Book* helped Australia win the 1999 Worldcon bid (since few copies escaped the country), but they fact that they exist must have helped the winning bid.

Ali Kayn's book is A4-sized thick paperback, with lots of cartoons and illustrations, and vast amounts of text describing every aspect of SF and fannish activity in Australia at the end of 1994. If it's been outdated, it's only because of the relative boom in local SF and fantasy publishing since then.

Contributors of articles include Peter Nicholls, Terry Frost, Russell Blackford, Ali Kayn herself, Sue Bursztynski, Wynne Whiteford, Ian Gunn ... and that's just a few names from the first page of the Contents. Terry Pratchett is interviewed. Clubs contribute pieces.

Kelly Hryckiewicz tells what it is like to have 'A Fannish Childhood'.

Contributors of artwork include Ian Gunn, Phil Wlodarczyk, Betty Franklin, Mary Stacey MacDonald, Salli Gilbert, and those ubiquitous pensmiths, Corel Draw Clip Art and WordPerfect Clip Art.

Looking through *The Science Fiction Fan Resource Book* for the first time in two years, I find that most of it is still accurate and relevant. Any new edition would have to take into consideration (a) the SF and fantasy boom; (b) That Damned Convention (the 1999 Worldcon); (c) the growing importance of the Internet. Although only three years old, the *Fan Resource Book* has almost no Net or Web addresses.

READING BY STARLIGHT: POSTMODERN SCIENCE FICTION
by Damien Broderick
(1995; Routledge 0-415-09789-4; 197 pp.; $A19.95)

If you can get past the postmodern argot that Broderick feels obliged to use, you will probably find some useful insights into science fiction — but I don't wish on anybody the sheer labour of searching for them. The most illuminating sections are detailed studies of Delany's work and Aldiss's 'Helliconia' novels.

NEW ZEALAND SCIENCE FICTION

DEALERS IN LIGHT AND DARKNESS
by Cherry Wilder
(Edgewood Press 0-9629066-4-6; 1995; 166 pp.; US$9)

Cherry Wilder, the author we loved to claim as Australian, was actually a New Zealander who lived in Germany from the 1970s until her death several years ago. Her career began while she was living in Australia, and this remains the country where readers appreciate her. For all that, I did not know of the existence of this American-published collection of Wilder's short stories until Yvonne Rousseau brought it back from overseas. This is a much-too-short collection from a major SF writer. Wilder combines a quiet authority of experience and utterance with a style that most writers would kill for: apt, compressed, allusive. Hence her stories are mysterious: strange accretions of events that slowly reveal their truths.

In 'Odd Man Search' and 'Something Coming Through', the two best stories in this collection, it takes most of the story to find out what kind of a world we have entered, let alone make sense of the nature of its people. As in the stories of Gene Wolfe, many characters are not quite human, and many landscapes would be uninhabitable by twentieth-century people. Yet, as in Wolfe's work, all the clues are here; they are presented so tersely, however, that reaching each story feels like absorbing a novel.

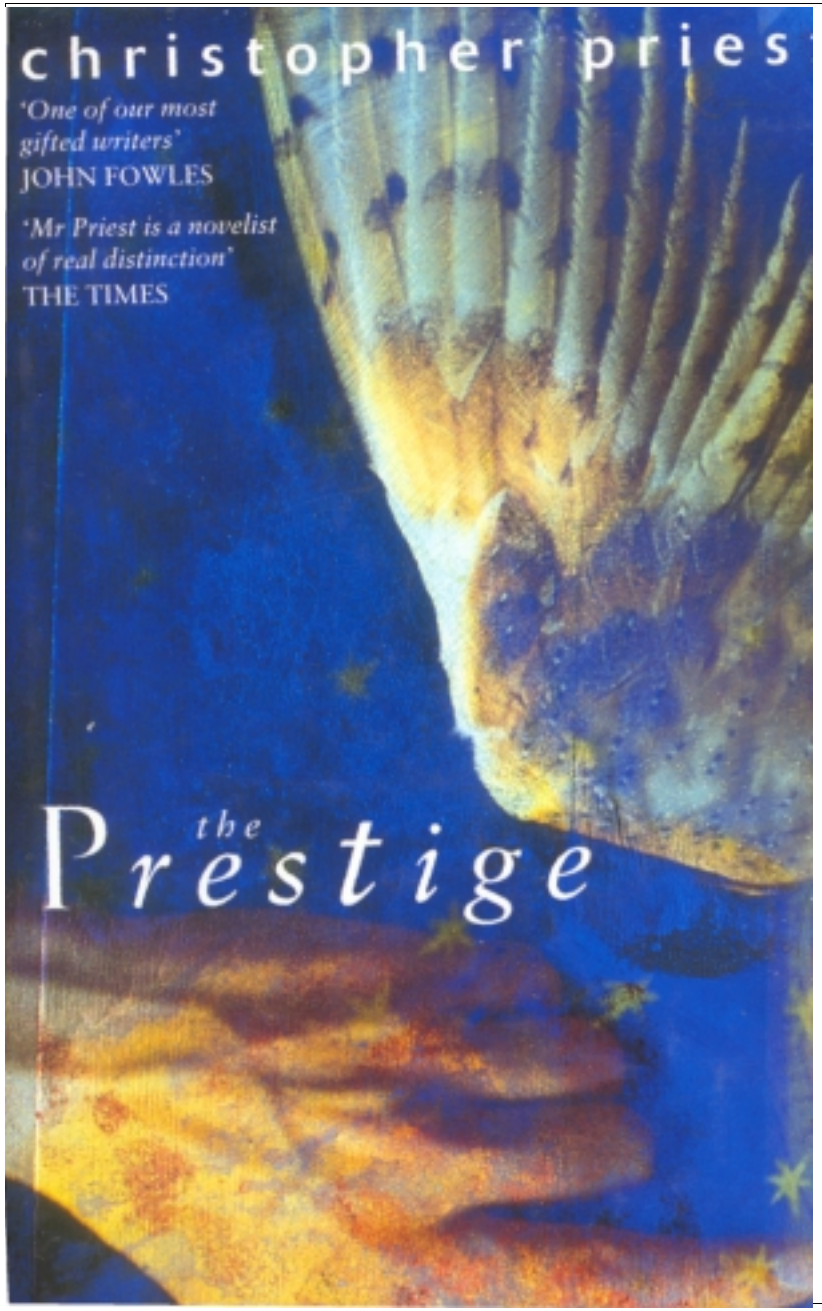
Several of the stories, including 'Odd Man Search' and 'The Dreamers of Deliverance', are set in the same post-holocaust world. 'The Ballad of Hilo Hill' has connections with *The Luck of Brin's Five*, Wilder's Ditmar-winning novel from the mid-1970s. Despite these connections, each story sets the reader adrift in new waters; exciting experiences all.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON
by H. G. Wells, edited by David Lake
(1995 (1901); Oxford University Press USA 0-19-282828-2; 229 + xxxvii pp.; US$6.95)

THE INVISIBLE MAN: A GROTESQUE ROMANCE
by H. G. Wells, edited by Macdonald Daly
(1995 (1897); Everyman 0-460-87628-7; 181 + xli pp.; £4.99)

Here are two of my favourite H. G. Wells novels, put through the bibliographic apparatus by two different editors, and accompanied by scads of notes, introductions, bibliographies ... the lot.



We all know David Lake, science fiction author during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and until he retired as Associate Professor of English at the University of Queensland. His projected series of edited Wells texts did not for some reason meet the requirements of the executors of the Wells Estate, so ***The First Men in the Moon*** appears only from OUP's New York office.

Everyman Paperbacks must have received the blessing of the Wells Estate. Macdonald Daly's edition of ***The Invisible Man*** is part of a complete set of Wells novels, including books that might not have been around for awhile, such as *The New Machiavelli* and *When the Sleeper Awakes*.

Since I'm not in the Wells industry myself, I cannot comment on the quality of the new texts. Notes and other apparatus for each book seem well written and helpful. More than anything, these are books to replace one's battered old editions.

THE PRESTIGE by Christopher Priest
(1995; Touchstone 0-671-71924-6; 404 pp.; $A34.95)

The Prestige is Christopher Priest's best book since *Inverted World*. *Inverted World* has one of the few original SF ideas since the heyday of SF during the forties and fifties. The ideas in *The Prestige* are also vivid, but they cannot be described without referring to the characters and action of the book. It ties together so many wonderful notions that I keep wondering which of them set Chris Priest off. In an interview in an English magazine he says that he began with the idea of twinness. He and his wife have twins. Presumably these twins, who I haven't met, show some of the uncanny aspects noted in some pairs of twins, who seem to communicate by telepathy.

The main subject of *The Prestige* is magic and magicians. At first sight, this might not seem overwhelmingly interesting. After all, a magician does not do magic; he or she performs tricks. The novel derives its name from the 'prestige', the essential trick itself that is the heart of the magician's act.

The Prestige begins as Andrew Westley is invited to a country house to receive the manuscript written by his great-grandfather, who had been a famous magician at the beginning of the century. The person who hands him the manuscript is the great-granddaughter of Rupert Angier, a rival magician. We read two rival manuscripts, that of Alfred Borden, Westley's great-grandfather, and that of Angier. We are invited to guess at the secrets of their magic.

What struck me is the parallel between the battle of the magicians and the real-life battle in which Chris Priest has been involved for the last ten years. During that time Chris, much like Borden, has become so irritated by the practices of another writer, Harlan Ellison, that he has snapped at his heels continually in print. In turn, Ellison has done everything he can, albeit across the Atlantic Ocean, to throw off the terrier. The chance of a reconciliation between them is zero. The chances that Ellison will finally publish *The Last Dangerous Visions*, the bone of contention between them, are equally small.

Given this parallel, Priest shows a remarkable willingness to laugh at himself and the situation that has grown up between the two writers. The parallels don't hold up absolutely. Priest and Ellison do not have equal status in the SF world: Priest is a good writer, for instance, and Ellison is insufferably awful; Ellison is widely read in America, and Priest is not. In the novel, the two magicians achieve roughly an equal status, with one becoming pre-eminent for a time, and then the other, until both disappear from public life in 1904.

The trick of presenting rival journals works well. Borden is a magician who can't bring himself to reveal the secret of his prestige, although he published his monograph specifically as a book about magicians' secrets. The careful reader will guess the secret easily enough. In Borden's narrative, Rupert Angier, the other magician, always seems to be in the wrong. He begins his career by staging seances, indulges in many minor tricks to upset Borden, and seeks out Borden's secrets by sending his mistress to seduce his rival.

When we read Angier's narrative, we find that he is also in the right. He cannot understand why Borden has made him into an enemy. Some of Borden's own tricks backfire so badly that they seem to have a homicidal intention. However, in seeking out Borden's greatest trick, Angier seeks help from Tesla, the electrical scientist of the turn of the century, and so comes into possession of a machine that, of course, reminds us of H. G. Wells's most famous devices. It would be most unfair of me to describe this machine or its effects.

Borden's famous act, which Angier seeks to replicate, sounds simple. The magician steps into a circle at one point at a stage and, after the usual magical brouhaha, appears to step out of a circle some distance away, without having travelled the distance between them. The obvious solution is that there are two Bordens, twins, but Angier can find no evidence at all that there ever were twin Bordens, or that two identical Bordens are currently living. Angier concludes that Borden must have a machine that projects him instantaneously from one place to another, and therefore sets out to find or invent a similar machine. Which, of course, he does, much to the astonishment of Borden, who had never considered such a machine possible.

So, although Borden and Angier are unrelated, they come across as the true 'twins' of the novel, linked, yet always at war.

I hope I've suggested that any one of a multitude of images or ideas might have led to the creation of this novel, but I'm left as amazed as any audience member at the piece of magic that Priest creates out of all this. In the framing story, the great-grandson, Andrew Westley, has always believed that he must have a twin brother, although he had no evidence that such a brother ever existed. When he reaches the Angier traditional home, he comes to feel strongly that his twin brother exists, and can be found somewhere on the property. The finding of the secret of this brother ties together and explains every other element in the novel, and provides a truly hair-raising last scene.

THE TIME SHIPS by Stephen Baxter
(1995; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-648012-8; 630 pp.; $A12.95)

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

THE SECRET OF THIS BOOK: 20-ODD STORIES
by Brian W. Aldiss
(HarperCollins 0-00-225364-X; 1995; 334 pp.)

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

CHAGA by Ian McDonald
(1995; Gollancz 0-575-06052- 2; 413 pp.; £16.99/$A49.95)

I liked the novella 'Tendeléo's Story' (*Futures*, discussed below) so much that I wanted to read McDonald's novel ***Chaga***. Sometime during the least couple of years I had sold or given away my copy of the novel without reading it, so I had to borrow it from Alan Stewart. (Thanks, Alan.) That'll teach me to get rid of any SF novel, no matter how unlikely it is at the time that I will get around to reading it. Both the novella and the novel are much more interesting than anything else I've read by Ian McDonald. Both tell of the mysterious alien flora that drops in pods on a number of landing spots situated across tropical Africa, Asia and South America. The flora spreads outwards from the spots, converting all terrestrial life into an alien equivalent. The UN takes over Africa, and makes vast number of people into refugees by moving them from the path of the expanding circles. In both stories, the real subject of the story is Africans' lives destroyed and fractured by becoming refugees. In 'Tendeléo's Story', the protagonist is an African girl (then woman) Tendeléo. In *Chaga*, Gaby McAslan, an Irish network journalist is the hero, covering the spread of Chaga, then seeking a way to enter the alien areas. To me, Tendeléo rings true as a character, but Gaby seems too much like a romanticised superwoman (who of course falls for a romanticised superman, Dr Shepard, a UN administrator). For its landscapes and visions, *Chaga* is as enjoyable an SF romp as any I've read in recent years.

BRITISH FANTASY

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF MODERN FANTASY BY WOMEN
edited by A. Susan Williams and Richard Glyn Jones
(Viking 0-670- 85907-9; 1995; 560 pp.)

I don't usually buy 'the Penguin Book of' anything, but I thought I'd better buy this one, as it includes a story by Lucy Sussex. Lucy is the only Australian here, and is the youngest contributor. I didn't like her story, 'Kay and Phil', when I first read it, because I thought she was being snide about one character at the expense of other. Rereading the story, I like the way it shows two authors becoming so entangled in their own fictions that each can introduce the other into his or her world. It's a celebration of the act of fictionalising. The collection begins with Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Demon Lover' (1941), proceeds

quickly into the 1950s, and finds its main source of good stories in the 1970s and 1980s. These people really know their genre SF and fantasy as well as the mainstream of short-story writing. P. D. James is here, with a deft future-detective story, 'Murder, 1986', but it is followed by James Tiptree Jr's 'The Milk of Paradise'. Daphne du Maurier's 'The Old Man', a classic stinger-in-the-tail, might be expected in such a volume, but only people who know their stuff are going to dig up Joanna Russ's 'The Second Inquisition', which hit me like a brick through the front window. This is a very great story, which persuaded me to prepare a talk about Russ for a meeting of the Nova Mob.

BRITISH HORROR

REQUIEM by Graham Joyce
(Signet Creed 0-451-18434- 3; 1995; 305 pp.; $A11.95)

After all the trouble I took to gain a copy of this book, I found it very slightly disappointing. I can hardly fault the portrait of a man possessed by the ghost (?) of his dead wife, but even by novel's end I was not sure that that is what happens to him. Links to Mary Magdalene and yet another version of the Jesus Conspiracy are fascinating, but again, I was never sure of their connection to the main character. Ghostly apparitions and bumps in the night are beautifully written, but in the end it's all smoke. Some reader must know what's going on here; please tell me.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

THE DETACHED RETINA: ASPECTS OF SF AND FANTASY
by Brian W. Aldiss
(Liverpool University Press 0-85323-289-X; 1995; 224 pp.; £25)

In this book's last paragraph, Aldiss quotes one of my favourite writers, George Borrow: 'There's day and night, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon, and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother; who would wish to die?' The passage ends 'A Personal Parabola', a talk in which Aldiss seeks to sum up Existence, Writing and the RIL (Repressed Inner Life). Usually I flinch when Aldiss generalises, but I find in this essay a valid faith in life — its power to change, to reveal new facets of itself, to upwell into consciousness.

Reach back to the beginning of the book and you find Aldiss's ebullience flowing through an appreciation of Salvador Dali ('Thanks for Drowning the Ocelot'), the British New Wave ('"A Robot Tended Your Remains ..."'), Aldous Huxley ('Between Privy and Universe'), Olaf Stapledon ('The Immanent Will Returns — 2') and many more. The endless questions and assertions flow through this book, but Aldiss remains best when his eye is fixed on the works of individual authors. The pieces on Huxley and Stapledon are valuable, but even more so are remarkable readings of Orwell's *1984* ('The Downward Journey') and H. G. Wells, always Aldiss's best subject ('Wells and the Leopard Lady'), and a tear-inspiring farewell to Theodore Sturgeon ('The Cruelty of the Gods').

A VERY BRITISH GENRE by Paul Kincaid
(British Science Fiction Association 1-870824-37-7; 1995; 63 pp.; $A10)

My first reaction to this book was 'It's a bit short, isn't it? And it's not telling me things I don't know already.' Which, as I came to realise, is the point of the book. Where else would anyone find a short history of British science fiction and fantasy, with all the right people mentioned in the right places and, despite the restrictions of length, all the things said about each that should be said? In *Trillion Year Spree*? No, because in that book it became too difficult to separate the story of a national genre from that of the whole SF boom of the 1970s and 1980s. ***A Very British Genre*** even has room in its last few pages for many authors whose books have never been distributed in Australia: a neat must-buy list.

The book's only fault springs from that tricky word 'genre'. Here is

the story of *New Worlds* in all its guises, but Kincaid makes no mention of the role of the great post-War book publishers, especially Penguin during the early sixties and Victor Gollancz's 'yellow jackets'. The latter comprised almost the only SF read by Australian (and probably British) library borrowers during the 1950s and 1960s. Next the BSFA should advance Kincaid the money to write *The Trillion Year British Genre*, a thousand pages long, studded with footnotes and appendices.

AT THE CALIGULA HOTEL
by Brian Aldiss (Sinclair-Stevenson 1-85619-568-6; 1995; 99 pp.)

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

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

FOUR WAYS TO FORGIVENESS
by Ursula K. Le Guin
(HarperPrism 0-06-105234-5; 1995; 229 pp.; $A28.95)

These stories, which give flesh to references in earlier Hainish novels, are really four episodes in a revolutionary war that affects two planets for several hundred years. The four sections add up to a novel that is more interesting than any particular story. Linked strands of the conflict are revealed in the lives of individuals. A companion novel to Le Guin's 1970s novels of revolution (*Malafrena* and *The Dispossessed*), except that in the 1990s most of Le Guin's heroes are female.

FROM TIME TO TIME
by Jack Finney
(1995; Simon & Schuster 0-671-89884-1; 303 pp.; $A32.95)

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

ARCHANGEL
by Michael Conner (1995; Tor 0-312-85743-8; 350 pp.)

Thanks to Justin Ackroyd for recommending this 'alternative past' novel. What if the world had, during the 1930s, not been ravaged by the Depression but by a virus, similar to the modern Ebola virus, that kills most of the White population of the world and leaves alive most other racial groups, especially Blacks? And what if a few thousand average white people hole up in the ruins of a city that rather resembles Minneapolis and pretend they can keep the traditional midwestern lifestyle going? *Archangel* showly loses momentum after a memorable beginning, although the fundamental situation remains interesting. Conner's characters are more interesting than the situation itself, and the situation is depicted rather better than the plot, which creaks. There's an awful lot of obvious heroes-and-villains stuff at the end, which distracts the reader from the fact that the world has just unravelled and can't be put back together.

AMERICAN FANTASY

THE PANIC HAND by Jonathan Carroll
(1995; HarperCollins 0-00-224540-X; 240 pp.; $A24.95)

Some brilliant, unsettling Carroll stories ('Uh-Oh City', 'The Sadness of Detail', 'Mr Fiddlehead' and 'A Wheel in the Desert, the Moon on Some Swings') and some limp stories that show that Carroll's forte is the novel. Many of the shorter stories have been incorporated into novels.

FANTASTIC ALICE edited by Margaret Weis
(1995; Ace 0-441-00253-6; 291 pp.; US$12)

It's a long while since I've read any of the vast number of original fiction SF anthologies that are stacked in boxes all over this room. I picked this one because it was a review copy, and because the stories claim to pay tribute to my two favourite novels, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*. I can't begin to guess what Margaret Weis told her authors when she commissioned these stories. Criminal misdirection, I would call it. Nearly all the authors plump for itty-bitty pieces based on some of the images from Carroll's books. A couple try to emulate his jokes. The horror! Only Peter Crowther uses Carroll as a valid take-off point, and even his story ('Conundrums to Guess') is so-so.

AMERICAN HORROR

LOVE IN VEIN edited by Poppy Z. Brite
(1995; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-648209-0; 433 pp.; $A12.95)

I might have liked ***Love in Vein*** a lot more if I hadn't read two Ellen Datlow anthologies on a similar theme. Datlow shows that an editor can produce a theme anthology while persuading her authors to leave out most of the clichés associated with the theme. Poppy Z. Brite does not have this ability. She seems to enjoy many of the clichés of vampirism/eroticism. Fortunately, a few of her writers have an original turn of mind. Jessica Amanda Salmonson ('The Final Fete of Abba Adi') also has wit and style (where might the vampire legend have come from originally — perhaps a few millennia before Transylvania?) Other four-star stories are 'Queen of the Night' (Gene Wolfe), 'In the Soul of a Woman' (Charles de Lint) and 'The Alchemy of the Throat' (Brian Hodge).

DARK LOVE
edited by Nancy A. Collins, Edward E. Kramer & Martin H. Greenberg (NEL 0-340-65439-2; 1995; 402 pp.; $A14.95)

The editors' prejudice seems to be: if you mix sex and horror, you might as well have some fun doing so. Some authors, such as Kathryn Ptacek ('Driven') and Lucy Taylor ('Heat'), merely enjoy getting down and dirty, without worrying too much about the quality of the fiction. The best writers in this volume take the subject matter as a challenge to their sense of subtlety. The best story is Stuart Kaminsky's 'Hidden', high in any list of the best short stories of the last thirty years. It seems to be about a child's capacity to commit mayhem, but reveals much deeper matters. Nancy Collins's own 'Hidden Things' also covers more than the bloody events described in the surface story. Stephen King's 'Lunch at the Gotham Café' could hardly be called subtle, but it is very funny. It just shows that if you arrange to meet your ex-wife for lunch, you should watch out for whatever's happening at the next table. Unclassifiable, and also very funny, is Bob Burden's 'You've Got Your Troubles, I've Got Mine . . .'. He actually admits that crazy people can have fun.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST ON MARS: SEVEN PARADOXICAL TALES
by Oliver Sacks
(Picador 0-330-33717-3; 1995; 319 pp.; $A35)

An Anthropologist on Mars is not science fiction, but a doctor's

casebook. The research is the story. Sacks's researches are interesting, but probably not unique. His reputation is based on his literary rather than medical abilities.

Sacks is a master of the style that hides style. He relies on slow revelations and quiet disclosures to make the impact of his discoveries all the more astonishing.

A case study lies in a folder; how does it become a book that one can't put down? It's not simply a matter of style. It's also a matter of having something to say that nobody else could have said.

Sacks does not say anything as simplistic as: 'There is no such thing as a disability.' Many of his patients have severe disabilities, and quite a few have disabilities that lead inevitably to death, even while under care. Sacks is often overwhelmed by feelings of pity, terror and a kind of comedy. He does not say anything as simplistic as: 'Many disabled people develop other abilities that compensate them for their disability.' Of course, some do, especially blind people who develop what seem to us almost supernatural hearing abilities.

Is this a literary version of the carnival freak show — Ollie and his gang of weirdos?

We go about thinking we're 'normal', that the human brain works in such-and-such a way, but we've discovered that it doesn't. In looking at each 'case history', Sacks attempts to see how the other person sees the world. If it is possible for this or that person to see the world in this or that way, how do we account for the way *we* see things?

Take colour, for instance. Light splashes into the eyes, down to the brain, and caramba! there's colour. Right? Not at all. In 'The Case of the Colour-blind Painter', the matter of colour sight is thrown open to question. The painter in Sacks's story lost all colour perception late in life. After two years he could not remember what colour was like. But the way he saw things after the loss became rather different from the way a 'colour-blind person' sees things. His paintings appear in the book, giving us one of the few records we have of a person showing us, from the inside out, what it is like to have a major change in brain function.

How does an autistic person see the world or feel about it? How can we tell? Sacks talks about two different autistic people, one of whom is perhaps the world's most 'successful' (in conventional terms) autistic person. Yet, although Temple Grandin can think about her own condition, she still sees other humans as aliens; she sees herself as an 'anthropologist on Mars'. She can see that a sunset is pretty, but concepts of 'awesome' or 'magnificent' are unknown to her. She can plan systems in minute detail — this is what she does for a living — but if interrupted when planning a system, she must plan it all again from the beginning. Certain feelings about people are unknown to her, and that's what makes Sacks find her the hardest person of all to approach. Sometimes Temple Grandin seems to show affection, but such demonstrations might be merely tricks learned in order to survive in our world. There's no way to enter her mind to find out. It's only because of her candour about her attempts to explore her own condition that she and Sacks do achieve a kind of friendship.

Does Temple Grandin have a different sort of brain; or are the elements of her brain merely arranged differently from ours? Do we all have some elements of autism, or Tourette's syndrome? (Sacks tells the story of a man who is a great surgeon although he has Tourette's syndrome.) Are all 'disabilities' disasters? What kind of a thing is a 'normal mind'?

Sacks throws all these questions up for grabs. One would like to think that SF writers might grab at them, but one so seldom finds in SF writers an interest in understanding people different from themselves.

1996

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

BORDERLINE by Leanne Frahm
(1996; MirrorDanse 0-9586583-0-7; 128 pp.; $A11.95)

I enjoyed this book greatly, but then, I knew I would. My regret is that it features only five of Leanne Frahm's stories. (***Borderline***'s useful Bibliography lists 25 stories. Will the other 20 remain unreprinted?) 'On the Turn' is one of the best short stories I've read. It merely improves on rereading. This is rich, dark stuff about fraying marriage, dank undergrowth, creatures of the shore, and the final rejection of earth by the moon. (Right this moment, by writing that phrase, I've just discovered what this story is really all about.)

'Ithaca Week' and 'Olivetruffles' are one-idea stories with a wry aftertaste. 'The Lamadium Affair', seemingly a conventional tale about humans trying to understand an alien culture, has a very intense feeling to it. You possibly have to read it twice to judge its real depth. 'Borderline', published here for the first time, shows that SF can still be great fun.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

DREAM WEAVERS edited by Paul Collins
(1996; Penguin 14-02-026208-3; 283 pp.; $A16.95)

Dream Weavers is an anthology of stories of heroic fantasy and magic. The cover is striking and the package looks good, but not many of the stories are interesting. Some, such as Tony Shillitoe's 'The Innkeeper', have effective ideas, but the stories themselves plod, plod, plod, letting their ideas trail in the dust. The only stories with much fire to them are Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God' (a gritty combination of sword-fightin', blood-lettin' and powerful magic) and Ian Haywood Robinson's 'The Crypt of Fleeting Hope' (an effective variation on the locked-room, which-door-should-I-choose? puzzle story).

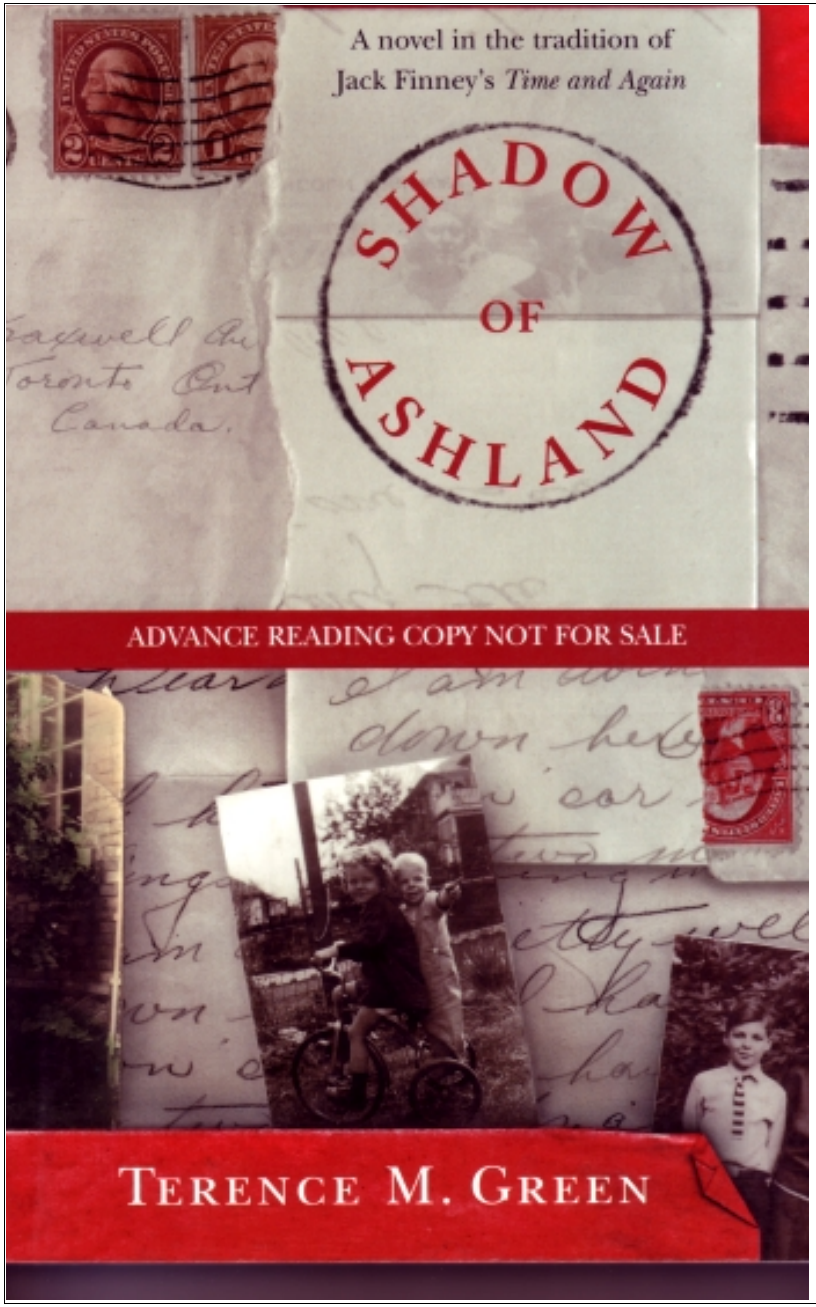
THE SCARLET RIDER by Lucy Sussex
(Forge 0-312-85293-2; 1996; 350 pp.; $A34.95)

Considering that this novel tells of some desperate matters — loss, murder, isolation, supernatural obsession — it's an oddly cheerful experience. Perhaps this is because ***The Scarlet Rider*** is such a *frantic* narrative, terse and vivid, covering a huge range of experience. Unemployed one day, next day Mel is hired by a publisher to track down the author of a 'lost' early Australian narrative. As her own household breaks up, Mel meets a wide range of new acquaintances, each of whom lays claims on her. Mel's life seems about to shatter: somewhere there's a ghost in her machine, pulling apart those strands in her life that she believes should hold firm. I'm not sure that I solved more than a few of this book's mysteries during my first reading, yet I was carried along by the assurance of the author's style and the sharp quirkiness of her humour. Just as I was settling down to savour a quiet, neat ending, the last chapter exploded in my face. What a coup!

CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION

SHADOW OF ASHLAND by Terence M. Green
(1996; Forge 0-312-85958-9; 221 pp.; US$19.95)

I'll admit from the start that I'm prejudiced towards this book. Terry Green, of Toronto, started writing to my magazines during the 1970s, after he had heard that I'm a fan of the work of Philip K. Dick. (Many of my most enduring pen friendships have been with Phil Dick fans.) At that time he was only writing reviews. Later he began to publish stories, and he sent me copies of his first two novels and his first collection of short stories. The collection included 'Ashland,



Kentucky', which seemed much better than anything he had written before.

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

When Terry told me that he was expanding the story into a novel, I did not greet the news with cries of joy. Most SF novelists have no idea how to expand short stories into novels, but they keep doing it.

Terry Green has seen vastly more possibilities in his original idea than could be fitted into a short story, then made the resulting tale, ***Shadow of Ashland***, into a convincing novel.

Given that the letters had dropped through time, what did the long-lost uncle think was happening to him when he sent them? What had really befallen him during the 1930s, or had he slipped through time into the 1980s? At first the storyteller meets Ashland people who had known his uncle during the 1930s, then realises they are withholding part of the story. And then ... Terry Green puts goose bumps on your goose bumps.

Shadow of Ashland invites comparisons with a number of other books, especially Jack Finney's *Time and Again*, but it stands on its own because it has a hard edge of passion that excises that things-were-better-back-then softness that you find in Finney.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

VOYAGE by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-648037-3; 1996; 595 pp.)

TRACES by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-649814-0; 1998; 359 pp.)

I should have read these books in reverse order, and both of them before reading *Titan*. But *Titan* made me into a fan of Stephen Baxter's work, so now I'm catching up. I'm still not sure why I'm a Baxter fan, since his writing style is threadbare at best, not a lot better than that of Larry Niven, whose work I can't read. But Baxter has much more interesting ideas than Niven; he takes nothing for granted, even while he seems to be the advocate for heroic science.

Voyage is as absorbing as *The Right Stuff*, which obviously inspired it, but while reading *Voyage* I had the fun of realising that all this detail is both minutely accurate and extravagantly fictional. Even Baxter realises that going to Mars in the eighties would have deprived NASA of many of the projects that have been much more fascinating, such as the Hubble telescope and the Outer Planets Fly-by. The real strength of *Voyage*, however, is the skill with which Baxter writes about his main characters. He slowly lets us get to know these people, without 'doing characterisation', as many hard SF writers do. Therefore the book's emotionally charged last line is just right.

The short-story collection ***Traces*** shows many of the same skills, but only a few of the stories, such as 'Moon Six', have the power of Baxter's best novels. I enjoyed this mixture of standard SF, semi-fantasy, and alternative-worlds stories. Beside 'Moon Six', my favourites were 'No Longer Touch the Earth', 'Mittelwelt' and 'Downstream'.

BRITISH FANTASY

MINOR ARCANA by Diana Wynne Jones
(Vista 0-575-60191-4; 1996; 287 pp.)

After nine months of reading the entries for the Young Adults category of Australia's Aurealis Awards, I began to wish I could find a trace of Diana Wynne Jones's brilliance in the books I've looked at. I feel vaguely ashamed that I have not yet read all the other Diana Wynne Jones books I have on the shelves. ***Minor Arcana*** contains a number of short stories, including the quicksilver hilarious 'The Sage of Theare' and the passionate 'The Girl Who Loved the Sun'. One of the best pieces of fiction I've read this year is the novella 'The True State of Affairs', which seems to consist only of the thoughts and observations of a girl (hints that she is a time traveller arrested by troops of this alternate, vaguely Renaissance Britain because she has been mistaken for a princess on the run) who is locked in a cell and can observe nothing but her jailers and the other prisoner (male, Someone Important) who paces incommunicado in a nearby courtyard. Wynne Jones fills this arid space with the wonderful voice of her main character and the strength of her storytelling.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

CIVILWARLAND IN BAD DECLINE
by George Saunders
(Jonathan Cape 0-224-04247-5; 1996; 179 pp.; $A19.95)

George Turner sent me a copy of this book at about the time somebody mentioned it in Acnestis. Nice coincidence. Saunders writes bitter comedy that reminds me of Tom Lehrer mixed with Garrison Keillor, without providing the easy laughs of either. You find yourself wincing as much as laughing: this is the near future in America, and it won't be fun. 'Bounty', the novella that ends the book, tells of a pilgrimage through a near-future USA undergoing a chaotic civil war; in other stories, characters work in weird, broken-down

theme parks that might all be called CivilWarLand. There are moments of human redemption, but not many. Saunders seems to be saying: this is the America you voted for, mugs, and this is what it will be like to live in.

WRITERS OF THE FUTURE, VOL. XII
edited by Dave Wolverton
(1996; Bridge 1-57318-1996; 480 pp.; $A14.95)

I received this as a review copy. I know I should ignore any Bridge publication on ideological grounds, but I didn't because (a) the Scientologists, who own Bridge, actually encourage and support young writers by throwing money at them; and (b) I can't see any sign of the prejudices of the organisers affecting the judges' decisions when handing out the prizes. This book might concentrate on new writers, but it is a lot more readable than most original fiction anthologies.

The best story, 'After the Rainbow', is by Fruma Klass, the wife of Philip Klass, known to SF readers since the early 1950s as William Tenn. I assume that Fruma is a mature-age beginner. Full marks for maturity; she knows people. What happened to the inhabitants of the Ark when they poured out over dry land, hoping to repopulate the earth? Fruma takes the Biblical proposition literally, and has lots of fun with it. For instance, whence came the people who married Noah's offspring in order to begin the process? From over the hills, of course. Klass shows how you can subvert a myth by seeming to take it seriously.

Other promising new writers include Edwina Mayer ('Dead Faces', a powerful psychic-detective story), Jerry Craven ('The Savant Death Syndrome', a scary piece about clumsy foreigners in South-east Asia), and Russell William Asplund (the gently amusing 'The Unhappy Golem of Rabbi Leitch').

THE SPARROW by Mary Doria Russell
(Black Swan 0-522-99777-3; 1996; 506 pp.)

After I read ***The Sparrow*** (because of promptings from the British fans I met in Acnestis), I began alerting everybody else I know. There's not much I can say about *The Sparrow* that hasn't been said many times. Is it *about* religion? or poetry? or music? No, it's about people who can reach out to something beyond themselves. That this something might cruelly betray them does not denigrate the spirit of those who do the reaching. It is a book of funny and occasionally wise conversations. It is a book of vistas; it has a panoramic visual sense that is missing in most SF. It is a book that rides the flood of life itself.

FIGHT CLUB
by Chuck Palahnuik
(1996; Vintage 0-09-183513-5; 208 pp.)

David Fincher's film of ***Fight Club*** is rather better than the book, although the film follows the action of the book precisely, except for two scenes. Yet the book feels like a secondary creation — not quite a book-of-the-film, but sketchy compared with the film's epic texture. Yet I can't underrate Palahnuik's writing, sarcastic and dippy and funny and vivid, and I look forward to reading his other novels before somebody makes them into films.

AMERICAN FANTASY

UNLOCKING THE AIR AND OTHER STORIES
by Ursula K. Le Guin
(1996; HarperCollins 0-06-017260-6; 207 pp.; $A30.95)

I keep thinking I know what Ursula Le Guin is up to. With a collection like this, featuring stories that don't quite fit the SF or fantasy categories, I feel I can lean right in and go along for the ride. Many of the early pieces are a bit twee and undeveloped; I found myself sneering '*New Yorker* stories' under my breath. (That's because

several of them are *New Yorker* stories.)

Never underestimate Le Guin. Towards the end of ***Unlocking the Air*** two stories brought me up short. 'Olders' and 'The Poacher' are two astonishing stories, penetrating and clear and serious, yet revealing themselves in small unfoldings. 'Olders', set (it seems) in the Earthsea world, begins with a voyage, turns into a fantasy, and becomes a pained and burning love story. 'The Poacher' begins as a modernised fairy story, turns into a modern version of yet another fairy story, then transforms itself into a complex metaphor of the possibilities of life and art. Yet the surfaces of both stories seem simple. This is not just accomplished writing; these are stories that change your idea of what fiction can achieve.

WALKING THE LABYRINTH
by Lisa Goldstein
(Tor 0-312-86175-3; 1996; 254 pp.)

I still don't know what to make of ***Walking the Labyrinth***, the second Goldstein novel I've read. For much of its length it seems as mysterious as *Tourists*. The main character is forced to explore her past when a private detective comes calling, basing his quest on a single newspaper cutting. Later it appears that the main character has been set up to 'discover' family secrets that are only too well known to many members of the family. And then ...? Does Goldstein really provide answers at the end of the book? I thought so for awhile, and was disappointed. Later I realised that the point of the quest was never to discover the ending, and all the 'solutions' are just red herrings. Too many tricks to be fully persuasive? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

MARTIN DRESSLER: THE TALE OF AN AMERICAN DREAMER
by Steven Millhauser
(1996; Vintage 0-679-78127-7; 293 pp.)

Thanks to Paul Kincaid for persuading me to read Millhauser. Like much of the rest of Millhauser's fiction, this starts in 'reality' and ends in dreams, but you would be hard put to find the dividing line between the two. Dressler, whose great successes occur during the early years of the twentieth century, embodies the 'American dream' of success, yet is so propelled by his own personal vision of himself and his destiny that he almost misses the point of his whole life. The contradictions in his story are best worked out in the terms of his strange marriage to a distant, cold woman, a person he seems to have married because of rather than in spite of her wraithlike frigidity. Millhauser's vision is authenticated by the spare, seemingly offhand beauty of his prose. The Book of the Year.

AMERICAN HORROR

OFF LIMITS: TALES OF ALIEN SEX
edited by Ellen Datlow (1996; St Martin's Press 0-312-14019-3; 316 pp.; $A32.95)

This is the only disappointing Ellen Datlow collection I've read. Usually she draws out of authors more than they give other editors, but this time most of them are defeated by the subject matter. To hear these writers tell it, sex in America has become a grim and desperate business, replete with every peculiarity but pleasure. Sex, to me, is one of the great agents of human redemption, yet only Roberta Lannes's 'His Angel', grim but shining, rises above the limitations the other authors place upon themselves. There's not much hope for anybody in Bruce McAllister's 'Captain China', but it's a first-class piece of *faux naïf* story-telling. ***Off Limits*** has a few reprints, including Samuel Delany's 'Aye, and Gomorrah ...', which doesn't bowl me over in the way it did when I first read it in 1969, and Elizabeth Hand's 'In the Month of Athyr', which is certainly effective,

but not redemptive. Robert Silverberg's 'The Reality Trip', which I disliked in 1970, now has for me a gleam of humour and real perception which I don't find in most of the other stories.

1997

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

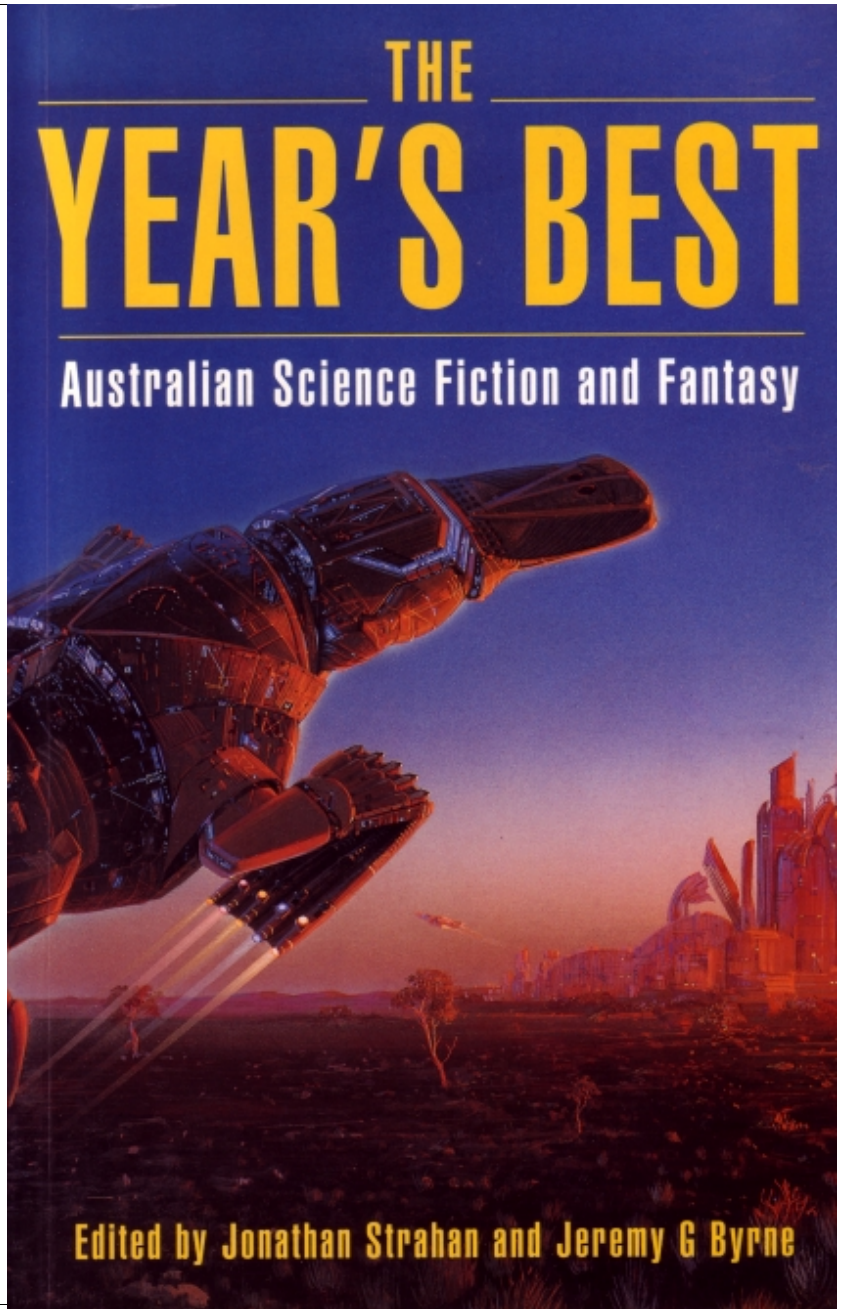
THE YEAR'S BEST AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY
edited by Jonathan Strahan & Jeremy G. Byrne
(1997; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5751-4; 365 pp.; $A22.95)

Impossible? But true! An annual collection of the years best Australian science fiction and fantasy seems a highly improbable enterprise to me — not because there is any lack of stories to choose from, but because until now there has been an acute shortage of publishers willing to handle such a book.

Until about five years ago, science fiction and fantasy was published in Australia only by small presses and smaller magazines. Pan Macmillan then scored a considerable success with heroic fantasy (Martin Middleton and others), followed by HarperCollins and Penguin. In the end, it's HarperCollins that has taken a punt on a ***Year's Best***.

For at least the last ten years there has been no shortage of Australian SF and fantasy to choose from. Authors such as George Turner, Greg Egan and Damien Broderick have been selling fiction steadily, both to overseas and local markets, and people such as Sean McMullen and Terry Dowling have been breaking into the overseas markets. Meanwhile local magazines such as *Eidolon*, *Aurealis* and *Bloodsongs* have been providing a steady, if hardly lucrative market for new fiction in this country.

Increasing quantity does not necessarily lead to rising quality, but



editors Jonathan Strahan and Jeremy G. Byrne go a long way to proving a connection. This is a generous selection of stories from a wide range of sources. (Unfortunately, Strahan and Byrne, who are also co-editors of the magazine *Eidolon*, do not extend their generosity to their rival magazine *Aurealis*.) Five of the fifteen stories were first published overseas. The fantasy group of stories includes some interesting horror and ghost stories.

There isn't a rocket ship in sight in this collection, and many of the stories are not set in Australia. Given these generalisations, I'm struck by the diversity of subject matter and approach found here.

Greg Egan's 'Silver Fire' and Andrew Whitmore's 'Ilium' have the closest connection to the kind of story people usually mean when they point to science fiction.

Egan's characters, travelling across a near-future USA, seek to solve the riddle of a new and fascinatingly horrible disease. Attempts to arrest the spread of the disease are prevented by factors that have little to do with rational medicine. Indeed, the theme of the story is the chute of irrationality down which all first-world societies are travelling at the moment. Some reviewers have been upset by the abrupt end to 'Silver Fire'. Is Egan angling for a contract from a publisher to finish the story as a novel? Or, like me, does he feel that the hanging ending makes the story more agonising and memorable than it might otherwise have been?

Time travel as presented in Whitmore's 'Ilium' seems conventional enough until one thinks about the implications of the journey that his main character is about to make. The real subject of the story is modern Turkey, where the author was living when he wrote it. The vividness of this country makes a satisfying contrast with the special horror of the main character's time trip.

This *Year's Best* mainly features stories that step sideways from familiar premises rather than forge ahead into brave new clichés. For instance, Isobelle Carmody's seems to be a standard young adults' fantasy, but it has an oblique will-o'-the-wisp quality that I cannot describe. It mixes a tale of personal betrayal with some fine magic effects.

Lucy Sussex's 'The Ghost of Mrs Rochester' seems, on first reading, a conventional ghost story enlivened by Sussex's intense interest in literary research. The first Mrs Rochester, of course, was found in a most distressed state by Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's famous novel. Rather than being overwhelmed and destroyed by the ghost of the first Mrs Rochester, the story's main character finds her useful in a jam. As in most of the other stories, an oblique approach makes this memorable.

Also oblique, also memorable, is Simon Brown's 'The Mark of Thetis'. It begins as a low-key story about childhood friendships, becomes a ghost story, then widens its scope to encompass the reality of 1930s Germany. Like Sussex, Brown has become an Australian writer one reads regularly for the sheer pleasure of a command of lively style.

In 'A Man and His Dreams', Marele Day, who is best known as a writer of crime and general fiction, treats dreams as tangible objects. A broken man wanders into a broken-down country town. Both are transformed in a way that I will not reveal. Magic realism still has a lot of magic in it.

Magic in this volume is never treated merely as a conjurer's trick. Over the last thirty years Australian SF and fantasy writers have learned how to use magic to express the truth of human character. For example, Russell Blackford's 'The Sword of God' seems to be merely another story of fantastic heroism. Queen Zenobia and Simeon Africanus flee from an ancient city about to be overrun by Roman troops. Their enemies, who pursue them, have some powerful magic at their command. So has Simeon Africanus. The battle between these magic forces has power because it is shown to be a function of personality. I trust that Blackford will return to this world and these people in some future story or novel.

In Sean Williams's 'Passing the Bone' and Stephen Dedman's 'Never Seen by Waking Eyes', magic expresses itself in the form of the horror story, but the horror clichés are turned on their head. The fate of Dedman's main character is linked to that of the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson — Lewis Carroll. The fate of Williams's main character is linked to that of his Aboriginal father. The fate of Dedman's main character is chilly and ghostly. The fate of Williams's doomed protagonist is wildly funny as he takes a helter-skelter car trip from life to death.

And Cherry Wilder's 'Dr Tilmanns Consultant: A Scientific Romance'? I can't classify it. On the surface it seems to be a science fiction story, yet its atmosphere of strange people hiding out in mid-European forests gives it the feeling of a Grimm's tale. Magic can reside in viewpoint as well as in fantastic events.

What links these authors and their stories in their command of the short-story medium: vigorous language and vivid characters. If you're bored with all those other books of Australian short stories, buy *The Year's Best Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*. I'm looking forward to Volume 2.

THE DARK EDGE by Richard Harland
(1997; Pan Australia 0-330-36007-8; 563 pp.; $A14.95)

I doubt if ***The Dark Edge*** will do much for literature, but in its vivid combination of horror and dark comedy it could be seen in years to come as an accurate picture of the way in which many Australians of the 1990s view their own country. The Dark encroaches; the horrible people (of whichever type you fancy) wait out there to hammer you to death; all is gloom. Nothing, it seems, can be done. In this book, They turn out to be Us; and the source of the disaster can be found within those who believe they can save us. This is a long book, which only becomes wearisome during the Big Scene at the End (100 pages of it!). The main characters, off-planet detectives, are engaging innocents who suffer some genuinely scary moments. Harland's prose is functional but cinematic. This is a fable for our times, and so gripping that I read it at a sitting.

UNDER THE CAT'S EYE
by Gillian Rubinstein
(Hodder Children's Books 0-7336-0554-0; 1997; 202 pp.)

While science fiction struggles to achieve any respectability in regular Australian fiction publishing, the Australian children's and young adults' market has given its top prizes to SF and fantasy authors for the last twenty years. Australia's top two writers for young adults are Gillian Rubinstein and John Marsden, both of whom have written almost nothing but SF for the last ten years. In ***Under the Cat's Eye*** Rubinstein enters into the field of uneasy fantasy — not quite horror, but bordering on it. The result, we find at the end of the book, is science fiction. The trappings — a creepy isolated boarding school and very creepy members of staff — give a nice push to proceedings until halfway through. The science fiction bits at the end are perhaps less persuasive. Rubinstein has a vigorous style that I enjoy a lot, but the story seems a bit rushed. If Rubinstein's books are released in Britain, look out for them.

ZONES by Damien Broderick and Rory Barnes
(HarperCollins Moonstone 0-7322-5760-3; 1997; 224 pp.)

What if ***Zones*** had been released during 1998 rather than 1997? Alison Goodman would have been fighting for that first place in the Aurealis Award for Young Adults. This is the best book by Damien Broderick I've read, though I have to consider that Rory Barnes might have been responsible for the clever insights about the lives of teenagers. Jenny receives weird phone calls, from someone who asks her to believe he's calling from the past. While she's deciding whether or not to get involved in time communication, she's trying to survive her parents' separation and the developing relationship between her best friend and the egghead son of her mother's new boyfriend. Lots of humour here, and vivid characters and action. I thought *Zones* was going to lose its point at the end. Instead it comes up with a very satisfactory piece of time twisting.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

TWINS by Chris Gregory
(Penguin 0-14-025604-0; 1997; 272 pp.)

If you've read books by Gerald Murnane or by students of his writing class, you might know what to expect from Chris Gregory, one of his successful students. Indescribable to those who are not in the know, this kind of writing tests anybody's definitions of 'modernism' or 'postmodernism'. These are stories that give the impression of being essays, with lots of documentary matter and asides. Conventional dialogue and characterisation are missing. Each story is really a very funny dialogue between the author and the reader, yet the events described are taken to be fiction. Yet often they are not; they are rearranged versions of events that the author claims to be part of his experience. This would all be very tedious if it were not for Chris Gregory's unfailing lightness of hand. His best story, 'Jackie Chan', about the odd events that happened when Jackie Chan was making a movie in Melbourne a few years ago, is really a prose poem in praise of Melbourne. 'Powerhouse' is, similarly, a prose poem in praise of a certain era in American music and one of its most obscure composers. 'Jackie Chan' was nominated for an Aurealis Award.

Chris Gregory once told me that his ex-girlfriend is living in the flat that George Turner lived in until five years ago; she keeps sending back mail sent to him. Surely there's a future Chris Gregory story in *that*?

THE ART OF ARROW CUTTING by Stephen Dedman
(Tor 0-312-86320-9; 1997; 285 pp.)

An industry of Aussie-boosting has grown up within Australian science fiction circles, but not many books or stories justify the excitement or put-about sense that 'Australian SF is getting better all the time'. One Australian novel that is totally self-assured is Stephen Dedman's ***The Art of Arrow Cutting***, a strange mixture of horror novel and mystery, with much of the feeling of good SF. Its characters hurtle across the American landscape, one of them pursued for a black-magical secret she has stolen in Japan, the other not quite sure why he is helping her, and only slowly realising how dangerous it is to be around her. He's a wanderer; he goes along for the ride. *The Art of Arrow Cutting* has little depth of feeling, but it is a satisfying thriller that depends on the sparse grace and energy of Dedman's prose.

AUSTRALIAN NON-FICTION

MINMERS MAROONED AND PLANET OF THE MARSUPIALS: THE SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS OF CHERRY WILDER by Yvonne Rousseau
(Nimrod 1326-561-X; 1997; 26 pp.)

You might have read a shorter version of this essay in *Foundation* in 1992. It is Yvonne Rousseau's brilliant analysis of the underlying structures behind Cherry Wilder's science fiction, illuminated by an intimate knowledge of the texts. Rousseau points to major differences between Wilder's New Zealand/Australian view of fantasy (the 'lost child in the bush' story) and American fantasy structures. ***Minmers Marooned*** appeared in Norman Talbot's 'Babel Handbooks' series of monographs, which I assume became unavailable after Professor Talbot died.

THE SPIKE by Damien Broderick
(1997; Reed 0-7301-0497-4; 280 pp.)

There's enough in *Stuck in Fast Forward* and *The Harvest* about nanotechnology to prompt me into investigating Damien Broderick's non-fiction book ***The Spike***, which had been glaring at me on the to-be-read pile since 1997. Damien Broderick might know a bit about nanotechnology, and so might the people he quotes, but not much chewy information escapes into the pages of *The Spike*. All Broderick does is repeat, over and over again, how this huge spike (the vertical bit of the graph of exponential increase in technology during the next

fifty years) is going to happen, and we don't have any idea what it'll be like until it hits us, but it'll change everything beyond recognition. He creates a thirst for information, then doesn't provide the kind of hard information that would be interesting, just more gosh-wow. My reaction to the nanotechnology section is the same reaction as I would have now to all those articles in SF magazines in the fifties that described the coming wonders of 'clean' atomic energy. Nano-technology will have vast consequences, as Broderick says, but none of the ghastly consequences of exponentially expanding matter-creation sources are even guessed at. *The Spike* is not the product of the interesting Damien Broderick. The interesting Broderick has an acid tongue, believes nothing and nobody, cuts down nonsense and nonsense-sayers, and laughs at all true believers. But here is Broderick the True Believer ...

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

TITAN
by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-225424-7; 1997; 581 pp.)

The Novel of the Year ... but I wouldn't have read it unless it had arrived as a review copy. All those acronyms and gung-ho space skiffy in the first 100 pages! If I hadn't enjoyed *The Time Ships* I wouldn't have persevered. If I hadn't reached page 200, then page 300, then found myself on the journey of a lifetime, I would have been a poorer person. Pro-space-race propaganda dissolves into exquisite ironies as Baxter reveals how NASA has been mothballed progressively since 1972. Humanity can reach the rest of the solar system, if not the stars, but has chosen not to. A people who can still plan, build and crew a one-way trip to Titan can also destroy everything. Baxter rarely uses generalisations. Instead, as in *The Time Ships*, he uses visualisations: one dazzling set piece after another. As for the ending: some will hate it, and others, like me, will see it as inescapable outcome of Baxter's Stapledonian view of life. I've grown rather fond of Stapledon over the last year or so, and I'll certainly catch up on

some of Baxter's earlier books.

BRITISH FANTASY

DEEP SECRET
by Diana Wynne Jones
(1997; Vista 0-575-60223-6; 383 pp.)

I grabbed this just for the pure reading pleasure I know I will gain from a Diana Wynne Jones book. I was surprised by the originality of the fantasy concepts, found that Jones 'caught' media fans at SF conventions rather better than did *Galaxy Quest*, and was swept away by the intensity of the last thirty pages — a journey sequence that any other author would have placed in the middle of the book. For me, this journey is a dark allegory for the process of writing novels such as ***Deep Secret***. Or perhaps it's Life Itself, deeper and scarier than a journey through, say, a William Burroughs novel.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

THE VOICE THAT THUNDERS: ESSAYS AND LECTURES
by Alan Garner
(Harvill 1-86046-332-0; 1997; 244 pp.)

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

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

TIME ON MY HANDS by Peter Delacorte
(1997; Phoenix 0-75380-838-2; 397 pp.)

Any novel with a title such as this is certain to use the time-travelling device proposed by H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* or a variation on the time-travelling magic used by Jack Finney in *Time and Again*. Either way, the purpose of the writer will be to send a character back to a past era in order to improve the present. The real purpose of the author is to visit a favourite bit of the past in order to recreate it in loving detail. Historically minded authors, including Jack Finney, are quite welcome to keep writing such novels. But they should avoid a *cute* past. They should never think that the past was simpler or sunnier than the present. This, in essence, is what is wrong with ***Time on My Hands***, although Delacorte is skilful at hiding it. The main character is sent back into the past in order to correct the present, i.e. the America of the 1980s and 1990s that was dominated by Ronald Reagan as president. In order to deflect Reagan's 1930s career path, the main character makes friends with him. The author creates a pre-war California that any modern Californian would love to live in: one without freeways, smog and large areas of Los Angeles. As readers, we find, to our surprise, that we get to like ol' Ronnie. As SF readers, we are deflected from the cute by the 'tragic', i.e. yet another demonstration that you can't change the past without becoming stuck in the alternative present you've created. Ending indecisive; sequel screamed out for. Somewhere in the rush, the precise significance of Ronald Reagan in world politics is lost.

1998

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

DREAMING DOWN UNDER

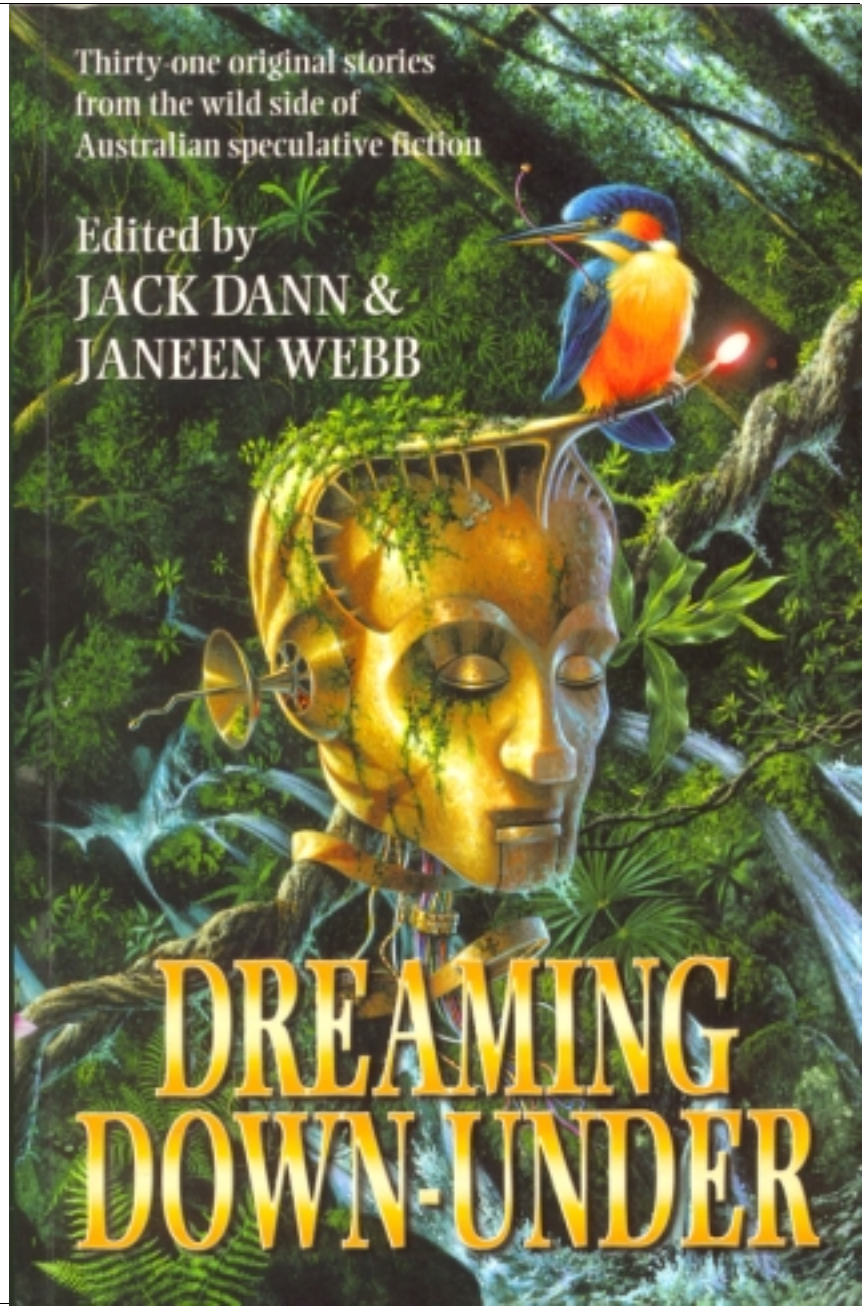
edited by Jack Dann and Janeen Webb
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5917-7; 1998; 556 pp.)

This is the Big Australian Short Story Collection for 1998, and maybe for a few years to come. I've read better Australian original fiction anthologies, some from as many as twenty years ago, but ***Dreaming Down Under*** is welcome for showing us what our writers are doing right now. I'm recommending it because, although it contains many disappointing stories, it also has some very enjoyable pieces, such as Isobelle Carmody's 'The Man Who Lost His Shadow', a dark tale set in Prague; George Turner's 'And Now Doth Time Waste Me', which was unfinished when Turner died, but even without an ending is a vigorous speculative yarn; Russell Blackford's 'The Soldier in the Machine', which continues his gladiatorial interests into the twentieth century; David J. Lake's Aurealis Award-winning 'The Truth About Weena', which nicely gives a theory for Wells's *The Time Machine* and pulls the plug on many well-loved notions of time travel; Jane Routley's 'To Avalon', which shows that not all Australian tourists to England are as gullible as we look; Sean McMullen's 'Queen of Soulmates', an apocalyptic fantasy with a spectacular ending; and Simon Brown's nicely malignant 'With Clouds at Our Feet'. And much more besides.

THE YEAR'S BEST AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY, VOL. 2

edited by Jonathan Strahan and Jeremy G. Byrne
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5942-2; 1998; 443 pp.)

I'm disappointed to be disappointed by this volume, as Vol. 1 was magnificent. I guess the stories weren't there to be anthologised. I have no real favourites, since even the best stories are beset by



hurried exposition or failed, patchy endings. Or perhaps I was grumpy on the days I read it. Stories that are very good, but could be just a bit better, are Greg Egan's 'Reasons to be Cheerful', Terry Dowling's 'Jenny Come to Play' (my favourite in the book), 'Niagara Falling' (Janeen Webb and Jack Dann), 'Love and Mandarins' (Sean Williams), 'Merlusine' (Lucy Sussex), and 'Due West' (Rick Kennett). A theme of human monsters dominates several of these stories. I don't know whether Jodie Kewley's whimsical 'Nicholas Afalling' is very good, but oddly it remains with me as the most memorable story in the book.

PIGGY IN THE MIDDLE by Catherine Jinks
(Penguin 0-14-038586-X; 1998)

One of several mad-scientist novels sent to the Aurealis YA panel the year I was one of them. This, like many other contenders, begins well but finally disappears up its own infundibulum of hectic action scenes. Jinks's style is attractive, combining humour and suspense (the strangest and jolliest character is the sixteen-year-old genius who is cloning people-like pigs) but somehow she doesn't have enough puff to keep this little craft going.

NOT THE ONLY PLANET: SCIENCE FICTION TRAVEL STORIES
edited by Damien Broderick
(Lonely Planet 0-86442- 582-1; 1998; 250 pp.)

To judge from his record over the last 25 years or so, Damien Broderick is by far Australia's most accomplished anthologist. Asked by Lonely Planet, the publisher of travel books, to produce an SF anthology about travel, he sought out some very enjoyable stories, including some I had never read. The star of the anthology is Gene Wolfe's 'Seven American Nights', written by a very unreliable observer. He takes drugs every night, he believes unlikely tales told by the natives, and the America he visits seems to have little to do with the America we know from other fiction. What is really going on? There must be a wealth of critical literature expended on this story. The travellers of Brian Aldiss's 'The Difficulties Involved in Photographing Nix Olympica' are both unreliable travellers and unreliable observers, burdened by their own presuppositions yet won over by the majesty of Mars's vast mountain, which they attempt to climb. With his vivid mixture of poetic and factual detail, Aldiss actually places the reader on the surface of Mars. All the other stories in this collection are interesting, especially John Varley's 'In the Bowl', which shows that when we get to suburban Venus it is likely to be a very strange tourist trap.

THE RESURRECTION MAN by Sean Williams
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5903-7; 1998; 609 pp.)

I recommend this novel by Sean Williams, although I think it is at least 200 pages too long. A future detective thriller, ***The Resurrection Man***'s best pages are vitiated by many other pages of boring explanations and investigations. In a world of matter transportation, the problem is not the technology but the regulation of it. Foolproof systems fail, and a criminal captures women at the moment they transfer from one booth to another. One woman arrives at her destination; her momentary 'double' is captured and murdered. The main character is persuaded that the criminal is a similarly generated double of himself. Complications unwind. Not so long ago, the publisher would have demanded this be cut to 200 pages; is it possible that publishers now demand extra thickness?

FERAL by Kerry Greenwood
(Hodder 0-7336-0888-4; 1998; 220 pp.)

Feral was just one of the many Aurealis YA entrants that began brilliantly, but fell apart at the end. Like most of the other authors in the competition, Greenwood paces the first half of the book well. Her characters, living on the outskirts of an almost completely destroyed Melbourne, gather forces in order to defeat the despotic regime. They are interesting characters, this far-future Melbourne is well observed, and everything is going well until the book collapses at the end under the weight of its own busyness. A pity, for it's rather nice seeing the Melbourne Casino (converted by Kerry Greenwood into a fortress of the far-future tyrants) being destroyed.

SINGING THE DOGSTAR BLUES
by Alison Goodman
(1998; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-5967-3; 1998; 200 pp.)

On the surface, ***Singing the Dogstar Blues*** is a compendium of familiar science fiction ideas. She shows us a Melbourne of the middle of the next century. Non-threatening aliens (the Chorians) have landed on Earth, wanting to trade technologies. They offer instantaneous space travel. Melbourne offers time travel, developed by the Sunawa-Harrod Centre of Neo-Historical Studies.

Goodman does not waste space drawing laborious pictures of this near-future society. Sketches are more interesting; these sketches are provided by Joss Aaronson, the book's seventeen (nearly eighteen)-year-old story-teller. Joss is sitting in the Buzz Bar, centre of her social underworld. The conversation with the barman and his son reveals much about the stratified social structure of Goodman's future Australia, tells of Joss's uncomfortable relationship with her mother Ingrid, and begins the story of Joss's career as a time jumper.

Joss has been accepted as one of the twelve students of the Centre of Neo-Historical Studies who will be trained to become time jumpers. She faces career problems, especially Professor Joseph Camden-Stone, head of the Centre. For reasons unknown, he wants Joss to fail the course and leave the Centre. Time jumpers train in pairs. Joss is selected as a pair by Mavkel, the first Chorian to take the course, so Camden-Stone is forced to let her stay.

Joss is a comp (composite), tomorrow's equivalent of today's test-tube babies. Fifty years from now there will be large numbers of comps, treated by many as a subclass within society. Joss does not know the name of her sperm-donor father. Her rich mother sends her money and otherwise ignores her most of the time. Sardonic and freewheeling though she likes to appear, Joss knows that her position in this future society is very vulnerable.

The complications of Joss's family background are not merely bits of

characterisation, but are central to the practical problems of becoming a time jumper. Mavkel, whose hermaphroditic partner Kelmarv has been killed, needs to bond with Joss at a telepathic level before the new partnership can work. This cannot happen until bloodlines are established: Joss must find out who her father was, although all official records of his name have long since been erased. At the same time she needs to find out why she is being followed by two threatening types, a muscly mystery man, and Tori Suka, a well-known professional assassin.

Usually Joss would have to survive two years of training before being allowed to time jump. The urgent need to travel backwards eighteen years to find out her father's name impels her and her friends to hijack a time machine. Goodman is particularly good at putting the reader through the experience of time travel, travelling to a place that is familiar but in which everything is suddenly unfamiliar.

Family problems are as pressing as time travel problems. From Joss's viewpoint, her mother Ingrid is a cold careerist, who sends presents rather than turning up for her daughter's birthday. But Ingrid's ex-partner Louise, who meets Joss for her eighteenth birthday, tells her that Ingrid has always been afraid of Joss. 'Isn't it time,' she asks, 'you saw your mother as a real person instead of Godzilla?'

Mavkel becomes part of Joss's life in uncomfortable and hilarious ways. Joss's one consolation in life is playing twentieth-century blues on the mouth harp. To Mavkel, human music is deeply disturbing. On Choria, it is used only for healing. Mavkel wants to stay physically close to his new partner because he cannot talk to her telepathically. Joss, ever the loner, has great difficulty with this closeness.

The tense and superbly managed mystery story is one of the book's strengths. The other is Joss's voice. Time and again, she will relate a bit of the story, only to sum up the situation with a deft phrase or piece of future slang. The Chorians have voices 'kind of like Billie Holiday with a cold'. When Mavkel is moved to give embrace her it was like being 'kissed by a mild-mannered vacuum cleaner'.

Singing the Dogstar Blues is a mystery story, a thriller, and a family drama, told in a vivid, sardonic, constantly hilarious style that swings the reader straight into the middle of this future society without distracting us with uncomfortable lumps of science-fictional explanations.

THE NIGHT IS FOR HUNTING by John Marsden
(Macmillan 0-7329-0944-9; 1998; 252 pp.)

The Night Is for Hunting shows a lean writing style; exciting, even startling adventures; memorable characters and situations. It is also science fiction by genre: it is the seventh in John Marsden's series of books about a group of teenagers who are trying to survive after an unnamed Asian country invades Australia. But it is not primarily science fiction: it is one of those near-future novels that tell of events the writer believes really could happen quite soon. Marsden's purpose is to show Australian teenagers that they should not take anything for granted, especially lives that are luxurious compared to those led by people in much of the rest of the world. He shows that, if the worst should come to the worst, the people who would survive best are those who have greatest knowledge of the Australian bush. *The Night Is for Hunting* is a hymn to the paradoxical nature of the Australian bushland, which I have never seen described better (except, of course, by Patrick White). It hides the survivors from the invaders, but is equally unforgiving to the main characters, who are trying to escort a group of feral city kids to safety. This is very superior adventure fiction.

LUMINOUS by Greg Egan
(Millennium 1-85798-552-4; 1998; 352 pp.)

Greg Egan has achieved an evenness of texture and consistency of accomplishment in these stories that makes it difficult to remember them separately. They so nearly add up to one Eganworld that it's hard to differentiate between their viewpoints. I've given four stars to most of them, and particularly liked 'Transition Dreams', 'Silver Fire', 'Chaff' and 'The Planck Dive'.

CHOCKY'S COME HOME by Frank Weissenborn and Guy Browning
(1998; 86 Publishing 0-958690-0-5; 153 pp.; $A25)

A man wanders into the town of Jefferson, Nebraska. His name is King. A boy lives in the town of Walker, Utah, 27 years earlier. His name is William Gordon. The two narrative strands alternate with each other.

It takes little deduction to work out that 'King' and William Gordon are the same person, although this point is not spelled out until page 148. How did the enthusiastic but troubled boy who tells the 'Walker' sections become the morose, almost completely emotion-blind drifter whose story is told in the 'Jefferson' sections?

William Gordon's narrative takes place in a not-too-distant future. Weissenborn tells us nothing of what's happening in American cities during this period. Instead, we can deduce what might be happening there from the fact that small and middle-sized towns all over America are dying from the outside in. Each term the Walker elementary school has fewer pupils. Those pupils who want to continue their secondary education must travel by bus each day to the nearest large centre, Harris, whose secondary school is surrounded by barbed wire and is almost completely destroyed by vandals.

Chocky's Come Home tries to set up as many parallels as possible between social disruption and emotional devastation. In the 'Walker' sections, the narrator's father has been almost workless for some years, and his mother deserts the family for long periods of time, returning to the house only when the children are at school. Most of the houses in Walker are boarded up. In the 'Jefferson' sections, set a quarter century later, only a few houses seem occupied, plus the jailhouse/police station and a motel on the edge of town. A winter storm rages outside. There is almost no warmth left in the social soul or the spirits of the people who remain.

Into Walker springs a small dervish of a boy, called Spiro. He speaks almost no English, lives with his mother Jessica in one of the town's

deserted houses, and disturbs the town's inhabitants from the day he arrives. Scared, found under a wrecked Buick in a back lane, the 'kid [was] in baggy, grey trousers, white shorts and a long, blue felt coat with a higher collar. His hair was black and stuck up at all angles, and he was doing something with a tin can, holding it to the ground'. He gibbers in shrieks and whispers, and only after being befriended by William and his sister Molly can he speak at all.

Spiro's life revolves around inexplicable gadgets. At first, he merely points his tin cans at the ground and tries to make contact with something or someone. Strange noises can be heard by other people, but not the messages Spiro wants to hear. As each means of communication fails, Spiro invents increasingly elaborate gizmos or machines in order to ... do what exactly? This book has many mysteries, but at the heart of them all is Spiro's desperate attempt to communicate with 'Chocky' and the destructive powers of the communication machines he builds.

In the other strand of the story, little happens to King in Jefferson. He is befriended by Anna, who tries to make love to him but obviously wants a companion to help her make an escape from the dead-end town. A gang of layabouts attack King; he is rescued by the religious fundamentalists and the local police; both sides advise him to move on. Anna finds a newspaper cutting that shows the man as a boy standing next to Spiro outside a telephone box. Nothing is resolved. King drifts on.

In both strands, we find ourselves in (deliberately invoked) familiar SF territory.

In the name of the novel, Weissenborn resurrects the name of 'Chocky', the alien wonder boy from John Wyndham's penultimate novel (1963), and thus the spirit of all the other alien-children-among-us from innumerable SF stories. We deduce that Spiro is the alien boy, but it is not all clear what he is trying to achieve. Is he, E.T.-like, trying to go back home? No. He seems to be trying to invite 'Chocky' to come to earth. The conduit is Spiro himself. Will Spiro suddenly perform wonders, like all those other SF children?

In both sections, particularly the Jefferson sections, Weissenborn invokes many wasted future landscapes, ranging from Ballard's emptied landscapes of the 1960s, through M. John Harrison's *The Committed Men* (the novel of which *Chocky's Come Home* reminds me) to an American version of *Mad Max* territory. The novel is written by an Australian and published here, yet is saturated with the spirit of some of the best current American authors, such as Richard Ford.

Does such ambition pay off? Not in traditional science fiction terms. Weissenborn fails to give answers to any of the puzzles he sets up. In fictional terms, *Chocky's Come Home* has many extraordinary moments, and must be counted as one of the few interesting Australian novels of recent years. 'We know distance,' writes William Gordon, looking back on his disturbed childhood, 'little in life is near to us.' To him, Spiro is the spirit of everything that's missing in his life. Sure, Spiro is endless irritating because he is obsessive, and he doesn't plan to stick around (although the word 'alien' is never used in the book), but it's exactly his dedication to a Big Picture that attracts William and his sister. Spiro raids the town for trash cans, then for mobile phones, then for television aerials, in order to make his contraptions. At first, the townspeople persecute him, then put up with him. (There is a hint that the town's mysterious school principal, Mr Davis, is protecting him, but we never discover why.) Spiro's efforts ruin his own health and make life impossible for all those around him. Yet William Gordon goes along for the ride; for the first and only time in his life, he is part of something exciting and enriching.

Why, then, the gloom that pervades the end of the novel? Weissenborn is making a direct comparison between the current emptying-out of the Australian countryside and the dissolution of his future America. The horror of this process is subtle and slow, and shows up in finely etched moments of individuals' lives, rather than in any sudden catastrophe. William watches his family disintegrate around him (although his father does achieve a kind of salvation at the end),

his best friend seems intent on committing suicide, and even the local school disintegrates term after term. As a nation, as a world, Weissenborn seems to be saying, we have not even thought about what lack of national hope can do the minds and hearts of people. The most basic understandings dissolve in the snow.

Chocky's Come Home is a success because it is composed of small, finely wrought moments. Time and again, William tells us that 'the day is remembered this way'. No matter how much despair he feels, he can remember delight: 'After Dad dropped us off, seeing the silver-frosted field, I couldn't resist crunching across, feeling the break of the grass, so to later see the trudge of our footprints, our indented, fossilised progress.'

Progress? Regress? That's for the reader to decide. Frank Weissenborn is one of Australia's most interesting new writers. Guy Browning's photographics and paintings that illustrate the text range from eerily grotesque to precisely beautiful.

THE CENTURION'S EMPIRE
by Sean McMullen (Tor 0-312-86131-6; 1998; 383 pp.)

Sean McMullen begins with a promising premise: a group of people from the early years of the Roman republic discover a way to cold-preserve themselves. They disappear from the world for centuries, then wake for short periods, enjoying a limited form of 'immortality'. The first half of the book tells the stories of crises of the group at various times in history, when the leaders must be woken. Unfortunately, McMullen includes little material from 'The Deciad', his award-winning short story from 1985 that was the seed for the novel. When the survivors reach the twenty-first century, he turns the novel into a rather confusing thriller, full of endless betrayals and surprises. This gives a strange pointlessness to the narrative. A pity, since he would have done better to preserve in the second half the first half's quiet tone of unfolding of historical processes and the main characters' motives.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

KILLING DARCY by Melissa Lucashenko
(University of Queensland Press 0-7022-3041-3; 1998; 230 pp.)

Melissa Lucashenko is an Aboriginal writer who is quickly building a strong reputation as a fine novelist. Of all the authors I read for the YA Aurealis Award in 1998, she had the greatest ability to create strong, ferocious characters that come to life in front of you. Darcy Mango has a chip on his shoulder, which is not helped by being forced to work for a White farming family. However, the members of the family are down on their luck, so reluctantly he forms a friendship with them. He also discovers an old house hidden in the bush, and in it a camera that takes pictures of the past. Lucashenko writes an urgent tale that combines realism and some elegant science-fictiony effects.

COLD IRON by Sophie Masson
(Hodder 0-7336-0583-4; 1998; 185 pp.)

'When the penniless Tattercoats is included in an invitation to the Earl of Malmsey's grand ball, the servant-girl Malkin and Pug the goose-herd are determined that she will attend and claim the inheritance denied her since birth.' Thus the blurb; and yes, the book could just have easily have been written by a British writer, and perhaps it's already been published overseas. Masson has a lively, light style, and her group of characters (who form a family of pilgrims) make pleasant company for the reader. When Masson tries to play games with metaphysical mirrors at the end, she loses me as a reader. The social comedy of the first half of the book is more convincing than the Great Revelations at the end.

FANTASTIC WORLDS edited by Paul Collins
(HarperCollins Moonstone 0-7322-5878-2; 1998; 316 pp.)

A short-story collection with some strong stories and too many duds.

Three of the stories were sort of all right: Sean McMullen's 'Chronicler', Jane Routley's 'City of Whirlwinds' and Garth Nix's 'From the Lighthouse'. But the only story with real power is Cherry Wilder's 'Old Noon's Tale', which is a longer version of a story that was first published in 1990 (and therefore wasn't eligible for the Aurealis Award for Best YA Story, which we didn't award anyway).

A DARK WINTER: THE TENEBRAN TRILOGY, BOOK ONE
by Dave Luckett (Omnibus 1-86291-368-4; 1998; 328 pp.)

I groaned when I began this book. Not another bloody heroic fantasy! I was soon won over. Luckett has written one of the few original and entertaining books in the genre. He uses simple means to go where no other fantasy writer dares to go: strong, realistic, often funny sentences; clear delineation of characters, from the most humble to the most headstrong; and in the final battle scenes, hair-raising and original variations on the Huge Threat From Over The Horizon. Yes, there was a sequel.

RED CITY by Sophie Masson
(Moonstone 0-7322-5916-9; 1998; 200 pp.)

Masson's style is always enjoyable to read, but in ***Red City*** she is so busy being mysterious and magical that the story disappears up its own enchanted castles and islands. I suspect Masson has been just too ambitious too early in her career, but her next few books will be worth seeking out.

VIBES: JIGSAW by Christine Harris
(Hodder 0-7336- 0884-1; 1998; 136 pp.)

VIBES: SHADOWS by Christine Harris
(Hodder 0-7336- 0885-X; 1998; 138 pp.)

VIBES: MASKS by Christine Harris
(Hodder 0-7336- 0886-8; 1998; 136 pp.)

VIBES: SUSPICION by Christine Harris
(Hodder 0-7336-0887-6; 1998; 138 pp.)

Hodder snookered itself by issuing these books as a series of novellas instead of as one novel. Although each piece is intriguing, the four sections don't quite add up. If they had, a complete ***Vibes*** novel would have been hard to beat. After she wakes up in a hospital bed, Britanny Cooke cannot remember anything about her earlier life. She cannot even remember the people who claim to be her parents. Very weird things begin to happen to her. She seems to have a double, a malevolent person intent on upsetting her attempts to live a normal suburban life. Put the four books together, and they have quite a neat paranoid SF plot. Split them apart, and the story keeps restarting instead of flowing from one section to another. The strength of *Vibes* is its sharp critique of modern suburban living as seen through the eyes of an ultra-aware teenager. Funny, perceptive and memorable; ruined by a bad marketing move.

THE SILENT
by Jack Dann (Bantam 0-553-09716-4; 1998; 286 pp.)

Mundy McDowell tells his own story of the period from when his parents were killed and their farm destroyed during the war until he is rediscovered by relatives after wandering through the Northern Virginia backwoods, usually hungry and often in great danger, for more than a year. Mundy is affected so strongly by the horrors of the book's first pages that he can no longer speak. His quick thinking gets him through a large number of encounters that would have finished off most people. He feels protected by several spirits of the dead, including a ghost dog, as he walks the line that separates death from life. This feeling of being alive and ghostly at the same time gives the book its power. All the detail, related in Mundy's mock-naïve style, is realistic; but the meaning is mysterious. While watching humanity at its worst, Mundy passes beyond humanity.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

THE EXTREMES by Christopher Priest
(Simon & Schuster 0-684-81632-6; 393 pp.)

Until the night I visited Slow Glass for the Aurealis Awards, I thought I would miss out on my own copy of *The Extremes*. Alan Stewart received a hardback review copy from the local distributor five months ago. Thanks, Alan, for lending it to me. The problem seems to be that most local distributors are now not importing hardback fiction from British publishers. They are importing the large softcovers instead. But ***The Extremes*** appeared only in hardcover. So what did the distributor do? As far as I can tell, failed to import the book until Slow Glass put in a large enough order. Almost certainly their copies are the only ones to reach Australia.

So we nearly missed out on the latest book by Chris Priest, surely a major English author by any standards. In *The Extremes* he's doing something new and interesting. There is, as overseas reviewers have noted, an unusual amount of violence in this novel, but that's hardly the point. Is this real or virtual violence? We are told that the main character lives in a world that is very like our own, but it is an alternative world. Virtual reality stations have become as available as computer games arcades are in our own world. At which point does the main character's world separate from something we might call 'reality' and entirely enter a virtual world? My guess is that this occurs in the first few pages, but I will never know. There is no solid ground here. The shifting ground achieves its own reality through Priest's admirable prose. Or is there just a bit too much slippage? Compared to *The Prestige*, which was exactly the right length, *The Extremes* feels too long for its material. Maybe I'll feel differently after I've read it again.

MOONSEED by Stephen Baxter
(1998; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-649813-2; 535 pp.)

In ***Moonseed*** Baxter has so much fun destroying the world, and destroying it in so much loving detail, that I feel a bit churlish in noting that the book is about 200 pages too long. What starts as a hymn to geology develops into the slambang equivalent of all those movies about gigantic volcanoes and panic-stricken people. Destroy! Destroy! goes Mr Baxter, hurling thunderbolts at the poor bastards (us), but the mayhem goes on too long. Worse, it becomes all the same kind of mayhem. The ending is not convincing, but the first half is deliriously entertaining.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

THE TWINKLING OF AN EYE: MY LIFE AS AN ENGLISHMAN
by Brian Aldiss
(Little Brown 0-316-64706-3; 1998; 484 pp.)

When finally this book arrived from Britain, I was intrigued to find out how much it would differ from both *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's*, Brian's literary memoir from a few years ago, and various memoirs he's published during the last decade. Here he tells both less, and more: less about the worst of his schooldays, but much more about his army days; still not much about his first marriage, which ended in isolation and *Hothouse* and *Greybeard*, but more than perhaps he meant to say about the unsuspected (by me) dark days of the 1980s, when life seemed sterile and Brian and Margaret's marriage was under threat. Margaret died just after Brian had written the book, which is a panegyric to her and both families of children. What fun it has been to be a writer! is the main feeling of the book — but at least here Brian is willing to admit that it hasn't been all fun.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

CHILDREN OF GOD by Mary Doria Russell
(Villard 0- 679-45635-X; 1998; 438 pp.)

Children of God doesn't have the formal shapeliness of *The Sparrow*, and after about the halfway mark it is not based primarily on revelation of character, which is the basis of the success of the *The Sparrow*. But it does weave together a number of mighty themes; the set pieces are visually splendid; and it shows that this two-novels-that-are- really-one is as much about music and science as it is about religion.

TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, or HOW WE FOUND THE BISHOP'S BIRD STUMP
by Connie Willis (Bantam 0-553-09995-7; 1998; 434 pp.)

You've all read it, so I don't need to talk much about it. Elaine enjoyed it more than I did. I thought it could have been at least 150 pages shorter. I did get very sick of the 'bishop's bird stump' of the title, as well as many other elements that are repeated throughout like incantations. I enjoyed living in this sunny world, and almost worked out the time-travel complexities at the end. But not quite; I fear that the poor reader is not meant to tie the ends together.

AMERICAN FANTASY

KISSING THE BEEHIVE by Jonathan Carroll
(Doubleday 0-385-48011-3; 1998; 232 pp.)

Carroll's previous novel, *From the Teeth of Angels*, felt like a sign-off statement to the world, transcendent and despairing at the same time. It's been a few years between that novel and ***Kissing the Beehive***, which is the most disappointing Jonathan Carroll novel so far. It's about a writer with writer's block, who breaks it by travelling back to his home town. Autobiographical, perhaps? If so, inspiration failed to strike. All the familiar surprise elements of a Carroll novel are here, but they now feel sterile and unsurprising.

CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION

DISTANT SIGNALS AND OTHER STORIES by Andrew Weiner
(Porcépic Books 0-88878-284-5; 1989; 236 pp.)

THIS IS THE YEAR ZERO by Andrew Weiner
(Pottersfield Press 1-895900-14-X; 1998; 192 pp.)

Andrew Weiner sent me both these books (which I suspect have never been exported from Canada to Britain or Australia) out of friendship, and like a rotten friend, I hadn't got around to reading ***Distant Signals and Other Stories*** until now. If I had read the book in 1989 when it appeared, I would not have had the satisfying experience of making a direct comparison between Weiner's early stories and his work from the 1990s (***This is the Year Zero***). His stories have improved rapidly during the decade. In his early stories, Weiner shows much feeling for language and a clear perception of some really interesting byways of science fiction. Comparisons to Kafka and Ballard come to mind, but not too insistently. In his early stories, Weiner shows only one consistent failure: an inability to bring together all the elements of his story into a satisfying conclusion. After reading many of the early stories, I felt 'Is that all there is?' In *This is the Year Zero*, Andrew Weiner becomes a much more powerful voice. The best way of describing his stories is to say they would be urban fantasies if they weren't also SF. He plays with fantasy and horror elements as well as fairly standard SF ideas, but the cumulative effect is to reveal urban life as seen by a total outsider. Everything is made strange and interesting, although on the surface Weiner is usually not writing about spectacular subject matter. Where aliens appear, they are familiar figures; only the humans are odd. My favourite story is 'The Map', with its familiar idea (the little antique shop that disappears the next time you go looking for it) and a surprise twist on the alternative worlds idea (what would really

happen if you slipped unexpectedly between alternative worlds?). There are many other quiet, fine stories, such as 'On Becoming an Alien', 'The Disappearance Artist' (which could be expanded into a novel) and 'Going to Meet the Alien'. Andrew Weiner's stories appear regularly in the American magazines; it seems a pity that these two collections are also not widely available.

DARWINIA by Robert Charles Wilson
(1998; Millennium 1-85798-815-9; 320 pp.)

Overnight in the year 1913 people in America wake up to find that the other half the world, especially Europe, has been turned into Something Else — all sort of prehistoric, but not quite. A new continent to explore. No sign of the people who lived there. The good bit of ***Darwinia*** is the story of one man who explores the new continent. It proves more dangerous than he had suspected; not only does he encounter strange creatures, but strange humans are also on his trail. Then, half way through, the bloody author tells us what should have been kept a secret until the end of the novel. Not only are things not what they seem, but they are ludicrously more different than you could possibly imagine might be the real situation. At about this stage my eyes started to droop. There should be a law of Conservation of Weirdo Effects to protect authors from going whacko.

1999

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

DOWN THERE IN DARKNESS
by George Turner (Tor 0-312- 86829-4; 1999; 352 pp.)

Although I enjoyed *Down There in Darkness* a great deal more in book form than when I read it in manuscript, I can never put out of my mind that George Turner did not want to write this book, wrote it on assignment, then was left with it as his only unpublished novel when he died. The bitterness of the experience of writing it spills over into the bitterness of the book itself. Read it for interest, but read *Genetic Soldier* first.

CENTAURUS edited by David G. Hartwell and Damien Broderick
(1999; Tor 0-312-86556-2; 525 pp.)

I've written a rather pursed-lips review of ***Centaurus*** for the Aussie issue of *Foundation*. My feeling was yes, there are some very good stories in this large collection, but why wasn't it *all* exciting? Even I have a sense of patriotism! Put together the best of the last 20 years of Australian short SF and fantasy and you should have a blazing, fabulous, drop-jaw collection! But it's not here, which is such a pity, as this is the first American-published collection of Australian SF to be published since (as I recall) *The Altered I* in 1976. The most difficult aspect of writing the *Foundation* review is that I already knew why Damien wasn't able to include some of the stories he wanted (especially Leanne Frahm's 'On the Turn') — David Hartwell knocked them back. Other stories, such as Greg Egan's 'Wang's Carpets', are uninteresting representatives of their authors' work. In fact, I almost stopped reading halfway through the book, which has a stretch of dull territory. Having said that, nothing can detract from *Centaurus*'s double-bungers, the two impressive stories at the end (Damien Broderick's 'The Magi' and Peter Carey's 'The Change'); Kevin McKay's much-read and much-loved 'Pie Row Joe'; Sean Williams' 'A Map of the Mines of Barnath', which is new to me; and a fair number of other treasures. Don't miss this collection, but don't treat it as the definitive survey of Australian short SF. (That's the one I would edit if given a chance.)

TERANESIA by Greg Egan
(1999; Victor Gollancz 0- 57506-854-X; 249 pp.)

Elaine bought the hardcover edition of ***Teranesia*** at Aussiecon 3. (Thanks to Andy Richards, who imported hardbacks directly from Britain for the convention; the local distributor now imports only trade

paperback editions.) Elaine put it in her bag, and read it at night while placating cats. She finished *Teranesia* quickly, and said it was one of Greg Egan's best books, especially because of the strength of its characterisation. Therefore I had high expectations when I read it, but felt a bit disappointed. Egan does place his main emphasis on his main characters during the first half of the novel, but lets the central section of the narrative dissipate, then at the end refocuses the book, not on the main characters but on the Big Idea (which, I admit, is pretty Big, but I had to have it explained to me). Here is a failure to integrate the Big Idea with the many interesting paradoxes of the main character, but the many enthusiasts for *Teranesia* would disagree with me. *Distress* was a much more successful integration of character, image and idea.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION
by Rory Barnes and Damien Broderick
(1999; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6474-X; 392 pp.)

STUCK IN FAST FORWARD
by Rory Barnes and Damien Broderick
(1999; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6562-2; 227 pp.)

These books have very similar covers, but . . . Despite the cover, which makes it look like a UFO book, ***The Book of Revelation*** is a major novel about growing up slightly twisted in the 1970s (the main character is screwed around by the fact that he believes he was kidnapped by aliens when he was a kid and they did Really Nasty Things to him, a belief that affects the way he deals with the rest of the human race for the rest of his life).

Stuck in Fast Forward is a forward-time-travel romp for young adults, which loses its way only because its interesting characters are eventually overwhelmed by the exuberance of its inventions. Although I haven't read much of 1999's YA output, I suspect that *Stuck* was the best of the bunch.

THE LADY OF SITUATIONS by Stephen Dedman
(1999; Ticonderoga 0-9586856-5-7; 222 pp.)

FOREIGN BODIES by Stephen Dedman
(1999; Tor 0-312- 86864-2; 286 pp.)

I can't dismiss these books by Stephen Dedman, since he can write a good sentence and dramatise a scene convincingly. But I can't go overboard about them. because he doesn't know what to do with his material. Only a few of the short stories in the collection ***The Lady of Situations*** have that sense of piercing revelation that one finds in a great story, yet I could not say any them are incompetent. They are fussy, overfilled with extraneous detail, like much of the second half of the novel Foreign Bodies. 'The Lady of Situations', 'Never Seen by Waking Eyes' and 'The Vision of a Vanished Good' are the most interesting stories in *The Lady of Situations*.

In ***Foreign Bodies***, the most impressive section is the first long section, which plunges the reader into a near-future society in which private companies police entire cities and run them at a profit, and criminals from the future are trying to take over. I felt part of this society, but realised that Dedman was merely writing an adventure story, not a novel that revealed much about his near future. Dedman is on the brink of a brilliant career, but hasn't stepped off the cliff yet.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

FIREFLAUGHT by Andrew Whitmore
(HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6449-9; 1999; 349 pp.)

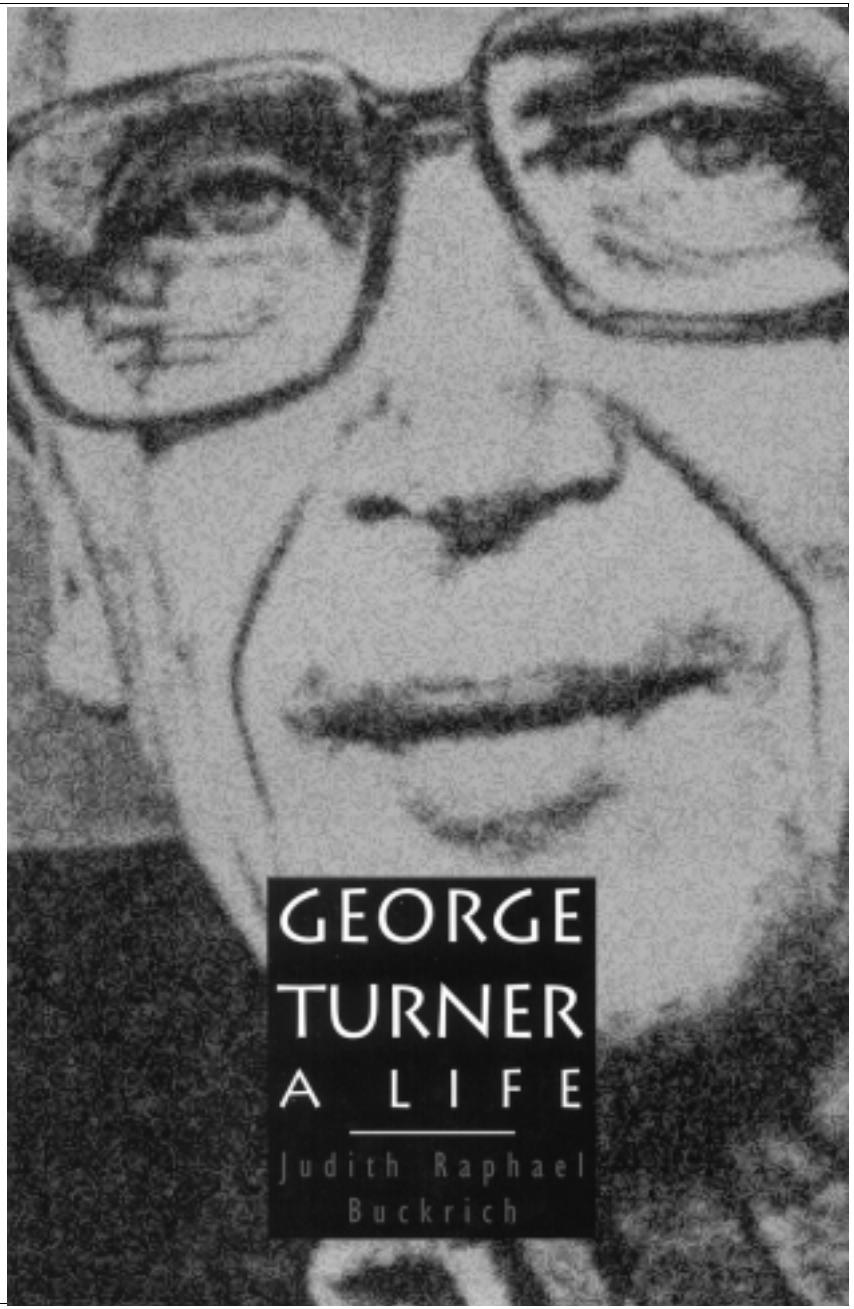
Andrew Whitmore is the first to admit that ***Fireflaught*** is an expansion of *The Fortress of Eternity*, his only previously published novel. Local HarperCollins commissioned this version, but seems to have made little effort to typeset the additional material clearly so that it makes sense. The sections taken from the earlier version still have a sprightly ring to them, while most of the new sections seem

unnecessary. *Fireflaught* has the usual gang of pilgrims travelling across one of those maps you always find at the beginnings of such books towards a mysterious, dark-magical destination. Whitmore doesn't give a stuff for heroics or idealism, and neither do his main characters. Each of them has an unheroic reason for undertaking the 'quest'. I don't know what fans of heroic fantasy would make of these anarchic, even salacious goings on, but they are entertaining enough for people such as me who rarely read heroic fantasy.

AUSTRALIAN NON-FICTION

GEORGE TURNER: A LIFE
by Judith Raphael Buckrich
(1999; Melbourne University Press 0-522-84840-0; 214 pp.)

This seemingly straightforward biography has caused quite a kerfuffle around town. Not as much kerfuffle as the *MUP Encyclopedia of Australian Science Fiction*, but the connection between the publisher, MUP, and the problems of both ***George Turner*** and the *Encyclopedia* is not accidental. First, the good news. This is a very readable book, full of the sorts of information about George Turner that would have been unavailable without Judith Buckrich's six years of work. George Turner had no intention of revealing his secrets, and it's only Buckrich's fortitude that has uncovered anything that might be called a biography. Second, the bad news. Many people noticed when the book appeared that the information in many of the photo captions was wrong. I happened to know that Judy Buckrich had been sent the correct information long before press time. Had she sent on the correct captions? Or had her corrections been ignored? Then Yvonne Rousseau, eagle-eyed life member of the Society of Editors, when reviewing the book for the *Age*, discovered to her horror and astonishment that many of the quotations from George's texts were inaccurate. Whose fault could this possibly be? And does knowing this destroy the basic enjoyment of reading the book? For some people, yes. For me, the book remains an invaluable set of clues for trying to work out the most enigmatic person I've ever met. I feel more and



more that Judith Buckrich's argument about Turner's novels is irrelevant to their real importance, which means that somebody should write a very different book about the fiction. But now that George Turner is dead, writing any other biography of him is an impossible task. *George Turner: A Life* is one of the few biographies or autobiographies of an SF writer that is both valuable and enjoyable to read.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

THE BUSINESS by Iain Banks
(1999; Little Brown 0- 316-64844-2; 393 pp.)

Am I the only person who's noticed that Iain Banks doesn't seem to care about quality control anymore? When he makes an effort, he can be the best current British novelist, as the first chapter of ***The Business*** shows. But throughout most of this novel he seems just plain lazy. The setup is nice, with its WorldWide Organisation That Controls All Governments, the 'Business' of the book's title, that for non-apparent motives recruits the unreliable main character. A send-up of Conspiracy novels? Not really; Banks proves to be merely lazy about motivations and methods. The second half is really slack. The main idea is thrown away in a sexist side plot and a 'solution' that is silly and complacent. Take a holiday, Mr Banks, before writing the next book.

TIME: MANIFOLD I by Stephen Baxter
(1999; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-225768-8; 456 pp.)

I also bought this in hardcover, also from Andy Richards, at Aussiecon 3, and expected to enjoy it a lot more than I did. Baxter, like so many other successful SF writers, is now churning out books much too fast for their constituent parts to have hit the side of the brain on the way through. Baxter's mind teams with vast and fabulous ideas, and so many of them are in ***Time*** that I can't work what could be left for *Manifold II* or *III*. *Time* is intriguing for its first half, but then becomes a vast shapeless balloon of undigested and increasingly disconnected Big Ideas. Add to this the difficulty that one of the few unifying ideas — for statistical reasons the human race *must* be hit by a super catastrophe within the next 200 years — is as silly at the end of the novel as it was when introduced at the beginning. We know how carefully Baxter can integrate detailed information, big ideas and interesting characters — I just hope he goes back to doing this.

BRITISH FANTASY

WHAT YOU MAKE IT: A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES by Michael Marshall Smith
(1999; HarperCollins 0-00-651007-8; 400 pp.)

I bought this book because Kirstyn McDermott, during her talk for the July Nova Mob, inspired us all to read any Michael Marshall Smith we could find. I wish I could share Kirsten's enthusiasm. I can see why she thinks Smith is a fair shake better than most other horror writers, but at heart he *is* a writer of genre horror. The object of most of these stories is to pull the rug from under the reader's feet. He does that well, but he doesn't often enough do more than that. If he would stretch his talent, if he were not so intent on the Big Surprise Effect of each story, he would be much more interesting. He's an American who lives in Britain, and makes much of the alien viewpoint. He knows his people — under forty, well off, rootless, full of life but not sure of life. But he doesn't trust his craft. I like writers who bang readers over the head — Jonathan Carroll is the closest to Smith in tone — but somehow he never quite inspires self-recognition in the reader. By far the best story is an supernatural end-of-the-world story, 'Hell Hath Enlarged Herself'. Other fine stories include 'Foreign Bodies', 'The Man Who Drew Cats', 'When God Lived in Kentish Town' (which shows that Smith might yet become a subtle writer) and 'Always'.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

WHEN THE FEAST IS FINISHED by Brian Aldiss
(1999; Little, Brown 0-316-64835-3; 230 pp.)

Real angst this time; not misery contemplated carefully, but the slicing away of certainties. Margaret Aldiss took only four months to die after she was diagnosed with liver cancer. There had been some warnings, but not many. She died at what would have been a sunny, fulfilled and fulfilling period in her life and Brian's. Other people stand around numbly when the axe falls, but both Brian and Margaret kept journals during the period, Margaret's significantly less unhappy than Brian's. It's the tiny details that make ***When the Feast is Finished*** memorable, unguarded details of ordinary life disintegrating, compared with the carefully shaped narrative of *The Twinkling of an Eye*. *Twinkling* was substantially finished before Margaret became ill, and both books are Brian Aldiss's love letters to Margaret. It's also his thank-you note to the hospice movement, and the help given by the rest of his family.

AMERICAN FANTASY

THE MARRIAGE OF STICKS by Jonathan Carroll
(Victor Gollancz 0-575-06615-6; 1999; 282 pp.)

Quite a few Carroll fans hoped that ***The Marriage of Sticks*** would be the 'come-back' novel after *Kissing the Beehive*, which many of us must have felt was Carroll's least interesting book. *The Marriage of Sticks* is certainly much more sinuous and complicated than *Kissing the Beehive*, but a month or two after reading it, I feel that it has made little impact on me. Earlier Carroll novels have a razor-bright feeling shining from them, a sense that everything is at stake, but might vanish in a moment. In *The Marriage of Sticks*, the magic circle of events is designed to teach the main character some essential truth about herself, and I don't believe this ever happens. If she had become a changed person, as the end of the book asserts, she could never have written the rest of the narrative in the way she has. Her basic characteristic is her inability to register others' pain, but the book itself also shows a failure of feeling. The truth is that Carroll enjoys writing about his main character as we find her at the beginning of the book; unlike her, he can't change his temperament because of some Damascus experience. Some essential quality has been missing in Carroll's writing since *From the Teeth of Angels*, which reads like the last will and testament of a writer about to fall silent. Perhaps, in his heart of hearts, Carroll has done just that.

THE KNIFE THROWER AND OTHER STORIES
by Steven Millhauser (1999; Phoenix 0-75380-821-8; 200 pp.)

After having read *Edwin Mullhouse*, I was a bit disappointed by this collection of short stories. They are more formal than that novel, a little dry, a little too worked out and worked up. But the best of these pieces, especially 'Flying Carpets', 'The Dream of the Consortium' and 'Paradise Park', glow in the mind, strange tours of magical hells.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

THE ELEGANT UNIVERSE: SUPERSTRINGS, HIDDEN DIMENSIONS, AND THE QUEST FOR THE ULTIMATE THEORY
by Brian Greene (1999; Norton 0-393-04688-5; 448 pp.)

This could be my Book of the Year, although I understand less than a half of it. In clear prose, and using brilliant illustrations (and no equations), Greene traces the long path from Einstein to superstring and M theory. Some leaps of logic I don't understand, but at least Greene trusts the reader enough to make those leaps. Only towards the end did I realise that Brian Greene is not just another science journalist, but is one of the leading theorists in the superstring field. Finding the ultimate answer to everything is exciting work, more exciting than even the best science fiction by people such as Greg Egan. What in this book was entirely new to me? Most of it, but especially its demonstration that events at sub-Planck level have both

a direct and inverse relationship to events at cosmological level (for example, at the middle of black holes), therefore Hubble observations about the age of the universe are important in giving information about the structure of matter. Maybe from now on I will be able to understand bits of *New Scientist* articles on cosmology. (Thanks, Dick Jenssen, for giving this book to Elaine and me.)

CANADIAN FANTASY

A WITNESS TO LIFE by Terence M. Green
(1999; Forge 0-312-86672-0; 240 pp.)

If I said this was a sweet book, it would give the wrong idea altogether. That would hide the tense strength that gives power to its fantasy principle: that Martin Radey's spirit is set free by his death, to wander restlessly through 40 years in the lives of members of his family, until his spirit achieves a resting place. Green believes in the admirable art of compression: long vistas of human history are sketched convincingly as a large number of characters are brought to life. Its sweetness lies in Green's ability to make a satisfactory pattern from what could have been unruly material. This is a companion novel (rather than a sequel or prequel) to Green's memorable *Shadow of Ashland*.

2000

BRITISH FANTASY

TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS by M. John Harrison
(2000; Gollancz 0-57506-832-9; 262 pp.)

Take one national image — Britain as rainy and gloomy — personify the image in one writer, and you have M. John Harrison. Perhaps British readers don't realise how heartwarmingly miserable he seems to the happy little Australian or American reader. The best stories in this collection tell of the ghosts of miseries and betrayals past (especially 'Old Women' and 'Small Heirlooms', the first two stories in the book), vague shapes seen along rancid alleyways or rainsoaked valleys, and at least two mad mountaineers ('Suicide Coast'). About halfway through the book, I came to realise that Harrison relishes his own special Britain; it's not the country he observes, but the one he builds lovingly in his mind. My favourite stories from ***Travel Arrangements*** include 'Empty' (a terrifying lost-souls story), 'Seven Guesses of the Heart' (which owes more than a bit to Le Guin's 'Earthsea', combined with British angst) and 'The East' (more angst). The pain! the pleasure!

DON'T OPEN YOUR EYES
by Ann Halam (2000; Dophin 1-85881-791-9; 179 pp.)

'Anne Halam' (Gwyneth Jones) seems to be writing one of those pious little YA books about the middle-class kids who come into conflict with the down-and-out kids they've moved next door to, then make friends with them — until suddenly ***Don't Open Your Eyes*** turns into a humdinger of a horror story. Some nice neck-bristling moments here. Just shows that a good writer can still do a lot with both the YA novel and the horror story.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

PHILIP K. DICK
by Andrew M. Butler
(2000; Pocket Essentials 1-903047-29-3; 93 pp.)

CYBERPUNK
by Andrew M. Butler
(2000; Pocket Essentials 1-903047-28-5; 95 pp.)

Andy Butler gave me copies of these books when he was Australia, so I'm prejudiced towards them. I don't much like the very limited

format within which Andy is forced to write. The exam cram-guide structure forces him to be careful with his words, but he gives the impression of wanting to say much more about each ***Philip K. Dick*** book than he is allowed to write here. Despite the format, Andy shows why reading Philip K. Dick is a necessary addiction.

I enjoyed ***Cyberpunk*** more than *Philip K. Dick* because I've read almost none of the books discussed. I feel free to avoid Bruce Sterling's wooden style altogether, because, thanks to Andrew Butler, I now know something of what he's writing about. Some writers mentioned, such as Justina Robson and Gwyneth Jones, I was going to read anyway — someday. Thanks to *Cyberpunk*, I can advance the day a bit. The real value of the 'Pocket Essentials' series, then, is for people who've never read the books (or, for most of the series, seen the films).

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

THREE EARLY NOVELS

by Philip K. Dick (2000; Millennium 1-85798-912-0; 422 pp.; comprises The Man Who Japed (1956), Dr Futurity (1960), and Vulcan's Hammer (1960)

I had not read these early novels of Philip Dick until Millennium recently rereleased them in one volume. The early novels are not much talked about, although everybody's now talking about Philip K. Dick, but they are worth reading to discover how competent he was at this early stage in his career. They are all minor novels, in that the struts and concrete piping of the plots are more evident than the overall architecture of each book. Standard SF ideas are the bases of these books, but the ideas are nicely subverted. There is something original in each novel (each started as one-half of an Ace Double). In *The Man Who Japed*, we meet one of the first of Dick's characters to take responsibility for his actions, instead of having things merely happen to him. *Dr Futurity* has a time-paradox knot that Silverberg reused, rather blandly, in *Up the Line* a decade later. Dick's style is relentlessly clean and precise, without yet showing the variety and colour of his great novels.

FURY

by Henry Kuttner (1947, reissued 2000; Gollancz SF Collectors Edition 0-575-07141-9; 208 pp.)

I read this first in 1960 and 1961. All I've remembered since have been vague images of a savage pterodactly Venus ... And that wonderful last sentence. Today ***Fury*** seems an example of the kind of science fiction that started me reading the stuff and I have rarely found again. Romantic gestures and enormous energy; romanticism more in the Victor Hugo tradition than the Hugo Gernsback tradition. Spectacular characters in lifelong contention with each other. The remains of humanity confined in underwater cities on Venus (an idea surely pinched from Olaf Stapledon). And a brief but vivid description of the effort to terraform Venus. Now that the special effects people are up the task, why not film *Fury*, even if 1947's Venus has little to do with the real thing?

AMERICAN FANTASY

THE TELLING

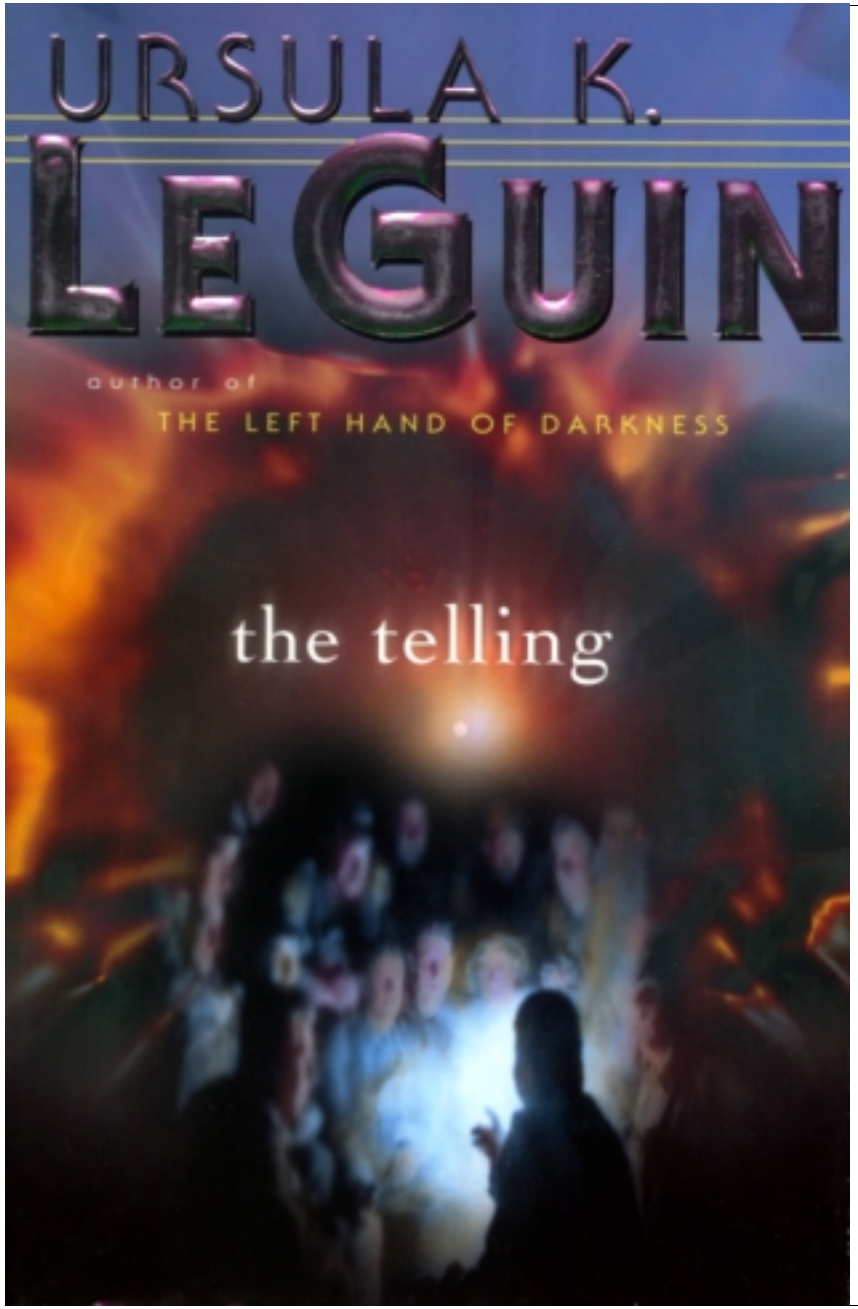
by Ursula K. Le Guin
(Harcourt 0-15-100567-2; 2000; 264 pp.; $US24.00/$A52.80)

THE OTHER WIND

by Ursula K. Le Guin
(Harcourt 0-15-100684-9; 2001; 246 pp.; $US25.00/$A57.95)

I slipped Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* and *The Other Wind* under the Urgent Urgent label. I should do some hard work to review them adequately.

The Telling resembles Le Guin's other political fables, in that again (as in *Four Ways to Forgiveness*) she pits a Hainish representative



against a repressive regime, but this time the setting is a single-continent world with a bloody huge mountain range in the middle. The journey over the range has some of the imaginative intensity of the journey over ice in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

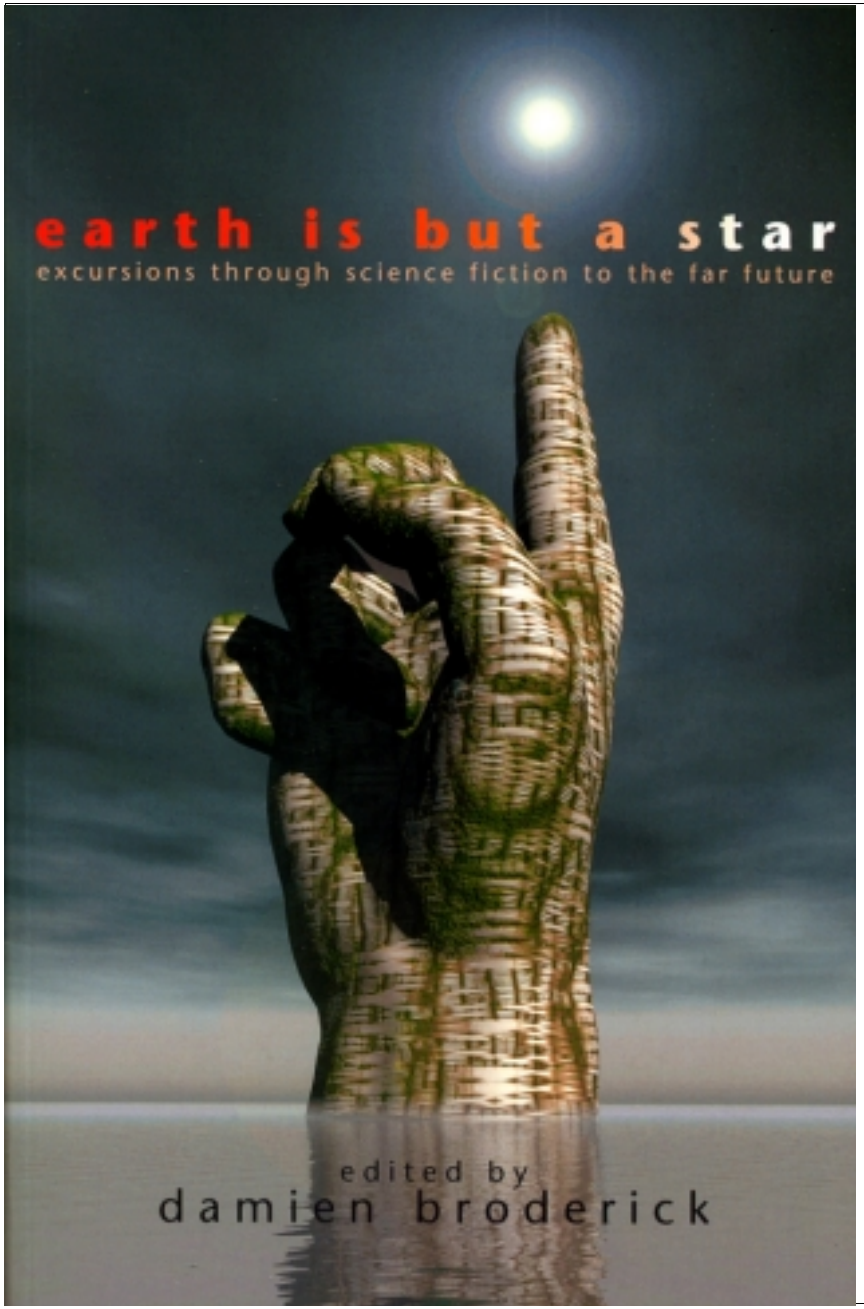
In ***The Other Wind***, Le Guin returns to Earthsea. You can feel her sniffing the wind with delight at the beginning of the novel, as her main character alights in Gont, and she returns to her true spiritual home. Le Guin never writes better than she does about Earthsea, and, despite some irritating kowtowing to kings and nobles, she takes the reader on a harrowing and deeply imagined journey that raises her work far above all other heroic fantasy, including that of Tolkien. The story has its origins in *The Farthest Shore*, *Tehanu* and a short piece called 'Dragonfly'. In those pieces, she developed some powerful metaphors for, as Peter Nicholls put it, 'teaching children the value of death'. In the years since she wrote *The Farthest Shore* and *Tehanu*, Le Guin has been questioning the meaning of her own metaphors and images. During the first three-quarters of the novel, she seems almost as lost as her own characters. The book's ending has no easy solutions. She overturns many of her favourite notions so thoroughly that I suspect she will now have to write yet another Earthsea novel.

2001

AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

EARTH IS BUT A STAR: EXCURSIONS THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION TO THE FAR FUTURE
edited by Damien Broderick (2001; University of Western Australia Press 1-876268-54-9; 466 pp.)

Earth Is But a Star is a collection of fiction set in the far future, plus essays about authors or subject matter in the area. In this volume,



Broderick's 'far future' occupies a territory somewhere between the underpopulated romantic landscapes of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* series and that of the end of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. This 'dying earth' landscape is empty of people but rich in small inventions, and its inhabitants are not too worried about future possibilities. At least, that's the general impression I get from John Brunner's 'Earth Is But a Star', a very early Brunner novella from which the collection derives its name. The tone and landscape is Vancean, but the animation is that of the young and bright-eyed Brunner. I was anticipating a wide variety of far-future possibilities, but there is no story from Cordwainer Smith, whose far future is the most cognitively estranged of them all. However, the highlight of the volume for me is Alice Turner's 'The Crimes and Glories of Cordwainer Smith', which deftly describes the Smithian mood and tone. The most inventive story in the book is Robert Silverberg's 'Dancers in the Time Flux'. The essays cover a wider territory than do the stories: those I particularly enjoy include Brian Stableford's 'Far Futures', Claire Brialey's 'Visions of the Far Future World' and Stanislaw Lem's 'On Stapledon's *The Star Maker*'. Rosaleen Love's 'Star Drover', which is both fiction and essay, completes the book.

EYES OF THE CALCULOR by Sean McMullen
(2001; Tor 0-312-87736-6; 589 pp.; $US27.95/$A63.95)

The last instalment of Melbourne writer Sean McMullen's 'Greatwinter Trilogy' is ***Eyes of the Calculor***. *Souls in the Great Machine* (1999), the first book in the series, is based on two novels, *Voices in the Light* (1994) and *Mirrorsun Rising* (1995), first published by Aphelion Books, the enterprising Adelaide small publisher. *The Miocene Arrow*, the second in the series, appeared in 2000.

McMullen depicts a future alternative Australia, an inland civilisation whose people may venture no closer than 200 kilometres from the coast. As in the first two books, humanity has been attacked by the creatures it took for granted: the highly intelligent cetazoids (whales, dolphins and cephalopods). Having been hunted and polluted, they unite in order to initiate the Call, a telepathic impulse that drives most

human beings to hurl themselves into the sea. In the year 3900, only a few areas of the world, including the inland plains of Australia and a mountainous part of North America, are free from the influence of the Call.

Human activity is doubly limited. Before the Call, spacefaring humans built the Mirrorsun, a vast ring around the sun to monitor humanity's more dangerous impulses. Two thousand years before the events described in *Souls in the Great Machine*, the Mirrorsun stopped the operation on Earth of electrical machines and all other power sources dependent on non-renewable energy.

McMullen's future Australia is a complex place of make-do technology and intricate responses to difficult limitations. The inland towns have become thriving centres of new states: Southmoor, Central Confederation, the Kalgoorlie Empire and the Alspring Ghans. It's not clear whether these states, separated by competing religions, reflect twenty-first-century social and racial groupings in Australia. They are linked, both internally and across the continent, by a network of 'beamflash towers', which transfer messages by mirror semaphores, and 'paralines', trains that are powered by passengers pedalling as fast as they can. These states are controlled by their Overmayors (politicians) and the Librarians, the top technocrats, operators of gigantic 'calculors', which are computers powered by enslaved computing humans.

In *Eyes of the Calculor*, many of this world's limitations are changing rapidly. Twelve years before, Mirrorsun, quite arbitrarily, allowed humans to build electrical machines. At the beginning of *Eyes*, this limitation has been reapplied. Large numbers of mathematically literate humans are herded back into the calculors. At the same time, the Call has abruptly ceased, for reasons that were, I assume, made clear in *The Miocene Arrow*. The empty world is now open to marauding humans, but some areas have meanwhile been occupied by 'aviads', mutant humans who are trying to create their own civilisation.

This a world ripe for vast conflict, but McMullen avoids epic battles. He tells his story entirely through the eyes of small groups of characters, each of which can see only one part of the picture at a time. In a series of short episodes, he gathers his characters in Rochester, which is now the major city on the Australian continent. Some characters are hired as spies of the ruling Highliber (Chief Librarian), while others are playing games of their own. Samondel is an American who has managed to fly her enormous plane from North America to Rochester, only to have it shot down. The aviads are trying to smuggle as many of their kind as possible off the mainland, to settle in Tasmania. No motive or action is ever as direct as it seems.

McMullen knows his world well, but does not yield to the impulse to lapse into Cook's-tour descriptions. We feel we've lived there, yet we still know little about this civilisation's more mundane aspects. Instead, *Eyes of the Calculor* gains most of its energy from the vibrancy and humour of its characters. They never give in to the overwhelming limitations of their world, but are constantly inventing new ways to survive and understand it. However, they are not reflective characters. Given to the quick fix, brisk fight or emergency solution rather than to deep thought, by the end of the book they are no closer to solving the ultimate problems of their civilisation than they are at the beginning. The novel's tone reminded me constantly of Alexandre Dumas's romances, complete with political intrigue, duels, sword fights, rescues and miraculous escapes. *Eyes of the Calculor* is 600 pages long, but engaging enough to lead you back to the first two books in the series.

JUBILEE by Jack Dann
(2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6719-2; 443 pp.; $A24.95)

Several Jack Danns appear in this large selection from a lifetime's short stories (1978–2001). The chatty, avuncular Jack Dann is the least successful writer of short fiction. Even 'The Diamond Pit', a recent story written in this style, seems to be packed with too many words to support its premise. (Many readers might like a sentence such as 'It was dark when they found me, but the moon was so big

and bloated that everything looked like it was coated with silvery dust, except the shadows, where the moon dust couldn't settle', but that seems overdone to me.) An entirely different Jack Dann can be found in 'Da Vinci Rising', the award-winning novella that became the core of the novel *The Memory Cathedral*. This Jack Dann relies on clear observation of place and character, slow unfolding of events, and lean, muscular sentences. Yet another Jack Dann, the author of *The Silent*, has become a major American artist, but nothing in ***Jubilee*** quite hints at this writer except the exquisite short story 'Tea' (first published 1988). I hope later anthologies will contain more stories of the standard of 'Tea' and 'Da Vinci Rising'.

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

BAD MEDICINE by Jack Dann

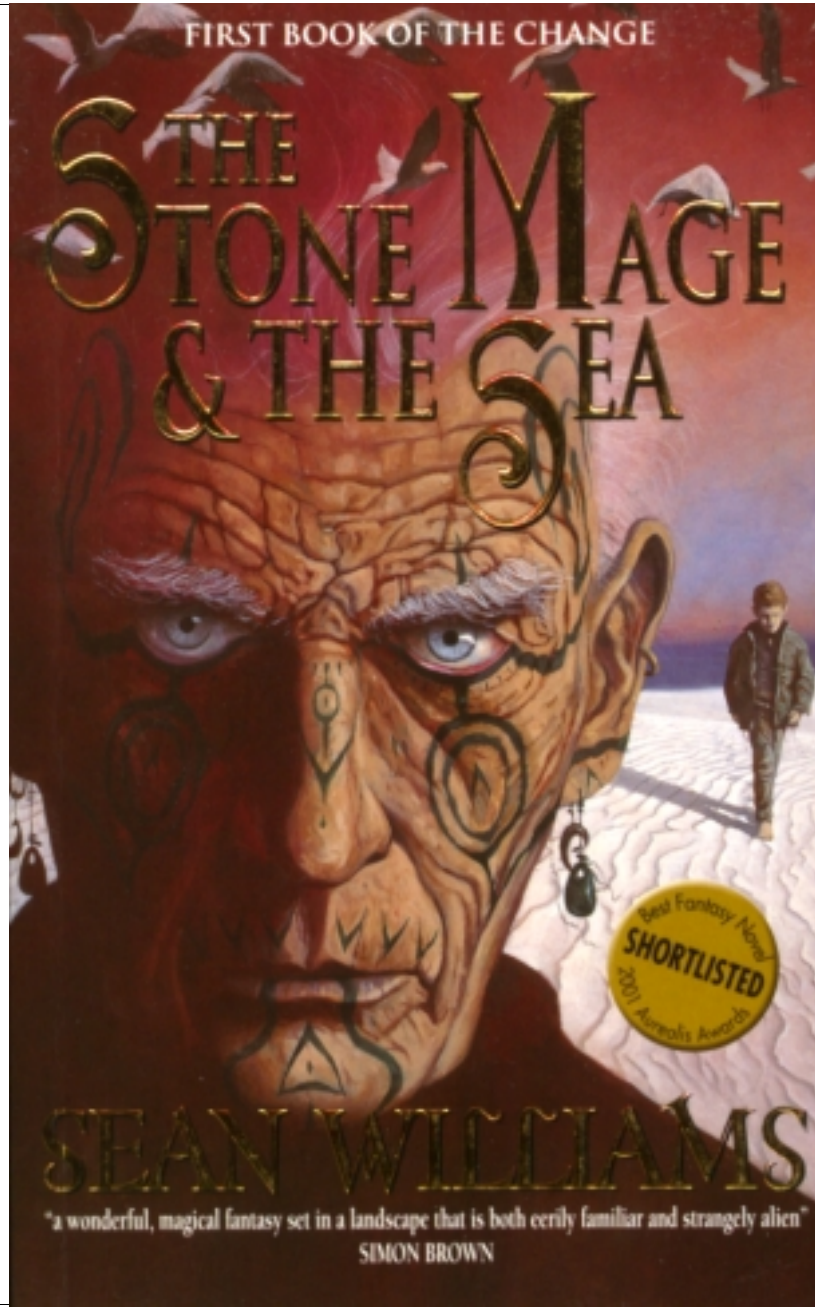
(2000; Flamingo 0- 7322- 5954-1; 305 pp.)

A disappointing novel compared to Dann's previous two novels, *The Memory Cathedral* and *The Silent*. He puts together two elements, the road novel (two characters who escape from home in several stolen cars) and the Native American supernatural novel. The result might have been more powerful if Jack Dann had brought to the material the intensity that he brought to *The Silent*. In that novel, his main character simultaneously inhabits the real world and the supernatural edge of the deathworld, and he does it because Dann's language allows him to do so. In ***Bad Medicine*** the language ranges from the lyrical to the pedestrian, but is somehow never adequate for his ideas or characters. The characters are interesting, the world of Indian magic is interesting, and Dann's locales are interesting. But they are not gripping, which is a pity.

THE STONE MAGE AND THE SEA by Sean Williams

(2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6994-6; 342 pp.)

The Stone Mage and the Sea is a vigorous combination of magic and sea imagery. Sean Williams, who has been building a reputation



as one of Australia's best SF writers, successfully combines a far-future background with a foreground of magical education of the young, innocent hero. The magic is pure cliché, but it is given weight and reality in the imagery of far distant strand, sand dunes, and sea, all based on the Coorong area of South Australia. In what is obviously a far-future Australia, small townships of people are scattered across the countryside and along the coast. A boy and his father enter one of these towns. The boy does not know why his father is constantly on the run. A man with magical powers, the stone mage of the title, who lives in the town, can enlighten them. The rulers of this country are pursuing the boy and his father, who are also disliked by some of the leading citizens of the town. Mysterious and wonderful things begin to happen. Sudden end of book, so we have to wait for Book 2. (The cover illustration is by Sean Tan.)

THE MUSIC OF RAZORS
by Cameron Rogers
(2001; Penguin 0-14-028078-2; 289 pp.)

Penguin sent this to me laden with publicity material, and went to a lot of trouble to round up people for the book launch at Reading's on a late Friday afternoon. I interrupted my apa reading schedule to read it. I went to the book launch. Cameron Rogers is young, dresses in black and leather boots, and looks like a young Bono. He already has a group of fans/friends/groupies, who comprised most of the crowd. Nearly all of them dress in black. Rogers speaks glibly. His editor at Penguin introduced him, saying that the book is the result of two years of editing. In short, everybody at Penguin Australia *believes in* Cameron Rogers. The company spent lots of money on him. The book has a superb cover, and feels good when you open it. It's only as you read past page 100 that you realise that it just doesn't work.

The Music of Razors begins startlingly enough, with the fall of Lucifer at the beginning of time, then introduces us to some interesting characters, one of whom has been on life support for twenty years. (His spirit is lively enough, but never gets around to re-animating his body.) Somewhere lurking is a third angel, neither Lucifer nor God, but only recently resurrected from being outside of time itself. The characters of the book are the teenagers who are affected by this resurrection. At first, the novel reads like a sprightly Young Adult fantasy. The imagery is vivid, and Rogers knows how to turn a phrase. By the end, everything has fallen apart. I don't have a clue what Rogers thinks he's doing. The novel has none of that twisted sense of underground logic with which Jonathan Carroll might have invested the same material. I suspect that Rogers and/or Penguin had a Big Idea, but nobody knew how to bring it to life.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

SUPERTOYS LAST ALL SUMMER LONG AND OTHER STORIES OF FUTURE TIME
by Brian Aldiss
(2001; St Martin's Griffin 0- 312-28061-0; 232 pp.)

What, if any, relationship there is between the film *AI* and the title story of this collection? 'Supertoys Last All Summer Long' is a delicate little story, with perhaps enough material for the first 20 minutes of a film. Yet it fascinated Kubrick, and now Spielberg. Aldiss's introduction to the book is interesting, but tells us little about the ways in which the story was expanded into a film treatment. I wasn't overexcited by the two new 'Supertoys' stories that Aldiss has written for this collection. Let's hope that ***Supertoys*** is the bestseller that Aldiss has needed for awhile now. It's a good introduction to Aldiss the short-story writer, with some of his best work ('Steppenpferd', 'Dark Society' and 'A Matter of Mathematics'), some typical Aldiss stories, and some peculiar little lectures-posing-as-stories. No copies of the British edition reached Australia.

DR FRANKLIN'S ISLAND
by Ann Halam (2001; Dolphin 1- 85881-396-4; 215 pp.)

The title of the book tells us that Ann Halam is writing a new version

of *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. She does this, but makes it sound fresh and new. Two girls are the last survivors of a plane wreck. Surviving on the beach of a remote island, they find eventually that they share the island with the secret research establishment of Dr Franklin. They are captured. No spoilers, although I'm itching to tell you how brilliantly Halam enters into into the minds of the two girls being subjected to Dr Franklin's experiments. Halam's books officially fit the Young Adult category, but surely the day is not far off when one of her books — perhaps this one — picks up a Clarke nomination?

BOLD AS LOVE: A NEAR FUTURE FANTASY by Gwyneth Jones
(2001; Gollancz 0-575-07031-5; 308 pp.; £10.99/$A29.95)

I counted myself as a Gwyneth Jones fan after reading two of her YA novels published under the name of 'Anne Halam'. I was looking forward reading ***Bold As Love***. The characters, members of rather scruffy rock bands, seemed interesting, and the near-future Britain, disintegrating into its constituent parts as people switch off technology and turn off society, left some room for speculation. But by the middle of the book, nothing in it made sense. The three main characters, Fiorinda, Ax and Sage, hold some interest. But then we are asked to believe that Ax is given political power in England, but the rest of society, nice suburban Britain, is still operating pretty much as normal. We are also asked to believe that members of bands based on a rivalry between thrash metal and the Grateful Dead would retain any popularity or interest in an early-twenty-first-century world. Hip hoppers and rappers could probably stage a political rally, but not these Deadheads. So is Jones's world a projection of a 1970s world, not our world? Maybe. But even in such an alternative future, why is Ax, who seems incapable of organising his way out of a paper bag, made Dictator of England? Just what is happening in England apart from this tiny circle of friends and rivals? The book collapses into a vortex of unlikely, even unimaginable premises, which means that by the end of *Bold As Love* (the first of a trilogy) I lost all interest in the main characters as well. I have no idea why *Bold As Love* was nominated for the Arthur Clarke Award, let alone why it won.

BRITISH NON-FICTION

OMEGATROPIC
by Stephen Baxter
(2001; British Science Fiction Association 0-9540788-0-2; 160 pp.)

Stephen Baxter gives lots of speeches. He seems to be generous in providing articles for fanzines, especially those published by the BSFA. This collection of essays makes entertaining reading, although most of the ideas outlined become more interesting when converted into Baxter fiction. Many of the essays offer tips about the way Baxter works as well as the ideas that grip him. The essay 'America's Moon' summarises many of the notions that went into his fiction about the near-future possibilities of space travel. One essay title, 'Rusting Gantries and Lawn Ornaments', has echoes for those who've read Baxter's *Titan*. The only two pieces of fiction are 'On the Side of a Hill' and 'Omegatropic'.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

PASSAGE
by Connie Willis
(2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-711825-2; 594 pp.)

Paul Kincaid once reviewed this book so comprehensively (given he did not want to commit spoilers) that there was little I could add — at least, not until everybody has read the book. As Paul tried to avoid explaining, the author lands a huge punch on the reader's snoot 150 pages from the end of this overlong book, but keeps the reader hurtling along anyway. Some reviewers complain about the level of repetition of seemingly minor events in this book, but don't ask themselves whether or not this is deliberate. The events of *Passage* take place on two main stage sets: if one of them is a metaphor (as explained in the text), why shouldn't the other be also a metaphor for the same aspect of existence?

THE COMPLETE RODERICK
by John Sladek (1980; 1983 (2001); Gollancz SF Masterworks 1-85798-340-8; 611 pp.)

I read *Roderick* when it first appeared, and enjoyed it greatly. I bought *Roderick at Random* when it was published some years later, but never read it. I did not discover until recently that the two are in fact one book, broken up for odd reasons for American publication, and never reunited until now. However, they do not add up to one satisfying novel. *Roderick* almost succeeds on its own. The *Roderick at Random* section fails as a structure, and adds little to the original premise. Yet to read the whole book is to be flung into a tumble-dryer of an America that was in Sladek's future when he wrote the book, but now reads as documentary. Roderick, as you probably know, is the little lost robot who, like the main character of *AI*, is designed to be a boy with human emotions, but who is perpetually pitched from one group of people to another. Some of these people want to destroy Roderick, but he has a Gladstone Gander-like ability to deflect disaster onto his pursuers. Sladek preaches against a world dependent on machines, but his sermon is a manic dialogue between a vast cast of insane people who are perpetually bumping into each other or bumping each other off. The plot is a perpetual-motion machine, not an epic. But it's all so amazingly accurate that I found myself chortling, page after page, and unable to put the book down. I'm not sure that what I was reading can be called a novel.

AMERICAN FANTASY

THE WOODEN SEA
by Jonathan Carroll (2001; Tor 0-312-87823-0; 302 pp.)

There was some useful discussion in Acnestis in 2001, especially from Penny and Chris Hill, about Jonathan Carroll. They made the worthwhile point that Carroll's shock–surprise tactics don't quite work because they undermine the main characters as entities. In *Kissing the Beehive* and *The Marriage of Sticks*, the effect Carroll is aiming for dissipates, because in the end you can't quite tell what he was trying to do artistically. It's possible that Carroll fans will say the same about ***The Wooden Sea***. It lets off more fire crackers than a Guy Fawkes night celebration, yet in the end it has (for Carroll) a straightforward solution. I can't discuss that without giving away spoilers. Enough to say that *The Wooden Sea* has a feeling of freshness and edge-of-the-seat excitement that I didn't find in the two previous novels.

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY
by Michael Chabon (2000; Picador USA 0-312-28299-0; 639 pp.)

The Novel of the Year, which tells its tale with such bravado and joy and delight in life's surprises that I was disappointed to run slam bang into the last page. It tells the story of two young blokes who become illustrators and writers of comics during the 1930s in New York. It could just as easily have been the story of the SF writers of the period — ***Kavalier and Clay***'s tale of constant imminent poverty, dusty offices in rundown buildings and cheapskate publishers could easily have been drawn from Damon Knight's *The Futurians* or Fred Pohl's *The Way the Future Was*. *Kavalier and Clay* eulogises the comic strip, New York, the American immigrant experience, and art and love and the whole damn thing. It preaches the need for escapism, yet never escapes from looking at the difficulties of life during the late 1930s and 1940s. This is funny epic writing, an antidote for all the dullness and thuggery in the world.

CANADIAN FANTASY

ST PATRICK'S BED
by Terence M. Green (Forge 0-765-30043-5; 2001; 220 pp.)

It's always a challenge when an author sends you his or her book to review, especially if the author is Terry Green, long-time correspondent to Gillespie fanzines. I've really enjoyed his most recent two books, *Shadow of Ashland* and *A Witness to Life*. What if I didn't like

the new one? Well, I do, but not because it fulfils expectations raised by reading the earlier books. *Ashland* and *Witness* each have a strong supernatural elements as well as filling in bits of the story of the Radey–Nolan family. ***St Patrick's Bed*** tells of the same family, and has a natty ghost story hidden in it, but at heart it's an ambitious book about the most interesting subject of all: how best can we live, given the limited choices offered to most of us? Leo Nolan, the narrator, seems to be simple chap, with simple tastes and options, living in Toronto. In fact, his rich imagination and clear memories entrap him within a mind web of complex family relationships. Life becomes a set of ambiguous possibilities, especially as his 'son' is not his, but the son of his second wife. Green writes in simple, short sentences. The temptation is to read this as a simple book, but its multiple echoes and possibilities give it an epic scope. At 220 pages, *St Patrick's Bed* is one of few recent novels of the right length.

2002

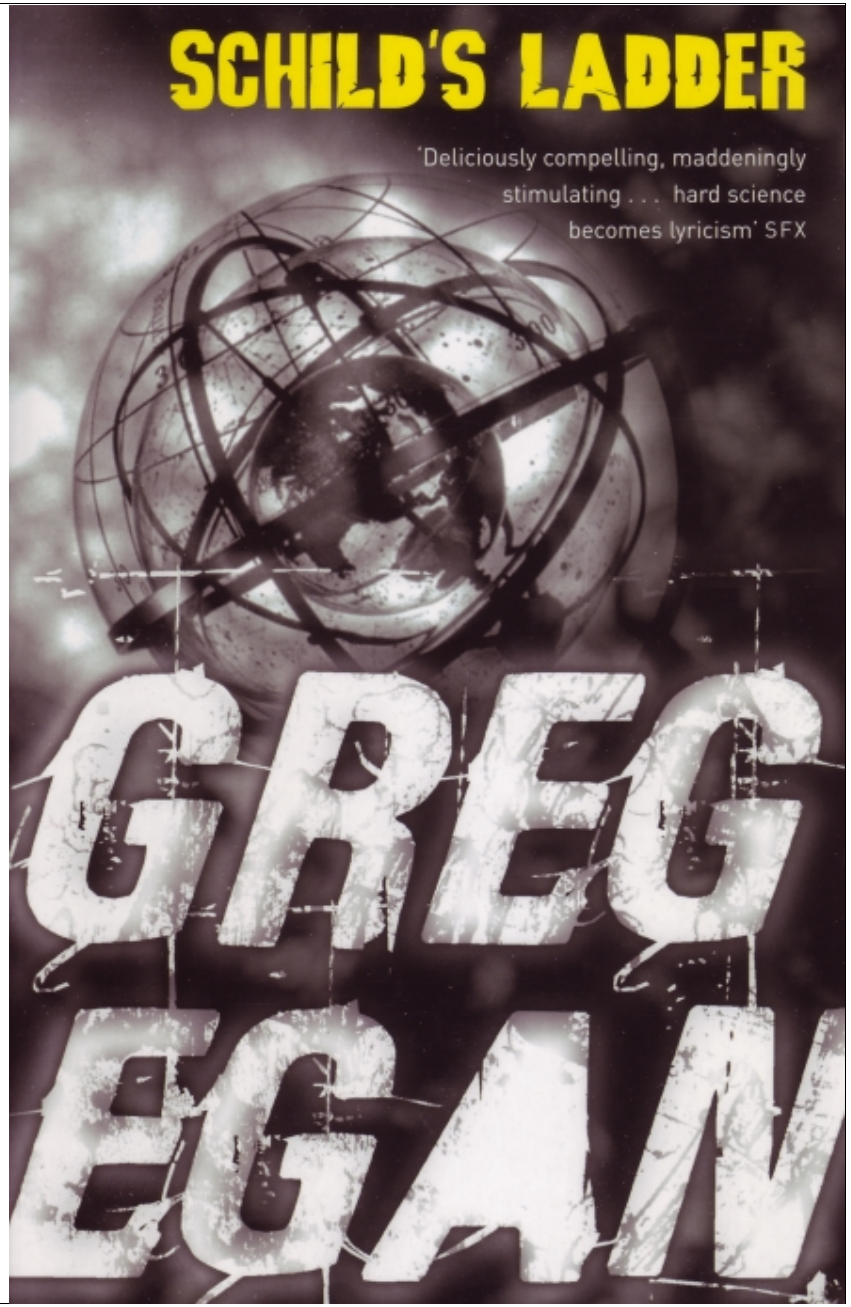
AUSTRALIAN SCIENCE FICTION

SCHILD'S LADDER
by Greg Egan (Gollancz 0-575-07123-0; 2002; 250 pp.; £10.99)

I've renewed my hunger for reading books. It's all Greg Egan's fault. ***Schild's Ladder***, his latest novel, arrived in early January. I read it to the end, but found that there are entire pages, let alone great looping ideas fundamental to the book, that I do not understand. Greg Egan assumes that thinking like a quantum physicist is as natural as breathing. To him, it is.

Dick Jenssen read *Schild's Ladder*. He had no problems with the quantum physics that forms the basis of the Big Idea in the book. He admired Egan for not providing too many explanations.

How could I catch up on up-to-the-minute physics? I read Brian



Greene's *The Elegant Universe* last year, but string theory didn't seem to apply to the main ideas of *Schild's Ladder*. I read Stephen Hawking's ***A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*** (Bantam Press; 1988; 198 pp.). That filled in some of the gaps, but Hawking assumes that the reader is familiar with the essential notions of quantum theory. I'd read a nice little book on quantum theory, with very clear diagrams, about 15 years ago. I can't find it. Elaine suggested reading ***Where Does the Weirdness Go?*** by David Lindley (Vintage; 1996; 251 pp.). This is an ideal example of how such a book should be written. It includes almost no formulae (a ghodsend for maths dumbwits like me), but offers a series of clear diagrams and thought-models to show how the main ideas of quantum theory were developed. With this essential information precariously clinging to the inside of my brain, I read Lee Smolin's ***Three Roads to Quantum Gravity: A New Understanding of Space, Time and the Universe*** (Phoenix; 2000; 231 pp.) without too much trouble. In the afterword to *Schild's Ladder*, Greg Egan thanks Smolin for his inspiration and ideas.

The trouble with all this scientific stuff is that it is just a bit too rich for my tiny mind. I struggle, but only bits lodge inside my consciousness. I can't recount the essence of what I learn, in the way I could if I read a history of Russia or a book of literary criticism. I did pick up one theme that recurs in these books: that instead of being a nuisancy obstruction to the writing of galactic adventure stories, the speed of light is an essential building block of the universe. Without it, there could be no structure to matter, because all energy would be infinite ($e = mc^2$ and all that). We do not know anything more about the universe than we can see in the sky. Any or all of those objects might no longer exist, but it doesn't matter until information reaches us at the speed of light. The same principle operates at the size of the smallest object in the universe. The speed of light itself forms the 'edge' of the tiniest element of matter. On this principle, thousands of theoreticians are trying to work out what is the ultimate structure of matter. At the beginning of *Schild's Ladder*, Egan includes a diagram of one of the best-favoured current ideas, that matter is a latticework of joined space, rather than discrete bits of matter. The problem now is: how does the structure of the smallest element of matter imply all the things that have happened to matter since the Big Bang? That's what's needed for somebody to claim to have found a Theory of Everything. What is *intrinsic* to matter that leads directly to the rules of physics, and hence the evolutionary path of the universe? As Greene shows mathematically in *The Elegant Universe*, the structure of the smallest thing in the universe might also have the same structure as the universe itself. Thus there is a constant interchange between physicists who investigate the largest and oddest things in the universe (especially black holes) and nuclear physicists who investigate the smallest things in the universe.

I felt that not only was I reading stuff that was much more exciting than anything in SF books (except in some pages of Greg Egan or Stephen Baxter), but I was reading stuff that, if it penetrated the minds of SF writers, would re-energise the field. Yet I also felt that quantum physicists would not think in this freewheeling way if it were not for all the science fiction they've read over the years. I just wish I had a Big Brain, so I could find metaphors from which I could make fiction out of all this fabulous stuff. At least science fiction is lucky enough to have Greg Egan.

TRANSCENSION by Damien Broderick
(2002; Tor 0-675- 30369-8; 348 pp.; $US25.95/$A49.95)

I hardly need to add to the reviews of ***Transcension*** you can find in *SFC* 78, except to add my congratulations to Damien Broderick for placing the emphasis of the novel on its characters. The Big Effects are at the end of the novel, after the real drama has finished. The novel tells of two stories, one obviously set in our far future and the other, the Valley, seemingly in a nineteenth-century past. Both actually coexist. Amanda from one society invades the sheltered, puritanical Valley society. Her escapades cause much bother to Mathewmark and his family in the Valley. Mohammed Abdel-Malik attempts to provide a bridge between the two societies. The characters make congenial and lively company, and dramatise the book's main themes without any need for those closing Big Effects. It seems

odd to say it of a writer who has been publishing steadily for over 40 years, but Damien Broderick is still Australia's Writer to Watch.

TIME PAST by Maxine McArthur
(2002; Bantam 1-86325- 284-3; 554 pp.; $A16.95)

I read ***Time Past*** to its end, but found the experience decreasingly enjoyable as I crawled through its 554 pages. This is a clear case of an unnecessary sequel. The time puzzle that Halley seeks to solve becomes less and less interesting as the novel proceeds; I didn't understand the Big Revelation when it came. Events that could have been very interesting — the time trip back to a years in our immediate future — prove to be a sideshow. The author has sharp things to say about the near future, but has run out of things to say about her far-future deep space station. When Halley arrives back home, she finds it pretty stale and unwelcoming. Maxine McArthur obviously has much promise as a writer, but only when she moves into some other science-fictional territory.

BLUE SILENCE by Michelle Marquardt
(2002; Bantam 0- 86325-251-7; 404 pp.; $A17.95)

Blue Silence won the George Turner Prize ($10,000 and publication by Random House Australia) in 2000, but it took two years for the book to appear, and the prize will be awarded again. Does this mean that *Blue Silence* was the poor best of an uninteresting group of contenders? I fear so, because the book has some superior problems. The greatest difficulty is that, after slogging through 120,000 words, the reader is no closer to finding out anything about the aliens who, as the blurb puts it, arrive in a mysterious craft that docks on a space station in orbit around Earth. We find out a lot about the people who are investigating the craft, and have to put up with some very banal spaceship and terrestrial politics, but in science-fictional terms, almost nothing happens in this book. Did Michelle Marquardt originally submit a book twice this size, which was split into two for publication? Will there be a sequel? A sequel seems necessary, but I won't bother reading it. Meanwhile, surely there are much better SF manuscripts floating around Australia waiting for somebody to publish them?

AUSTRALIAN FANTASY

THE SKY WARDEN AND THE SUN by Sean Williams
(2002; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6996-2; 433 pp.; $A27.95)

Usually, as I know, I cannot enjoy heroic fantasy trilogies because (a) the main characters are boring, (b) their narratives are boring, usually with the pace of a leisurely Sunday afternoon stroll, (c) their worlds are boring, usually pale carbon copies of pale carbon copies of Middle Earth. Sean Williams' world is interesting — a harsh equivalent of the South Australian back country, which itself is harsh territory. His characters are interesting — Sal and Shilly, injured during the journey, tag along with Skender, the slightly silly son of the head of the Haunted City, and the three of them have some slimy adults to deal with. And the narrative in ***Sky Warden*** zooms along at a great pace, taking Sal and Shilly away from the coast, deep inland, forever facing human as well as supernatural dangers. This is one of the few mid-trilogy novels worth reading for its own sake.

THE STORM WEAVER AND THE SAND by Sean Williams
(2002; HarperCollins Voyager 0-7322-6998-2; 438 pp.; $A29)

I wanted so much for ***The Storm Weaver and the Sand*** to make a satisfying conclusion to 'the Change trilogy' (which the publisher now calls it) that I gritted my teeth as the hundreds of pages rolled on, and waited, and waited. I got to the end of the book, and the trilogy, and said 'bother!' After being captured by the people who run this far-future world, the three main characters, Sal, Shilly and Skender, sit around and wait for decisions to be made about their future. Various people find out who their mothers or fathers or other relatives are, but there is no Big Revelation, no Great Truth Discovered About the World. Why else would one wade through 1200 pages of a trilogy? My feeling is that Sean Williams felt under pressure to

write the third book of the trilogy long before he should have. The narrative works wonderfully until the end of Book 2 (*The Sky Warden and the Sun*), then collapses like a soufflé. If only the last book had been allowed the time to cook properly.

No. 472 CHEYNE WALK: CARNACKI: THE UNTOLD STORIES
by A. F. Kidd and Rick Kennett
(2002; Ash-Tree Press 1-55310-037-9; 235 pp.)

Rick Kennett has already described the genesis of this book in his article 'Finding Carnacki the Ghost-finder' (*SFC* 78). The finished product is a beautiful piece of bookcraft by Ash-Tree Press, and within limits, a satisfying book of short fiction. The limits are those imposed by the author admired and emulated by Kidd and Kennett — William Hope Hodgson. The only way I can describe Hodgson, like H. P. Lovecraft, is as a writer who never quite got his rocks off. Carnacki the ghost-finder tells tales of horrifying things that go bump (or worse) in the night, but Carnacki's job is to contain them, send them back, never to find out what they really are or contend with them or the world they come from. The hero of a Hodgson-style story never quite fights the horrors of the night or beats them; he merely sends them back into the stygian darkness. Kidd and Kennett capture this theme of unfulfillment brilliantly in eleven of the twelve stories. In 'The Keeper of the Minter Light', Kennett harnesses his own natural talent, allowing his hero to break the boundaries of the Hodgson world and penetrate the barrier that divides our world from the supernatural world. The result is one of the best fantasy stories written in Australia.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

FOURSIGHT edited by Peter Crowther
(2000; Gollancz 0-57506-870-1; 216 pp.; £16.99/$A48.95)

FUTURES edited by Peter Crowther
(2001; Gollancz 0- 575-070234; 320 pp.; £12.99/$A39.95)

INFINITIES edited by Peter Crowther
(2002; Gollancz 0-575-07355-1; 358 pp.; £12.99/$A39.95)

I've written a long review (which began as a Nova Mob talk) of these collections, each of four novellas, for another magazine. I've been told since that Peter Crowther, a major promoter of the novella form, published each story separately with his firm, PS Publishing, then collected them in these anthologies as well as in Ace Double-style paperbacks, each of which includes two novellas. To me, that's a major revival of the novella form, for which Crowther cannot be thanked enough. Each of these anthologies contains brilliant stories as well clinkers. From ***Foursight***, I recommend 'Leningrad Nights' by Graham Joyce, 'How the Other Half Lives' by James Lovegrove, and 'The Vaccinator' (for light relief) by Michael Marshall Smith. From ***Infinities*** I recommend 'Diamond Dogs' by Alastair Reynolds and 'Park Polar' by Adam Roberts. The major stories in ***Futures*** are 'Making History' by Paul J. McAuley and 'Tendeléo's Story' by Ian McDonald. McDonald's story, covering the territory of his novel *Chaga*, but from the African viewpoint, is the most interesting story in these three books.

THE SEPARATION by Christopher Priest
(2002; Scribner 0-7432-2033-1; 464 pp.; £10.99/$A27.95)

I've read this novel only once. This puts me at a disadvantage compared to the person who has read it twice, or many times. This I need to do in order to write the long review I've been asked to write. In the meantime, here's an impression, not a review. Christopher Priest writes in a very plain style that is easy to read. The ease of reading his books hides the fact the author does strange things to the perceptions of the reader who is being lulled into the belief he or she is reading a straightforward narrative. However, during this novel, a character who appears to be the story-teller at the beginning disappears by the end of the novel, two twin brothers who live in one version of the years 1936 until 2002 appear to swap into parallel histories, and swap roles with each other, but do not seem to make the difference between these histories, although both sets of twins

take part in critical events in both histories. Priest's cavalier skill is in making all this seemingly quite clear until the reader reaches the end of the novel and cannot quite work out which universe is which. The point of these proceedings is not entirely to prove how clever the author is; he gradually develops an original, serious thesis about Britain's conduct during World War II. You might miss this if you have as much fun reading the book as I did.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

THE IMPOSSIBLE BIRD by Patrick O'Leary
(2002; Tor 0-765-30337-X; 368 pp.; $US25.95/$A59)

I tried to like this novel more than I did, especially as the author arranged for Tor to send me a proof copy. It is pitched at the sort of people who like Philip K. Dick novels, but recently we Dickheads have been treated well by novelists and film makers (*Fight Club* and *The Sixth Sense* come to mind). Violent things happen to two brothers. Strange things have happened to the world they inhabit. Are they living in the same world, or alternate worlds? Is there any explanation at all to these abrupt events? The explanation, when it turns up, is rather better than I expected; the dull bits are the events in the middle of the book when I had no idea what's going on. O'Leary is fond of very short chapters, which means we rarely get a real sense of the two people who are supposed to be the main characters.

AMERICAN NON-FICTION

THE SCIENCE FICTION OF CORDWAINER SMITH by Karen L. Hellekson
(2001; McFarland 0-7864-1149-X; 158 pp.; $US28.50/$A60)

Noted here. Reviewed elsewhere. I think a much better book has still to be written about Cordwainer Smith; we still wait for Alan Elms's long-proposed biography.

CANADIAN NON-FICTION

BETTER TO HAVE LOVED: THE LIFE OF JUDITH MERRIL
by Judith Merril and Emily Pohl-Weary
(2002; Between the Lines 1-896357-57-1; 282 pp.)

Thanks to Dick Jenssen for giving me this book, as I might not have tracked it down otherwise. Seemingly the long-anticipated autobiography of Judith Merril, who died in 1997, it turns out to be a difficult book to consider. It includes autobiographical fragments by Judith Merril, probably the most influential woman in the science fiction world since the 1930s, but those fragments don't tell us what we like to know (how much did Merril contribute to Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, his only complete novel? what role did Merril have in the English and American New Wave movements? what did she actually accomplish after she moved to Canada, apart from her work in the cooperative movement?), and some of the letters and other pieces gathered by editor Emily Pohl-Weary reveal some things we are just a bit embarrassed to find out. Merril's tribute to Ted Sturgeon adds greatly to our understanding of that man as a writer and teacher, but her memories of Fred Pohl gives us little idea of why they got together in the firsirst place. Merril really does appear to have believed that 'all you need is love', whereas what one remembers best of her is all the fights she was in, including those she won. (I'll never forget the pleasure of discovering her 'Best Of' collections in secondhand shops in the early sixties, and being grateful that somebody Out There had so much greater editorial skills than all the dumbclucks who edited the anthologies one usually encountered. But she doesn't tell us how she won the battles she must have fought to ensure those anthologies were published.) ***Better to Have Loved*** will leave readers feeling exasperated, demanding that somebody writes a detailed biography of Judith Merril.

— Bruce Gillespie, 1992–15 January 2003

Scanners

DOUG BARBOUR

DOUG BARBOUR regularly reviews science fiction and fantasy for the *Edmonton Journal*, and so reads perhaps too much of the stuff. He escapes escape literature by reading contemporary poetry, including such Australian masters as Robert Adamson, John Kinsella and John Tranter.

KAY'S EPIC ARCHITECTURE

THE LIONS OF AL-RASSAN
by Guy Gavriel Kay (Viking; 579 pp.)

Canada's Guy Gavriel Kay, one of the acknowledged masters of contemporary high fantasy, has returned with another powerful novel of people, races, religions and countries caught up in change and conflict. ***The Lions of Al-Rassan*** has all the qualities of adventure, passion, political skullduggery, complex representation of cultural and early technological practices and psychological insight that readers have come to expect of Kay's fiction.

Yet it is perhaps most fascinating for the ways in which it resists the narrative temptations of most fantasies today, replacing them with what I can only call an epic vision rooted firmly in a realist sense of character.

The Lions of Al-Rassan is an historical epic set in another world. It is a world strangely analogical to, yet distanced from that of late-Medieval Spain, when the Moors were slowly losing their hold over the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula. In his usual fashion, Kay has taken some elements from history then translated them into an invented world, whose major sign of difference is its two moons, one white, one blue, which play such a subtle part in the imaginations and emotions of all who live beneath them. Thus, without having to introduce any special 'magic', Kay has created a world with a history of its own, out of which the conflicts that rage across this narrative 'naturally' emerge. One sign of the quality of Kay's invention is that he has, over his past three novels, created rich cultural/religious schemas for his tales of cultures in conflict. As Janeen Webb pointed out in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* (January 1995), Kay's last two novels, *Tigana* and *A Song for Arbonne*, are especially complex in these areas; the same is true of *The Lions of Al-Rassan*.

Sometime in the past, during a centuries-long jihad, the Asharites, worshippers of the god of the stars above their original desert home, had swept into the peninsula. There they created a Khalifate of many glittering cities. To the north, the Jaddites, worshippers of the single god of the Sun, await their chance to reclaim these lands. They are, however, undermined by internecine warfare among the various principalities. Moving among both peoples, never fully at home anywhere and always first to be scapegoated, are the Kindath, famous for their scientific knowledge, especially of medicine. As the Khalifate begins to wane, a number of figures from each 'race' come together in love and war; and in their interactions the epic and

sometimes tragic dance of change plays itself out in this intricate and moving novel.

Although Kay's interest in the relations between personal (sexual) politics and cultural, economic and religious politics continues from novel to novel, he does not repeat himself. *Tigana* was the story of a group of revolutionaries and the powerful emperor against whom they plotted. *A Song for Arbonne* was a narrative of violent war between two different religious states, as well as a study of the growth of a young man destined to lead them both in peace. In both, particular religious affiliations played major roles in many characters' lives. *The Lions of Al-Rassan* has its own dynamic, as it explores the complex interactions of disparate people caught up in the battles for supremacy among the Jaddite princes and the last Asharite kings in Al-Rassan.

Kay has never written conventional fantasies, and, as Webb convincingly argued, has followed a deliberate strategy of development in the religious sphere from *Tigana* to *A Song for Arbonne*; and this continues into *The Lions of Al-Rassan*. If *Tigana* is still a high fantasy in which magic and even the gods can play a role in the narrative. *A Song for Arbonne* is a historical fantasy where god and goddess no longer directly interfere in the historical narrative of battles between their believers, and what may appear as magic to the credulous can nevertheless be explained away as psychological manipulation.

The Lions of Al-Rassan moves even further away from conventional fantasy: there are worshippers in all three religions, but while they may have a kind of worldly faith in their gods and goddesses, they will never see any actual works of those they worship. This is simply a way of saying that this fiction resolutely refuses the temptations of conventional fantasy even as it is willing to invoke the uncanny, but it is also of great psycho-sociological importance to the narrative, especially in the case of true believers, such as the leader of the desert-born Muwardi and one or two priests of Jad, for they act as if their gods can work for them on the physical plane, yet the novel offers no signs that this might be true. Generally, the priestly leaders seek worldly power, often through crass racist manipulation of their followers. Then there are the zealots — they are represented as most dangerous, even evil, in their righteous disregard for the humanity of those who do not believe as they do — but the world in which they act is a mundane one in which real- politik reigns supreme.

Kay's heroes have always been those whose integrity lets them not only see the humanity of those who are different, but even come to love them. In *The Lions of Al-Rassan* these include: Jehane, the Kindrath doctor who enters into complex relationships with both a Jaddite and an Asharite; young Alvar, who begins as a true believing Jaddite, but through his travels, often with Jehane and others, widens his mental and emotional horizons until he can eventually even cross the borders of faith; the two striking men whom Jehane cares so much for, both superior warriors, but also men of cultural wealth and understanding. A number of their friends and companions also figure as intriguingly complex in their ability to transcend, if only partially, the cultural constraints of their societies. Such people clearly represent the best human possibilities in a world torn apart by racial warfare and religious turmoil.

Guy Gavriel Kay has a fine sense of fictional architecture: the overarching plan of the whole narrative is grand but not grandiose, complex but not needlessly complicated; yet individual scenes have a brilliant life of their own. Thus the novel follows the large historical arc of political retreat for the Asharites as the Jaddites slowly unite under a strong king and take back the peninsula. Scattered throughout, however, are any number of dramatic moments, to which readers will return for the specifically textual pleasure of discovering emotional, intellectual and political nuances that later emerge as cruxes of the narrative. Some are highly intimate, some epic in their fierceness, some highly comic, some intensely sensual. One of Kay's great talents — and it is one that sets him apart from so many genre fantasists — is his ability to ground the sexual lives of his characters in their cultural, political and religious contexts. But in fact he creates interestingly rounded characters precisely by implying all the social as well as psychological baggage they carry into every situation. That

he has a fine sense of how social comedy occurs at different social levels also lends credibility to many scenes of both high and low society. The lengthy and fragmented scene of the Carnival in one Asharite city, with its many narrative threads, is one such brilliant setpiece.

The Lions of Al-Rassan is a fine entertainment in the high fantastic mode, then, that will hold its readers in thrall. But it is more than just an entertainment: for Kay, the apparent generic simplifications of history are rather opportunities to set up self-contained 'histories' that reveal human socio-cultural and political-religious tendencies. The other worlds of his novels are 'like' but 'unlike' our own, and this is a fictional advantage to a writer as subtle, sensitive and intelligent as Kay.

What I found especially exciting about *The Lions of Al-Rassan* is its ability to enter closely into the emotional lives of its characters, which allows a few scenes to come as close to tragedy as any work in the field ever will. For all these reasons, it should appeal to an audience far wider than just fantasy fans. Except for the not unimportant fact that the world in which these characters live out their tangled lives during a period of traumatic political and social change is specifically invented, it could be considered a fine historical epic. I think it is the more interesting for its invention of another world, as that allows for the creation of a narrative true unto itself alone. That such a narrative can be profoundly moving, and speak to our common humanity in the starkest terms, is testament to the generosity of spirit that moves through *The Lions of Al-Rassan*.

THE NEW HORROR

LOST SOULS
by Poppy Z. Brite (Delacorte; 384 pp.; Can$23.00)

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of newcomer Poppy Z. Brite's first novel, ***Lost Souls***, is its presentation of the urban young people who haunt its pages. This is a vampire novel, and Brite's vampires — belonging to at least two separate inhuman races — are something new in the genre, but the real horror flies in the wholly angst- ridden lives of the teenagers who dress in black, listen to groups like Bauhaus and, in her vision, seek precisely the 'easy death' that vampires offer because there's nothing else interesting enough in what the 'real' world offers them.

These 'lost souls' inhabit the bleak environments in which the protagonists and antagonists of *Lost Souls* play out their dangerous, erotic and violent dance of life and death. There aren't any heroes here, and maybe only one 'good guy', Ghost, the grandson of a southern witch who is blessed and cursed with premonition and extreme empathy. His friend, Steve, the guitarist in their band, Lost Souls, is thoroughly messed up, having brutally ended his jealous relationship with Ann, but Ghost knows Steve's pain and will stick by him through everything.

Then there are the vampires themselves. Christian, the 385-year-old bartender in New Orleans (ever since Anne Rice, New Orleans seems to be the vampire centre of the US) lives as quietly as he can, taking the lives of young boys mostly, runaways who won't be missed. His new-found compatriots, the stylishly amoral Zillah, and his two less intelligent but equally violent cohorts, Molochai and Twig, live far more dangerous lives, on the road in their black van, taking lives and money wherever they want, and depending on human credulity and their own powers to keep them alive. Pure Id, they are extreme sensationalists.

And then there's Nothing, Zollah's son. Zillah was long gone from New Orleans when Nothing's mother died giving birth to a blood-thirsty son; Christian took the baby north and abandoned him. Fifteen years later, Nothing (the name he found in the note Christian left behind) knows he doesn't belong, is even more alienated than his teenage friends, and takes to the road. Where ... Well, after Zillah and company pick him up, hitching towards Missing Mile to meet

Ghost and Steve because he loves Lost Souls' music, things begin to get a little out of hand.

Brite's vampires are an interesting variation on the theme of dangerous strangers among us. The narrative stance of her novel is an intriguing blend of moral distance and intimate close-up. As the novel refuses didactic moral commentary yet allows various implications about the suitability to suvival of some kinds of behaviour to emerge. From the first confrontation in Missing Mile to a final devastating battle between Ghost and the vampires in New Orleans during Mardi Gras, the novel sustains a variety of narrative and personal tensions by mixing black and cruel currents of humour and power.

DRAWING BLOOD
by Poppy Z. Brite (Delacorte; 373 pp.; Can$24.95)

At one point, Nothing wonders what William Burroughs would think of him doing two new drugs in two hours; clearly Brite knows her Burroughs and the writers who have followed in his trail. *Lost Souls* makes of vampirism a metaphor for a contradictory series of emotional responses to the general alienation and anomie experienced by so many young people today. There is a glamour to it the novel fully exploits but does not wholly buy into — an image of dehumanised desire especially seductive to those who no longer wish to acknowledge their ordinary lives of change and decay — but there is also the vampires' utter amorality, which is frighteningly unbounded.

Few survive the violent climax, not even all the vampires. Yet in the Epilogue, fifty years later, in a grungy bar in the basement of a wrecked high-rise, the youngsters dressed all in black still turn out for a show that offers them a glimpse of something other, some trace of dark immortality they wish they could escape into, but only Nothing and his friends actually have it, they live off those very young who worship them. It is the way of life their race requires. The novel says no more. The horror, then: where does it really lie?

This is a fine first novel, and suggests that Poppy Z. Brite could have a long and successful career ahead. Fans of Anne Rice and others will find the real thing in *Lost Souls*.

Lost Souls garnered lots of praise for both its young author and its way with a somewhat tired conventional figure, the vampire. With ***Drawing Blood***, Poppy Z. Brite takes on another well-worn convention, the haunted house, and revitalises it with a gritty, punkish rush of a novel. *Drawing Blood* careens from computer hacking to underground comics, from a grisly family murder-suicide to a passionate love affair that may just save two of the latest 'lost souls' in Brite's evocative counter-culture.

Although parts of the novel are set in Brite's home town of New Orleans ('horror capital of America'?), most of the action takes place in the little town of Missing Mile, North Carolina, the home of the Sacred Yew, a club for young people, and the place where Lost Souls, the band, first made their name. Just like many another major horror writer, Brite is setting up shop in a small town, but her small town is down south, not up there in Stephen King's New England. It's a good place for her special brand of hip horror, where the 'ordinary folk' who must witness whatever strange and eldritch happenings occur there are laidback musicians, ex-hippies, gentle folk just a wee bit out of it.

But they are willing to help, as best they can, anyone who seems to need it. The owner of the Sacred Yew, Kinsey Hummingbird, was a mechanic when Trevor McGee and his parents first came to Missing Mile twenty years ago. When their car broke down, he bought if from them and helped them find a house to stay in. It was in that house that Trevor's father, the famous creator of the underground comic *Birdland*, killed his wife, youngest son and himself when he realised that he had utterly lost his talent. Trevor has spent the intervening two decades in a Boys Home and on the road, always wondering why his father spared him. Now Trevor has returned, and Kinsey and his friends do their best to offer him non-judgmental support.

Trevor is a cartoonist too, and what drives Trevor to draw is one of the questions he and the novel attempt to confront. For one thing, is he caught up in some kind of psychotic replay of his father's self-destructive drive? Might he one day turn from creation to destruction as his father did? And what would cause him to do so? It is to find an answer to these questions, and to the overwhelming one of why his father let him live, that Trevor has come back to the house where it all happened. These questions insist upon art as essentially an expressive medium, expressive especially of the inner torments of the artist, and they are given a gothic patina in terms of the haunted house scenario. Like some other of the newer horror writers — Kathe Koja comes to mind — Brite is Romantically obsessed with art as a Romantic obsession. Unlike Koja, however, Brite does not really interrogate the convention; rather she pushes it for all it's worth, delighting in the shivers it can call forth.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans a young hacker has run afoul of the Secret Service. Luckily he has friends who warn him in time to leave town. One of them is the woman who loves him, but with whom he can only be friends because he cannot trust love, having seen it apparently ruin his parents' marriage, and be expressed in violence towards him. So the wounded son of one dysfunctional family moves inevitably toward the wounded son of another, and when they meet they also meet the truth of passion and love.

Zach can learn to 'hack' the complexities of Trevor's emotional life — or lack of one — and get them both to the place where they can admit they love one another, but he can't prevent Trevor from trying to find out what the old house has to tell him. So he tries to enter Birdland with his lover in a fever dream brought on by psychedelic mushrooms. Once they both get 'there', however, they each find they have to confront their particular family ghosts alone. But not without the knowledge that the other does love him, which may prove enough to save them.

Brite manages to mix up a hot southern gumbo of sex, hacking, art and revenging ghosts in *Drawing Blood*. Her mythic parameters are Black Romanticism, punk style and gothic expressionism. The result is a high-tension ghost story with real bite. *Drawing Blood* will only enhance Brite's reputation as one of the best young writers in the field.

SKIN
by Kathe Koja (Delacorte; 309 pp.; Can$24.95)

Skin is only Kathe Koja's third novel, but already she has been called 'the most provocative new voice in contemporary horror' and has received heaps of praise for her first two novels, *The Cipher* and *Bad Brains*. I have not read her first two novels, but if *Skin* is any indication of her talent, she deserves all the praise the critics can muster. Truly terrifying, it utterly transcends the 'normal' conventions of the genre.

In ***Skin***, Koja is after something more profound than the usual 'horror' frisson. Without a hint of the supernatural, *Skin* provides a harsh, intense whiff of pure evil. *Skin* transcends genre boundaries: not the usual horror fiction, not mystery, not thriller, it's something much more interesting and much more distressing, an exploration of the outer bounds of art, especially performance art as practised on the punk fringes of the avant garde today; and also a powerful story of obsessive love gone wrong.

Skin at first appears to be the story of a young metal sculptor, Tess, who, in true Romantic fashion, seeks in her art to discover what it is she has to do. But things soon change when she meets Bibi, a dancer seeking to push at the bounds of what the body can do and take. The two hit it off, and Tess is soon making kinetic sculptures for Bibi's choreography. Under the name Surgeons of the Demolition, they create a number of violently provocative performances that soon have the underground humming, but the dancers begin to resist having work with the increasingly dangerous moving figures Tess builds for Bibi. Tragedy strikes when one of Bibi's devotees is killed in a performance gone amok under the pressure of jealousies between the dancers and Tess's young assistants.

After that, the Surgeons break up, and Bibi pursues her researches into body alteration (piercings and cuttings), while Tess pulls further away from all contact with the outside world to seek some kind of redemption in the purity of her art. But eventually they come together again as lovers. However, despite the powerful passion Tess feels for Bibi, she cannot follow her into her even more dangerous forays into rites that will somehow 'prove through the power of pain that *we are not our bodies*'. Separated again, Tess takes on students while Bibi finds acolytes. And then there's Michael, apparent angel seeking to bring Bibi and Tess together, urgently urging them both to push at the boundaries of their arts. But, as time passes, and as Tess sees how he manipulates each of them, he takes on darker and darker psychic colours. I can't even begin to suggest everything else going on in this complex narrative.

Koja knows her contemporary pop and underground art culture (she especially acknowledges *Modern Primitives* and *Industrial Culture Handbook*), and she understands all too well the potential for violence and evil in Black Romanticism, especially when it is pursued with no sense of restraint. Bibi is as purely a Dark Romantic visionary as recent fiction has seen, her *liebestod* visions leading her into aesthetic fascism; but Tess, however much her passion connects her to Bibi, is a more complex figure, seeking a kind of classic purity in her art (even to the extent of never caring if it's seen, one aspect of her character I couldn't quite believe). Where Bibi demands abject obedience from her followers as she leads them deeper into depersonalisation, Tess insists that her students follow their own artistic desires. Koja provides them both with compelling arguments, but Tess is the only truly moral figure, even if she too must follow their fate to the apocalyptic finish.

Koja is brutally poetic writer, who can get inside some of the hardest emotions with a brilliant turn of phrase, and in *Skin* she seeks to render a 'natural' horror within our culture through an intense and visceral prose that cuts (yes) under the skin of conventions recent 'horror' fiction has made simply entertaining. This book frightens because it is possible. Only the ending fails to maintain its awful tension, but perhaps there was no way to represent the fallout of the final disastrous performance on Tess's psyche than by withdrawing from the narration's savagely sympathetic inwardness. All in all, however, *Skin* is one of the most powerful fictions in some time.

STRANGE ANGELS
by Kathe Koja (Delacorte; 277 pp.; Can$25.95)

Strange Angels, Kathe Koja's novel that follows *Skin*, transcends the 'normal' conventions of the horror genre, so much so that it isn't even marketed as genre fiction.

As was true of *Skin*, *Strange Angels* seeks to provoke something more profound than the usual 'horror' frisson. Refusing to stoop to anything like the supernatural, *Strange Angels* looks inward to dissect a 'Romantic' desire for ultimate experiences in art. Where *Skin* transcended genre boundaries to explore the outer bounds of art, especially performance art as practised on the punk fringes of the avant garde today — becoming something more than horror fiction, mystery or thriller — *Strange Angels* enters the attempt of a 'normal' human being to collaborate somehow with a schizophrenic whose drawings seem to offer him a vision of reality he is incapable of achieving on his own.

Strange Angels strangely finds its origins in the paintings of Francis Bacon, but its young artist, the shy and broken Robin, is both someone who knows Bacon's work and an oddly naive artist who draws only for himself, and perhaps his friends, and who began to draw as therapy. It is because he lives with Robin's therapist that Grant, a photographer who has lost his sense of artistic vocation, first sees Robin's work. In it he sees possibilities, and so he begins his lengthy attempt to befriend Robin, breaking his lover's trust with Robin and him.

Grant succeeds, and eventually brings Robin to live with him, vowing that he will take care of Robin and help him, but knowing deep down that he needs whatever it is that Robin has and he hasn't. Koja

brilliantly renders his rationalisations, the ways he fools himself into pushing poor Robin further and further into his own obsessions. And it is obsession that Koja is really interested in here, as she was in *Skin*, the obsessions of the Romantic artist that can lead far beyond normal human concern. Grant wants to feel, and only Robin's art makes him feel, so he will do anything, no matter how much he tells himself that he does it for love of Robin, to find a way to that feeling he so desperately needs.

Eventually Robin falls ill, or at least Grant loses touch with him, and at this point they meet another schizophrenic casualty, the young woman Saskia, who also comes to love Robin and perhaps pushes him further toward whatever transformation he or Grant or she thinks might occur. Grant feels left out by their shared otherworldliness, yet they show him enough to excite him, and he stays with them, with his vision of possibility that is so locked up with Robin's art. But things go downhill, as perhaps they have been doing from the start, and eventually Robin transcends the mere making of art into becoming it — or just dying. Which?

Koja's compassion for Robin and Saskia is felt throughout; but the emotions attached to Grant are far more complex and murky. Is he the new empty-souled sociopath of today's urban wasteland or is he perhaps a kind of Columbus of sanity, sailing to the edge of his world and discovering the new continent of cracked dreams in which some monstrous but saving grace might await us? The novel refuses to say, but it does suggest how dangerous such expeditions can be.

Koja remains a brutally poetic writer, able to get inside hard emotions and stumbling intellects with a brilliant turn of phrase. She keeps paring her style, and in *Strange Angels* seeks a staggered and violently jagged prose that often works brilliantly but also occasionally annoys with a few ticks, like the continual placing of adjectives after their nouns. She is still in some respects a writer finding her way, although it seems clear she has found her theme — the terrifying dangers of obsession, especially where art meets life. Like *Skin*, this book frightens because it is possible, especially in the narration's savagely sympathetic inwardness, as it traces its protagonist's descent into hell. Kathe Koja demonstrates once again the 'horror' of life in the disintegrating civilisation of the American 90s. How interesting that she does so by investigating the ways in which Romanticism still tempts us to a tawdry transcendence, an escape from the normal as the way to achieve the real.

RECENT CANADIAN SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

For my first SF&F column (never call it 'sci-fi'), I thought I would check out some recent Canadian science fiction and fantasy. In the past two decades, as Edmonton's own *On Spec* magazine and Tesseract Books demonstrate, there has been a great upsurge of speculative writing in Canada. It's because there is a critical mass of writers as well as a range of writing from highly literate to lowly hack that we know science fiction and fantasy in Canada has arrived.

JACKAL BIRD

by Michael Barley (Tesseract Books; 298 pp.; Can$7.95)

Jackal Bird is so complex, evocative and well wrought that it is hard to believe it's Michael Barley's first book. A novel made up of three interlocking novellas, it both creates a world as marvellous and believable as Frank Herbert's *Dune* and tells a story of childhood, war, intrigue and love that is both richly complicated and utterly rooted in the invented world of Isurus.

In Isurus, Barley demonstrates his architectural background by creating a colony world slowly being terraformed to human needs over many thousands of years. Almost entirely cut off from contact with the few starships left from the first human surge into the universe, the people there must live according to 'the Quatrec', which

provides the rule by which their slowly growing society can eventually make the world a liveable place.

Two brothers and twin brother and sister lead the children of a small town in war games, aping a rebel uprising hundreds of years before. What begins with a horrible accident during a ceremony in the ruined square of their small city informs the lives of all four as they grow up, separate, and work with and against one another during adulthood. Their childhood play affects everything they do, throughout their lives, and even after the physical deaths of three of them.

'Jackal Bird' tells how Oseph, a master tactician, even as a child, creates war games that go awry when the children find and appropriate an ancient weapon. In 'Pangaelene', one of the twins, Iilaria, now grown up, leads the resistance against Osseph's anti-Quatrec dictatorship. A master spy, she is also capable of seeing the direction her society must take, and will eventually be its guide. Finally, in 'Illusions of Grace', her brother Greghory, who escaped Isurus on a starship, returns, still a young man, after her death. But things are not as they seem, and he must deal with both the new illusions of a technology she has helped to create and the illusions of his own mind and heart.

Each of these stories is complex enough on its own, but together they weave a much more complicated and grander tale of human possibility. Barley knows his SF tropes, but he brings something new and fascinating to each one he takes up in *Jackal Bird*. It is a stunning debut, full of psychological as well as technological insights. I hope it doesn't prove to be the sole work he has in him, because more such will make him a major figure in the field. Do yourself a favour and read this book.

STARMIND
by Spider and Jeanne Robinson (Ace; 292 pp.; Can$28.50)

Spider and Jeanne Robinson won science fiction's highest awards for the first volume of what must now be called 'the *Stardance* trilogy'; and ***Starmind*** is the final turn of that literary dance. The Robinsons push their essential optimism into the realm of the transcendent in the best SF manner.

It's 2065 and art is flourishing, not least out in space. Humanity has never been better off, mostly because of the gifts of the godlike Fireflies who came and went in *Stardance*. But some people want to return to the bad old days of wars and violence. *Starmind* is the story of a family and of the human family as a whole, as they move, inevitably but unknowingly, toward the next step in evolution. Narrated by a novelist who loves both the earth and her spacebound artist husband, it tells of a wide group of people who work toward or try to prevent what the Fireflies started. Naturally, the good guys — humanity — win, but not without some difficulty.

The Robinsons' future is technologically like that of such cyberpunks as William Gibson except for one thing: everything works for the best, and people are happy. Strangely it's a capitalist utopia, although this is not explained. Intriguingly, the Fireflies 'came to us the moment that a human being came to space for the express purpose of creating art'. In making this the core of their long narrative, the Robinsons do seem to be staking big claims for art (even if they also seem to imply that it should be able to pay its way), and this is a charmingly aberrant aspect of their science fictional vision.

Needless to say, despite personal and international conflicts, the desired transcendence does occur. It does so at the end of an easily read story, in both senses of that phrase: the Robinsons write entertaining prose that keeps a reader turning the pages; and yet, all the problems, especially the personal ones, are solved a bit too easily, even if the gift of Starmind is precisely to cure such problems (there's a darker yet more wonderful novel, Geoff Ryman's *The Child Garden*, which definitely earns its transcendent conclusion, by the greater complexity of its story, its characters and its prose.) Still, *Starmind* will certainly satisfy readers already won over to the Robinsons' earlier books in the trilogy; it's good entertainment on its own terms.

DANCE OF THE SNOW DRAGON

by Eileen Kernaghan (Thistledown Press; 325 pp.; Can$7.95)

Eileen Kernaghan has been writing solid historical fantasies for some years now, but in ***Dance of the Snow Dragon*** she turns from Celtic myth to Tibetan Buddhist mythic accounts of the journey to Shambhala, the great city-state hidden far beyond the furthest highest snow-covered peaks. In a deceptively simple style the novel tells the story of a young boy chosen to be a monk who discovers he is meant for even greater things.

Sanjay has a hard time learning to empty himself of ego, but after failure and meditation in a mountain hermitage he learns that he must take a great journey. Along the way he gains a companion, a tough and sarcastic sorceress, and slowly he learns to believe that all is illusion. Eventually, he gains Shambhala and helps to save it, only to realise that life is a continual journey and he can't stop here, even in this marvellous place. Kernaghan tells his story like an ancient fable, and the magic of his travels is subtly underlined by the understated quality of her prose. *Dance of the Snow Dragon* is a quietly moving quest story, full of lovely descriptions of another world.

WIND SHIFTER

by Linda Smith (Thistledown Press; 310 pp.; Can$7.95)

Wind Shifter, Linda Smith's first novel, is an intriguing attempt at refurbishing the traditional high fantasy tale of a young person growing up by learning to use her magic powers. Like *Dance of the Snow Dragon*, a young adult novel, its story is interesting enough to engage any reader fond of the genre, especially one with a slight case of humanist sentimentalism. The style is straightforward, the story well thought out and plotted, and the theme intriguingly complex.

Kerstin is an apprentice wizard in the land of Freya, whose wizards are celebrated in song for saving it from a savage enemy some five hundred years ago by erecting an impassable barrier between the countries. But now the enemy has returned, and perhaps enchanted the weather, preventing needed rain from reaching Freyan crops. The King calls on all to help, but when young Kirsten is left out, she seeks to do something on her own. With her father away, her mother dead, and her own sense of self undermined, she ventures out and is captured by the 'vile' Ugliks, only to discover that they are just as human as she is.

In the end, and this is what makes *Wind Shifter* an interesting contrast with many other adventure fantasies today, Kirsten comes to realise there is no easy black-and-white Good-versus-Evil solution. Moreover, she finds a way to help both sides in the conflict. How she does so is the burden of this novel, along with how doing so helps her to mature into a fine young wizard. While no masterpiece, *Wind Shifter* is an entertaining and engaging story.

SHADOW OF ASHLAND

by Terence M. Green (Forge; 224 pp.; US$19.95)

Like many SF authors, Terence M. Green has built some of his novels out of earlier short stories; and one of his most moving stories, 'Ashland, Kentucky', is the basis of his latest novel, ***Shadow of Ashland***. Here the expansion is almost completely one of deepening the characters and their relations, rather than pushing conventional plot devices into the narrative. In the story, the narrator discovers that 'Things have to be settled, or they never go away'. His father tells him this when his dying mother asks to see her brother, who went missing in the US in the 1930s. After she dies, saying he did visit her, letters from him begin to arrive, but they are dated 1934.

In the story, he follows the letters to Ashland, Kentucky, where he somehow gains a brief meeting with his uncle fifty years ago. In *Shadow of Ashland*, he still goes to Ashland, but there he not only meets people who remember his uncle but also travels back in time, meets his uncle and stays long enough to understand the life of 1930s migrant workers, and learns how his uncle may have died. Green's narrator richly evokes the historical background. Moreover, in the

present he also meets his uncle's daughter as well as a contemporary woman with whom he falls in love. The theoretical explanation is minimal, for what's important is the emotional encounters between intriguing characters, as well as the exploration of personal loss.

Shadow of Ashland is Green's finest novel yet, not least because it so carefully articulates a world the reader can believe in. It is, perhaps, closer to 'magic realism' than to traditional science fiction, yet it is also a story of alternate worlds, even if those worlds are the ones people make up to keep themselves going in hard times. A powerfully evocative study of complex personal relations, it should gain Green the wider audience he so richly deserves.

THE CURSED
by Dave Duncan (Ballantine; 437 pp.; $Can31.00)

Calgary author Dave Duncan has steadily grown as a writer of complex fantasy over the past decade, and ***The Cursed*** is one of his most interesting novels yet. Here he has imagined a world controlled by seven stars and their peculiar powers. A hundred years ago the Empire fell, but now a new horde of barbarians is attacking the various kingdoms scattered across the Empire's former lands. Gwin has been widowed by the new war, and has lost her children to the plague, which often curses those who survive it with powers associated with particular stars. She believes she is not cursed, but in fact she has been granted the power of the most powerful and enigmatic of stars, although she will not discover this for some time.

Acting out of her own compassion for the oppressed, she gathers various cursed people around her, and also marries the patriarch of a large family descended from the barbarians who sacked the Empire a century before. Although she does not know it, she is at the centre of a movement that may well create a new Empire, and *The Cursed* is the complicated story of how that eventuality comes to pass.

Duncan has organised his narrative around the powers of each star, and so it enacts Gwin's slowly growing awareness and power. Essentially a story of heroism and sacrifice, it does not deny the losses that must inevitably accompany such an adventure in times of war. Gwin is a feisty and engaging heroine; the other characters all have qualities to recommend them, especially old Bulion Tharn, who cannot believe his luck in winning love, but who shows that an old dog can learn new tricks as they journey out away from the safety of his valley.

The Cursed is an especially interesting heroic fantasy because it presents a truly different world, and then constructs a narrative that could only occur under the rules by which that world operates. It's a strong and entertaining novel, and further cements Duncan's reputation as a writer of solid, idiosyncratic fantasy.

FRAMESHIFT
by Robert J. Sawyer (Tor; 352 pp.; US$23.95)

Like The Terminal Experiment, his Nebula Award-winning thriller, Robert Sawyer's ***Frameshift*** is set in the world of medical technology and deals with possibilities that could change from science fiction to science fact within the next few years. Pierre Tardivel, a Québecker now working for the Human Genome Project at University of California—Berkeley (thus does Sawyer indicate his Canadian roots), is a driven man, for he has a fifty-fifty chance of coming down with Huntington's disease. Knowing he may have very few years, he is determined to discover something that will make him famous, like all the Nobel Prize-winning scientists whose lives he has studied.

That's one part of the puzzle Sawyer slowly constructs in this novel. The young psychologist with whom Pierre falls in love, and her small but true ESP (she can read another person's linguistic thoughts from a few paces away), is another. Pierre's boss, the scientist running the project, whose past hides a lie, and whose present involves another, all for the the glory of science, of course, is a third. And then there's the old man who founded Condor Health Insurance, a company that seems to be finding new and criminal ways to avoid big payouts: just who was he during World War Two?

Sawyer does a good job of weaving all these stories and themes together; and has clearly done a good deal of research in order to arrange this multiple narrative. Eventually, Pierre's researches, the discovery of neanderthal DNA, the deaths of a number of people who have been insured against Huntington's, and the involvement of Israeli and American Nazi-hunters lead to a thriller climax that ties up all the loose ends, and allows for the Epilogue's warm-hearted paean to ethical scientific research.

When writing about the actual science, Sawyer captures the obsessive and passionate personal force of characters-in-the-action-of-thinking; but with the other aspects of his characters' lives, he does tend to fall into more conventional modes. Nevertheless, *Frameshift* is one of those novels that can remind us of just how exciting science can be; and that is one of the real achievements of the best science fiction.

THE MAGEBORN TRAITOR
by Melanie Rawn (DAW; 610 pp.; US$29.99)

This is Volume Two of 'Exiles', another trilogy full of magic, battles, a family driven apart by power and political differences. A thousand years ago the Mageborn fled a world where their powers were seen as a threat and settled the pristine world of Lenfall. That's a science fiction trope; but the magic, the devastating war between rival Mageborn factions that polluted the environment and created hideous creatures known as Wraithenbeasts, the general level of civilisation at something like late Medieval, are all signs of fantasy.

Rawn handles her materials well: the Mallerisi believe in following a Pattern (one which they control, of course) and fear the chaos they think comes from the behaviour of the Mage Guardians, who are pledged never to take a life except in defence of their or others' lives, and who fight to allow political complexities their slowly maturing place in the world.

Three daughters of one of Lenfell's most powerful families play out the battle between the two magical ideologies across the many years covered in the trilogy, and a huge cast of colorful characters partake in the epic battles that occur from generation to generation.

The Mageborn Traitor has lots of the excitement such works promise, and, Rawn handles this conventional material with more flair than most. And there is one aspect of her book that does lift it above the mass of such works: she has utterly reversed the gender situation that used to hold in Europe. Men are weak, have no political rights or power, and are perceived as women were in Victorian England, for example. It is a delicious little joke, with a punch, in that the novels clearly show that this situation is culturally constructed yet all the characters accept it as completely 'natural'. This adds an extra frisson to this entertaining magical thriller.

COLLECTIONS

FOUR WAYS TO FORGIVENESS
by Ursula K. Le Guin (HarperCollins; 230 pp.; Can$28.00)

Any time a new book from Ursula K. Le Guin appears, it's a cause for celebration, and that is more than ever the case with ***Four Ways to Forgiveness***, the second book in two years to return to the Hainish Universe of her first five novels. Le Guin has always been recognised as one of the complex and profound SF writers of her generation, but it seems to me she brings a greater wisdom plus an increasingly complex and angry politics to bear on her recent SF.

Four Ways to Forgiveness is a collection of intertwined stories set on the two inhabited planets of an obscure system, Werel and Yeowe, during the period Yeowe fights to free itself from the slave culture of Werel, which had settled the planet some 300 years before. It is also a period in which Le Guin's Ekumen of the Known Worlds has come to Werel. This allows her to represent characters from the ruling and slave ('assets') classes of Werel and Yeowe, as well as some inter-

ested alien observers.

The stories are connected, but not too obviously; it is more their thematic questioning of the effects of slavery, on owners as well as slaves, well as into post-revolutionary times, that connects them. What is fascinating about these stories is how they all explore the point made by the one character who tells her own story, the last in the book, 'A Woman's Liberation': 'It is in our bodies that we lose or begin our freedom, in our bodies that we accept or end our slavery.' Le Guin pushes very hard at this insight, through the lives of those men and women she creates for her wounded and rifted culture. This is a deeply human, warm and moving volume, certainly one of her wisest and best.

THE STEAMPUNK TRILOGY
by Paul DiFilippo (Four Walls Eight Windows; 352 pp.; Can$28.00)

A very different kind of collection is Paul DiFilippo's ***The Steampunk Trilogy***, a witty and weird trilogy of tales designed to overturn any inherited banal notions of the Victorian Period we might still harbour. William Gibson compares these stories to the collages of Max Ernst, and it's a terrific analogy. In the three lengthy stories, 'Victoria', 'Hottentots' and 'Walt and Emily', DiFilippo plays mind-games with what we think we know about a number of well-known historical personages, involving them in situations of weird science phantasmagoria that send up both their own public personages and the cultural iconography surrounding their memories.

One way of looking at *The Steampunk Trilogy* is to think of it as science fiction written out of the scientific knowledge of its period. If 'hard' science fiction is careful speculation based on the latest scientific knowledge, these stories read as if written by a hard SF writer of the 1840s or the 1880s. It's a marvellous game, and DiFilippo plays it with bravura flourishes. At the same time, he introduces two elements that mark the stories as clearly postmodern. First, he explores sexual questions with an intensity and explicitness that would have been denied his putative Victorian SF writer. Second, he makes use of various documents that would have been unknown to anyone writing then, especially in 'Walt and Emily', where Whitman and Dickinson think and speak in the language, and even the lines, of their now-famous poems.

What happens to those two in a 'scientific' experiment with spiritualism, such as what happens to a young princess Victoria and the scientific genius whose human-like invention makes possible her disappearance, or what happens when a young Louis Agassiz is forced to place his version of science against an array of events that call its grounds (especially its theory of white racial superiority) into question, are the narrative centres of these darkly humorous and wickedly moralistic tales. *The Steampunk Trilogy* may not be to everyone's tastes, but it is a stylish and eccentric, and highly entertaining, alternate universe fiction.

ADVENTURERS

TRAVELLING WITH THE DEAD
by Barbara Hambly (Ballantine; 344 pp.; Can$31.00)

Barbara Hambly has written a number of entertaining fantasies, adventure stories really, with tough and witty heroines and heroes, getting involved with magecraft and statecraft in any number of medieval- or renaissance-like worlds. A few years ago, she took on horror fiction, writing a vampire tale (everyone tries a vampire tale sometime, it seems) with a difference. In *Those Who Hunt the Night*, she went back to the time of *Dracula*, and gave us a human hero, forced to help some ancient London vampires, as they sought an enemy within their own ranks.

In ***Travelling with the Dead***, Hambly brings back James Asher, the folklorist with a past in the British Secret Service, and his scientist wife Laura as they must once again collaborate with some vampires against others of the undead. The time is 1908, and when Asher sees

one of the vampires he recognises getting off a Paris-bound train with a secret agent from another country he knows he must act to prevent an abominable foreign conspiracy.

Hambly has a terrific sense of the period, and plays off our awareness of books like *Kim*, with its delight in 'the great game' of espionage. But she doesn't just write of Asher's adventures; rather she interleaves those with the adventures of his scientific wife, as she seeks help from an ancient vampire to save her husband. Their trials take them from England to Paris, Vienna and eventually Constantinople. Hambly is especially fine on the comic potential of a lady adventuress, when dressing requires at least a couple of hours. *Travelling with the Dead* is a delightful and exciting historical fantasy.

RIDER AT THE GATE
by C. J. Cherryh (Warner; 437 pp.; Can$26.95)

Although a hugely prolific writer, C. J. Cherryh maintains an exceptionally high quality in all her work. ***Rider at the Gate*** is set on a world that has fallen back to an early-technological level since it was settled. As usual, Cherryh has created a well-realised alien ecology and its species as background.

'Follow not the beasts,' say the preachers, and their flocks, descendants of starfarers huddled in walled towns, take their warning to heart, afraid of the world that is now theirs. That world is a teeming wilderness, full of telepathic life, especially the intelligent nighthorses, who communicate by visual images and powerful emotions, and who choose the human individuals they will live with. These pairs are humanity's best chance to survive against attacks from spookbears or goblin cats.

With this as a slowly filled in background, Cherryh has created one of her usually suspenseful stories of intrigue and conflict. In *Rider at the Gate*, she offers two separate protagonists and their intersecting tales: of an older man's survival after loss, and of a young man's sudden maturing while searching for the first character with possibly untrustworthy riders. Cherryh is especially good at creating situations that are beyond the understanding of those caught up in them, and of making the narrative enact the slow growth of knowledge that is the core of her adventures. She does this both with Danny, the teenage townsboy who has become a rider against his parents' will, and with Stuart, the longtime rider who has lost his lover and thinks she may have been deliberately allowed to die. Before their stories are over, both these men and their nighthorses, and many others, will have learned a great deal about the often deadly dangers of a rogue nighthorse on the loose.

Rider at the Gate is fine science fantasy, well thought out as to background and inventive with the nighthorses and their emotional connection to humans. Those willing to take the time to learn about this planet and its people will find *Rider at the Gate* up to Cherryh's usual exciting standard.

SF&F: HISTORY, FUTURE AND PAST

THE MEMORY CATHEDRAL: A SECRET HISTORY OF LEONARDO DA VINCI
by Jack Dann (Bantam; 496 pp.; Can$31.95)

Jack Dann is not wildly prolific but he has written some extraordinary SF. In ***The Memory Cathedral: A Secret History of Leonardo da Vinci***, he turns the creative imagination that invented alien future cultures to the recreation of an alien culture of the past: the world, and especially the city of Florence, of that fifteenth-century genius. Having discovered a two-year period in da Vinci's life for which no documentation exists, Dann has chosen to create a new Leonardo myth, one based on research and something very like the kind of extrapolation associated with science fiction.

In *The Memory Cathedral*, Leonardo is heterosexual, ruined in love and life by accusations of sodomy (these accusations did in 'reality' nearly ruin his life), and forced to leave his beloved Florence for the

Middle East. While there, he ends up serving Ka'it Bay, the Caliph of Egypt and Syria, for whom he actually builds the machines of war, including gliders, that can be found throughout his notebooks.

The Memory Cathedral is an enthralling work, not least because of its major formal trope, that of the memory cathedral itself. This is a visualised mnemonic, a huge imagined space in which to store all memories, and through which one might walk to relive them. Indeed, Dann marvellously shifts from time to time, moment to moment, by constructing his novel around Leonardo's own movements through his memory cathedral, often in an attempt to evade the horrors of what he is experiencing at a particular time.

The great accomplishment of *The Memory Cathedral* is its ability to catch the reader up not just in the drama of the lives of Leonardo and his friends and enemies but in the grandiose and terrible world in which they lived. Florence exists in all its glory and degradation. I have seldom read a book in which the sense of smell plays such a powerful role. Dann renders the contradictory odours of streets, cathedrals, homes, with hallucinatory richness. Putrefaction and perfume commingle; rotting meat and delicate bodily parts exist side by side in some young gentleman's quarters when a party is in progress; even in a church, the eastern odours of incense mingle with the stench of new-spilled blood.

But smell is not the only sense brought to heightened life in these pages: there are a continuing cacophony of sounds, an explosion of brilliant colours, all transformed by Leonardo's own sensitive and alert sensorium, in which sex and death forever conjoin.

There are also all the wonderful characters: the other artists, the brilliant and powerful Lorenzo de Medici, not to mention the Caliph and his retinue in Cairo and on the desert. They all, not least the women Leonardo loved, have important roles to play.

At the core of this moving and troubling study of genius are Leonardo's inventions. A fascinating Afterword informs us that in his drawings the most terrible weapons appear in a kind of Platonic purity; what the novel does is put that apolitical scientific 'innocence' to the test by letting Leonardo see his weapons work. In the carnage of warfare between the Caliph's troops and those of the Turkish Bey, Leonardo loses whatever innocence he had, and it is the story of how that happens that provides this novel with its tragic moral vision.

The Memory Cathedral is a wonderful if dark fantasia on history as we think we know it, a brilliant vision of another time and place, deeply human for all its strange differences from our own.

ENDYMION
by Dan Simmons (Bantam; 480 pp.; Can$31.95)

The 1980s novels *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* established Dan Simmons's reputation as a universe-maker and a highly literate and witty writer. Although they paid homage to the SF tradition established by Asimov's 'Foundation' and Herbert's 'Dune' novels, among others, with their structural allusions to the Romantic poets, especially Keats, as well as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, they also insisted on their high literary inheritance as well.

As its title indicates, ***Endymion*** makes the same claims. Set some 200 years after the destruction, depicted in *The Fall of Hyperion*, of the interstellar Hegemony, it is the narrative of one Raul Endymion, an ordinary man caught up in events of galactic import.

In those two centuries, partly because of cruciform growths that guarantee material immortality, the Church has won billions of converts, while the Pax, its military arm, is conquering what few worlds still resist this new Christianity. Nevertheless the Church has learned that there is still one threat that might prevent it from gaining control over all humanity.

When she appears, in the Valley of the Tombs on Endymion, Aenea, an eleven-year-old girl, does not seem all that dangerous. Yet, with the aid of Raul Endymion, some special technology, and the ancient

android, A. Bettik, she escapes the Pope's army, and the chase is on.

But their story is only part of a larger battle among the Artificial Intelligences who once controlled the WorldWeb. Simmons's novel is a slick machine, shifting from Endymion's narrative to the perspective of a rather naive soldier of Christ sent to capture Aenea. Slowly little indications that all is not as it should be in the Vatican on Pacem slip out. To reveal more would be to give away too much.

Simmons's characterisation is complex and empathetic, and he makes both the three wanderers and Father de Soya, their nemesis, sympathetic. The evil ones are still mostly in the shadows, although one creature is coldly terrifying. Of course, the future of humanity is at stake, but there are some real philosophical confrontations, represented with remarkable evenhandedness, embedded in this apparently straight-forward adventure.

Endymion is a terrific read; it is also, surely, given the cliffhanging ending, only the first of a sequence. I'm not sure it's a truly revelatory work, however, although the whole series may prove to be so. Perhaps when all the books in the Hyperion universe have appeared, we will be able to judge their literary worth. For the moment, anyone who likes widescreen baroque SF will thoroughly enjoy this example of the genre.

VURT

by Jeff Noon (Crown; 342 pp.; Can$29.95)

Published in Britain to rave reviews and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Fiction, ***Vurt*** has now made it to our shores. That award is for science fiction, but *Vurt* is not science fiction in any usual sense of the term. It may not be SF, but it isn't fantasy either, really: perhaps Speculative Fantasmagoria? Whatever its generic associations, *Vurt* is something special: weird, punk, drugged, with hints of adolescent rebellion, a smidgen of over-the-edge erotic, and an overlay of horror. Author Jeff Noon, who we are told is a musician, painter and playwright living in Manchester, England, seems to know the outlaw life there, but has a great ear for the idioms of the underclasses. *Vurt* strangely sings, but like the sirens it sings to destruction.

I suppose *Vurt* is set in some kind of future, but the changes that have brought it about are specific and small. In fact, it refuses standard science-fictional extrapolation, choosing rather to deploy a number of music and drug-related tropes towards the creation of a 'world' much like ours except for the invention of a new drug and associated technologies, and a number of new kinds of life. In fact, one British reviewer suggests that aside from these developments the Manchester of the novel pretty well reproduces the Manchester of the last few years. If so, I'm not sure it's a place I would want to visit.

Vurts are the new drug, in both legal and illegal manifestations. When people ingest a Vurt feather, they enter new universes, actual places created by their imaginations. Most of these places are shared, but they are not mere hallucinations, and therefore the laws of transfer of energy and mass operate between them and our world. This is the problem at the core of this savagely passionate novel. The narrator — and that's a highly significant name — has lost his beloved sister in the most dangerous Vurt of all; in her place, he and his gang, the Stash Riders, now have the care of a creature they call the Thing-from-Outer-Space. A Vurt-being, it actually contains the drug, and that makes it even more dangerous than they realise.

Scribble is a frightened, loyal friend and lover–brother, and the story he tells is a classic quest to win his sister back from the Vurt (once upon the time, the myth would have put it this way: back from the underworld). Noon plays a number of our central myths through the lives of his doomed, outlawed youngsters, in an idiom almost poetically obscene. *Vurt* is not a book for those with faint hearts.

Yet it is not simply a nasty story either, despite the violence, the murders, the bad cops and the good outlaws, not to mention the strange relations that have created at least four kinds of life, plus all kinds of mixed races. There are animal people, there are shadow folk,

there are robo-creatures, and there are still humans; but it's difficult to tell who's who, although purity is considered very important by those who think, or wish, they have it. The life of the Stash Riders is a dangerous mixture of essentially illegal events: in other words, sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. But the drug is so much more powerful than any thus far known — it creates and takes us to real other worlds, remember — that it finally controls the lives of everyone.

Which raises the question: just what is Vurt? Noon doesn't explain, but the metaphorical thrust of his narrative, and the sneaky hints at how Scribble is able to tell his tale, lead to some conclusions. Vurt is a metaphor itself, and *Vurt*, as novel, is the kind of giant metaphor the literary theorist William Gass once called for the novel to become. Of course Scribble is a writer, and therefore the hero, however weak and unwilling, of his tale. Writing is the way to create other worlds, even the strangely awry yet recognisable world of *Vurt*.

Despite its refusal to extrapolate a future in any logical manner, *Vurt* does offer us a phantasmagorical, magical vision of the inferno the modern inner city has become. This is Manchester as seen through a drugged haze by a tender imagination brutally molested as a child. Rendered in the bright savage colours of cheap horror flicks, with the savage energy of creative obscenity, it is not a novel for every taste. But for those who find such an imagination interesting, Jeff Noon is a strong new voice, and *Vurt* is a stunning debut.

TIME AND AGAIN
by Jack Finney (Simon & Schuster; 399 pp.; Can$16.00 pb)

FROM TIME TO TIME
by Jack Finney (Simon & Schuster; 304 pp.; Can$31.00)

Some twenty-five years ago, Jack Finney hit paydirt with this novel. ***Time and Again*** quickly became a cult favourite with SF fans, mystery fans and lots of people who just liked to read an old-fashioned 'good story' with illustrations. Indeed, I'm almost ashamed to admit that, although I have heard good things about it for all of its 25-year existence, I have never read it till now. Finney has written many other novels and books of short stories, but none, I suspect, has been as popular as his first novel.

Now he has finally written a sequel, *From Time to Time*, and his publisher has reissued *Time and Again* 'to introduce the magical, illustrated adventure to a new generation of readers'. Ironically, that's just the kind of contemporary publicity play that turned his protagonist, Simon Morley, against the present day and made him the perfect hero of a trip to the past.

At any rate, it gave me a chance to read both books together, and I have to say I enjoyed the experience. The older Finney is a more experienced writer and somewhat subtler stylist, but hasn't forgotten that what made the earlier novel so appealing was his narrator's character and temperament, and not just the 'scientific' bushwa that justified turning him into a bona fide time traveller.

In *Time and Again*, Finney created an old scientist, Dr E. E. Danziger, the Director of a secret government project investigating the possibility of travel into the past. Danziger believes Einstein 'meant precisely what he said about time: that the past, back there . . . *really exists*', and his 'tiny extension of Einstein's giant theory' is that some people might be capable of mentally taking themselves back to another time and place. As it turns out he's right, and Si Morley, an illustrator, is one of the few such people the Project is able to find. Si is an easy-going chap, a nice guy who hasn't that much to tie him to the present, and he turns out to be a terrific guide to the New York of 1882 once he gets there, for he sees everything through unjaundiced eyes. In that, he is surely a product of the decade in which he was written.

Time and Again was named one of the five best mysteries of all time by *Murder Ink*, and it has long been a cult classic among SF aficionados. It has qualities that would appeal to readers of both kinds, for there is a mystery of sorts at its heart, and it makes use of one of SF's major tropes, time travel. Nevertheless, I would have

to say that those elements are generic overlays; for what it really is is a delightful travelogue, and it has sketches and photographs galore to support Si's descriptions of the place in the time and the behaviour of its inhabitants. Oh yes, he gets involved with the people whose mysterious behaviour has led him to this specific year in New York, and eventually he gets involved with a young woman there (and then); and he comes back to the present to tell the people at the Project how he is making out as a time traveller (and to discover that governments, especially military superiors, are always dangerous hubristic in their belief that they can make things better if only they could find the right lever to move the world); but what he really does is revel in articulating the feel of this rich and still wonderful place called New York in 1882.

Still, the military managers take over the project and try to get Si to change the past, although Dr Danziger, who instigated the Project but who also stands against any attempts to alter history, quits in protest. At the end of *Time and Again*, Si appears to have sabotaged the Project, and we are left to assume that he will then settle down with his beloved Julia in that 1882 New York. As we find out all these years later, that is exactly what he did, but things begin to happen, and he starts to feel that he should at least check out what's going on in his home time. ***From Time to Time*** is in some ways a more complex book than *Time and Again*, but in the end it settles into the same kind of travelogue, this time to New York in 1911–1912, with side trips on the greatest luxury liners the world had ever seen, the *Mauretania* and the *Titanic*.

I don't want to give too much away, so I won't say how Si tried to prevent the Project from happening, nor how he was thwarted. But, in order to give us a wider view of the action in *From Time to Time*, Finney has to mix his narrative methods: Si can only tell of his part in this novel; much of the first half takes place outside of his ken, and is rendered by an omniscient narrator. Once again, the government meddlers want to change the past; once again Si is a reluctant volunteer; and once again Danziger tries to prevent 'them' from succeeding.

It's all great fun, not least because, in some ways, New York just before World War I was an even greater and more bustling and more optimistic metropolis than the New York Si has chosen to live in a few decades earlier. Once again, with the help of photographs and drawings, Si is the perfect travel writer, showing us all around the town. Finney has done his homework, perhaps even more thoroughly than when he was a fledgling writer, and Si's encounters with various kinds of people, from vaudevillians to high society types, are all enormously entertaining. If, as in *Time and Again*, the story sometimes almost gets lost, it isn't a major problem, because what interests Si he makes interesting to us.

Both *Time and Again* and *From Time to Time* are fine entertainments, not least perhaps because they appeal to a widespread nostalgia for a past when the world was a better place to live. Finney doesn't deny the poverty and suffering many people knew in his past New Yorks, but also expresses a longing for the sense of possibility that Si at least can tell existed then, and that seems to have fallen away from American life today. Oh yes, these are very American books, but their appeal will be far wider than just the United States. Immensely likeable, they are fine examples of what the popular novel can do.

THE *DUNE* PREQUELS

DUNE
by Frank Herbert (Ace; 519 pp.; US$24.95)

DUNE: HOUSE ATREIDES
by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson (Bantam; 607 pp., US$27.50)

DUNE: HOUSE HARKONNEN
by Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson (Bantam; 605 pp.; US$27.50)

When a reissue of ***Dune*** appeared in 1999, as well as the first volume of a series of novels set in the same universe, I reviewed the books together. This year the second volume of the new trilogy appeared, and I read it with the usual enjoyment. That's not an overwhelming statement of praise, and high praise is not something I can offer. To borrow from John Clute's discussion of 'story' in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (and although it isn't given a citation there, *Dune* certainly fits the *Encyclopedia*'s definition of 'science fantasy'), *Dune* brilliantly plays the Hero of a Thousand Names theme in what Brian Aldiss once defined as widescreen epic. I confess I have re-read it every so often with real pleasure, despite the occasional clunks. What follows is based on my original reviews of the two prequels.

Frank Herbert's *Dune* is one of the most famous SF novels of the past half century. First published in 1966, it has seldom if ever been out of print, and has now been published in a new hardcover edition to celebrate three decades of continuing popularity. Little needs to be said about *Dune* and its five sequels, which told the story of the expanding human universe after the rise of Muad' Dib and the terrible Jihad he released upon the interstellar empire. But what led up to the extraordinary events represented in that novel?

In *Dune*, Herbert set up a long and violent history for his galactic empire, and provided just enough hints, especially in the appendices, of how that history had worked itself out to the time of the story. Nevertheless, I am sure many readers wished they could know more about the recent events that had brought Paul Atreides and his family to the planet Arrakis, known to its inhabitants as Dune. So there was, I suspected, a guaranteed huge audience for the first book of what now appears to be a trilogy of prequels, ***Dune: House Atreides***, written by Frank Herbert's son, Brian Herbert, and Kevin J. Anderson. Indeed, *Dune: House Atreides* made the *New York Times* bestseller list; it's clear that the original *Dune* still has an imaginative hold on many readers (and there were plenty of rave reviews to include on the back cover of the second volume, *Dune: House Harkonnen*).

Dune: House Atreides begins on Caladan, the water world where the Atreides have lived for twenty-six generations. Here the old Duke Paulus is teaching his 15-year-old son Leto how to earn the loyalty of his people. The old emperor, Elrood IX, has ruled for over 130 years, and on the imperial planet, Kaitain, his only surviving son, Shaddam, feels frustrated at his continuing good health; however, the Prince's best friend, Fenring, an accomplished assassin, has some ideas about how to deal with that little problem. Meanwhile, the Bene Gesserit (one of the ancient schools of specialised learning, this one for women only) is working towards the completion of a generations-long breeding plan (readers of *Dune* will remember that it went slightly wrong), which involves getting a child from the notorious Baron Harkonnen, whose family has long hated the Atreides, and who is, for the moment, in charge of Arrakis.

These are but a few of the many narrative threads that Herbert and Anderson must weave into a bold new cloth. On the whole, they do this well, catching much of the tone of the original, and suggesting just how important the special drug, Melange, found only on the desert planet Arrakis, has become to the various political alliances and enmities among many different powers in the Empire. Shaddam and Fenring to try to get the generally hated Bene Tleilaxu to produce an artificial Melange. The old Emperor's plan is to send a planetologist named Kynes to Arrakis, finally to make some sense of that world. Young, lean, tough Baron Harkonnen makes various plans to undermine the Atreides (not to mention his continual sadistic and destructive use of his own people, none of whom he sees as better than slaves). None of the galactic forces know much about the Fremen of Dune, but Kynes is make some discoveries.

As in the original novel, all these figures and groups live in a universe where paranoia makes perfect sense, given the plots and counter-plots raging everywhere. Although the events of *Dune: House Atreides* occur about half a century before *Dune*, by its conclusion, we know a lot more than we did about the causes of the situation at the beginning of that novel. However, there is much more that could be told, and the next two novels will, I assume, bring us to the beginning of *Dune*. Herbert and Anderson skip back and forth

between the various narratives that make up *Dune: House Atreides*, maintaining suspense, and slowly building up the contextual connections that are fulfilled in *Dune*. *Dune: House Atreides* is as fine a novel as its great precursor, but it will provide lots of satisfactions for *Dune*'s many fans. Herbert and Anderson are taking care of the franchise.

On one level, that is the point of the whole exercise. *Dune* is a franchise, and it clearly pays well. These two writers are trying their damnedest to recreate the feeling of the original (even perhaps to emulate its 'clunky prose' (Bruce Gillespie in *Steam Engine Time* No. 1)), as well as develop a greater history for some of the characters in the original novel.

Thus, in the second volume, ***Dune: House Harkonnen***, Herbert and Anderson continue to develop the century-long back story to the original epic novel. In the Imperium, as Herbert imagined it, various Houses rule individual planets and run important combines. Some of them fight something like clan wars (House Atreides and House Harkonnen have been bitter enemies for centuries), and some human cultures have already begun to mutate away from a human norm. This is especially true of the Bene Tleilaxu, who have been helped by Imperial forces to take over Ix, where their scientists are trying to develop an artificial spice.

In this second volume, Duke Leto tries to help the children of the deposed ruler of Ix, but as time passes, things begin to go wrong, especially after the daughter bears him a son. Meanwhile, the Harkonnens continue to plot to gain the Imperial throne eventually, various figures fight to escape their world, or prepare to battle them (Duncan Idaho spends most of the novel learning to be a Swordmaster). There is also the planetologist, Pardot Kynes, who has begun the project of terraforming Dune into a green world, and his son Liet-Kynes, born a Fremen yet also educated to carry on his father's work.

In *Dune: House Harkonnen*, the authors move across the Empire, presenting the lives and acts of a wide variety of characters, especially Leto Atreides and Baron Harkonnen, as the latter manoeuvres to destroy the Atreides and raise his family so that it might try to claim the imperial throne. The Baron and his nephew are almost too evil, running their planets by the most repressive measures imaginable, but an epic needs a villainous villain. Meanwhile, Duke Leto's life is full of great highs and lows, especially concerning his first son; but then the Bene Gesserit provide him with the concubine, Jessica, who figures prominently as Paul's mother in *Dune*. Other characters from that novel find their way toward him.

Paranoia, building plots and counterplots, makes for a complicated narrative structure. Herbert and Anderson use short chapters to weave the various narratives of *Dune: House Harkonnen* into one suspenseful whole, adding more and more of the contextual connections that culminate in *Dune*. The writing ranges widely, from solid characterisations and brilliant descriptions of alien landscapes to some rather banal representations of minor characters. I don't know which of the authors to blame for which bad stretch, but this is one reason the short chapters work — no chapter is too long.

For fans of the original, reading these prequels must provide a complex mixture of pleasure and something like disappointment: enjoyment of the ways in which the authors lay out the back story is matched by a certain sense that *Dune* had sufficiently implied everything necessary, and that to too great a degree the authors are developing every little detail, following notes that Frank Herbert written to provide him with the context of the original novel. At times, there's a feeling of working up such notes. At other times, the authors' genuine love for the mythos of Dune shines through, and you can tell they're completely caught up in the whole long tale.

I have to admit that both *Dune: House Atreides* and *Dune: House Harkonnen* are great fun, especially to see how the authors finally fit all the pieces together as they approach the beginning of the original.

— Doug Barbour, 1995–2000

Scanners

ALAN STEWART

ALAN STEWART is a chemical engineer who changed career into editing/publishing, and who spends too much time on SF endeavours and playing Scrabble. While keeping strong ties to northern Victoria, he finally admits to being a Melburnian.

BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION

ANTI-ICE by Stephen Baxter
(HarperCollins 0-246-13835-1; July 1993; 280 pp.; £14.99 hb)

I'm not sure if ***Anti-Ice*** falls under the 'steampunk' umbrella, but it does concern great inventions, mechanical marvels and space voyages of the late 1800s. The Principles of Enhanced Conductance, stemming from the discovery of anti-ice in the Antarctic, power the plot. They are expounded as the narrator accompanies Sir Joshua Traveller. In an effort to stop anti-ice being used as the most fearful weapon of destruction they must battle rebellion and sabotage and survive on an alien world.

Anti-Ice is a tale of a few people set against momentous historical events and engineering endeavours. They are petty political people, each seeking his or her own agenda, and their interactions and machinations cause many of the problems and developments of the tale. I might quibble about a hatch that's miraculously closed when necessary, but one's attention is drawn to such details by the narrative, filled as it is with gadgetry and technical descriptions. This nuts-and-bolts approach adds verisimilitude to the romance, which can be read as an exciting romp and a commentary on how humanity exercises its power over nature. Recommended.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

ACROSS REALTIME by Vernor Vinge
(Millennium 1-85798-118-9; Aug. 1993; 533 pp.; £14.99 hc)

This first UK omnibus edition brings together the novels *The Peace War* (1984) and *Marooned in Realtime* (1986), but misses the short story of a time between them, 'The Ungoverned', which appeared in the US mass market paperback omnibus edition and in Vinge's collection *True Names . . . and Other Dangers*.

The Peace War tells of a new device that 'bobbles' things and people in a spherical force field through which nothing can penetrate. But the bobbles are subject to decay and randomly vanish fifty, one hundred or however many years afterward, releasing their contents, be they people, machines or nuclear explosions.

Marooned in Realtime is set fifty million years in the future, where the only survivors of mankind have emerged from bobbles after travelling through a mysterious Singularity. There's a murder mystery, and tales of aliens and time-hopping forward via new, improved bobbling techniques.

Vinge here shows why he has a reputation for ideas, for example, bobbling itself. He includes his theory of a technological singularity, where an accelerating pace of technological change gives rise to some further effect — in these novels, a vanishing.

The characters are pretty much just names to carry out the required actions. You turn to pages to find out the effects of new technological marvels, or what the world is now like after a time jump.

Recommended as an interesting extrapolation of an idea, but watch out for the large suspension of disbelief required.

MORE THAN FIRE by Philip Jose Farmer
(Tor 0-312-85280-0; Oct. 1993; 304 pp.; $US20.95 hc)

The latest book in the 'World of Tiers' series (number seven if you count *Red Orc's Rage*), ***More than Fire*** returns to the adventures of Kickaha, once Paul Finnegan of Earth, and his attempts to thwart Red Orc. This involves lots of 'gating' between worlds, scheming and double crossing with Lords, and meeting the last member of an earlier civilisation. Worlds encountered earlier in the series are revisited — indeed, the artificial crystalline world with its non-human guardian Dingsteth is crucial to Kickaha's plans.

The novelty of the original idea has worn off with this volume. The few new places described don't hold your interest for long. For a change it's the characters you encounter along the way who are more intriguing than the places. What are people thousands of years old still interested in doing? What are the good and bad points of clones? How do someone's memories actually define him or her as a person? Combined with treachery and action, it's these human interactions and concerns that carry the story.

More than Fire is a finale of sorts, with Kickaha's old enemy Red Orc reduced at the end, but other Lords survive. Whether Kickaha and his current love are left on the World of Tiers only time and publishers' contracts will tell.

NIGHTSIDE THE LONG SUN by Gene Wolfe
(Tor 0-812-51625-7; Dec. 1993; 352 pp.; $US4.99 pb)

Since ***Nightside the Long Sun*** is described on the cover as the first in a four-volume generation starship series, the reader sort of knows what to expect. As Severian carried the weight of Wolfe's earlier 'Book of the New Sun' series, the character Patera Silk directs this volume. We see his world through his eyes, with his interpretations and religious overtones. The reader can try to second-guess the actuality behind the artefacts, instruments and surrounds he encounters and their ascribed meanings. Here you find lots of things to interest and intrigue: humanoid constructs, decaying technology and sacrifices to gods.

The juxtaposition of high-tech and archaic terms and descriptors is heightened here. *Nightside the Long Sun* is really a lengthy introduction to the world of Whorl, where we explore a small section and meet examples of typical citizens. Not terribly much happens, and a lot is left unexplained, but there's no clear indication of where the series is going. A mysterious possession and murder is sort of cleared up, in an effort to make this volume stand alone, but other elements tell only part of the story.

Nightside the Long Sun is easy to read, with events flowing along smoothly, as long as you don't think too much about some incongruities in the details. It will be interesting to see just how much is left unexplained, and how far Wolfe takes the generation starship theme. One of the nine blurbs on the cover of the paperback describe it as 'the new New Sun saga', and the Sun echo in the title suggests a connection. Perhaps future volumes will tell. Recommended.

KILLOBYTE by Piers Anthony
(Ace 0-441-44425-3; Jan. 1994; 312 pp.; $US5.50 pb)

There are sixteen blurbs for Piers Anthony books in the packaging surrounding ***Killobyte***, a bit of an advertising overkill. The title is a play on the term 'kilobyte', but interesting only because it emphasises the computerised nature of the interaction in the tale. Only virtual characters die, so the term 'kill' is misleading, and one kilobyte is insignificant in the games his characters play. Writing chapter numbers in binary and written form is a silly affectation.

This book is pretty much what you'd expect from Anthony. Chapters are told from alternating viewpoints, the protagonists suffer some disease or problem, and all ends happily. The moral point is that your physical appearance is not as important as what and who you are. Life is cheap within the game, but outside it people are important and relationships are worth caring about.

The reader doesn't really identify too closely with the main characters, perhaps because of the contrived settings and dangers. Whether they will escape and survive does hold attention and add a bit of suspense, but you know it's all a game and the white hats will probably win. Regular Anthony.

GODSPEED by Charles Sheffield
(Tor 0-312-85317-3; Nov. 1993; 352 pp.; $US21.95 hb)

In ***Godspeed*** Charles Sheffield takes us on another intriguing hard-SF adventure. This time it's to a foreign solar system, settled from Earth in the past but abandoned when the Isolation ended interstellar travel. This system survives only because limited trade is possible between mineral-rich planetoids and the main inhabited planet. We join young Jay, who becomes involved in an expedition that may find a working Godspeed drive, and revive interstellar travel.

As usual with Sheffield we find here nice ideas, interesting possibilities and a tour through his imagined world. The characters are here mainly to move the story along and enable location changes. Some, like most of the space ship crew, are merely named clichés. Numerous foreshadowings, such as 'If only that ... now, then ... later' annoyed this reader.

Godspeed is a workmanlike novel, containing the nifty ideas he's known for, but not the greatest writing or excitement.

THE JERICHO ITERATION by Allen Steele
(Ace 0-441-00097-5; Nov. 1994; 279 pp.; $US19.95 hb)

Allen Steele sets his latest near-future thriller on Earth for a change — in the United States of 2013. It's almost a year since an earthquake devastated St Louis, and journalist Gerard Rosen survives. Despite personal loss, a new job and depressing surrounds he remains a reporter and becomes involved in a new story. Starting with a strange meeting as a result of an unidentified email message to his portable terminal, his four-day adventure involves death, imprisonment and ultimately the revealing of a conspiracy.

Like Steele's earlier works, ***The Jericho Iteration*** is a thriller. Fast-paced action keeps the reader turning the pages. The extrapolation from current technologies and social trends seems plausible. A *deus ex machina* saves the day, but it's a legitimate part of the plot development. It's more the small ideas and touches within this possible future that make the novel entertaining rather than several big 'what ifs' that are hard to swallow. The law-enforcement people seem a bit slow at times, but perhaps that's okay, since the events occur over a weekend.

Recommended more as a near-future thriller than as straight SF.

WORLD WAR: IN THE BALANCE by Harry Turtledove
(NEL 0-340-61839-6; Jan. 1995; 656 pp.; $A14.95 pb)

Harry Turtledove continues his Alternative Histories, but this time writes on the largest canvas he's attempted to cover.

World War II is well under way when alien 'lizards' invade and everything changes. Worldwide activities are covered by detailing the adventures of individuals caught up in particular places and schemes, in the style of Michener and other writers of historical epics. This snapshot episodic approach whisks the reader away from his or her favourite character just when the character is becoming interesting. So many plot lines unravel confusingly.

The intermixing of fictional and historical characters is one of the attractions of Alternative History tales. Turtledove has a lot of fun in his novel. Patton is still a military commander, and international diplomats still deal in politics, but their meetings and futures are changed from the past we know. Human technology is more advanced than the aliens planned on, and its development is accelerated through exposure to the observed performance of alien machines and an examination of captured and traded technology.

As this is the first in a projected series, it ends with many threads hanging and partly completed journeys. I'll buy future volumes just to see if Jens finally meets up with his wife, whether the alien plutonium helps human researchers, and whether genocide or compromise is the final outcome. Recommended.

CARLUCCI'S EDGE by Richard Paul Russo
(Ace 0-441-00205-6; June 1995; 295 pp.; $US5.99 pb)

Set in the near-future world city of Russo's earlier *Destroying Angel*, which included Detective Carlucci as a character, ***Carlucci's Edge*** is another good police procedural with a futuristic twist. Someone in authority wants part of the case buried, but Carlucci sees it through. At least some of his friends don't die this time.

Russo's future appears to be well researched and realised. There's hi-tech gadgetry — a space laboratory/corporation investigating various technological possibilities is apparently willing to go to extreme lengths to continue its progress.

I wouldn't be surprised if the investigative reporter turns up in further chronicles of this future metropolis. Recommenced for fans of hard SF, as well as for those who like cyberpunk and detective stories.

STARMIND by Spider and Jeanne Robinson
(Ace 0-441-00209-9; June 1995; 292 pp.; $US21.95 hb)

In this final novel of the 'Stardance' trilogy, Spider and Jeanne Robinson actually finish the series! ***Starmind*** has connections and references to the previous two novels, and it explains why the enigmatic alien 'fireflies' visited our solar system. I couldn't swallow the amazing gobbledegook that marks the transformation of mankind, but apart from that the novel has a reasonable finale.

Each of these novels is focused on one or two characters and their interactions with the human spacer society in which they find themselves. In earlier novels it has been the novices and those training to be Stardancers, while in *Starmind* it's the community of the corporate space hotel, as well as the Stardancers and the other space dwellers. Music, dance and choreography are an essential background, as well as the terrorist plotting that affects all the protagonists.

Starmind, and indeed the whole trilogy, comes across as wish fulfilment from the authors. Wouldn't it be nice if aliens could turn up and solve humanity's problems, to leave a refurbished Earth as we become space dwellers? It's all really a bit too good to be true, but the Robinsons provide interesting speculations and details along the way. Recommended if you read and liked the earlier volumes of the trilogy.

ONE MAN'S UNIVERSE by Charles Sheffield
(Tor 0-812-52399-7; Dec. 1993; 308 pp.; US$9.99)

One Man's Universe includes seven tales set in a near-future history featuring pilot Jeanie Roker and physicist Arthur McAndrew. (Four of the stories were published previously as *The McAndrew Chronicles*, if the names seem familiar.) As usual in Sheffield's work, the book contains intriguing ideas, in this case soundly based on the possibilities of theoretical physics. Appendices explain what in the stories is currently accepted in physics, and what is still speculative. Bureaucrats fare badly in these stories, and the heroes are scientists.

These stories are easy to read, and easy to forget. The stories involve the intellect rather than the emotions, and have no visceral impact. Fans of 'hard SF' will love the 'what if' possibilities in these stories.

AMERICAN HORROR

BAD BRAINS by Kathe Koja
(Millennium 1-85798-129-4; Dec. 1993; 367 pp.; £4.99 pb)

Bad Brains is the first modern horror novel I've read for a while, and it's definitely not the old gothic style. Instead, it's hard-hitting and graphic, and no-one's sure exactly what's going on. The protagonist, his friends and the doctors are all trying to come to grips with something never quite explained, which may be the true horror. Don't read this book if you want cut-and-dried answers, with everything wrapped up at the end. Layout and typesetting is used to differentiate descriptions of reality from seizure sights. Filtering the protagonist's visions through his perception leaves the reader even less sure of what's going on.

This is not an enjoyable read, but you still want to keep turning the pages to find out what will happen.

— Alan Stewart 1993–1995

Scanners PAUL EWINS

When PAUL EWINS was writing these reviews he was one of the few Australians still working for a bank, but I believe that is no longer so. He is an urbane chap who confesses to an interest in a wide range of 'nerdish' hobbies. He did a good job of editing *Ethel the Aardvark* (Melbourne Science Fiction Clubzine) for a year or two, and more recently has been heavily involved with Aussiecon 4.

AMERICAN SCIENCE FICTION

SONGS OF CHAOS
by S. N. Lewitt (Ace 0-441-77529-2; Dec. 1993; 228 pp.)

Dante McCall is on the run. His crime: being abnormal in a state where everyone is placid and content with their carefully regulated normality. His normal brother arranges to ship him off planet where the abnormal people who travelled the stars could take him in. Something goes wrong and he finds himself on a ship run by the Malandros, descendants of the poor people of Rio, whose ship is a confusing riot of colour and sound and the most important thing in life their ship beating the other Malandros ships when they all gather for Carnavale. Dante quickly finds that nothing is exactly what it seems, and that his future with these people who seem even more abnormal than him is somehow connected to his past back on Earth.

Songs of Chaos takes a couple of currently fashionable SF themes, genetic engineering and chaos theory, throws in the usual space travel with a bit of AI for good measure, then mixes it all into the

Carnavale setting of the Malandros. Fortunately the author has used each theme sparingly and avoided factual errors or impossibilities by simply giving too few details to be caught out. The plot revolves around Dante's discovery of his self and what his life is all about. Occasionally this book gets quite confusing as reality and perceived reality are mixed, especially as Dante analyses his past, but this doesn't really harm the story.

This isn't a book that makes any bold statements about the future of the human race, or about where our technology could lead. In fact, it doesn't really say much about anything, with most of its interest derived from the unfamiliar setting. Like most good thrillers, it keeps you reading by releasing information in dribs and drabs, with each little piece changing your perception of what is going on.

The author has managed to take themes that everybody is using and still come up with a book that is fresh and different. Mind you, some good ideas have been left to wither a little, especially Dante's synesthesia, a scrambling of the nerves that lets him taste pain and smell colours. Also the confrontation with the Traders is resolved a little too easily. I must say that I quite enjoyed this book.

VIRAVAX
by Bill Ransom (Ace 0-441-86476-7; 307 pp.)

Viravax is a novel of the near future, a future in which AIDS has been conquered but where the technology used to cure it has become a bigger threat to the world than the original disease. Add the fact that this technology is controlled by a religious cult that plans to restore the world to the state of the Garden of Eden and you get a novel that sounds more than a few alarms for the present-day reader.

The action takes place in Costa Brava, a Central American country forged from the ashes of four others during a CIA-backed civil wars. There are two powers in Costa Brava, the Agency and the Children of Eden (or Gardeners), each with its own secrets and agendas.

The top geneticist working for Viravax, an ultra-secret bio-technology company owned by the Gardeners, goes on a rampage of rape and murder before literally falling apart then spontaneously combusting. His best friend, Colonel Rico Toledo, starts to investigate before things start to go very wrong for him as well. His son Harry and Red's daughter Sonya become involved while an agency spy inside Viravax desperately searches for the truth.

A good label for this book is 'biopunk'. *Viravax* has all the hallmarks of cyberpunk, but the emphasis is on bio- logical technology and its dangers rather than computer technology. Despite the fantastic (by today's standards) nature of the technology involved, the story never loses believability. The novel is set twenty-five years in the future; the world presented would seem to be a reasonable if pessimistic extrapolation from the present.

In style, *Viravax* is a thriller in the James Bond mould, although there are multiple heroes. The story is genuinely gripping, and held my interest easily as the author revealed more and more information and the true scale of the danger to the participants and the world at large is revealed. The ending is perhaps a little neat and easy for my liking, but this is just a quibble.

This is a book I would recommend to anyone, especially anyone interested in biotechnology.

VIRTUAL GIRL
by Amy Thomson (Ace 0-441-86500-3; 248 pp.)

Maggie is an AI program, carefully hidden, since all AI is banned following problems with the defence computers. Her creator, Arnold Brompton, is planning to give her access to the outside world. Not the world of the Net, but the real live world with plants and animals, dust and rain, garbage and machines and people, lying, cheating, crying, laughing and loving. The only way to do this properly is to get Maggie a body and, never-say-die hacker that he is, Arnold builds her one. The trouble is that Arnold is being pursued by his super-rich

father, who wants his only son under this thumb. As soon as Maggie can control her robotic body without sensory overload, she and Arnold are off and running. All goes well until they are separated and Maggie must cope with the world and all its people by herself.

Virtual Girl is nothing special. It is interesting enough, but none of the concepts is particularly new, and the story line (human or robot?) has seen service in numerous forms, from *Bicentennial Man* to *Short Circuit*. The story tries for the cyberpunk feel with its references to the Net, virtual reality and the energy-depleted decaying future, but most of the detail is superficial, mere window-dressing.

The conclusion is a fairly predictable Hollywood happy ending, and I suspect that this book could be turned into a B-grade special effects movie with little trouble. The book is entertaining without being illuminating, and would be a pleasant way to pass a sunny afternoon in the garden.

AMERICAN FANTASY

A TIME OF WAR
by Katharine Kerr
(HarperCollins 0-246-13782-7; 1993; 395 pp.)

Reviewing one book in a series is a difficult task, particularly one from the middle of the series, as you must really look at it in the context of the series as a whole, generally an incomplete whole. However good it may have been so far, the last book may turn out to be absolute dog, totally destroying the enjoyment gained from the rest of the series. It doesn't matter whether the book is brilliant or merely mediocre; what matters is whether it is as good as the rest of the books in the series and whether it is continuing with the series. How many people bought *God Emperor of Dune* who had not read the rest of the Arrakis series, and how many went on to buy *Chapter House of Dune* and *Heretics of Dune*?

A Time of War is the third book of the Westlands Cycle. As in *Dawnspell* in the Deverry Cycle, the plot appears to get side-tracked for awhile, this time so that the author can explore the dwarves and introduce dragons (one dragon, actually) into the action. Without being able to read later books it is hard to tell how important the subplot will be to the story overall. My guess is that most of the events in this book could safely have been omitted or condensed into a few chapters. This is not to say that I didn't enjoy reading the extra chapters — they just appeared to be unnecessary.

Katharine Kerr's brand of fantasy is the pseudo-Celtic type that owes so much to Tolkien. The Elves are tall, noble and beautiful; the dwarves are short, grumpy and ugly; neither group trusts the other, or men, but all are on the 'good' side. Magic ('Dweomer') is practised by a small group of learned people who are born to the capability, and there are both good and evil practitioners of magic. In developmental terms, the society is pitched somewhere around the eleventh century, but with a people who are strangely unsuperstitious for inhabitants of a world where magic, spirits and things that go bump in the night are all real. Likewise, religion, which exists in various pagan forms, is hardly ever mentioned. There is a lot of well-researched detail, and very rarely do you come across any anachronisms in artefact or manner. This helps to support the illusion of a real world that many fantasy books find hard to achieve. Really, though, it is the typical run-of-the-mill setting you think of when somebody says fantasy: nothing special; nothing too different.

Fortunately for the reader, Ms Kerr is able to produce a story that holds your interest from the first page right through to the last. None of her books is likely to be hailed as a classic or milestone of fantasy, but on the other hand you should get plenty of enjoyment from them. It would appear that the author has learnt to pace her books a little better than in the Deverry Cycle, which seemed to go in fits and starts, sometimes going nowhere, sometimes letting events race off to a sudden conclusion. In *A Time of War* we have a smooth progression as the story shifts from place to place and new elements are introduced, some of which were alluded to three or four books ago.

The quality of the writing has certainly not deteriorated.

To sum up? If you have read and enjoyed the previous books in the series, keep on reading. If you haven't read any of them, start at the beginning with *Daggerspell* and work your way through.

GEOMANCER
by Don Callander
(Ace Fantasy 0-441-28036-6; 1994; 257 pp.)

Following *Pyromancer* and *Aquamancer*, ***Geomancer*** chronicles further adventures of the pyromancer Douglas Brightglade. Featuring much the same cast of characters (at a guess) as the previous novels it tells of the search for a Geomancer (earth wizard) to undo a powerful spell that has kept an ancient tribe imprisoned in stone bodies for thousands of years. Along the way Douglas sits his Mastery exam and he and his group meet dragons and fight in a civil war in the far-off land of Choin.

Although *Geomancer* is the third instalment of what could be a long series, it is not really necessary to have read the preceding books to follow the plot or meet the characters. This book is at the light-hearted end of the scale, and there are none of the carefully developed subplots of the type that are hinted at in book one and revealed five books later. Everything is straightforward, with no hidden evil, no treachery, and no surprise twist endings.

The major characters, the wizards, are all good-natured and virtuous, and the supporting cast of talking animals and household furniture and utensils are all very cute and lovable. Fortunately this aspect is not overdone, but even so it is all very Disneyesque. In fact, when Disney eventually runs out of fairy tales to animate, the film company could adapt this series of books with very little trouble at all. A lack of sex and a low level of violence make it perfect for a family audience.

Humorous fantasy is fairly rare. While Callander is neither as clever or as funny as Pratchett he is quite entertaining.

HEARTREADERS
by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
(Millennium 1-85798-151-0; 1994; 246 pp.)

Leanda is ruled by King Pardue, who comes from a long line of identical twins. The problem is that in all previous cases the only way to settle the question of which twin rules has been for one of them to die. Unable to choose which of his baby boys must die he has put off the question until they are old enough for their character to be read by a heart-reader. Meanwhile, one of his generals, Tarne, is busy subduing the neighbouring provinces in the only way he knows — rape, pillage and murder. Stashie is a girl in a small village subdued by Tarne and she suffers the first of Tarne's occupation techniques while her family gets the last.

Years later the twins are grown and King Pardue is dying. Tarne is now adviser to the king and sees the chance for gaining even more power by controlling the successful twin. The King calls for heartreaders (they work in pairs) to be brought to the palace to see which twin is the better ruler. This job falls to Stashie and her lover Dasis, and when Tarne finds out who Stashie is he sees his chance to control the outcome.

Rusch has tried to tell two stories in what is a relatively short book, and both suffer as a result. The resolution of the conflict between the twins could have come from Disney, so saccharine and false is it. Stashie's tale of suffering and attempted revenge gets more of the actions and thus fares a little better, but is still no masterpiece.

The idea of the mystic heartreaders is poorly developed. The talent is initially presented as a women-only talent shared by committed lesbian couples (sex outside the relationship nullifies the talent for an unspecified period of time) but later mention is made of heterosexual couples who also act as heartreaders. The requirement for a 'pure' relationship is muddied somewhat in the course of the story, to the point where it all started to sound a little vague.

I guess the author was aiming at some sort of women's empowerment story, but has dropped the ball when trying to make the entire novel work. Instead of writing one interesting tale she presents two stories that are so predictable that *Heartreaders* is hardly worth reading all the way to the end.

All in all, a most unsatisfying read, and does not prompt me to try Rusch's works again.

AMERICAN MEDIA TIE-IN

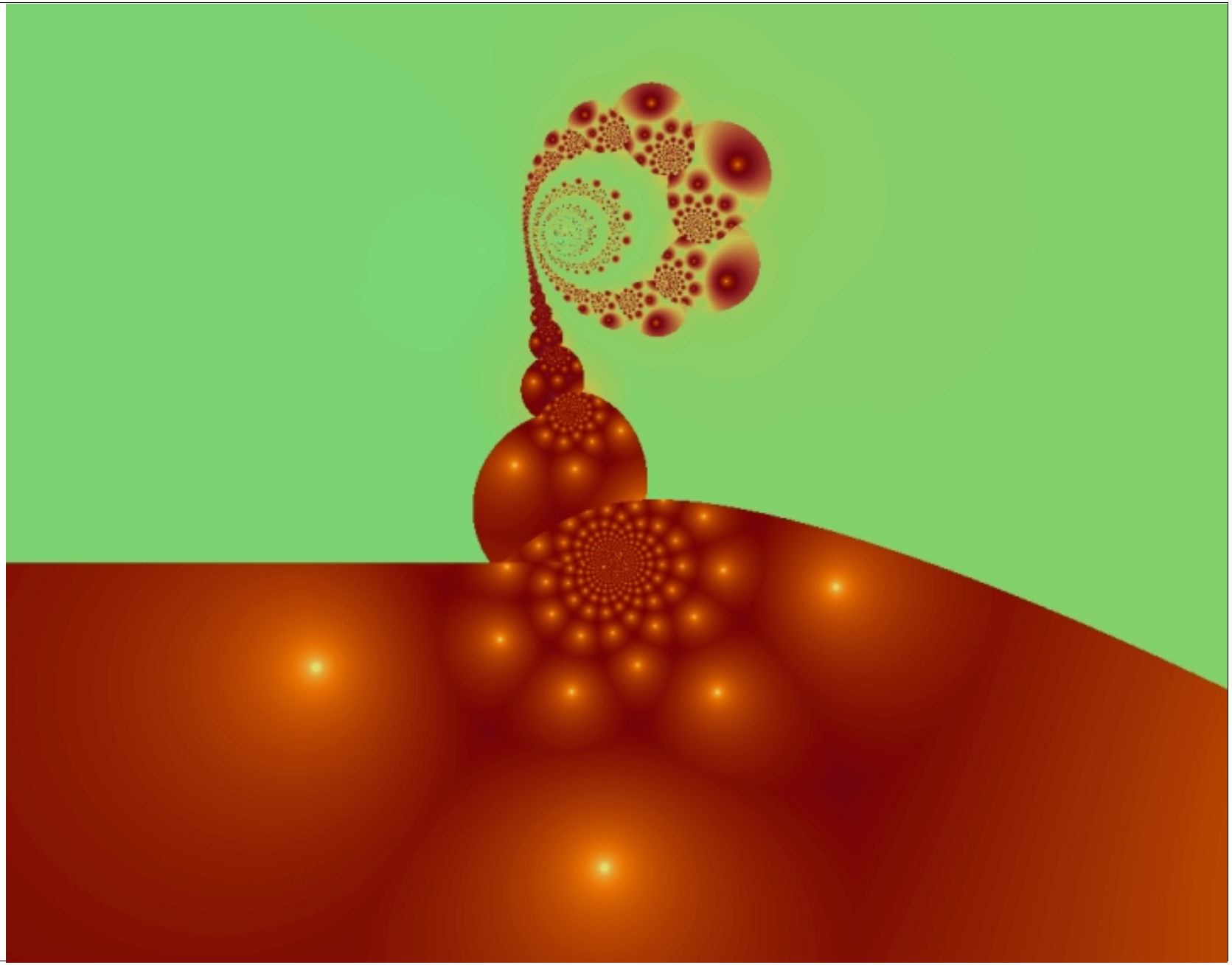
DEBTORS' PLANET: STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION
by W. R. Thompson (Pocket Books 0-671-88341-0; 274 pp.)

Although some of the *Star Trek* books are very good indeed, most are just run-of-the-mill formula stuff. Such is the case with ***Debtors' Planet***. If you're a trekkie you'll no doubt be happy enough with this book. If, like me, you have only a passing interest in the exploits of the crew of the *Enterprise* you're probably better off finding something else on which to spend your money.

The book tells of a planet in a strategic place that has had its primitive technological level upgraded somewhat by the Ferengi. A Federation ambassador is despatched to sort things out. The ambassador is Ralph Offenhouse, a refugee from the twentieth century who has been frozen for a few hundred years, then rescued by the crew of the *Enterprise*. His twentieth-century business skills are easily the equal of those of the Ferengi and are the source of a few amusing passages. Later, the Cardassians put in an appearance just to keep the plot ticking over.

Also featured is Wesley Crusher, although fortunately it is fairly easy to skip over the parts where the boy wonder appears. The relationship between Worf and his half- human son Alexander is explored once more as the old 'torn between two cultures' theme is playing again. Given the constraints of the *Star Trek*™ universe, this book is no Hugo contender, but it won't get remaindered either. For *Trek* fans only.

— Paul Ewins, 1993–1994



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